

Reflections on the Psalms: Introduction

The Book of Psalms is a book of worship. It is also a clear reflection of what it means to follow God in a fallen world. The Psalms is a book every Christian should spend significant time with.

Charles Spurgeon said, "More and more is the conviction forced upon my heart that every man must traverse the territory of the Psalms himself if he would know what a goodly land they are. They flow with milk and honey, but not to strangers; they are only fertile to lovers of their hills and vales. None but the Holy Spirit can give a man the key to the Treasury of David; and even he gives it rather to experience than to study. Happy he who for himself knows the secret of the Psalms."

Psalm 1: The Way of Blessing

I've been spending a lot of time in the Psalms lately for their encouragement and their real-world look into the hearts of those who trust in God as they cry out in worship and praise, and sometimes, in despair. Charles Spurgeon titled his commentary on the Psalms "The Treasury of David." A treasury is where you keep treasures, and that's exactly what the Psalms are. The Psalms are about praise and prayer. They are about the joy of the Lord and godly sorrow. They are about worship and wisdom, how to live wisely.

This morning, we are going to be in the first Psalm, which is fitting as we've considered God's Word this morning, because Psalm 1 is all about the centrality of that Word in a believer's life.

The Psalm is first in the book for a reason. James Boice called it a "magnificent gateway" to the rest of the Psalms. Jerome, writing in the 5th century, called Psalm 1 "the Holy Spirit's preface" to the Psalms.^[1]

Psalm 1 presents the basic choice of life, which path you choose to follow in your life. And as we will see, one way leads to blessing, the other, to death. Two colliding and contrasting choices are a pretty common theme in Scripture. You see it embodied in Cain & Abel, Abraham & Lot, Isaac & Esau, Moses & Pharaoh.

In the New Testament, Jesus ended his Sermon on the Mount with series of contrasts, talking of two trees, two houses, two foundations, and in what is perhaps the best known contrast, two ways. Listen to Matthew 7:13-14: "*Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it.*"

Psalm 1 predated the Sermon by about 1,000 years, but it has the same message. The way of blessing, and the way of "sure, eventual, and eternal ruin." Listen to it with me:

¹ How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! ² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law

he meditates day and night. ³ He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers. ⁴ The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶ For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish.

First, “How blessed is the man.” “Blessed,” Hebrew *esher*. You may have heard that a good meaning for “blessed” is “happy,” and it is certainly possible to translate it that way. But there is more to this Hebrew word than we usually mean by “happy.” “Happy” is usually focused on a life that is going along all right, on circumstances that are themselves, happy. But “blessedness” doesn’t depend on circumstances. “Blessedness” is deeper, richer, fuller than that. “Blessedness” implies joy and well-being that goes beyond emotion, below the surface, and into the heart.

First, the Psalmist tells us what the one who is blessed does not do, v1. He “*does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!*”

The one who is blessed does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. The “wicked” here aren’t necessarily murderers & rapists, but just the garden variety godless man or woman who makes God no part of their lives. Their evil is more casual than intentional.

Note, he doesn’t say to avoid their sin, or their error, but their “counsel.” That’s their worldview, how they look at life. And their counsel is fallen and human and ungodly in the sense that it excludes God. To walk in their counsel means to live by their wisdom. Don’t do it.

And the one who is blessed does not stand in the path of sinners. That’s their lifestyle, their behavior. These are the practices that result from their counsel. The picture here is of someone taking a stand, firm and fixed, hardened, stubbornly committed to a lost way of life.

And the one who is blessed does not sit in the seat of the scoffers. To sit down, that’s to be at home, to be comfortable. That’s where the counsel of the wicked, their worldview, and the path of sinners, their lifestyle, takes them. Scoffers are those who deride what they can’t see, feel, or understand himself. They are false teachers. ⁱⁱⁱ Do you see the progression here? There is an increase in intensity in each one. Spurgeon put it this way,

At first they merely walk in the counsel of the careless and ungodly... But after that, they become habituated to evil, and they stand in the way of open sinners who willfully violate God's commandments; and if let alone, they go one step further, and become themselves pestilent teachers and tempters of others, and thus they sit in the seat of the scornful.

And in fine, 19th century British style, Spurgeon concludes,

They have taken their degree in vice, and as true Doctors of Damnation they are installed. ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Don’t let the quaint language disguise the severity of the issue. Those who follow this path are on a “fast track to emptiness and frustration here, and judgment in the life to come.” ^{liv} Instead of

following their lead, v2 tells us that the one who is blessed delights in the Law of the Lord, and delighting in it, he meditates on it day and night.

What does it mean to meditate in his law? First, understand that Law doesn't just mean the Torah, the first 5 books of the OT. "Law" here stands for all of God's Word. All the Old Testament, Torah or Law, the histories, the writings or wisdom literature, and the prophets. And for us in this latter day, the New Testament – all of God's Word. We are to delight in it and meditate on it.

The Hebrew word for meditate literally means to mutter, to speak in an undertone. You see that in Isaiah 31:4, "As the lion or the young lion *growls* over his prey..." "Growls" is the same word translated "meditate" in Psalm 1:2. Or Isaiah 38:14, "I *moan* like a dove..." Again, "moan" is the same word translated "meditate" in the Psalm. It is explicit in Psalm 71:24, "My tongue also will *utter* Your righteousness all day long;"

We think of meditation as an abstract concept, but it isn't. It's just verbal repetition, constant repeating of God's Word. And v2 says to do it day and night, constantly. When Augustine translated this psalm, he used the word, "chatter" instead of "meditate." Do you get the idea? To meditate on God's word day and night means to repeat it over and over, in your mind, your heart, and your mouth.

This goes beyond your daily quiet time to making it your constant companion, something you carry with you throughout the day, like a song you can't get out of your head. Let me show you the relationship between delighting in God's Word, and meditating on it.

Turn to Psalm 119:15-16, "I will *meditate* on Your precepts And regard Your ways. I shall *delight* in Your statutes; I shall not forget Your word."

Psalm 119:23-24, "Even though princes sit *and* talk against me, Your servant *meditates* on Your statutes. Your testimonies also are my *delight*; *They are* my counselors.

Psalm 119:47-48, "I shall *delight* in Your commandments, Which I love. And I shall lift up my hands to Your commandments, Which I love; And I will *meditate* on Your statutes."

Scripture is clear: If you delight in the Word of God, you will meditate on it. Delight and meditation go hand in hand.^[v]

How much do you delight in God's word? Do you prefer it to *food?*

- Job 23:12, "I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food."
- Matthew 4:4, Jesus answered Satan's temptation by saying, "MAN SHALL NOT LIVE ON BREAD ALONE, BUT ON EVERY WORD THAT PROCEEDS OUT OF THE MOUTH OF GOD."

What about *sleep?*

- Psalm 119:62, 147-48, “At midnight I shall rise to give thanks to You Because of Your righteous ordinances...¹⁴⁷ I rise before dawn and cry for help; I wait for Your words.¹⁴⁸ My eyes anticipate the night watches, That I may meditate on Your word.”

What about money?

- Psalm 119:14, 72, 127, “I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches...⁷² The law of Your mouth is better to me Than thousands of gold and silver *pieces*...¹²⁷ Therefore I love Your commandments Above gold, yes, above fine gold.”

Does God’s Word mean more to you than food? Sleep? Money? Convicting, isn’t it?

You might ask, “How do I meditate on Scripture? Give me an example.” In our Crown studies we are memorizing Scripture together, and in that exercise I’ve found that 1 Chronicles 29:11-12 has been on my mind daily: *“Everything in the heavens and earth is yours, O Lord, and this is your kingdom. We adore you as being in control of everything. Riches and honor come from you alone and you are the ruler of all mankind. Your hand controls power and might, and it is at your discretion that men are made great and given strength.”*

I’ve recited it to myself over and over, and taken it apart phrase by phrase to dwell on what it means. That everything belongs to God. There is nothing he doesn’t own. That his sovereignty is something that should inspire adoration. That he is the only one who confers power on men. And on, and on, and on. That process of turning that verse over in my mind, that’s meditation.

Colossians 3:16 pictures meditation, “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Praying through Scripture, articulating its requests and promises back to God in your prayer time, is meditation. And the Psalmist is saying that if you will not follow after the wicked, and if you will delight in and meditate on God’s Word, you will be like a tree, v3. And not just a sapling, but a magnificent, majestic tree, beautiful, strong, and enduring.

If you delight in God’s word and meditate on it day and night you will be rooted, firmly planted by streams of water. You will stand strong in the Lord, neither swayed by lies nor influenced by the world’s opinion.

If you delight in God’s word and meditate on it day and night you will be fruitful, yielding your “fruit in its season.” Not early, not late, but perfectly ripe, perfectly pleasing, everything God meant fruit to be.

What do we mean when we say someone is fruitful? We mean that they bear fruit in their lives and the lives of those around them. When you are with them you are refreshed, strengthened, convicted, encouraged, and enlightened. All because the Word of God is at work in their lives.

If you delight in God’s word and meditate on it day and night you will be enduring, a tree whose “leaf does not wither.” When the rains dry up, trees not planted by the streams wither and die.

But watered by the stream, you stay green in the heat and drought. You have strength for trials, happiness that endures, and a deep dependence on God, because you continually draw life from an absolutely dependable source: God's Word.

And finally, if you delight in God's word and meditate on it day and night, v3 says you will prosper in whatever you do. Really? No problems, life just a great, big bowl full of cherries? Just read the Psalms and you'll know that's not true. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous," Psalm 34:19 says. Psalm 60:3, "You have made Your people experience hardship; You have given us wine to drink that makes us stagger."

So how can we say that "in whatever he does," the godly man or woman prospers? Because it isn't circumstantial prosperity. Like blessedness, it doesn't depend on your circumstances. It is spiritual prosperity. John Piper says, "The person who delights in God's law so much that he meditates on it day and night is delivered from the ways of the wicked and sinners and scoffers, and is made fruitful and durable and prosperous. That's the point. Delighting in the law of God is the central issue."^[vii]

Psalm 73:26, "My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." That's the prosperity the Psalmist writes about in Psalm 1. And that stands in stark contrast to the way of the wicked in v4-5. There is a great contrast presented in 2 little words in v4, "Not so." As in, "The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous."

Just as the one who is blessed is pictured as a tree planted by water, the wicked are given an image that illustrates what they are like, and that that image is chaff. You know what chaff is? Chaff is the husk that encloses the kernel of wheat. The kernel is what's valuable. The chaff is inedible and has to be separated from the grain before the grain can be used.

Chaff couldn't be less like the tree. The tree has life, chaff is dead. You can water chaff all you want, and all you'll have is wet chaff. The tree has value, gives fruit and shade. Chaff is worthless, a nuisance and an irritant, without value or substance, to be blown away. The tree has roots, it is solid, firm, it isn't going anywhere. Chaff is blown away and winds up on a burn pit.

And so the Psalm concludes, v6, that "the Lord knows the way of the blessed." Word translated "known" is literally "has regard for" your way, he approves it. In other words, there is nothing haphazard about God's blessing. He gives it gladly to those who live a life that is centered on his word. Not just believing it, not just reading it casually, but making it your daily companion, delighting in it, meditating on it.

Note this well. All too often we think that if we want to please God, to experience his blessing, we think the key is to live in v1. Avoid counsel of wicked, path of sinners, seat of scoffers. Parents, isn't that what you tell your children? And that's good, but it isn't enough. Unless you are also living in v2, delighting in God's Word and meditating on it day and night, then v1 is just a kind of negative purity. It may keep you out of trouble, but it won't open the doors to the best God that has for you.

If we want God's blessing, we must be like the Bereans of Acts 17:11, who received the word from Paul and Silas with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if what they were telling them was true.

Make the Scriptures your daily companion. Read them, get a daily reading plan and spend time every day just reading. Take just a few verses, even one, and memorize it, then chew it over during the day. Consider it from all angles, and let God go to work on your heart through it.

I want to close with an example from the NT. There's a brief word in 2 Timothy 4 that is almost haunting, but is such a clear picture of someone who delighted in God's Word. Paul is in his final imprisonment, and he knows it. He tells Timothy in v6-7, "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith..."

He's written his last NT letter, he's founded dozens of churches, he's witnessed to thousands, he's preached the gospel, pastored churches, and discipled the next generation of Christian leaders. He's lived a lifetime of ministry and he's leaving it with no regrets, absolutely fulfilled.

Yet he has one, final request, v13, "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments." Especially the parchments. You know what the parchments were, don't you? The scrolls of the OT. Even after years of service, at the very end of his life, Paul delighted in the Law of Lord and wanted it with him at the end.

What about you? Is Scripture your delight? Do you meditate on it day and night? Who wouldn't delight in something that would change you from chaff to a cedar of Lebanon? From rootless, lightweight, and useless, to rooted, enduring, and fruitful? Paul cries out, "Bring the parchments!" May that be our cry as well.

^[i] Boice, James Montgomery, "Exposition of Psalms," vol. 1, p13.

^[ii] Kidner, Derek, Psalms 1-72 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973)

^[iii] Spurgeon, Charles H. "Commentary on Psalm 1". "C.H. Spurgeons's The Treasury of David".

^[iv] Boice, p16.

^[v] Wiersbe, Warren "Be Worshipful," p13.

^[vi] Piper, John, "Meditate on the Word of the Lord Day and Night," Sermon, January 3, 1999

The Twenty-Third Psalm

In our time in God's Word this morning we are returning to the Book of Psalms. I've told you before that I spend a lot of time in the Psalms, for their comfort, their wisdom, and their worship.

And because of that, I decided back in January that when I get the occasional opportunity to preach this year, I would bring a Psalm, so that by the end of the year we'll have looked at 6 or 7 of the most important Psalms together.

At that time, I decided that one of the most important Psalms to preach was also the most familiar, the Twenty-Third. Most of you know much of it by heart, and you may be thinking, "What's he going to tell me that I don't already know?"

But we don't preach for novelty. Often, we preach familiar truths that we need to hear over and over. Paul, writing to the Philippians, told them 3 times, "rejoice in the Lord." And he says this in 3:1, "To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you." And so it is no trouble to preach a familiar passage, and just maybe, it will be a safeguard to us all.

Where is this Psalm most often heard? At funerals, and that is certainly apropos, but we will see that it wasn't intended for funerals, it was intended for life.

It is not a complex Psalm, but it is a deep one. Its message is clear. "It speaks of peace, not escape. Contentment, not complacency. The ability to face the deepest darkness because the Shepherd is there with you." ¹

It is a very personal psalm. David says "the Lord is my shepherd," not "our shepherd." "I shall not want," not "we shall not want." He makes me to lie down, not "us." David is reflecting on the personal, intimate care of his shepherd.

The Lord is My Shepherd

See it in very opening sentence, "The Lord is my shepherd." LORD, all caps, is Yahweh, the personal name of God that stresses that he is the source and author of life. He exists in and of himself, the uncreated Creator who doesn't depend on anything or anyone else.

And David says that Yahweh, the source and author of life, is our Shepherd. Not our King, not our Deliverer, not the Rock of our Salvation. God is all these things and more, but here, he is our Shepherd.

Which is really remarkable when you think about it. That the living God, who is so powerful, so vast, and so holy, would be shepherd to ones who are so weak, so puny, so unholy.

Everything that follows in this Psalm flows from this truth. "Like a shepherd He will tend His flock," says Isaiah 40:11, "In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes."

He is omnipotent, yet tender. He is holy, yet gentle, caring for his weak, defenseless flock. If he is the Shepherd, then we are...the sheep. Sheep don't know much. In fact, sheep are just plain dumb. But they do know their shepherd.

