

DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Class Introduction and Overview

The Psalms are ideal for initiating discussion of the personal side of the believer's relationship with God. The Psalms show us how to praise God, how to appreciate his creation, how to deal with defeats, doubts, and disappointments, and many other such aspects of our lives. Study of the Psalms particularly helps us to take our focus off of worldly concerns, and helps us to build a more spiritual mind-set, focusing more directly on God himself, his will, and his values. In the contemporary church this can be of great benefit in helping us both with our focus and with practical living, as we respond to the many challenges that face us.

This class will meet on Sunday mornings for the next two quarters, Spring and Summer. After an introductory lesson (including background and thematic material) in the first week of Spring classes, the way we will study the Psalms is to group several of them each lesson that pertain to a common theme or that serve a common purpose. In the class time, we will carefully study one or two of the Psalms, including discussion time on the ways they can help us personally. Each week's class will be accompanied by notes that will include references to other similar Psalms that you can study on your own if you would like to do so.

Sources & References

Of the many possible sources for studying the Psalms, the following are particularly recommended. Each one has different strengths and its own perspective. If you would like to do further study on your own and would like to know what books may be especially helpful, just let me know.

Frank Gaebelin (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms - Song of Songs*
Derek Kidner, *Psalms, Volumes 1 & 2* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)
James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation Commentary)
Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon on the Psalms* (also published as *The Treasury of David*)
John T. Willis, *Insights From the Psalms* (3 volumes), ACU

Tentative Topics List

We will begin with an introductory lesson to provide an overview of the Psalms and their purpose, to the Jews and to Christians. This introductory lesson will feature Psalm 1, to illustrate the major goals we have in studying the Psalms in the church today. After that, rather than study the Psalms straight through in numerical order, each week's lesson will center around a collection of Psalms with similar themes. Since there is no way to cover every Psalm adequately even in two quarters, this approach will allow us to become familiar with a wide variety of Psalms, and will prepare you to go back through the book on your own and study the Psalms we omitted in our survey.

Aside from the introductory lesson, the topics that follow are given only in a tentative order, which may be revised later in the series. Note that several of these topics will be given two or more weeks of class time. Note also that there are many other Psalms that would also fit into these topics, and the list is not intended to cover all of the Psalms, but to provide familiarity with the most common and important types of them. See the class notes for more comments.

Introduction Via Psalm 1:

- Overview/Background of the Psalms

- Goals in Studying the Psalms

- Illustration of Themes using Psalm 1

 - Delighting in God & His Word (v. 1-2)

 - Faith Leads to Life & Fruitfulness (v. 3)

 - God's Care & Protection Of His Children (v. 4-6)

- Survey of Types of Psalms

Psalms of Faith & Trust

Examples: 3, 11, 16, 23, 42

These Psalms celebrate the confidence, joy, and hope we are able to have in our relationship with God when we understand the presence of his caring and guiding hand in our lives. Faithfulness and trust produce these other positive qualities that we long for.

Psalms of Praise to God

Examples: 96, 97, 98, 148, 149, 150

These types of Psalms remind us of many of the things for which praise is due to God (often they are things we overlook), and they also give us some memorable examples of how to offer praise to God for what he has done.

Celebrating God as Creator

Examples: 8, 19, 33, 104

These special examples of praise Psalms help us to appreciate and honor God as our Creator, so we will devote special attention to them. Although most Christians firmly believe that God created the universe out of nothing, we rarely step back to appreciate this fully or to meditate on the astounding implications of this truth.

Prayers For God's Help or Deliverance

Examples: 40, 55, 70, 77, 90, 142

Probably the most common type of all the Psalms. There are many others besides these examples (see separate notes). Psalms such as these help us to feel closer to God in times of desperate need, and also help us learn to approach God in an appropriate way.

Psalms of Penitence

Examples: 38, 51

Psalms like these teach us how to be penitent for sin in a way that brings us back closer to God, as opposed to handling our sin with worldly sorrow or hardness. We will also look at Psalm 32, a celebration of God's forgiveness.

Delighting in God's Word

Survey of Psalm 119

This famous and lengthy Psalm teaches us how to value and appreciate God's Word, and incidentally furnishes us with many practical insights on how to pursue a more intimate familiarity with the Word of God.

The Struggle Between Good & Evil

Examples: 36, 37, 73

The struggle between righteousness and temptation, between discouragement and faithfulness, is not unique to ourselves. Even the great spiritual figures in the Bible often felt that the sinful and proud were more blessed than they were, and had to struggle to see things from a more spiritual perspective.

God & His People

Psalms 78, 89, 105, 106, 114

These Psalms celebrate and illuminate, with poetic language, the covenant God made with his people. It helps us to see from a personal perspective the grounds of our own covenant and relationship with God. These Psalms also describe the struggle of God's people to remain faithful to their covenant with God, contrasted with God's own perfect faithfulness.