And knowing him and following him is the most important thing we will ever do in our lives.

I Shall Not Want

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, "I shall not want." That doesn't mean I won't desire things, as though he takes away all my self-will and wants. It means "want" in the sense of lack. The NIV gets it right, "I shall not be in want."

In other words, because the Lord is my Shepherd, I lack for nothing that I need. Notice, I said need, not desire. I don't have money, fame, or power, but I have everything I need spiritually and physically.

Spiritually, Col. 2:10 says I have been made "complete in Christ." Eph. 1:3, God "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." Phil. 4:19, "My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." 2 Peter 1:3, Christ "has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness." We lack for nothing spiritually.

Physically, the Shepherd's provision for us is pictured in v2, "He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters." David is drawing from his days as a shepherd, picturing rest amid great beauty and peace.

That's a rest unknown to the world. Where can you turn for peace and rest apart from the Lord? Alcohol, drugs? Deadens the pain, doesn't take it away, certainly doesn't provide peace.

Money, sex, power? Just distracts with temporal pleasure that fades fast. Friends, family? They are every bit as finite and broken as you are. At best, they are the company that misery loves.

Only in the Lord is peace found. He is in the business of leading his sheep to green pastures, still waters. Jesus told his disciples, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." (John 14:27)

Even as he is preparing himself for the cross, he is soothing his flock's fears. That's what he does. He tells us, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

He Restores My Soul

Because the Lord is my shepherd, v3 says, "he restores my soul." You could interpret this two different ways. Either David means that the Shepherd restores my soul from sin, or he means that the Shepherd refreshes my soul when I am dry and lifeless. The whole sense of the Psalm runs to the idea of comfort, so I think spiritual refreshment is the idea here, not moral restoration.

We need this. Proverbs 18:14 says, "A man's spirit will endure sickness, but a crushed spirit who can bear?" If our soul is refreshed in the Lord, we can endure great physical sickness and pain. But when our souls are dry, when our spirit is broken, when our heart is discouraged, it is beyond us to fix.

Every one in this room has known these times, and what we need in them are things only the Shepherd can provide. We need a sense of relief from our anxiety, a sense that the things that weigh us down are in his control. We need a reminder of his truth and beauty and power, that he is greater than the things that crush our spirits. And we need to feel the reality of that power at work in us. None of this can we provide.

The Shepherd alone is the great Restorer of our Souls. Psalm 42:11, "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."

Jeremiah cries out, "Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers And is bowed down within me. This I recall to my mind, Therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I have hope in Him." (Lamentations 3:19-24)

Cast your anxiety on Him, knowing that He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7), and he will restore your soul. Because the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. I will know his peace and his rest and his provision, found in the green pastures and quiet waters, and I will know the comfort of a soul that is refreshed and restored.

He Leads Me in Paths of Righteousness

And because the Lord is my Shepherd, I will never lack direction, v3. "He leads me in paths of righteousness." His paths are the ones that are straight and good and righteous, but we don't walk them on automatic pilot. Our ways are not God's ways – we are prone to sin and even when led by our great Shepherd, we tend to wander around all kinds of places we don't belong.

So David, just two Psalms over, prays, Psalm 25:4-5, "Make me know Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, For You are the God of my salvation; For You I wait all the day."

We have to be taught the paths of righteousness. we have to be led on them. How does God lead us in these paths? I have never in my life heard an audible word from God. He has never appeared over my shoulder in my shaving mirror, telling me what decisions I should make that day. But he leads me just the same.

He leads me by his Word. It "is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105). "The unfolding of Your words gives light; It gives understanding to the simple." (Psalm 119:130) "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

He leads me by his Word, and he leads me by his Holy Spirit, the Helper who teaches us and guides us into all the truth, and glorifies Christ in us. (John 14:26, 16:13-14) "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." (Romans 8:14)

The Spirit and the Word work together. George Mueller said, "The Spirit and the Word must be combined. If I look to the Spirit alone without the Word, I lay myself open to great delusions. If the Holy Ghost guides us, He will do it according to the Scriptures and never contrary to them."

Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." The Spirit uses the Word to transform us, to renew our minds so that we recognize God's righteous paths.

Two months ago I preached on Psalm 1: if we delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night, we will be like a tree, strong, fruitful, enduring, and spiritually rich. That's the Spirit's work.

Would add here, if we delight in his word and meditate on it day and night, the Spirit will transform us, give us a renewed mind, and continually mold us into Christ-likeness. Those are the paths of righteousness.

But I want you to see something that I'll bet most of you haven't given much thought to before.

For His Name's Sake

Look at the last 4 words at the end of v3. Why does he lead us in paths of righteousness? "For his name's sake." These 4 words add a meaning to the verse that is very important.

We tend to think that God leads us in righteous paths because that's where we belong, because we are better off there than on the unrighteous paths. And that is true.

But understand, David is saying that God leads us to do right not merely for our sake, but for his! He is glorified when we walk in his ways, because when we do, we reflect his own holiness. Jonathan Edwards, in *The End for Which God Created the World*, writes "As God delights in his own beauty, he must necessarily delight in the creature's holiness which is a conformity to and participation of it..."

In other words, God gets glory when his children follow him. To see sin-stained, weak and finite creatures transformed by his power into God-worshiping, God-pleasing, obedient sheep brings praise and honor to his name.

And so he delights to be my Shepherd, so that I shall not want, that I will rest in green pastures, beside still waters, so that my soul will be refreshed and restored, and I will follow him in his paths of righteousness – all for the sake of the glory of his name, so that we can say with David, "I will give thanks to You, O Lord my God, with all my heart, And will glorify Your name forever." (Psalm 86:12)

I Will Not Fear

Our Shepherd's personal care reaches its fullest expression in v4, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me."

Might ask, "if God is such a caring shepherd, how do we come to this valley in the first place?" Shouldn't his paths of righteousness be pain-free, sunlit places?

Not according to Scripture. Jesus told the disciples, "in the world, you have tribulation" (John 16:33), and all we have to do is look at Hebrews 11 to know it is true. The author writes of believers who were tortured, mocked and whipped, chained and imprisoned. Stoned, sawn in two, tempted, put to death with the sword; destitute, afflicted, ill-treated.

Consider Stephen, godly man, full of Holy Spirit, first among first deacons, key man in first church. How did he die? Stoned to death, Acts 7, a grisly, painful way to die.

What about Paul? His list of suffering is enough for many lifetimes, let alone one, 2 Corinthians 11:23-27. *"beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure."*

If you think life for a Christian is supposed to be a breeze, you are seriously mistaken. David says "even though I walk," not "if I walk." Every one of us comes to the valley of the shadow of death, not just once, but perhaps many times in this life.

Because this valley isn't just death, it is every danger, heartbreak, sickness, and suffering we encounter in this life. The loss of a loved one, a beloved friend confronted with a wasting disease, our own distress as we deal with personal pain.

And look at the change in the way David speaks. In v1-3, he was talking about the Shepherd, he leads, he restores, he guides. Now, in the valley of the shadow of death, he is talking to the Shepherd, "I fear no evil, for you are with me, your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

When we come to the valley, truth about God, "the Lord is my shepherd," pretty quickly turns into prayer to God, "I fear no evil, for you are with me."

Why do we go through the valley? Because that is where the Shepherd leads us. Why would he do that? Give you 2 reasons. First, because he wants to mature us.

Soren Kierkegaard said that sometimes, "Christians reminded him of schoolboys who want to look up the answers to their math problems in the back of the book rather than work them through. We yearn for shortcuts."²

We look for ways to avoid the pain and hurt, which is understandable. But shortcuts usually lead away from the righteous path, not toward it. That's why we learn more, grow deeper, from walking the valley of the shadow of death than we do on the sunlit plain.

Remember Paul's list of sufferings? Romans 5:3-5 is his perspective on them, "We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us."

James, Jesus' brother, knew this. "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1:2-4)

He leads us through the valley because he wants to mature us. Second reason he leads us through the valley is so that we will trust him more. C. S. Lewis writes, in *The Problem of Pain*,

"I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinary contented condition, when suddenly a stab of pain threatens serious disease...At first I am overwhelmed, and all my little happiness look like broken toys. And perhaps, by God's grace...for a day or two I become...consciously dependent on God...drawing strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys.

"Thus the terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. God has had me for but 48 hours and then only by...taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe the sword for a minute, and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over—I shake myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness in the nearest flower bed. And that is why tribulation cannot cease until God sees us remade."

Before you can trust, you have to know you are weak and needy. We need the valley, and God is faithful to be there with us, leading us not only into it, but out the other side.

"I waited patiently for the Lord;" says Psalm 40, "And He inclined to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction, out of the miry clay, And He set my feet upon a rock making my footsteps firm. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God." (Psalm 40:1-3)

Paul wrote of his thorn in the flesh, 2 Cor. 12:9, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

It is when we are most aware of our weakness that God's power is most obvious in us.

What I am saying is this: the valley of the shadow of death is as much God's right path for you as are the green pastures and still waters. And if you are a Christian, you need fear no evil in that valley, even if it means great physical suffering.

He understands our pain because he's experienced it himself, to the fullest. It is no accident that this Psalm follows Psalm 22. How does that Psalm begin? That's the psalm of the cross. It's only after we've read, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" that we come to "The Lord is my Shepherd."

We must know the value of suffering before we can truly know the good Shepherd's care. The only true comfort is not to avoid the pain, and it isn't to embrace the pain, either. It is to embrace the Shepherd thru it.

Andrea Rowell is learning this truth, daily. She is dealing with her cancer with great trust in her Shepherd. She doesn't fear the valley because she knows he is with her, leading the way, and she is following willingly. Because she is, she is a living display of God's strength, power, and glory.

But she would be upset if you gave her the credit, and rightly so. It isn't Andrea's strength on display, it is the Shepherd's. She is strong because the Lord is strong in her.

And that's the way it is supposed to be when we go through the valley. Fearing no evil, comforted by the Shepherd's rod, which is what he uses to fend off attackers, and by his staff, which is what he uses to guide, and sometimes to apply firm but gentle correction to his sheep, keeping us focused on him, not the valley around us.

Because the Lord is my Shepherd I fear no evil, for I know the reality and comfort of his presence, his vigilance on my behalf, and his loving correction of my character.

You Prepare a Table Before Me

Finally, because the Lord is my shepherd, the threat of the valley is turned to triumph, v5, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup overflows."

This is the place of pasture, the place of feeding. When we were in Rocoroyvo 3 weeks ago, we saw goatherds take their flocks hours away to find good pasture to feed in.

So too our Shepherd takes us to a place of feeding. God spreads a banquet for us, anoints our heads with oil, and fills our cup to overflowing. Not simply what we need, but more than enough. And all the while, he's watching over us, keeping us from harm.

It is interesting that this banquet table follows the valley. God gives us the valley, and he also gives us times for rejoicing, festive times to appreciate his goodness. There are times for both. "For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ." (2 Corinthians 1:5)

And I Will Dwell in the House of the Lord Forever

Finally, because the Lord is my shepherd, v6, "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." And this is where we realize that the Psalm is not a static recitation of truth, it is a picture of a life-long journey.

The Shepherd is in front, leading the way. Following close behind comes his goodness and mercy. Hebrew for "follow" usually translated as "pursue," even "persecute." The idea is the very active goodness and mercy of God chasing after us.

"How great is Your goodness, Which You have stored up for those who fear You, Which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You, Before the sons of men!" (Psalm 31:19)
 "Because Your lovingkindness is better than life, My lips will praise You." (Psalm 63:3)

We are enveloped in the Shepherd's care, from the green pasture, through the dark valley, and so we come to journey's end, the house of the Lord, where we "will hunger no longer, nor thirst anymore; nor will the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and will guide them to springs of the water of life; and God will wipe every tear from their eyes." (Revelation 7:16-17)

Few parts of Scripture are as well known as this Psalm. 1 Corinthians 13, the Lord's Prayer, John 3:16, but none outshines the Holy Spirit's expression of simple truth in it.

So much so, that it is known and loved even by many who have no claim to it. Because you can love the Psalm, you can know it by heart and take great comfort in reciting it, but unless you have made the Lord it praises your Shepherd, you have no claim to his care.

He loves you – he loves the whole world – but if you do not submit to him as Lord, if you do not follow him as Shepherd, then he doesn't recognize you as one of his flock.

Jesus is the Shepherd of the Psalm. We heard it in John 10, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep... My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand." (John 10:11-15, 27-28)

If you are his, you are secure. But Jesus said not all who call him Shepherd are his sheep, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Matthew 7:22-23)

It isn't about calling him "Lord," it's about following him as Lord. How do you know if you are his or not? Would ask you 3 questions: Do you believe that he died on the cross in payment for your sins, and that God raised him from the dead? If so, have you repented of those sins and turned to him as Savior? If so, is there some evidence of the fruit of salvation in your life? A growing desire to submit to him, to know him, to conform your life to his character?

He longs to be your Shepherd, to make you lie down in green pastures, to lead you beside still waters, to restore your soul. He wants to lead you in paths of righteousness, through the valley of the shadow of the death, to his banquet table, and finally home, forever. Ask him to be your Shepherd today.

And for the rest of us, it is possible to be part of his flock, and yet not follow him closely, content to wander around at will, hanging on the fringes of the flock. Don't let that be you. If you want to know the peace and rest and trust that are yours in Christ, you have to follow the shepherd.

Life is far too short to live it half-hearted. Jim Elliot was a missionary to the Waodani Indians of Ecuador in the 1950's. He was one of 5 men who spent months making contact with the Waodani from the air before finally landing on a small beach and beginning tentative face-to-face meetings with members of the tribe.

The first meetings went very well, but on January 8, 1956, the Waodani attacked the men, and speared all 5 of them to death.

Elliot was 28 years old. But he lived a life that was 100% sold out to following his Shepherd. Sometime before his death, he wrote in his journal, "Oh, the fullness, pleasure, sheer excitement of knowing God on earth!" I think he knew more than most 20-somethings about following the shepherd. More than most 50-somethings, for that matter.

28 years old. Far too young, we think, yet he accomplished more in his 28 years than many do in 3 times the life span. None of us know what the future holds. But we can know this:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Even though I walk thru the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

^[1] Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Psalms 1-72*, p. 109

^[2] *Disappointment With God*, Philip Yancey, Zondervan, p. 208

Psalm 51

The Church is the fellowship of the redeemed. That means that by definition, it is fellowship of those whose sin has been forgiven. The paradox is, the more you grow in Christ, the more focused and aware of your own sin you are. The deeper your relationship with God, the more pronounced should be your sense and awareness of sin.

That's always been true of God's people. It was true of Isaiah, *"I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips."* It was true of Peter, *"Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"* (Luke 5:8) And it was true of Paul, *"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all."* (1 Timothy 1:15)

All confessed their sin openly. To say you follow Christ, yet never address your own sin, or never deal with it before God, is to misunderstand what it means to follow Christ.

- 1 John 1:8-10, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us."
- Proverbs 28:13, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion."
- James 5:16, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much."

We are to be honest and open about our sin, before God, and before one another. This morning, we will look at the greatest example of that in Scripture, from David, in Psalm 51. There is no better Scripture to consider before we come to the Lord's Table.

Turn there for a moment, and look at the heading: "For the choir director. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

This tells us several things. That the Psalm was written by David, for choir the director, that is, for the public worship of the Temple. The choir was made up of Levites who led in singing and reciting Scripture in the Temple service. And then this, "when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

The story of David and Bathsheba is a familiar one. In the '50's, during Hollywood's infatuation with Biblical subjects, a film was made of the story, starring Gregory Peck as David and Susan Hayward as Bathsheba. Here's the synopsis of the plot:

Though David has all the wealth & power of the King of Israel he does not have what he craves most: the true love of a woman who loves him as a man instead of as King. He is attracted to Bathsheba, the wife of a soldier who is more devoted to army duty than to his wife. Their affair

brings down God's wrath, and David must rediscover his faith in order to save Bathsheba from death by stoning, his kingdom from drought & famine, & himself from his many sins.

Very Hollywood, isn't it? There's a kernel of truth in there, but only a kernel. The real story is isn't so much a searing saga of love as it is a sordid tale of lust, deceit, and murder. One of the evidences that the Bible is no human document is that humans would never write so honestly about their failings. No hero in its pages is untainted, not even David, the "man after God's own heart."

This is a story of David at the height of his power, at the height of God's blessing on his life. And it is the story of how, at that time of greatest blessing, he inflicted on himself his greatest defeat.

It is found in 2 Sam. 11-12, let me summarize it for you. It starts in 11:1, "at the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, Israel's army to war against Ammonites, but David stayed at Jerusalem."

He should have been at war, but he stayed at home instead. No reason is given, but it isn't hard to imagine that David wants to enjoy the fruit of his power rather than continue to fight for it. As someone has said, Satan tempts all men, but the idle man tempts Satan. And David is idle.

One day, from his rooftop, he saw Bathsheba, the wife of one of his captains, Uriah, and immediately fell in lust with her. He committed adultery with her and got her pregnant. When he found out, he summoned Uriah home, thinking the normal course of events would cover up the adulterous pregnancy. But he hadn't counted on Uriah's loyalty.

Uriah refused to go home to his wife while his men were at war. Nothing David can do will get him home, so David decides that Uriah has to die.

He writes a letter to his unscrupulous general, Joab, and tells him to put Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle, then pull back and leave him there. And as if that weren't bad enough, David has faithful, loyal Uriah himself carry letter, knowing he won't read a message intended for his commander.

The man who was once stricken to the heart for cutting off a corner of Saul's robe has become entirely ruthless and cynical. And the plan works great. Joab did as David said, and Uriah was killed in the fighting.

His plan accomplished, David takes Bathsheba as wife. But Samuel, in classic understatement, tells us in 11:27, "the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of the Lord."

Months pass, the baby is born. It looks like David is off scot free, until God sends the prophet Nathan his way. Nathan tells the king a very sad story about a poor man and his little lamb, perfectly suited to David's case. And as Nathan tells of the rich man who takes the lamb and kills it, David reacts with righteous anger, "*As the Lord lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die.*"

And Nathan says, with the directness of God's messenger, "You are the man!" And he reels off God's bill of indictments against David, piling sin upon sin and consequence upon consequence, promising him that because of his sin, "the sword shall never depart from your house." Until David finally crumbles, and tells Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord."

Which seems like an awfully short confession for so powerful a series of sins. We might be tempted to question its sincerity, but Nathan knew it was genuine. He told David "the Lord has taken away your sin." But he also makes it clear that those consequences remain. More about those in a minute.

If David's on the spot confession was less than eloquent, it's because words aren't the heart of confession, heart is the heart of confession. A changed heart, a repentant heart, a broken heart. And David's heart is shattered, broken before God's reproof, and open to his cleansing.

But that short confession was only the beginning. In the days after the confrontation with Nathan, David gave longer, stronger voice to his confession. It's a mark of godliness, not to wear our guilt like a badge of honor, but to be honest, before God and man, about our sin. And David was so honest that he wrote 2 songs about his sin for public consumption. One, Psalm 32, focuses on the blessedness of God's forgiveness.

The other is Psalm 51, where David put his sin and his confession out there as part of the Temple worship as a testimony to God's forgiveness and a pattern of confession for God's people. This is a Psalm every Christian should know. And if we make it our own it will humble us, increase our desire for holiness, and help us lean on God's mercy.

It divides simply into two parts, based on two needs every confessing sinner must recognize: the need for God's pardon from our sin, v1-9; and the need for God's renewal within us, v10-19.

Prayer for Pardon, v1-9. The Psalm begins where everyone who knows his sin must begin, clinging to God's mercy. There is no other approach to a holy God by sinful man than God's mercy, v1-4.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity And cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, And my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned And done what is evil in Your sight, So that You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.

First, let me point out something about structure here. There are three triple parallels in the first 2 verses. First, a three-fold description of God's character: gracious, a God of lovingkindness, a God of compassion.

Second, there is a three-fold description of David's evil: transgressions, iniquity, and sin.

Finally, there is a three-fold description of God's action in dealing with our sin. Blot them out, wash me, cleanse me from my sin.

Why is this important? Because Hebrew poetry doesn't depend on rhymes, it depends on parallels. Saying something one way, then saying it another for added emphasis. Most parallelism is double, but when you really want to make a point, you say it 3 ways.

David is poetically emphasizing three things. First, the gracious and forgiving character of God. Second, the depth of his own sin. And third, the absolute completeness of the forgiveness available to the repentant sinner. This is confession raised to level of art.

And so, in the light of his sin, David pleads for God to be true to his nature. And God's nature, Scripture says, is "compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness." (Psalm 103:8) "The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, For His compassions never fail." (Lamentations 3:22)

Sin deserves judgment. When we come to God in confession, we are saying, "Don't give me what I deserve. Give me out of your nature." So here, David prays that God would be gracious, according to his lovingkindness, according to the greatness of his compassion.

But David's prayer goes beyond mere forgiveness. He doesn't just ask that God withhold judgment, he asks God to take his sin away. To blot it out, wash it away, cleanse him of it.

"I know my transgressions, my sin is ever before me, v3." It seems obvious, but you can't confess sin you don't repent of. It's one thing to know you are in sin, and another to have a heart broken for it. David wants his sin out of his life.

He acknowledges his responsibility for his sin. He doesn't blame Satan's temptations. He doesn't blame Bathsheba for taking public bath. He knows the fault is his, the sin is his. Alone.

Note how many times David uses "my" in v1-3 in talking about his sin: my transgressions, v1; my iniquity, my sin, v2; my transgressions, my sin again, v3. Any other attitude is not confession, it is explanation. Not repentance, but rationalization.

Then he says something truly striking in v4. "Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Your sight." Without trying to be flippant, I wonder if Uriah would beg to differ.

After all, David's sin was very much directed at this faithful soldier. It was Uriah's wife he coveted, Uriah's wife he impregnated, and ultimately, Uriah's life he took. Yet David says his sin was against God alone.

David is telling us that all sin is first and foremost, against God. And this is so because of who God is. Remove God from the picture, and there is no sin. Anything goes, there is no right or wrong.

Evil is only evil because there is a holy God who objectively defines goodness. A wrong done to a neighbor is sin because that neighbor is made in God's image, is loved by him just as you are, and is endowed with the same rights, feelings, and desires as you are.

To sin against a neighbor is to join Satan in tempting him to evil, to join Satan in working against God's good purposes toward him. All sin, even that against our neighbor, is truly sin against God. Because David knows that he completely accepts God's judgment against him, v4b, "*You are justified when You speak And blameless when You judge.*"

When we come to God in confession, have to recognize our sin for the evil it is. We have to take complete responsibility for it, throwing ourselves on the mercy of a compassionate, forgiving God, who alone can wash it away from us. No therapy, no ceremonies, no works can cleanse us of that stain. God alone can.

David elaborates on our need for God's cleansing, v5-9. First he says that we are sinful by nature, v5, "*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.*" We sin because we are sinful from birth.

That's no excuse, it is merely a fact. We inherited our fallen nature from Adam, so sin is the element in which we live. Job 15:14, "*What is man, that he should be pure, Or he who is born of a woman, that he should be righteous?*" "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Romans 3:23

But even though we are given to sin from the womb, that is still no excuse for our sin. God knows we are fallen, yet, v6 says, he desires truth within us. "*Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom...*"

A holy God is not interested in external righteousness. Anyone can fake externals, with a good work here or an offering there. But nobody can fake internal righteousness. And that's where God wants us to be right, true, and wise: in that hidden part of our selves that God alone sees.

Therefore, we need the cleansing God alone can give. David asks for that cleansing 3 ways. First, v7, "*Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.*"

Hyssop is a plant with a springy, spongy head. In Lev. 14:6-7, hyssop was used to declare pure one who had been cured of leprosy. A bird was sacrificed, the hyssop was dipped in its blood, and it was used like a brush to sprinkle blood on the one being made clean.

Moses also used it in dedicating the Tabernacle, Heb. 9:19, "*For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people.*"

To be purified with hyssop means to be purified with blood. He's saying, in effect, "Purify me on the basis of the blood which was shed for me." Sin requires blood. Heb. 9:22, "without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." When he says "wash me," he's saying that when he's washed in the blood, he will be "whiter than snow."

The second way David asks for cleansing from his sin is in v8, "*Make me to hear joy and gladness, Let the bones which You have broken rejoice.*" A holy God is no burden to follow. Rather, there is a deep-seated joy and gladness in a restored relationship with him.

The bones in v8 aren't literal, they are a picture of God's chastening. Heb. 12:10-11, "*He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness. All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*" David wants the chastening to end, so he can rejoice again.

The third way David asks for cleansing is in v9, "*Hide Your face from my sins And blot out all my iniquities.*" This is an echo of v1-2. He is underscoring the fact that God forgives. "*Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in unchanging love.*" (Micah 7:18)

No sin is beyond God's power, love, and mercy. Psalm 86:5, "*For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.*"

Prayer for Renewal, v10-19. Because we are born in sin, if we are left to ourselves, sin will always be the result, even when God washes and forgives us. We need God's direct help, so David asks of God three things, v10-12.

First, he asks God to do a new work within him, v10, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me.*" Not "clean my heart," but create a new, clean one. Creating something out of nothing is something that God alone can do. To renew a steadfast spirit means, literally to make a right spirit in him. Again, that is something God alone can do.

Second, he asks God to abandon him because of his sin, v11, "*Do not cast me away from Your presence And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.*" I think David has Saul on his mind here. Saul, David's predecessor on the throne, began well, but fell into sin and never came out of it. So God took away his Spirit from him, he took away his throne, and finally, he took away his life.

David doesn't want to end like Saul, he wants to follow God all his days. Just as a side note: don't read too much into this and think that David is telling us we can lose our salvation. This is David's poetic cry of the heart, not a systematic theology on the perseverance of the saints.

Third, v12, similar to v8, "*Restore to me the joy of Your salvation And sustain me with a willing spirit.*" There is a sweetness about a right relationship between the Lord and his follower. Joy is not in sin, but in its forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration. David is asking God to uphold him with a spirit that is once again willing to follow God.

God desires our purity, our holiness. He desires that we have joy in him, that we rely upon him, and need him. There is nothing in these requests from David, only from God. David is asking God to do what God alone can do. And he is faithful. Ask, and he will do it.

That's the promise of the New Covenant, Ezek. 36:25-27, *"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."*

David articulates his response to God's forgiveness in v13-19. David had always been used by God, and he wants God to use him again. So, restored by God, he will lead others to the same place, v13, *"Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners will be converted to You."*

He will teach how a compassionate God deals with sinners. Chastening them, providing a blood sacrifice to cover their sin and point to the ultimate sacrifice of his Son, and forgiving their sin when they turn in repentance.

In v14, David prays, *"Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation."* He's praying for deliverance from the guilt of Uriah's murder, not the consequences. Confessing our sin restores a right relationship with God, but it doesn't mean we necessarily escape sin's consequences.

And the consequences for David would be heavy. In spite of them, and because of them, he feels the need to worship again, v14-15, *"Then my tongue will joyfully sing of Your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, That my mouth may declare Your praise."*

Spurgeon said, "A great sinner pardoned makes a great singer. Sin has a loud voice, and so should our thankfulness." David wants to offer sacrifices that are pleasing to God again. It is safe to assume that as King, he maintained a façade of worship, offering sacrifice as the Law required.

But sacrifice, without a right heart to go with it, is useless, v16-17. *"For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."*

Sacrifices were to be a token of a heart that was right before God. Without the personal reality of a humble, repentant heart, even the sacrifices commanded by God had no value at all.

Finally, v18-19, applies David's personal prayer of confession to the nation. Same truths: God does the work: *"By Your favor do good to Zion; Build the walls of Jerusalem."* In other words, revive your people, build your nation, restore it, so that, v19, we can offer right sacrifice. *"Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, In burnt offering and whole burnt offering; Then young bulls will be offered on Your altar."*

When God does the work within us, when he extends his favor to us, and forgives us, then he accepts our offerings.

Psalms 51 is a perfect picture of confession, and behind it is the reality of God's forgiveness, full and free. But understand this. David's confession, and God's forgiveness, did not stop the natural progression of the consequences of David's sin from washing over him like a tidal wave.

The child born to Bathsheba died, as Nathan said he would. Beyond that, he told David, "the sword shall never depart from your house," and it didn't.

David's son Amnon repeated his father's adultery, but went a step further, in incest against his sister, Tamar.

David's son Absalom also repeated his father's sins, and also took them a step further, murdering his brother Amnon for the rape of their sister. Then, rebelling against his father, he chased David out of Israel, and committed adultery with David's concubines, in public, on the very same rooftop where David first watched Bathsheba.

This was Ahithophel's idea, in order to completely humiliate David and to send the message that Absalom was king in every way.

Who was Ahithophel? He had been David's counselor, but when Absalom rebelled, Ahithophel rebelled with him. And this is the coup de grace in divine irony, because Ahithophel was Bathsheba's grandfather. It's likely that he only had a place of authority with David because of Bathsheba, so that the initial success of Absalom's rebellion was a direct result of David's adultery.

And that isn't all. When Absalom's revolt was overthrown, he was killed by Joab, in spite of David's express command that his life be spared. But it was Joab who carried out David's plan against Uriah, and no doubt felt like he had David over a barrel, and could act with impunity.

The sword truly never departed from David's household during his lifetime, or the generations after. When David was dying, before Solomon was named king, David's son Adonijah tried to take the throne. He was deposed, and Solomon had him murdered after David's death.

And when Solomon died, the kingdom split in two, fell into apostasy and was ultimately led away to captivity. David's sin had set the pattern for the rest of Israel's history. It is fair to say that the apostasy and ultimate captivity of Israel had its roots in David's sin.

Sin's earthly consequences are terrible. But the consequences for our sin are far worse if left to eternity. There is no opportunity then to ask God's pardon.

David lived when animal sacrifice covered human sin, looking ahead to Messiah's ultimate sacrifice that would pay for sin once and for all. We live in the light of that sacrifice, and can look back to the price that's already been paid.

We must take our sin seriously. I pray that you would make this Psalm your own, clinging to God's mercy and cleansing, relying on his renewing power, made available to you in the cross of Christ.

Take your stand beneath the cross, a mighty Rock of salvation, a home in the wilderness, a place of rest, the very image of God's redeeming love.

Psalm 72, The Savior Reigns!

All year, when I've preached, I've brought a Psalm. I've done that because I want you to know the Psalms, to make them part of your life. They are the Bible's book of worship, and should be a regular part of your personal time in God's word.

We've looked at Psalm 1 and the way of blessing. At Psalm 23 and our Good Shepherd. At Psalm 51 and our need for confession of sin. At Psalm 103 and God's gracious forgiveness of our sin. And at Psalm 127 and the importance of giving to God our work and our families.