Messianic Psalms

Examples: 2, 22, 110

These Psalms look ahead to the Messiah, who fulfilled all of the other goals and purposes in the Psalms and the rest of the Old Testament. The Messianic Psalms provide a valuable perspective, and one different from Messianic prophecy.

Psalms of Thanksgiving & Victory

Examples: 9, 18, 20, 21, 30, 34, 65, 68

Giving thanks to God is a simple principle, but too often forgotten by his people. There are many victories and blessings that each of us enjoys every day, and these Psalms can help us to notice these victories, enjoy them more, and give God the heartfelt thanks for these victories and blessings that he deserves.

The Songs of Ascents

Psalms 120 through 134

These often-overlooked Psalms are usually understood to have been the Psalms traditionally sung by the Jews on those special occasions when they "went up" to Jerusalem for worship. They are helpful to us in exemplifying worshipful attitudes and themes that can focus our own attitudes towards worshipping God.

- *Mark W. Garner, March 2000*

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson One: Introduction □ia Psal□ □

This week's introductory lesson will provide an overview of the Psalms and their purpose, and will feature a study of Psalm 1, to illustrate the major goals we have when studying the Psalms in the church today, and to show us how the Psalms can help us in our relationship with God.

Overview/Background of the Psalms

The Psalms, unlike most books of the Bible, were collected over the course of many years of Israel's history, and include writings by numerous different authors. They served many uses for the Jewish nation, but were especially seen as a collection of divinely inspired songs and prayers that could be used for worship in a number of settings. A basic understanding of how the book came to be, and of how it was used historically, can give us a little direction with which to begin our own study of the Psalms.

Most books of the Bible were written by one particular writer, as that person was inspired by the Holy Spirit. But in the Psalms, we have a collection of similar writings by a number of different authors from differing time periods. These individually inspired writings were then collected over a period of years by God's people, and organized into the Psalms. They all share some of the same obvious characteristics, such as the poetic nature and format of the writing, the topical material, and the goal or theme of the compositions.

A large number of the Psalms are connected to the era of King David. No fewer than 73 are attributed to David personally, and another 12 to Asaph, his director of music (see 1 Chronicles 16:4-6). Others may have come from this era as well. Certainly, all of the Psalms reflect in some way the values exemplified by "the man after God's own heart", whose relationship with God is in many ways the ideal for those who want to know God more personally.

Since the book of Psalms was assembled over the course of time, there were points in Israel's ancient history when the collection of Psalms was shorter than it is now. There are actually five collections, or Books, of Psalms, which in a general way give us an indication of how they were historically collected. The 5 books are respectively: Book One, Psalms 1-41 □Book Two, Psalms 42-72 □Book Three, Psalms 73-89 □Book Four, Psalms 90-106 □Book Five, Psalms 107-150. (Take a look at the first Psalm in each of these books, and you will see a heading above that Psalm, indicating a new book.) While there are a few stylistic characteristics that can sometimes be generally associated with particular books, in practical study there is no real significance to the division into books, aside from its usefulness in helping us understand the historical collection of the Psalms. It is unknown exactly when the Psalms were assembled in their now final form, other than that it is certain they existed in this form before the creation of the Septuagint in the 3rd century BC. At some point early in the collection process, Psalm 1 was selected as the most suitable introductory Psalm, and given a place before the rest. Psalm 1 has no specific title or author listed. Most Psalms do, and especially those in Books One and Two.

Technical notes: (1) the numbering of the Psalms is slightly different in many of the ancient manuscripts, since at times some of the present Psalms were combined. For example, Psalms 9/10 and 42/43 were often written as one Psalm. Note that the second of each of these pairs has no heading or author in the actual text □(2) The Hebrew text, and the usage by ancient Jews and Christians alike, generally considered the brief headings and authors' names to be as inspired as the rest of the text □(3) Modern

"scholars" have concocted many speculative theories about other books of the Bible being pieced together as were the Psalms, but such theories deny and discredit the work of the Holy Spirit. The multiple authorship of the Psalms, however, is attested to in the Bible itself, and is in fact an important feature of the book (4). Many Psalms have a description such as "miktam", "maskil", or "shiggaion". These are musical terms whose meaning is now lost to us. One that is fairly certain is the occasional use of the term "Selah" in the text of a Psalm, which probably referred to a musical interlude for the purpose of meditation. If you are interested in these more technical aspects of the Psalms, see me or refer to the sources listed, since we will not spend much class time on most of these topics.

The collection of Psalms was used by the Jewish Nation as an inspired collection of prayers and songs, especially useful for worship, both formal and informal. Some Psalms became associated with particular holidays or occasions. Many were designed to be performed with musical accompaniment, while others were more likely read or sung without instrumentation. Most of the Psalms had an inspirational and instructive value of their own, irrespective of the particular occasion on which they were used. So today, we find the Psalms to be suitable for inspiration and instruction in a great variety of contexts. They have furnished material for many Christian songs, and even for popular songs. We see the Psalms on plaques and other decorations in addition to their use as reading and study material.

The earliest Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, often used the Psalms in similar ways. The Psalms also furnished material for many early hymns of a definite Christian nature. In addition, many of the writers of the New Testament saw in the Psalms some values and themes that were not fully realized until the coming of Christ. A few Psalms are even explicitly Messianic, and are so used and interpreted both by the inspired writers of the New Testament and by later generations of Christian writers. The Messianic perspectives in the Psalms are meant to be something different from the predictive Messianic teachings of prophecy—they are meant also to emphasize the personal aspects of Jesus' redemptive mission, and to illuminate those aspects of his ministry that we may not always fully appreciate.

Goals & Principles in Studying the Psalms

The Psalms are part of the Bible's "Wisdom Literature", or Poetic Literature, which deals much more personally with our relationship with God than do books of history, the prophets, or the epistles. (The Jews called books like Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and others simply "The Writings".) Further, each individual Psalm can be considered a complete study in itself. We shall review just a few of the consequences of these characteristics that can help us in our study. For a more detailed discussion of the general principles involved in studying the Psalms (and other parts of the Bible), an excellent beginning source is *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

The Psalms, as well as the other books that are more poetical in nature, are meant to play a particular role in our relationship with God. This is true of other portions of the Bible as well. For example, the historical books give us factual background and practical examples to follow, and the epistles give us direct instruction which almost always is meant to be followed literally by the church in any era. When studying the Psalms, we are looking at some very personal aspects of our relationship with God. We see how to express our positive emotions and how to deal with our negative emotions. We see David and other godly persons both praising God and wrestling with their doubts. We find many examples of personal thoughts expressed between a believer and God, which can help us in similar circumstances. The Psalms thus can do two things for us. They can teach us about the ways that God views our emotions, our doubts, our

struggles, and the like, and they can also help us to handle such things in a godly and positive way.

When studying any book in the Bible, context is important. In studying the Psalms, context plays a somewhat different role than it does in other books. Each Psalm can be studied as more of an individual unit or self-contained study than can other parts of the Bible. (I realize that it is very popular to pull verses out of context from other parts of the Bible as well, but it is a dangerous practice.) For this reason, Psalms particularly lend themselves to topical study. But it is also to keep any Scripture in context. In studying a Psalm, there are usually just two key things to remember. First, many of the Psalms do have a personal or historical context, as indicated by the headings some of them bear. When that is the case, it is important to keep that in mind when interpreting the Psalm. More importantly, the Psalms have an overall context, and are part of the Bible as a whole. There is nothing in the Psalms that contradicts any other part of the Bible, if understood properly.

The key to a proper interpretive emphasis in Psalms is to keep the focus on the personal. They are not meant to give doctrinal teachings or points. A well-known example of the importance of this comes from Psalm 51:5, wherein the writer says, "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." There are some commentators who use this verse to teach that a newborn infant carries a burden of "original sin", and thus must be baptized. Read in context, it is an expression of how deeply convicted David has become of a horrible sin he committed. (Note the heading to Psalm 51, giving us the occasion.) It is a deliberately exaggerated expression of his anguish and his realization of what he has done, and was never meant to be taken literally. Some other obvious examples would be in the book of Job, in which Job's three friends express many erroneous opinions about God. They are recorded in the Bible to contrast this kind of human error with the truth about God that is revealed later in the book.

When reading the Psalms, we should be looking for a few basic things. What is the main theme of the Psalms? That is, what feeling or emotion is being expressed (positive or negative), or, what situation does the writer find himself in? Our tentative topic lists will give you an idea of some of the more common topics addressed in the Psalms. It is then always a good idea to try to relate to the writer's own feelings. Can we identify with his doubts or struggles? Can we remember moments when we too broke into praise or thanksgiving to God? Then, we want to look for the things God teaches to the writer about this main topic, and of course how we also can learn from them. This is the appropriate emphasis in studying Psalms, which will both prevent us from getting off-track and will enable us to get the most out of these beautiful prayers and songs.

Psalm 1: The Introduction to the Book of Psalms

Psalm 1 was intended to serve as a suitable preface to the rest of the Psalms, and it brings out the most basic themes that are examined from various perspectives in most of the other Psalms. We shall survey Psalm 1 as an introductory study to the others that we shall study in more detail in the coming weeks. This week, our primary goal is to bring out some ideas that we shall keep in mind, not to cover all the details. So when studying this Psalm, we may deliberately bring up more questions than we can answer!