So we'll bring this series to a close with Psalm 72. Like Psalm 127, it is by Solomon. It's a "coronation" psalm, a type of psalm that focuses on the human king who reigns on David's throne and his relationship with God. On one level, Psalm 72 is a prayer for the king, perhaps for Solomon himself, or for the son that would rule after him.

But it isn't as a psalm about Solomon or his sons that it has come to mean so much to the church. OT commentator Derek Kidner says that applied to a human king, the Psalm's language would be no more than courtly extravagance.ⁱⁱ

Rather, this Psalm holds a high place in Scripture because it so vividly and profoundly portrays the coming King beyond Solomon, beyond his great father, David, beyond any earthly king, the Lord, Jesus Christ. We sang "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" this morning. What do the herald angels sing? "Glory to the newborn...king." Last week, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her...king."

These great carols don't merely focus on the baby Jesus, born in a manger, but on the Savior who reigns, King of all the earth. He was born to die, born to rise, and born to reign over his kingdom. Now, when we think of Christ's kingdom, what period of time do we normally have in mind? The millennial kingdom, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth pictured in Revelation 20. But we need to realize that there is more to the Kingdom than that. One of the mysteries of the kingdom is the paradox that it is future, yet it is present.

The Kingdom is future. In the parable of Luke 19:11, Jesus tells of a nobleman who goes to a far country to receive his kingdom, and he's gone a long time. Luke says Jesus told that parable because, v11, "they supposed that the kingdom of God was going to appear immediately." Jesus answered their assumption with a story that said, not yet. In Acts 1, just before Jesus ascends, the disciples ask, "Lord, is it at this time you are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?" His answer was "it's not for you to know." Not yet. So the Kingdom is future.

Yet, the Kingdom is present, Matthew 12:28, "If I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. Luke 17:20-21, "The kingdom of God is not coming with

signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." So the Kingdom is present.

That's the mystery of the kingdom, it is here, and it is not yet. That's why Jesus said, Matthew 13:31-32, "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches."

It starts small and grows. The Kingdom has come in the person of Jesus Christ like a mustard seed. It will some day be a huge, majestic, mighty tree, but we don't see that now. It is present, but not yet consummated. That will happen at the end of human history, when all God's enemies will be defeated and all sin, suffering, and sickness will be destroyed forever. That is part of the "not yet," what G. Campbell Morgan called, "the Kingdom for which the world still waits."

Even though we wait for its consummation, that Kingdom is still present, and that means that even now, Christ reigns. And that is what Psalm 72 is all about. Christ, our Savior, reigns!

Two quick points before we dive into the text. First, Psalm has 20 verses, but I'm only dealing w/19. Reason for that is the last verse, v20, is most likely editor's note. The Psalms were written over 1,000 years. The earliest, Psalm 90, was written by Moses around 1400BC. The last ones date from the mid-400's BC. They were compiled several times over those years, and put into 5 "books," based on their authorship and subject matter. If you'll notice, Psalm 72 is the last psalm of book 2. We believe v20 comes from some compilation before the final one, because there are many Psalms after #72 written by David. So v20 gives us a glimpse into the nuts and bolts of gathering the Scripture together, but not part of the original, and so we won't cover it further.

Second, a translation point: The NASB reads "may he," referring to the coming King. That is prayer language, fitting for a prayer for the king. But the Hebrew can also be translated "he will," which is prophetic language. That is the best way to understand this Psalm: apply every one of these "He will's" to the reigning Savior. That's what the NKJV does, and that's how I'll be reading it. Doing that gives us a simple 5-point outline. The Savior's reign is righteous, v1-7, universal, v8-11, benevolent, v12-14, eternal, v15-17, ending all with doxology for the reigning savior, v18-19.

The Savior's Reign is Righteous, v1-7. "Give the king Your judgments, O God, And Your righteousness to the king's Son. ²He will judge Your people with righteousness, And Your poor with justice. ³The mountains will bring peace to the people, And the little hills, by righteousness. ⁴He will bring justice to the poor of the people; He will save the children of the needy, And will break in pieces the oppressor."

The right of a king to reign descends from father to son, and that is also true from God the Father to God the Son. The King's Son is enthroned by divine right, endowed w/divine wisdom, and so he will rule the world with divine righteousness. That's a novel concept! A king with God's righteousness as the foundation and guiding light of his throne. But it isn't just what he's like, it is who he is. Jer. 23:6, "In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, 'The Lord our righteousness.'

And he exercises that righteousness on the people's behalf. Because he is righteous, v2, he judges the people righteously, the poor with justice. No one suffers wrong in Christ's kingdom. There is no partiality with him. The wealthy and the powerful get no favored treatment. That's why Paul said in Romans 8:28 that God causes all things to work together for good for those who love him. Because he is righteous and judges the afflicted with justice, he will never give you something that is evil.

We may not always understand what he has for us, whether sickness, difficulty, or loss, but we can always know what he gives us flows from his righteousness. When given a burden we don't understand and cannot carry on our own, we can know that because he is righteous, he will not give us more than we can handle.

God's righteousness always results in God's peace. Because he is righteous, his peace radiates, deep and wide, through the whole land. Mountain passes were the last place you'd expect peace. The mountains and hills were where thieves and robbers hung out, where armies ambushed, and where pagan idols were offered sacrifice.

Because he is righteous, he will vindicate the afflicted. He will do them justice, but more than that, v4 says he will save them, and crush their oppressors. Understand, he is not only talking about those who are physically poor. Just as the king is more than an earthly king, so the poor are more than earthly poor, they are those who recognize their spiritual poverty, who are poor in spirit, mourn for their sin, meek.

And that means the oppressors of v4 are more than earthly powers. He crushes sin and Satanic influence, delivering us from its power. Charles Wesley's great hymn, "O for a Thousand Tongues," says "He breaks the pow'r of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean, his blood availed for me."

He crushes the source of fear, doubt, grief, and despair. Keith Getty's "In Christ Alone" says, "No guilt in life no fear in death, This is the power of Christ in me, From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. No power of hell no scheme of man, Can ever pluck me from His hand, Till He returns or calls me home, Here in the power of Christ I'll stand."

It is in that power of Christ, the righteous, reigning Savior, that Isaiah 55:12 says, "you will go out with joy And be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth into shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

He is the true Melchizedek, the Old Testament priest and king, in Genesis briefly, who named in Psalms, and Hebrews as a type of Christ. His name literally means "king of righteousness." He was the king of Salem, which is Hebrew for "peace," so he is also "king of peace." Christ is the true Melchizedek, king of peace, and king of righteousness.

Righteousness is the foundation of his throne, and righteousness is the result of his reign, v5-7: "They shall fear You As long as the sun and moon endure, Throughout all generations. ⁶ He shall come down like rain upon the grass before mowing, Like showers *that* water the earth. ⁷ In His days the righteous shall flourish, And abundance of peace, Until the moon is no more."

Where he reigns, v5 says, those he has saved will worship, as long as sun and moon endure. Spurgeon says his reign is “as lasting as the lights of heaven.” The sun, moon, and stars will give out before his reign comes to end. How many dynasties have come, gone in few thousand years of recorded history? Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, Ottomans, Europeans in all varieties. All seemed permanent. All seemed invincible. Now all are gone, blips in the river of history, memories in books.

The power of the righteous, reigning Savior is infinite, yet it isn't his power that Solomon pictures in v6. Falling rain on new-mown grass, picture of gentleness, v6, refreshing, renewing rain that brings nourishment and fruit. There is nothing better than the smell of a freshly mown lawn after a light rain cleanses the air and the ground. That's the picture here. The Righteous Savior rains down his grace, love, mercy, peace, and joy.

And as a result, v7, “the righteous shall flourish.” Made righteous because he is righteous, abundant in peace and in depth and length of days, their worship will outlast the moon. Spurgeon, “let all hearts and voices welcome the King of nations, Jesus, the Good, the Great, the Just, and Ever-blessed.”

The Savior's Reign is Universal, v8-11. “He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth. ⁹ Those who dwell in the wilderness will bow before Him, And His enemies will lick the dust. ¹⁰ The kings of Tarshish and of the isles Will bring presents; The kings of Sheba and Seba Will offer gifts. ¹¹ Yes, all kings shall fall down before Him; All nations shall serve Him.”

His reign stretches from sea to sea, v8, from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and back again. He is King of kings, Lord of lords, ruler of all mankind. No human king ever ruled all territory given to Israel. None ever will, but Christ. It stretches from the River, the Euphrates, the central focus of the ancient world, to the furthest point you can imagine. Name any river you like, from there to the ends of earth, Christ reigns.

He is central figure of all history. He is the central figure of God's divine plan for mankind. He is the central figure of salvation, and so he is the focus of all glory, praise, honor, and worship, from nomads to kings.

The nomads bow before him, v9, wild, tribal, desert-dwellers. His enemies bow before him as well, broken, humbled, face down in dirt.

Kings honor him, v10-11. Tarshish and the islands will bring presents. These are places across the sea; Tarshish is thought to be present-day Spain, as remote and far as the imagination of Solomon's day could go.

Sheba, Seba, will offer gifts. These are places across the desert, southern Egypt and present-day Sudan. From across the sea to across the desert, from nomads to kings, all pay homage to the King of kings and Lord of lords, so that “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow...and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11)

So the Savior's reign is righteous, it is universal, and it is ***Benevolent, v12-14***. "For He will deliver the needy when he cries, The poor also, and *him* who has no helper.¹³ He will spare the poor and needy, And will save the souls of the needy.¹⁴ He will redeem their life from oppression and violence; And precious shall be their blood in His sight."

The reason kings bow to him is, he is good. He hears the cries of the needy and the poor, and delivers them, v12. He has compassion on them, and saves them, v13, and he rescues them from oppression and violence, v14.

How often have you heard that the God of the Old Testament is an angry, vengeful God? It's not true. He is holy and just, and a rebellious child will always mistake justice for vengeance. How often did God respond with compassion to Israel's cries for deliverance? How often did God deliver David when he cried out to him?

The Old Testament is story after story of God turning in compassion to his children's cries. A child's cry always touches a father's heart, maybe even especially when it is a rebellious child. That is no less true of our heavenly father. When the spiritually needy cry out, God responds. The humanistic proverb, "God helps those who help themselves," has it exactly backwards. God helps those who ***cannot*** help themselves.

God's heart is for the poor and the needy. He is the help of the helpless, hope of the hopeless. Their "blood," lives, are precious to him. Isaiah 25:4, "For You have been a defense for the helpless, A defense for the needy in his distress, A refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; For the breath of the ruthless Is like a rain storm against a wall."

I know some of you are struggling with hopelessness, for whatever reason. This is for you. If you have no hope today, look to him, because he is looking to you.

Savior's Reign is Eternal, v15-17. You know, no matter how loud subjects yell out, "O King, live forever!" they never do. But the reigning Savior will live, v15, and live forever. Solomon pictures that eternity by showing eternal prayers for him and abundance from him.

"And He shall live; And the gold of Sheba will be given to Him; Prayer also will be made for Him continually, *And* daily He shall be praised.¹⁶ There will be an abundance of grain in the earth, On the top of the mountains; Its fruit shall wave like Lebanon; And *those* of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth.¹⁷ His name shall endure forever; His name shall continue as long as the sun. And *men* shall be blessed in Him; All nations shall call Him blessed."

Prayers will never cease, v15. Solomon says these are prayers ***for*** the king. We can understand praying for an earthly king, what about a heavenly one? How do you pray for the One who sits at the right hand of the Father's throne? You can pray he would be glorified. You can pray for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. you can pray that he returns soon.

Abundance will never end, v16. In his reign, the fertility of the land will be indescribable. Barns and silos will bulge with grain, even mountaintops. Ever see a cultivated mountain top? No, this

is a picture of abundance, of fruitfulness, of a harvest so great, the wind rustles thru it like leaves in a forest, and as a result, the people will flourish like grass in a field.

And so, because the reigning Savior is righteous, because his reign is universal, benevolent and eternal, v17, his name will endure forever. It is the name of saving power, the identifying mark of the Christian, renowned, glorified, blessed, and powerful, for as long as the sun shines, and longer.

He is the light that fuels the sun and in his new creation, at the end of all the ages, he is the light that makes the sun superfluous. And in accordance with the promise God made to Abraham, all men are blessed in Him, and all nations shall call Him blessed.

Doxology, V18-19. These last two verses are the response of the heart, and need no exposition. This is adoration prompted by the Savior's righteous reign, "blessed be the Lord." The highest expression of praise is to bless his name, to worship him for who he is, the God who alone works wonders. As we await the fulfillment of his reign with joyous anticipation, we look to the day the whole earth will be filled with his glory.

Jesus Christ, the baby born at Bethlehem, is the last king. All who ever reigned before him will submit their crowns to him, willingly or not, and none will ever reign after him.

Even though we wait for the Kingdom that is not yet, the incredible truth of Psalm 72 is that our King reigns today. When the king is your protector, you are fully protected, and so our salvation is secure.

Even though we wait for the Kingdom that is not yet, he reigns today, and so we know that he works all things together for good.

Even though we wait for the Kingdom that is not yet, he reigns today, and so we already have many of the blessings of the Kingdom in the person of the King. The King has come and has dealt with sin once for all on the cross. The King has risen from the grave, defeating death, and now sits at the Father's right hand, where he reigns until all his enemies are under his feet.

The King's righteousness is ours by faith. His Spirit dwells in us, producing his holiness, love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The King's victory over Satan is ours as we resist him, girded with the King's armor and the King's Word.

He is the king to whom all authority has been given, in heaven and on earth. He is the Lord both of the living and the dead, who has been raised above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. (Mt. 28:18; Rom. 14:9; Eph. 1:21-22)

His is the name which is above every name, to whom every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. He is the head over all rule and authority, who sits at the right hand of God, to whom angels and authorities and powers have been

subjected, and who must reign until all his enemies have been placed under his feet. (Philippians 2:9-11; Colossians 2:10; 1 Peter 3:22; 1 Corinthians 15:25)

^[1] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, London, 1973, p. 254.

Psalm 90: Numbering Your Days

Time, and our place in it, is one of those universal concerns. None of us ever has enough of it. Some years ago one of the newsmagazines commissioned a survey of some 6,000 people to see how they used their time. Among other things, they discovered that in a lifetime the average American would spend: Six months sitting at stoplights; Eight months opening junk mail; One year looking for misplaced objects; 2 years unsuccessfully returning phone calls; 4 years doing housework; 5 years waiting in line; 6 years eating (a few of us may be closer to 7).

Have you ever thought about the fact that we spend a lot of our time doing things that we don't think about much? God has given each one of us the same amount of time: 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Why is it that everybody else seems to have so much more of it than ourselves?

As we think about time, I'd like to relate it to something that may seem somewhat unrelated, the Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. Think of the hope and promise of God's deliverance of Israel from slavery. God raised up a deliverer, Moses, to bring his people out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan, a rich land that was theirs by birthright thru Abraham, and now would be theirs in actual fact.

God not only delivered Israel but he did it in the most spectacular fashion, a series of plagues that devastated Egypt and all its false gods, proving conclusively that it is Yahweh who alone is Lord. To cap it all, the escape climaxed in the magnificent parting of the Red Sea, an ending tailor-made for Hollywood. But God's work on Israel didn't end with deliverance from Egypt.

Once in the desert, God revealed himself as guide and protector, by day and by night. Further, he revealed his love for his chosen people and his desire that they know him and worship him by establishing the Law and the commandments. Never was there a people so blessed! And then, real life kicked in.

The desert was filled with difficulty and disappointment. These recently delivered Israelites begin to miss their regular meals and their Egyptian gods, to tire of sand in their manna, and really, just for once they'd like to find a spot with a little bit of shade. Yet thru it all, God is preparing them for the culmination of his deliverance, when they will enter the land.

After 2 years in preparation in the desert, it is finally time to enter the rest that God has held for them since Abraham's day. They have but to trust him and to take hold of that rest, entering into the land. And that is where life literally falls apart for the Israelites.

Turn to Numbers 14 for a moment. We all know the story from here. Fearful of the inhabitants of the land, not trusting that God would deliver it as he promised, the Israelites rebel.

Numbers 14:1-4

That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." (NIV)

Verse 2 is especially instructive, isn't it? After all that God did to pull them out of Egypt (at their request, don't forget) they now conclude that all in all, they would rather die in the desert than in the land they have been headed for. So what does God say as a result of this rebellion? Look at vv28-29:

Numbers 14:28-29

So tell them, "As surely as I live, declares the LORD, I will do to you the very things I heard you say: In this desert your bodies will fall -- every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. (NIV)

And thus, the wandering in the desert was born. This people, created and redeemed from slavery in Egypt in order to kill giants in Palestine, winds up in a meaningless life of killing time instead. 38 years of walking in a big, hot, dusty, circle. Does that describe your life? I hope not. There are always bits and pieces of wasted time, but God created us for purpose. Moses understood this.

Now, think about this rebellion and its consequence from his perspective. The fact that the people from age 20 and up would all die meant that he would have to . . . bury them. In other words, from this moment until the day of his own passing, Moses lived with death. In fact, hundreds of thousands of deaths.

Based on Exodus 12:37 which says there were 600,000 men, not counting women and children, many estimate that the Israelites may have numbered close to 2 million in total. Accounting for those under 20, some estimate that on average, 80-90 people would have died every day for 38 years. 3-4 every hour. Can you imagine that? Almost 100 people every single day for 38 years, dead and buried. And who was there thru it all? Moses. Day in, day out, until the last of the rebellious adults was gone.

Moses' life was filled with death. What kind of perspective would that kind of experience give you? How would that affect your outlook on life? How eager would you be to roll out of bed and start another brand new day?

We tend not to want to think much about death. Billy Graham said that we ignore death, calling such an attitude the "great suppression" of the 20th century. We put our cemeteries far from us,

but perhaps we could profit from considering Moses' outlook, since it comes from such a depth of experience. Turn to Psalm 90.

The Book of Psalms is an edited collection of praise songs. In fact, that is what "psalms" means. Literally, "praises." Who do we call "the Psalmist?" David, because he wrote so many. But he didn't write them all. Many were written by Asaph, David's chief musician. Some were written by Solomon, others by a group of musicians that was called "the sons of Korah." But one, Psalm 90, was written by Moses, making it the oldest Psalm there is.

In Psalm 90 Moses' experience of death in the desert is seen from the perspective of an experienced, godly, and long-lived man who has learned the most valuable lesson in the world. Psalm 90 is a "cause and effect" psalm. That is, each of its major points is grounded in the previous point. In it, Moses' prayer of v17, the last verse, expresses the ultimate desire of his heart: that God's favor would rest on man, and that in particular, God's favor would rest on man by confirming man's work, establishing it, giving it permanence:

And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And do confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.

Rather than try to make sense of this psalm from the ending lets look at it in its entirety first. It is a simple psalm in its structure, with 2 major divisions. The first 11 verses are Moses' reflections on the eternity of God, the brevity of man's life, and the wrath of this holy and eternal God toward the sin of unholy and death-prone man. v12-17 presents Moses' requests which flow out of this reflection.

Reflections (1-11)

First Reflection: The Eternity of God (v1-2).

(A Prayer of Moses the man of God.) Lord, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born, Or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God.

Moses exalts the eternity of God, calling him Adonai, the Lord, the Creator & Ruler of the universe. He says simply that the Lord is our "dwelling place," the oasis or refuge, of man. The idea here is a place of comfort, of safety, and refreshment. He does not merely inhabit some temple or place which becomes a place of refuge, he is our refuge. In all generations, the Lord God who is Mighty Creator is the comfort of man, because he is eternal God. "From everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God."

Think about this: Long before matter existed, before the cosmos first awoke, when there was nothing, God had already existed forever. Not only that, but God had been content forever. He is perfectly contented, called "the blessed God" in 1 Timothy. When you are looking for help, how much comfort can you draw from someone who is ill-tempered and out of sorts, who can barely get themselves out of bed in the morning, let alone bear your burdens? None. There is comfort in his eternal contentedness.

Before time or creation ever was, God had already existed forever. From eternity past, to eternity future, the Lord alone is God, a place of comfort and refreshment. And that makes him very different from his creation.

Second Reflection: The Brevity of Man (v3-6).

Thou dost turn man back into dust, And dost say, "Return, O children of men." For a thousand years in Thy sight Are like yesterday when it passes by, Or {as} a watch in the night. Thou hast swept them away like a flood, they fall asleep; In the morning they are like grass which sprouts anew. In the morning it flourishes, and sprouts anew; Toward evening it fades, and withers away.

Unlike the eternal God who is a place of comfort and refreshment, his creation, symbolized by man, lives a brief life that turns to dust at its end. From the curse of Genesis 3, "dust you are and to dust you will return," God says in essence, "Return to dust, O children of men." He is eternal, we are anything but.

When you think of a long life, what figures come to mind? 80-90 years? What about 1000? Right. Nobody lives that long. Most of us don't make it to 1/10 of that length. The few that hit 100 get their name read on the "Today" show and the truly fortunate might get a visit from a bubbly and balding weatherman. Who lives past 100? Very, very few. 10 times that length? Forget about it. It is preposterous to think about.

We are a drop in the immense stream of human time, stretching back thousands of years, but God is bigger still. In fact, time is part of God's creation. He *made* it. God exists outside of and independent from time. Like we are independent of the pond a fish must have for life, stepping into and out of it at will, God is independent of time. He created it, he is not bound by it.

What does Moses mean when he says in v4 that 1000 years are like a day? Or even shorter, like a watch in the night, a 3 or 4 hour period of time? It means that time, which is everything to us, is nothing to God. Don't mistake this for a heavenly time scale, thinking that we can calculate eternity. Moses' point is simply that in the light of eternity, our lives are incredibly *short!*

Like a flood seeping past and carrying away everything it comes into contact with, we are swept away by time's flow. Like new grass that sprouts in the morning and withers away in the heat of the day, we aren't around very long. Do you hear the perspective of someone very familiar with death?

Third Reflection: The Wrath of God (7-11).

For we have been consumed by Thine anger, And by Thy wrath we have been dismayed. Thou hast placed our iniquities before Thee, Our secret sins in the sight of Thy presence. For all our days have declined in Thy fury; We have finished our years like a sigh. As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, Or if due to strength, eighty years, Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; For soon it is gone and we fly away. Who understands the power of Thine anger, And Thy fury, according to he fear that is due Thee?

Not only is man's life very brief, but it is so different in character from its maker's intent. God is holy, and he created us in holiness. Yet man has sinned, and he feels the wrath of the holy Creator, the Lord God. Our sins, even the secret sins that no one knows about, are ever and always before God.

I think most of us deal with about 3 levels of sin in our lives. There are the sins that I'll tell you about, the sins I'll tell my wife about, then the ones I'll only tell God about. But there is another, deeper level of sin. Those "secret" sins that I can't or won't acknowledge to anyone, even God. And yet, even those things I am so ashamed of I can't bring myself to admit, an infinitely holier and more powerful person knows infinitely well. What a horrific thought!

What Moses has in mind is clearly the rebellion of the Israelites. The daily reminder, for 38 years, of their sin in the desert as grave after grave after grave appears in their wanderings, made God's wrath and man's sin very evident. The promise of the Exodus has been replaced by the tedium of the Wandering, and Moses' choice of words in v9 reflects it - declined, finished, sigh, whisper.

What do you consider a long life? How about 70 or 80 years. Pretty short in comparison to eternity. What is more, this brief life of 70 or 80 years is spent in labor and sorrow. Moses asks the question "who understands the power of God's anger, who understands the fear that is due him?"

This all sounds pretty bleak and depressing, doesn't it? Getting pretty close to hellfire and brimstone preachin'. But God's wrath is *not* Moses' emphasis. It is a reality no thinking man or woman can ignore, but it is not the sum total of God's character. We are hearing the perspective of a man who buried several hundred thousand people over a 38 year span of time. 38 years lived in the consequence of their sin. How many years will we live in the consequence of our own? How about every day we draw breath?

It is good to consider the power of God's anger. Hebrews 10:31 says "it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Are you prepared for eternity?

But the Psalm doesn't end there. In fact, the sorrow of this brief life in the light of an eternal God is cause for great hope, provided we are prepared for eternity, provided we have the proper perspective on our time.

Three reflections - on God's eternity, man's brevity, and God's wrath against man's sin. There are balanced by three requests.

Requests (v12-17)

First Request: Teach Us to Number Our Days (v12).

So teach us to number our days, That we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom.

v12 contains the implied answer to the anguished question of v11. Who understands the power of God's anger, who understands the fear that is due him? The one whom God has taught to "number his days." Just what does that mean? How long are you going to live? John Pike? Ken Carson? None of us knows the answer to that question. How can we number our days if we don't know how long we are going to live?

Well, the truth is that we have a rough idea. What does v10 say? 70 years, or due to strength, 80 years. Actual results may vary. Whatever time we have, 70 or 80 years, 60 or 90, it is a finite amount. God is eternal, we are not. Lord, teach us to know that we are only here but a moment. And if we recognize that fact, if we number our days by knowing they are limited, what then? "That we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom." The recognition that our time here is limited should result in . . . wise hearts. Not smarts, but wisdom.

What kind of wisdom? Hold your place here and look at Exodus 31:6:

"in the hearts of all who are skillful (wise-hearted) I have put skill (wisdom), that they may make all that I have commanded you."

In the building of the tabernacle, God provided skillful craftsmen who knew how to work in metal, in wood, and in fabric. Literally, the word translated skill is "wise." Their wisdom is skill in their particular craft. In the same way in Psalm 90, the heart of wisdom of v12 is a heart of skill in living. Knowing how to live life skillfully, knowing how to live life well.

Seneca, a Roman philosopher, dramatist, and statesman was pretty accurate when he said, "We are always complaining that our days are few, and acting as though there would be no end." In the same vein but a bit more contemporary, Susan Ertz writes, "Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon." How many of us does *that* fit?

Lord, teach us to know that we are only here but a moment, so that we can live that moment skillfully and well. In the light of our few years, give us wisdom to use it on things that matter. What are the things that matter? That answer will depend on where you are in the light of eternity. If you are prepared for eternity, if you have put your life under the authority of Jesus Christ, accepting his death on the cross as payment for your sin, then use your days on things that have eternal significance.

But, if you have not yet taken that step, there is no more important thing for you to do. All other matters, all other concerns, pale in comparison. The heart of skill will recognize its need and cry out to God for repentance and mercy. Don't delay.

Second Request: Return, Satisfy, Make Us Glad, Reveal (v13-16).

Do return, O Lord; how long will it be? And be sorry for Thy servants. O satisfy us in the morning with Thy lovingkindness, That we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad according to the days Thou hast afflicted us, And the years we have seen evil. Let Thy work appear to Thy servants, And Thy majesty to their children.

The second request, actually a combination of four, should be the daily prayer of our hearts as we live skillful lives, as we give God freedom to work within us. It is a reflection of the "dwelling place" of comfort of v1 that while this life is filled with difficulty, skillful hearts will still pray: *Return* from your judgment on our sin; *Satisfy* us with your lovingkindness that we may praise you; *Make us glad* for as many days as we have trouble.

How many days do we have trouble? All our lives. So, how long will he make us glad? All our lives. In this life there is an inescapable need that should drive us to our knees. And going there, we find comfort and gladness in God's lovingkindness. Finally, we also find that God will *reveal* his work to us and in us and to the generation that follows.

If we number our days, living lives skillfully, we draw our comfort from him. If we don't, what happens? We'll tend to treat God casually, to take his word lightly, to treat sin less seriously, and to seek "instant" gratification, and all for a fleeting life here at the expense of eternity.

Where do you draw your comfort from in this life? Is it from the Lord, or from the world? Are you willing to let God satisfy you, or are you driven to settle for less? Will you let him make you glad, or would you rather escape into more shallow satisfactions?

And so we come to Moses' final prayer. We have seen the eternity of God, the brevity and strife of man's life, and the necessity for man to number his days in order to live life skillfully. Now, Moses concludes his song with his third and final request.

Final Request: Establish Our Work (v17).

And let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; And do confirm for us the work of our hands; Yes, confirm the work of our hands.

Moses' prayer is that the favor (literally, the beauty) of the Lord God would be upon man by making his work lasting. The word he uses means to make permanent, to establish in a lasting way, and he repeats it for emphasis. I love the KJV, "establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it."

There is irony here that I don't want you to miss. God is eternal, we are not. In fact, our lives are but a moment, swept away in the flood of time and carried out in labor and difficulty. And yet, the final prayer of Moses is one of confidence that the favor of the Lord will be upon us, that our lives can be eternal in their impact.

What would that look like? What would it mean to have lives that were eternal in their impact? I think it would overwhelmingly mean we have freedom. Freedom from anxiety over losing stuff, or position, or privilege. Freedom from the fear of death. Freedom from the fear of losing control, knowing that the eternal Creator is in charge. Freedom from futility and sadness, knowing that God is using us as he involves in work that is lasting.

Did Moses fear death? Or loss of stuff or loss of control? I don't think so. What will produce this effect in us? What will make the work of our hands to be established? I said earlier that this is a

cause and effect psalm. I also said in a fit of hyperbole that it contains the world's most valuable lesson. I think if we finish by looking at the chain of cause and effect in Moses' view, we will see what that valuable lesson is, and will understand what will produce the effect of having our work established.

Here is the Psalm in a single summary sentence:

In the light of God's eternity (1-2)

And the brevity and sinfulness of his life (3-11)

Man must be taught to number his days (12)

Looking to God for his satisfaction (13-16)

So that his work will be established (17).

Or, look at it in reverse:

God will establish the work of man (17)

When he looks to Him for his satisfaction (13-16)

Being taught to number his days (12)

In the brevity and sinfulness of his life (3-11)

In the light of God's eternity (1-2)

Either way, it starts with God's eternity and ends with man's work being established, which is as close to eternity as man will get in this world. Practically speaking though, what is the heart of the psalm? What is this most valuable of lessons? It's right in the center, v12. "Teach us to number our days . . ."

How do we do that? How do we number our days and live skillful lives? First, we must recognize that our time *is* limited. God brings opportunities for us to take, not to ignore. Bruce Waltke, a prof at DTS, literally numbers his days until his 70th birthday. If you live 70 years, that's 25,550 days. I'm 43, and today I have 9,764 days left. A good deal less than half. Subtract one day every day, and you get a real sense of the finiteness of your time. Not a bad idea?

What can you do that will outlive you? Where can you invest your time? What kind of work is permanent? I'd suggest the work that outlasts us is work that focuses on people, not things: Evangelism, discipleship, nurturing. How would your life be different if you lived with eternal priorities in mind? How would your community be different if we actually went out and lived that way?

The question is, will you recognize that fact and press ahead with a life that draws its satisfaction from God, or will you draw back like Israel? Are you really willing to settle for a life of killing time, or wouldn't you rather number your days for a life of killing giants? Are you prepared for eternity?

Psalm 91: Who Do You Trust?

If you were stuck on a desert island with only one book of the Bible, which would you choose? Of course, that is the classic false choice question. No one in this room is likely to ever be stuck on a desert island. No one in this room will probably ever get within sight of a desert island at any time in our lives.

And why in the world would you need to pick just one book of the Bible when you could get a compact version and have it all? Okay, I know it's a dumb question, but it obviously sets up a point I'm trying to make, which is that, if you were stuck on a desert island, with only one book of the Bible, you'd choose...the Psalms.

Gallup surveyed American's Bible reading preferences in 2000 and found that the Psalms topped the list. Not surprising. Leviticus would have been surprising. Psalms covers a vast range of topics, catalogs life's experiences, and has such a full and exalted tone that if that was all we had, we'd be well supplied for a long time.

John Calvin would probably have picked the Psalms too: "I may truly call this book an anatomy of all parts of the soul...All the sorrows, troubles, fears, doubts, hopes, pains, perplexities and stormy outbreaks by which the hearts of men are tossed have been depicted here to the very life." I might add all the joys, blessings, triumphs, and praises are found in the Psalms as well.

The Psalms were written over a period of about a thousand years, starting with Moses. David wrote about half of them, another third are anonymous. Psalm 91 is one of the anonymous ones.

Psalm 91, like Psalm 23, 8, 119, 150, is one of those that stands a little above the rest. Yes, they are all equally inspired and profitable, but there's something special about a few of them. Charles Spurgeon said of Psalm 91, "In the whole collection there is not a more cheering psalm; its tone is elevated and sustained throughout, faith is at its best and speaks nobly."

Psalm 91 is all about trust. We don't do well when called to trust. We are a skeptical society. "Don't trust anyone over 30." Psalm 91 is going to help us with that problem.

There are three clear points to Psalm 91: 1) God is our refuge, v1-4; 2) he will protect those who take refuge in him, v5-13; and 3) he promises deliverance and salvation to those who know and love him, v14-16.

God Our Refuge, v1-4

¹ He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. ² I will say to the LORD, “My refuge and my fortress, My God, in whom I trust!” ³ For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper And from the deadly pestilence. ⁴ He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark. [u](#)

This is very personal. The Psalmist is not merely saying God provides us a refuge and shelter. He uses four metaphors to say that God himself is our shelter, our shadow, our refuge, and our fortress.

God is our shelter, literally our secret or “hiding place.” Psalm 91 was the last Scripture Corrie ten Boom shared with her father after their arrest for hiding Jews from the Gestapo in 1940’s Holland. The hiding place, shelter, took on a whole new meaning in their home.

Those who rely on God find He is a hiding place from the storms of life, a shadowy place of security and cover, a refuge where we can turn for safety and a fortress of defense against those who would harm us.

In addition to four metaphors, there are also four names for God:

- “Most High,” v1, *Elyon*, God over all, sovereign ruler, one who has dominion.
- “Almighty,” v1, *Shaddai*, all powerful;
- “LORD,” v2, *Yahweh*; the name by which he reveals himself to man. Intimate, personal.
- “God,” v2, *Elohim*, plural form of El, strong one, associated with God as Creator, Genesis 1. It is a plural form of a singular verb, which speaks in a subtle way to the Triunity of God.

“Most High,” “Almighty,” “Elohim” stress his position and his limitless power. “Yahweh” stresses his revealing himself to man in a personal way.

The power of the Most High, Almighty, Creator-God, coupled with the enduring love of the covenant-God who reveals himself to man, delivers us from the “snare of the trapper” and the “deadly pestilence,” v3. Surprise and danger. Stuff that’s unexpected, unseen until it’s too late. God’s protection is adequate for every danger, every menace.

His delivering power is portrayed in two images, a mother bird and a warrior’s armor. Every spring, our front porch becomes home to 2 starling nests. We’ve tried to get rid of them and short of cold-blooded murder it just can’t be done, so we now share our porch for a couple of months each year.

Once the eggs have hatched, Momma Starling tucks her young under her wings, close to her, where they will feel her presence, protected from threat, secure in mother’s wings. There is

something very tender about that picture, until you get about one step too close to that nest and Momma Starling isn't so tender anymore, comes swooping out of that nest to drive off the perceived attacker.

There are times when God covers us with his wings and protects us from the storm, and there are time when God straps on his shield and puts up his bulwark, which is a wall or rampart, a defensive fortification, and rains on our enemy's heads.

From the perspective of the protected, God is warm and tender; from the perspective of the attacker, God is as strong as steel. "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing."

Note, v4, *his faithfulness* is the shield and bulwark, "truth" in the KJV. God is faithful to his promises. When we take God at his word and act on it, he is trustworthy in what he has promised and his truth is our shield and bulwark from danger.

All of which raises a key question: what does it mean to dwell in the shelter of the Most High? The dictionary says to "dwell" means to live or remain, to belong. Also has connotation of consistency, length. When someone can't stop thinking, talking about something, we say they are *dwelling* on it.

As believers, the Holy Spirit *dwells* in us, he lives within, come to stay. God the Father *dwells* in unapproachable light, 1 Tim. 6:16. The fullness of the Father's deity *dwells* in his Son, Jesus, in bodily form, Colossians 2:9.

Gary shared some thoughts on John 15 in our staff meeting this week. Jesus talks there about abiding, which is a synonym for dwelling. Listen to it v4-11:

⁴"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. ⁵"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. ⁶"If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. ⁷"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and *so* prove to be My disciples. ⁹"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰"If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. ¹¹"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

Rest is hard to do for many of us. But resting, dwelling, abiding in God is all part of trusting him. There is a relationship between abiding, joy, love, and obedience, all of which results in fruit.

To dwell is to be right at home, in your natural environment. If you are dwelling in his shelter, you are abiding in his shadow, and you are trusting in his protection, v2.

Where do you live? In the shelter of the Most High, covered, protected? I'm going to submit to you that there is more to this than just being saved. There's a difference between trusting Christ

for salvation and dwelling in that trust day by day. I believe there are a whole lot of saved people who are not availing themselves of the shadow of the Almighty. We'll talk more about that as we go.

God Our Protection, v5-13

⁵ You will not be afraid of the terror by night, Or of the arrow that flies by day; ⁶ Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, Or of the destruction that lays waste at noon. ⁷ A thousand may fall at your side And ten thousand at your right hand, *But* it shall not approach you. ⁸ You will only look on with your eyes And see the recompense of the wicked. ⁹ For you have made the LORD, my refuge, *Even* the Most High, your dwelling place. ¹⁰ No evil will befall you, Nor will any plague come near your tent. ¹¹ For He will give His angels charge concerning you, To guard you in all your ways. ¹² They will bear you up in their hands, That you do not strike your foot against a stone. ¹³ You will tread upon the lion and cobra, The young lion and the serpent you will trample down.

If God is your refuge, no matter what evil threatens you are safe in his shadow. Here is what God does for the one who trusts in him.

Protection 24x7, v5-6. Night, day, darkness, bright sun of noonday, this is 24-hour protection. There is no threat, seen or unseen, anticipated or unexpected, which could catch God unaware and unable to protect us. No threat or danger, no matter how great, is mightier than God's keeping power.

Note well, the Psalmist isn't saying you won't experience threat or danger – you will. He is saying God is greater.

Protection from Judgment, v7-8. Even when men are falling like flies around us, God is able to keep us. Note v8, you will see the “recompense of the wicked.” This is true 2 ways. First, God protects his people from the opposition of the wicked. Like Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego in the fiery furnace, like Daniel in the lion's den, you will see God's deliverance.

Second, believers are protected from God's righteous wrath as he brings judgment on the wicked. Like the plagues of Egypt. Blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock disease, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, finally, death of first-born all but destroyed Egypt, but didn't touch Israel.

You may well see God's judgment, but you won't experience it yourself, if you know Christ as Savior. Jesus has paid the price of your sin, and so you have been delivered from sin's judgment. That means you can be at peace and not fear either human or satanic attack. God has your back, and your front, and your side as well. Nothing can touch us but what He permits.

I said just a few minutes ago that there's more to this promise of protection than just being saved, and in v9 that is made clear. There is a condition for God's protection, that you make “the Most High your dwelling place.” As we've seen, that means more than just believing in God or coming to God when things get tough. It means resting, abiding in him continually and trusting him at all times.

Can you be saved and not be at rest in God? Absolutely. And if that's you, you'll be protected against God's judgment against sin, because Jesus has already paid for that. But you'll miss the assurance of the rich promise of his complete care and protection detailed here.

It's easy to tell if you're "dwelling" or not. Is something scaring you, troubling you, weighing you down? Is something keeping you awake at night? Is there something you've been unable to get off your mind since you got up this morning?

What do you do with those things? Where do you go for relief? You might need to consider if you're truly dwelling in God's shadow, or if you are trusting someone or something that can't bear your weight.

Because if you truly trust God, v10 is the result: "No evil will befall you, Nor will any plague come near your tent."

Really? None who trust God have ever suffered? Anybody here ever suffered evil? Know someone who has? This is a statement of God's care, not a charm against hardship. God may remove his protection temporarily, as when Satan was allowed to test Job. He may allow suffering to refine us, burn away our dross. Is that a bad thing? No, but it sure might feel like a bad thing for a short while.

I want to show you something in one of Scripture's greatest statements on God's care for us, Romans 8:31-39:

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? ³² He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? ³³ Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴ who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." ³⁷ But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Note v35-36. It's pretty clear that God's protection does not exclude tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, the sword, death, and slaughter. And still, Paul says, we overwhelmingly conquer.

In Luke 21:16. Jesus made a pretty hard promise to the disciples: "you will be betrayed even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death,"

But have you ever noticed what he says in v18? "'Yet not a hair of your head will perish.'" How many of the disciples died in their beds? Maybe 1, John. The rest died martyr's deaths. Jesus

promises death, yet no harm. Paul promises tribulation, peril, and the sword, yet none of it will separate us from God's love.

In the same way, the Psalmist promises God's continued protection from ultimate evil and plague. We may know the terror of night, v5, but we don't need to fear it. We may experience the arrow, the pestilence, and destruction, but we won't be harmed by it.

What do you fear? Human disapproval? Satanic opposition? Man's anger? Difficult circumstances? Place your trust deep in God's character and faithfulness and whatever you may experience of it, he promises to keep you through it. He's on it 24 hours a day, and he has good help, v11-13.

Agents of Protection, v11-13. Angels, Hebrews 1:14. "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?" Guardian angels? You bet, though I don't expect they look or act much like the TV variety. His angels watch over us, so that, in v12, you will "not strike your foot against a stone."

Is God promising we'll never stub our toes? No, that's just a figure of speech to emphasize the extent to which his care extends. And it extends from the smallest matters, toes, to significantly bigger ones, v13, cobras and lions.

I don't think the psalmist is just saying God will protect us from dangerous animals. I tend to think he has a more specific picture in mind. What does Peter call Satan in 1 Peter 5:8? "Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a... roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." What form did Satan take in the Garden? A snake.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Satan quoted v11-12 of Psalm 91 when he tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Matt. 4:6, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You...'"

That's the only Scripture Satan ever quotes, by the way. And he sought to misinterpret it, a counterfeit application that would have led to Jesus testing God, not trusting him. Do you think he'd ever try to do the same thing to you?

Here's the genuine application, Luke 10:17-19: Jesus had sent out 70 of his disciples to preach the gospel, and they come back in v17, "The seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name.' And He said to them, 'I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you.'"

Not a direct quote, but a clear allusion to Psalm 91:13. We are protected from the worst enemy in the world, Satan himself. He has no power over those who trust in the Lord, and cannot injure us, and in fact, we can even walk on him without fear.

Fear is a paralyzing force, and Jesus and our psalmist say, needless. Trust God, and boldly confront your most fearful opponent, because you know you are safe in God's keeping.

Our protection is as certain as God's guarantee. We are not safe because we hope to be, but because God says so. In v14-16, the Psalmist turns from his own reflections to God's personal promise.

God Our Promise, v14-16

¹⁴ "Because he has loved Me, therefore I will deliver him; I will set him *securely* on high, because he has known My name. ¹⁵ "He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. ¹⁶ "With a long life I will satisfy him And let him see My salvation."

Promise to deliver, v14. The Psalmist has touched on many dangers, but God promises to deliver us from them all. We are "set on high," out of reach of trouble. But more than just help, to be "set on high" also means he will lift us up in the sense of exalting us, as v15 says, "I will rescue and honor him."

Promise to answer, v15. We can know that when we call on him for help, he hears us. 1 John 5:14-15, "This is the confidence which we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him."

He promises to be with us "in trouble." He doesn't always lift us out of our troubles, but he will always walk with us through them. That's how Paul can say, in Romans 5:3-4, "we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;"

And in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it."

I'm one of those who say, "No pain, no gain!" God says, I'm with you thru the pain. His promise is for strength to endure our temptations, not escape them.

Finally, **Promise to save, v16.** This takes God's deliverance to its ultimate conclusion, from protection in this life to salvation in the next. He promises to deliver, to answer our call, to save us.

Who gets these promises? First, those who are personally related to Him, v14: "Because he has loved Me...because he has known my name." Second, those who ask for help, v15: "He will call upon Me, and I will answer him."

Jesus told his disciples to count the cost of following him (Luke 9:57-62). Paul warned that godly living would bring persecution (2 Timothy 3:12). The heroes of Hebrews 11 only got to be heroes by dealing with some pretty harsh circumstances.

You can't know God's peace and protection unless you are taking the things that concern you to him. If something is bugging you, take it to him. If it's still bugging you, take it to him again. If it's still bugging you and still bugging you, have to ask: are you really taking it to him or just venting it at him?

There's an important lesson here about our faith. The most important thing about our faith is not how much we have, or how deep it goes, or how passionate we are about it. The most important thing about our faith is its author. "So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy." (Romans 9:16)

It's not about your faith or your trust, but the One in whom your trust is placed. Want to experience the refuge and protection that God promises? Dwell in and upon him. Trusting in God and dwelling in God are joined at the hip. If you are dwelling, then you will trust. If you will trust, you will begin to dwell.

Does Psalm 91 reflect your relationship with God, or does it expose it? Don't just exist as a Christian, set your roots deep in God's faithfulness. Don't allow worry, fear, anger, or bitterness to choke off God's blessing.

Corrie ten Boom, who knew something about shelter and hiding places, said "Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow; it empties today of its strength." Amen?

[\[1\]](#) *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. The Lockman Foundation: LaHabra, CA

Psalm 103

Last week, we looked at Psalm 51, David's confession to God in the wake of his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband. We said the Psalm is not only testimony to God's forgiveness, but a pattern for our own confession. That if we will make it our own it will humble us, increase our desire for God's holiness, and help us lean on God's mercies more faithfully.

Psalm 103 could be considered the other side of confession, an assurance of pardon. Where there is confession of sin, there is always assurance of pardon. Counter to Psalm 51's, "*Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;*" there is Psalm 32's, "*How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered!*"

But this is more than an assurance of pardon. There is no confession in it, only praise. There are no requests, only praise. There is no crying out to God for deliverance, only praise. Psalm 103 is a call to praise the God from whom all blessings flow, and to take a good look at those blessings, appreciating them all in full.

The majesty and beauty of this Psalm has inspired a number of hymns, including "Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven," "Bless the Lord, O My Soul," "Count Your Blessings."

Spurgeon, "David...awakens all the melodies of heaven and earth in honor of the one living and true God. Our attempt at exposition is commenced under an impressive sense of the utter impossibility of doing justice to so sublime a composition; we call upon our soul and all that is within us to aid in the pleasurable task; but, alas, our soul is finite, and all our mental faculty far too little for the enterprise. There is too much in the Psalm, for a thousand pens to write..."

To that, I can say a hearty "Amen!"

This is a song of praise you sing to yourself, an encouragement to your soul to remember what God has done for you. When you are beset by worry, despair, anxiety, doubt, all sins of unbelief, simply confess them, do what David does here, prod yourself to bless God, to remember the benefits he pours out on his beloved.

David begins with *call to praise, v1-2, read.* "Bless the Lord, O my soul." We understand what it means to be blessed by the Lord. God blesses by bestowing some good, some benefit, on his people. Genesis 1:27-28 says God blessed Adam and Eve, gave them dominion over the earth.

But how do we bless the Lord? We can't give him something he needs, we can't add anything to him. How do we bless the Lord? We "bless the Lord" when we express our love and gratitude for who he is and what he has done. We were made to worship him, and when we do, it delights his heart, it blesses him.

We are to bless the Lord, and we're to bless him with everything we've got. "With all that is within me." That's total commitment to God's praise, which is exactly what God expects. "*you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.*" (Mark 12:30) Jonathan Edwards said there is no true worship that doesn't touch the affections.

Stop and consider this for yourself. When we worship together, are you engaged with all that is within you? With your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength? Or is your singing half-hearted, your prayers half-believed, the sermon half-heard?

We need this prodding to praise because its too easy to forget God's blessings, to take them for granted. When was the last time you really thought about what God has done for you?

Forgetting what God has done is no small matter. Moses warned Israel over and over about it. "*Beware that you do not forget the Lord your God by not keeping His commandments and His ordinances and His statutes which I am commanding you today;*" Deuteronomy 8:10-11

The sad testimony is, Israel did forgot, over and over. Constant refrain of the OT is "but Israel forgot the Lord their God." To forget God's blessings is not merely to be forgetful, it is to be an ingrate. We need to remember what God has done for us, so David *calls us to remember, v3-14.*

First, he calls us to remember *what he has done, v3-5*, lists six of God's benefits, beginning with the most important first, forgiveness, v3, "who pardons all your iniquities."

Till our sin is forgiven, the rest of God's benefits don't mean much to us. Forgiveness is first in the order of our spiritual experience, and is first in value. God pardons our iniquities because of Jesus' death on the cross. *"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace."* (Eph. 1:7)

God's forgiveness is ongoing, he *pardons*, present tense, continuously, and his forgiveness is infinite, reaching to *all* our iniquities. There is no truth more significant, and David will come back to it in v10-14.

The second benefit, is healing. Some twist this to make it mean God never wants us sick. That if you are a child of God, if you just trust him enough, you'll never suffer illness.

That is absurd on its face. Consider Paul's friend Epaphroditus, who was sick to the point of death, Phil. 2:27. Or Trophimus, who was so sick he had to be left at Miletus, 2 Tim 4:20.

This doesn't mean there will be no illness, it means God is the one who does all healing. Every cold recovered from, every cancer in remission, every broken arm mended is of the Lord. The time when there will be no illness isn't here yet, it's in the Kingdom, where there will be no disease, no illness, and no tears.

Until then, Rom. 8:20-21 says all creation has been subjected to futility and corruption. Physical illness is an effect of sin: we live in a fallen, germ-ridden world, and there will be illness and injury here. But God subdues sin's effects on our physical bodies by allowing healing to occur, both natural and miraculous.

Third benefit, v4, he redeems your life from the "pit." Literally, destruction. By his forgiveness, God has redeemed us from the penalty of sin, spiritual death and its consequence, eternal destruction. By substituting himself on the Cross, Christ saved us from going down into the pit.

And as if that wasn't enough, fourth benefit, he crowns us with lovingkindness and compassion. Lovingkindness, *chesed*, God's steadfast, loyal love. Compassion, *racham*, mercy. Both God's *chesed* and his *racham* are sprinkled through this Psalm, not only here but also in v8, 11, 13, 17.

Spurgeon said, "this crown is far more precious than if it were made of silver and gold. It is studded with gems of grace, lined with the velvet of lovingkindness; and decked with the jewels of mercy..."

*For who is like the Lord my God, Compassionate and full of mercy
Who compares to Your great love, There's none in all the earth
I will sing of Your love and grace, That covers all my guilt and shame
In all the earth, Who is like the Lord* Holland Davis, "Who is like the Lord"

Fifth, he satisfies your years w/good things. Not useless toys or idle pleasures, but things of real value, that satisfy us down deep in our souls. What does it mean to be satisfied? To be satisfied is to want for nothing more, to so enjoy what you have that you need nothing else.

What satisfies us most is God himself. Jesus said "*whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.*" (John 4:13-14) He said "*I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger...*" (John 6:35)

Our Good Shepherd gives us rest, leading us to green pastures and quiet waters, restoring our souls, satisfying us with good things, so that, sixth, our youth is renewed like the eagle.

The eagle is the image of strength and majesty, soaring to the heights of heaven. Isaiah used a similar image in 40:31, "those who wait for the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary."

Paul said, "we do not lose heart, but though outer man decaying, yet inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen..." (2 Corinthians 4:16-18)

In a very small way, I can give testimony to this truth. I spent all Thursday morning studying this Psalm, outlining it, going thru a number of commentaries. I hadn't slept well the night before, so by noon, my brain was fried. I couldn't concentrate, so I decided it was time to focus on one of my New Year's resolutions, show more support to favorite Mexican restaurant.

So I drove downtown and relaxed over lunch with notebook, and just jotted some notes on the Psalm. I came out into the blinding sunshine and 100 degree heat, ready to get back to work, only to find that I'd got a flat tire.

First thing I thought about was going right back in and jotting more notes while I let AAA fix it. But there was no telling how long they'd take, and I didn't really have the time. So, blazing sun and all, I got the spare tire out, jacked up the car, and went to work.

And as I started to work, I started thinking, "Lord, why...?" Fortunately, didn't get much further than that. Next thought was, "Bless the Lord, all my soul, and forget not all his benefits," and I just started going through v1-5 while I'm down on the burning asphalt, jacking up the car, taking off the lug nuts, thanking God for forgiveness, for healing, for redemption, for compassion, for satisfaction, and for renewal.

Then I started thanking God for a car that runs, flat tire and all, for wife and children who love me, a house to live in, a job and ministry to serve in. It didn't make it any cooler. It didn't keep me from sweating like I was in the Black Hole of Calcutta, getting greasy and ruining a good pair of pants. But I wasn't thinking about the tire anymore, I was focused on praising God. Instead of frustration, I had a sense of renewed strength and spirit.

This is quite a list of benefits: forgiven sins, subdued effects, taken penalty away, crowned with lovingkindness & mercy, satisfied w/good things, finally, renewed very nature. How can we keep from saying with David, "Bless the Lord, O my soul?" He withholds nothing good from us, let us not keep back our praise from him.

David also calls us to remember who he is, v6-14. He is righteous and just, v6. He is righteous, that is, he is holy. He started out the Psalm calling us to "bless his holy name." He is only good, and he is wholly good. "The Lord is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him." (Psalm 92:15)

Because he is righteous, he is also just, especially to the oppressed. He does not leave the poor and needy to fend for themselves, but works on their behalf. Malachi 3:5, God says he will judge those *"those who oppress... the widow and the orphan."*

He makes himself known, v7-8. Some interpret v7 as a contrast, he made his ways known to Moses, but only his acts to Israel. I don't think so. David is just saying God revealed himself to Moses and to Israel.

See it in Ex. 34. Moses, on Sinai, asked God to show himself, so 34:5-6, *"The Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."*

That same self-revelation from Ex. 34:6 is quoted in v8, "Compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness." That's who he is. Verse 8 is almost a creed in the OT.

It is not only in Ex. 34 and here in Ps 103, but its repeated in Ps. 86:15, 145:8; Neh. 9:17; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2. If you were to ask an OT believer who God is, he would probably respond, he is *"compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth."*

That's who he has revealed himself to be. Holy, so he hates sin, just, so he judges it, yet compassionate and gracious, so he gives the way to pay for it. Slow to anger, allowing us to repent of it, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth, so he restores us to fellowship when we confess it.

And his compassion and grace are fleshed out further in v9-14. Because he is compassionate and gracious, v9, he will not always strive with us, nor keep his anger forever.

I've been reading thru the OT, and I just finished the histories. I have to tell you, God is angry a lot at Israel's truly horrific sin and rebellion. But he didn't stay fixed in his anger forever. Over and over you see these words, "Israel cried out to the Lord, and the Lord heard their cry."

When his children turn from their sin, God turns from his anger at our sin. He bears no grudges, and like a good father who disciplines his child, after the spanking he hugs him to his chest and assures him of his love.

God could find plenty of reason to strive with us every moment of every day, because we are always opposed to his holiness. But the truth of v10-14 is real, he has not dealt with us according to our sins.

If he dealt with us according to our sins, every single one of us would have been consigned to the lowest hell long ago. But he has not, v11, because of the greatness of his *chesed*, his lovingkindness. As high as the heavens are above the earth, how high are the heavens? Where do they end? There is no limit to them, and there is no limit to his lovingkindness.

Just as the sky, the sun and moon, the stars surround us, in the same way God's lovingkindness surrounds us, envelopes us, covers us and protects us, and is poured out on us without measure, and without limit.

There is just one qualifier though: his lovingkindness is to those who fear him. God's blessings are not poured out indiscriminately. They are only given to those who fear the Lord, who know him, revere him, and worship him as only living God. Those who fear him have all these blessings. Those who don't, none of them.

And that brings us to v12, a truth so marvelous, expressed so beautifully, that Spurgeon said it was his favorite verse. "O glorious verse, no word even upon the inspired page can excel it!" "As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us."

How far is east from west? It's an infinite distance. They aren't just points on a compass, but two mutually exclusive directions. When God forgives, you will never be held guilty for those sins again.

East and west are significantly different from north and south. If you go north, once you hit the north pole, you start going south, and vice versa. Not east and west. When you head east, you go east forever.

That means that once it is forgiven, your sin will never be brought back on you again. Satan may accuse, but Jesus lives forever to make intercession for you. All our sin, not just part of it, are forgiven, taken as far away from us as east is from west.

That is the depth of our Father's compassion for us, v13. Good fathers feel their children's pain, and their compassion causes them to act to relieve it. And so has our heavenly Father acted to relieve our pain, because he knows how weak and frail we are, because he made us, v14.

All these truths are variations on the one truth of v3, that God pardons all our iniquities. David calls us to remember who he is, to see his compassion, grace, and lovingkindness reflected in his past benefits, his present mercies, and his future promises.

And as we see him more clearly, David also calls on us to see ourselves more clearly, and to reflect on what we see, v15-18. First, to reflect on who we are, v15-16.

We are frail, weak, and temporary, shown by the images of v14-15, dust, grass, flower. The idea isn't that we are without value, as in "we are no good at all, just plain dirt." The idea is that we are without strength, we are only here a short time. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," isn't in Scripture, but it's true.

Moses, in Psalm 90:10, *"As for the days of our life, they contain 70 years, Or if due to strength, 80 years, Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow; For soon it is gone and we fly away."*

We are here for a moment, and like dust, dried grass, or a dried flower, all it takes is a breath, and we are gone.

That's who we are, but v17, what a contrast, as David calls us to **reflect on who he is, v17-18, read.** We are frail and weak and here for a moment, but the lovingkindness of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.

From eternity past God saw us as objects of his everlasting mercy. Never will the sins of those who fear him outstrip his lovingkindness, because it is not only higher than heavens, it is eternal.

The main question is, "Do you *fear him*?" Have you placed your trust in him? Do you "keep his covenant and remember his precepts?"

The covenant in v18 is not kept by works of the Law, it is kept by God's grace. We saw the great promise of the new covenant last week, *"I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people."* Jeremiah 31:33

God's grace sanctifies his people, and by his grace we keep his covenant by looking to Jesus alone to will and to work of his good pleasure.

We are dust. The world of David is dust, but God's lovingkindness is still the same, his steadfast love hasn't changed since before the foundation of the world. We are weak and frail, but our fragility is surrounded by God's *chesed*, his steadfast love.

And with that, David brings the psalm to a close by returning again to a **call to praise, v19-22.**

He starts with the truth of God's sovereign rule, v19, his throne established in the heavens, where he rules over all. He is King of kings and Lord of lords, the source of the security of all his benefits to us.

But David is no longer calling for himself alone to praise God, he expands the choir from the heavens to the earth, v20-22, with 3 calls to bless the Lord, each one enlarging on the previous.

First, v20, calls on the angels in heaven to bless the Lord. Second, v21, all his hosts, bless the Lord. This isn't just angels again. NIV's "heavenly" is not in the Hebrew. "Hosts" is often used of angels, but it doesn't have to be. The idea is all God's armies, no matter what race of creatures they belong to. All who serve him, bless him.

Third, v22, and most comprehensive of all, "all works, in all places of his dominion." Everything he has made, which is everything, everywhere he reigns, which is everywhere, bless him.

And that final call for universal, worldwide praise brings David back to where he began, v22, "bless the Lord, O my soul." Even with all the world sounding God's praise, we still need this personal application. Enormous as the choir may be, we need to add our voice to it, "bless the Lord, O my soul."

We were created for his glory, Is. 43:7, to be people for his renown, Jer. 13:11. In the Scripture for this morning, Ephesians 1, Paul says 3 times that we were saved to the praise of his glory.

Our words of praise will always fall short, because words can't match God's reality. We can never fully express all that he is or has done. But still, we must bless him, remembering what he has done and who he is, reflecting on our frailty and his everlasting mercy, calling all to bless his name. That's the worship he seeks.

Two questions as we close. First, how's your praise? Your body is here, is mind here as well? Do you make it a habit to remind yourself of the many benefits God has given you?

"We need to ask ourselves whether or not there is any real praise in our hearts. It is so easy to come to church out of habit. It is so easy to repeat "Amen" without every really speaking to God. It is so easy to hear sermons without ever really listening to God. Spiritual lukewarmness is a common disease in a land like ours where being a Christian is respectable. If that is our condition, then we, like David, need to talk to ourselves. We need to stir our hearts up to a more appropriate emotional response to the truth about the God we know. If you find your heart cold, then do what David did and count your blessings." Boice, Psalms, Vol. 2, p837.

Chuck Swindoll tells of working with a missionary in Okinawa. The man was going through great struggles, and Swindoll went by his home one evening, but he wasn't there. His wife told him he was down at his office, in a little alley off streets of Naha. So Swindoll headed down, expecting to find the man folded up in despondency, discouragement, and depression.

Got off the bus, walked down an alleyway, turned into a smaller alleyway to little hut w/tatami mat inside. Before walked in, he heard him singing, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, / Prone to leave the God I love; / Here's my heart, O take and seal it; / Seal it for Thy courts above."

Swindoll says he stood outside that little bamboo shack, looking into his candlelit room. There was his friend, on his knees, hands lifted toward heaven as he praised God. Open Bible on one side, open hymnal on the other. Turned from page to page in Scripture, read it aloud to God, then found hymn to match, would sing it to God.

Swindoll says his friend's private worship taught him more in that brief moment than he could have learned in a year of instruction. His friend knew what it meant to bless the Lord with all that was within him. Goes on to say that his friend never failed, continued ministry through the difficult circumstances he was dealing with, because he knew the importance of remembering the Lord's benefits. How's your praise?

The second question is, can you say with David, "Bless the Lord, who forgives all my iniquities?" God's blessings are for those who fear him. Have you experienced God's forgiveness? Have you placed your life in his hands, so that you can say "he has redeemed my life from the pit?"

Do you know the reality of God's grace and lovingkindness? It's waiting for you at the cross. John 3:16, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

You can't get more merciful than that. Surrender to Christ, accept his death on the cross for your sins as your own, and join those who bless God for all his benefits.

Psalm 127: When Work is Worthless

This morning, we will look at Psalm 127. It is by Solomon, one of only two of the Psalms written by David's son. We will see the other in a few weeks, Psalm 72.

The heading, "Song of ascents," refers to 15 of the Psalms, numbers 120-134. These Psalms were kind of a songbook used by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for the feasts. They were called "ascents" because Jerusalem sits on high ground, and you would literally be ascending as you went to the city. Joseph and Mary would have sung these Psalms as they went to Jerusalem with the young Jesus. Jesus himself would have sung them with his disciples as they went up for the Passover. Each was intended to point the worshipper to consider some aspect of the Lord's care, kind of a call to worship.

Besides being a call to worship, Psalm 127 is also a practical psalm, because it deals with two central areas of our life, work and family. Both are so consuming, when either one isn't going right, there is no bigger pain in your life.

When I worked for IBM, one assignment I had was for marketing education, headquartered in Atlanta. I was responsible for training the US sales force on a particular line of mainframe storage devices made by our plants in San Jose, California. One winter day I was asked by the plant to fly out to San Jose to participate in a half-day conference with the directors and other people responsible for the sales of the new line, to talk about plans for the following year's education rollout. These were complex products, with lots of issues, so out I flew.

I still remember the flight. It was a beautiful winter's day, with the sun streaming in the plane windows, and I had a whole row all to myself, with plenty of room to work. Only, I didn't feel like working. I thought, there's going to be at least 10 people in this meeting, each one telling me what I need to do. I don't need to prepare for that! I'll just go and listen, throw out the occasional idea, and let the other guys do the work. So, I took out a book, and read the entire flight.

When we landed, I got a rental car and drove out to the plant, arriving an hour or so before the meeting. When I met the guy who invited me out, he showed me to the conference room, then

asked if I needed anything for my presentation: overhead projector, flip charts, etc.? I said, “Say that again?” “What do you need for your presentation?” “My presentation?”

Then it dawned on me. I thought I had been asked to participate in a conference about their plans. I realized at that moment, that they had asked me to lead a conference about my plans. I was the conference! Did I panic? Did I hem and haw, apologize for being unprepared? No way, I did what any self-respecting corporate staffer would do: I faked it. I said, “I think flip charts would be best. Be good to keep it informal, you know, open discussion sort of thing. I’ll just get some coffee and hang here for a while.”

And so I closed the door and started to put stuff on flip charts. And the funny thing is, that’s the last memory I have of that trip. The “conference” may have gone just fine, but there is probably some reason it is blanked out of my mind. Sometimes, work is a very tough place to be. That’s the meaning of this psalm, though Solomon’s intent goes considerably deeper than the story I just told you. He addresses the futility of work without God and the anxiety that results from it, compared to trusting in his sovereign care and provision.

The Bread of Sorrows, v1-2. The Bible says a lot about work. It says work is good, and that we are to work hard, to work diligently, Pro. 12:24, to work skillfully, Pro. 22:29, and to work to provide not only for our own but also for those in need. But here, it says there is a time when hard work, diligent work, even skillful work, is worthless. That is, when it is entirely human, when there is nothing of God’s power or direction in it.

Unless the LORD builds the house,
 They labor in vain who build it;
 Unless the LORD guards the city,
 The watchman keeps awake in vain.
 It is vain for you to rise up early,
 To retire late,
 To eat the bread of painful labors;
 For He gives to His beloved even in his sleep.

“Unless the Lord builds the house...” That was our byword for 10 years as we worked toward building this building and as we built it. It still is today, because without God’s direction, without his power, or his blessing, our work is...worthless.

“They labor in vain,” to no purpose, uselessly. Without God’s blessing and protection on the city, the most extraordinary security precautions are not enough to keep us safe. Without God’s blessing and power, we are like the people in Haggai 1:6, who work to no purpose: “You have sown much, but harvest little; you eat, but there is not enough to be satisfied; you drink, but there is not enough to become drunk; you put on clothing, but no one is warm enough; and he who earns, earns wages to put into a purse with holes.”

Why? Because our security doesn’t lie in our work or our watching, but in the Lord. “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” (Zech. 4:6).

There is nothing here that says don't work. If we don't build, neither will God. The point is, who is our work for? Who do we trust for the results? Whose strength do we rely upon? Whose glory do we seek?

We live in constant danger of dependence on the dollar. Harvard professor Juliet Schor, in her 1990 book, "The Overworked American," said we work longer hours than any other industrialized nation in the world. The average US manufacturing employee works 320 hours more per year than those in Western Europe. That's two full months more work per year.

Why? Are we less productive, need more hours to get the job done? No, we just buy more stuff. As of 1990, the average American owns and consumes more than twice what his parents did in 1948. As an example: Lines formed 10 days before Sony's PS3 went on sale. Enterprising early buyers were getting almost \$3,000 for a \$500 game system. We love our toys, but we have no time to enjoy them. The average American worker spends 16 hours per week on leisure activity, total.

There will be times we have to put in extra hours. But when extra hours aren't extra, but routine, when, per v2, we are constantly getting up early and going to bed late because of our work, it is *vain*. We are talking about someone who gets by on 4-5 hours of sleep, who works 16 hours per day. We are talking about... me! I'm a confirmed 60+ hour per week, guy, at a minimum. I'm not bragging, but confessing.

Wait a minute – is it really vain to spend 60+ hours per week in the Lord's work? Is it vain to spend 60+ hours planning, studying, teaching, and discipling? Even that would be, if it was done in man's strength, without trusting God for the results, relying on his strength, claiming the glory for it.

I hope...I hope...I hope I'm not doing that. I hope I work the hours I do because the workload requires it and the critical nature of the work demands it. But I have to be very careful, because you can bet it is just as easy for a pastor to get up early and retire late to work, and be doing it completely in his own strength. There's a word for those people: workaholic.

What drives the workaholic, the one so addicted to work he wants to do nothing else? Simple: Anxiety. Worry. Fear. That's the meaning of v2, "eat the bread of painful labors." The Hebrew is "bread of sorrows." The food that should give strength for life only maintains misery.

Why are workaholics anxious? Why fearful? Because they think it is all up to them. The Desert Fathers, 4th-5th century Christians who protested worldliness in the early church, called that kind of busyness "moral laziness." It is an addictive drug that covers our fears as we scramble to achieve the image we want to project. When we rely on that level of busyness, we are just living life on the surface, obsessed with how we appear rather than what is going on inside us.

And that kind of worry causes lots of hurt. Worry about money leads to overwork and greed. Worry about relationships makes you indifferent and uncaring to others. Worry about your image makes you put on a false front and focus on surface things. Like the love of money, worry is a root of all sorts of evil.

But what is the root of worry? Look at Matthew 6:25-34. Five times in these verses, Jesus tells his disciples, "don't worry." v25, 27, 28, 31, 34. The key is in v30: "Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, ***O you of little faith?***"

At heart, anxiety, worry, fear is just a symptom of a larger problem, lack of faith. When we worry, we are simply showing our unbelief. Much worry, Jesus says, comes from little faith. Does that mean that if I struggle with an anxious temperament, the real issue is actually whether or not I trust God? Yes, it does. Does that mean that if I struggle with feelings of anxiety every day, my trust in God must be inadequate? Again, yes.

Bad news, isn't it? Bad, yes, but not fatal. It's only fatal if left untreated, ignored. George Mueller, a great man of faith and prayer, said "The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith, and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety." Psalm 127 points us to the cure: the recognition that all our building, all our guarding, all our labor, belongs to the Lord. Give it to him, invite him in to lead the way. Giving God your life and work doesn't eliminate your responsibility, it frees and empowers you because you are trusting him for the results. Build, guard, work at his direction, for his glory.

If you do, you will not eat the bread of sorrows and anxiety, but instead you will know the blessing of being God's beloved, of knowing his rest and his peace. "He gives to his beloved even in his sleep." You are God's beloved, and even as you sleep he is caring for your needs. Even the most foolish workaholic stops to rest sometime, but God never does. Why spend your life in overwork? Why eat the bread of painful labor? Cut back your work, confess your fears, and step up your trust.

Psalm 56:3, "When I am afraid, I will put my trust in you." Notice, "when I am afraid," not "if." Fear strikes us all and when it does, it is a battle for our soul. The Bible never says believers will never worry, it tells us how to fight when the unbelief of worry hits us.

1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you." When the fear comes and the doubts increase and the worry blinds you to God's sovereign care, cast it on him.

Philippians 4:6, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And what will happen when you do that? v7, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

When I worry about the future, I can still know the truth of Isaiah 41:10, "Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand."

When I worry for the health of this church, I know the truth of Isaiah 55:11, "So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, Without accomplishing what I desire, And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."

When I worry about my inability to be what I must be, I know the truth of 2 Cor. 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” And Psalm 32:8, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you.”

Free yourself from the frantic, self-centered, anxiousness of overwork and work without the Lord, and enjoy the quiet blessing of God.

The Blessing of the Lord, v3-5. The two halves of the psalm seem disjointed to our modern sense, but not to an ancient Jew. The well-being of the family was central to every concern. Why build a house if not for the family? Why guard the city if not for the families who live there? The ancient Jews knew it, we don't.

Solomon grabs our attention, v3, with “behold!” There should be a big exclamation point after that word. He's telling us to pay attention to what he's about to say.

Behold, children are a gift of the LORD,
 The fruit of the womb is a reward.
 Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
 So are the children of one's youth.
 How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them;
 They will not be ashamed
 When they speak with their enemies in the gate.

Children are a gift and a reward. Every single one of them. There is no such thing as an accidental birth or an unintended pregnancy. You may not have intended it, but God did. This is not primarily about birth control, although some use it to argue against it. This is not primarily about the duty of every couple to have children, although some use it to argue for that.

This is about the plain and simple fact that children are a blessing. A gift from the Lord, something he gives us that is good and precious. A reward, something he gives us as a sign of his pleasure.

All the more reason to care for them diligently. If it is foolishness to build a house without God, it is doubly stupid to raise families without him. A house, an inanimate object, at least benefits from good workmanship. Families are far more fragile, made of sinful men, women, and children, have the unfortunate tendency to ignore God, to rebel against him, to stubbornly choose their own way.

All the more reason to direct them carefully. They need to be tenderly loved and encouraged, and they need direction. Eph. 6:4, “raise your children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”

Children are like arrows, v4. They have to be straight to fly well. If allowed to grow any which way, they are just sticks, crooked, useless to their purpose.

You can even see that in how a toddler views possessions. "If I like it, it's mine. If it's in my hand, it's mine. If I can take it from you, it's mine. If I had it a little while ago, it's mine. If I saw

it first, it's mine. If you are playing with it and you put it down, it's mine. If it's broken...it's yours."

That's why the Bible says "The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother." (Pro. 29:15) The literal translation is "a child left to himself brings shame..." A child left to himself, not given direction, brings shame to his mother because, Pro. 22:15 says, "Foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child; The rod of discipline will remove it far from him."

We need to seek God's help at every step, and accept it by doing what he tells us. Praying, teaching, modeling Christ's life, disciplining, leading. When raised well, children are like arrows in the hand of a warrior. They are instruments suited to their purpose, they fly straight and true, and they are useful to the Lord and a delight to you.

Our children are a delight to us. Jonathan and Sarah are 22 years old now, and both love the Lord, and have mostly made good decisions. They want to use their lives well. But let me tell you, most of you started with one kid and learned from your mistakes, doing better with the next. We screwed our kids up two at a time.

I can't tell you how often we despaired of our children, when we knew we were the worst parents in the world. We lost Jonathan at Sea World in San Diego, at the DFW airport, and at the Grand Canyon! But we loved them, we strived to do what the Bible said, and in the end, the Lord was in control.

That's why it's a blessing to have your "quiver" full of them, v5. It's amazing how our perspective in the US has changed on this. Just a few generations ago, most would agree that many children are a blessing. Not any more. Now large families are mocked, even among Christians.

Perhaps in an age of \$100K college tuition, braces on teeth and insurance on teen drivers, we see many sons and daughters as liability. But if money is the issue, why are we spending so much on bigger homes for fewer kids?

The average home price in 1970 was \$23,400. That's \$113,800 in today's dollars. The average home price today is \$221,000. Even adjusted for inflation, that's an increase of 94%.

Maybe one reason is the size of the average home. In 1970, the average single family home was 1,700 square feet. Today, the average home is 2,400 square feet, an increase of 39%.

Know what's interesting? At the same time houses were doubling in cost and getting almost half again as big, families have shrunk, fast. Since 1970, the percentage of households with five or more people has fallen by half. 21% of US families had 2 parents and at least 3 kids in 1970. Today, less than 10% do.

The average family size in 1970 was over 3. Today, it is 2.6, a 16% decline across the board. So we are working more, but enjoying it less. We have fewer kids, but bigger homes which cost us

double what they used to. We own twice the stuff we did two generations ago, but only have 2 hours per day to enjoy it. What's wrong with this picture?

We see the family upside down. Instead of a gift and a reward, as arrows in our quiver, we see them as work, as trouble, as a cost center. And guess what? They are all those things. It's a rock solid guarantee: many children mean many trials. But when you give those trials to the Lord, when you know kids are a gift, a reward, a blessing, many children mean many joys.

Not all families have the same size quiver. Some, one or two, others, more. Whatever the size, they are God's blessing. "A wise son makes a father glad." Proverbs 10:1. That proverb, this Psalm, were both written by Solomon. What's really sad is that Solomon himself completely missed its point.

He built the Temple, yet most of us forget that he invested twice as much time, effort, and treasure in building his own palace. He wrote of the need to delight in the wife of his youth, being satisfied by her alone, yet he pursued women for sex to a degree that rivals anyone even in this sensual age. He wrote that a wise son makes the heart glad, yet he worshipped false gods who required child sacrifice.

Solomon missed the point, because his treasure was in earth, not heaven. If we could look inside him, we might have seen a man consumed by fear because he was consumed by image. Rather than cluck our tongues at him, may he be a warning to us all, because if he can miss the point, so can we.

God is in the work of building us into a spiritual house, part of the body of Christ worldwide. Are we allowing him freedom to work in our lives, to get rid of our dross, purify our silver?

God is in the work of building a spiritual house right here at SMBC. We are living stones, Peter says. Are we allowing the Lord to build this church? Are you doing your part to share in that work? As elders and deacons, are we praying, seeking God's aid, working in the strength he provides?

As parents, are we caring for our children diligently? Are we directing them carefully? Do we see children as God's gift, and love and welcome them all?

Bow your heads, consider these things, and silently give to God your fears, cares, frustrations... You can trust God. Jer. 29:11, 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. He loves you so much, he died for you. Give your life to him, repenting of your sins, trusting him as savior. Give your work to him, rely on his strength, trust his provision, seek his quiet blessing. Give your children to him, see them as gift of God they are. Know they are yours to care for and direct because of your love for them, just as God cares for and directs you because of his love.