Psalm 1:1-2 tells us about delighting in God and in his Word:

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers.
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

We see right away the ideal for our lives that God gives us, and the Psalmists will tell us about. The ideal human life is spent following God, seeking his will in all things, and devoting oneself to the study and fulfillment of God's Word. In studying the Psalms, we will see this goal both upheld and explained. What exactly does it mean to be "blessed"? Is this a promise that we shall have everything we want if we follow God, or is there a deeper meaning to it? Further, how does one "delight in the law of the Lord"? Clearly, this does not mean to promote a love of legalism, but something more spiritual and personal.

The next verse (Psalm 1:3) tells us that faith leads to life and fruitfulness:

*He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither.
Whatever he does prospers.*

Note the images in this verse, which are intended to suggest life and growth: tree, water, and fruit are typical and common ways of suggesting the life lived by a follower of God, and the growth and fruitfulness that accompany faithful living. Many Psalms that we shall study will both emphasize this and will explore what it means. Christians are often frustrated when their faithful efforts seem to be unappreciated or unproductive, and it can strengthen our faith and give us perseverance to have a deeper understanding of the life found in Christ.

Finally, verses 4-6 teach us that, while the ungodly have much to fear, God takes care of and protects his own:

*Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff that the wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

These verses in part echo the first part of the Psalm, assuring us of the benefits of a faithful life, and they also indicate the risks and dangers involved in rejecting the way of God. Again, we will need to ask ourselves what exactly this teaches, since there are clearly many ungodly and sinful persons who experience positive things in their lives, at least in the short run.

In addition to that, these verses teach us another idea that is prominent in the Psalms. Note that the fate of the sinner is described, and the fate of the righteous is also indicated, but there is no reference to the fate of the one who tries to be middle-of-the-road. Each human simply must decide whether he or she wants to follow God whole-heartedly or not at all. This will be stressed in many of the Psalms, as it is so many times elsewhere in the Bible. The definition and implications of this are among the many things we will hope to learn more about.

Survey of Types of Psalms

See the General Introduction for a more complete description of the kinds of topics we plan to study in our class. Here is the basic list:

Psalms of Faith & Trust (Examples: 3, 11, 16, 23, 42)
Psalms of Praise to God (Examples: 96, 97, 98, 148, 149, 150)
Celebrating God as Creator (Examples: 8, 19, 33, 104)
Prayers For God's Help or Deliverance (Examples: 40, 55, 70, 77, 90, 142)
Psalms of Penitence (Examples: 38, 51)
Delighting in God's Word (Survey of Psalm 119)
The Struggle Between Good & Evil (Examples: 36, 37, 73)
God & His People (Examples: 78, 89, 105, 106, 114)
Messianic Psalms (Examples: 2, 22, 110)
Psalms of Thanksgiving & Victory (Examples: 9, 18, 20, 21, 30, 34, 65, 68)
The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120 through 134)

Sources & References

Of the many possible sources for studying the Psalms, the following are particularly recommended. Each one has different strengths and its own perspective. If you would like to do further study on your own and would like to know what books may be especially helpful, just let me know.

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- *Mark W. Garner, March 2000*

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Two: Psalms of Faith and Trust Part A

Beginning this week, we shall use each class to study a group of Psalms that have a common theme. This week and also next week we shall cover a selection of Psalms that teach us about faith and trust in God. These will help us focus on some of the most basic, but most important, aspects of our relationship with God.

In a sense, all Psalms are about faith and trust. Much else in a Christian's life flows from faith and trust in God, and so all of the other topics dealt with in the Psalms (and for that matter, in any part of the Bible) flow from, or relate to, these basics. But the Psalms we shall study this week and next week give special emphasis to these themes. These Psalms give us reasons why we can put our full trust and security in God, and help us to see the difference between trusting in things of this world and trusting in God.

Psalm of Trust in the Face of Adversity

Psalm 3, our first "faith and trust" Psalm, was written by David at a very demoralizing point of his life. His own son Absalom had risen up against him and had driven David out of his kingdom. The full account of these sad events is found in 2 Samuel 13-19. It is a good example of the ways that sin compounds itself in our lives and the lives of others. To give just a very brief synopsis of what happened, it all began when one of David's sons, Amnon, raped his half-sister Tamar. Absalom, another of David's sons (and a full brother of Tamar), hired killers to murder Amnon, and fled Jerusalem afterwards. It is interesting to note that this episode came in the wake of David's own adultery with Bathsheba and its aftermath (2 Samuel 11-12), which surely undermined David's moral authority with his family. David forgave Absalom and allowed him to return, only to have Absalom plot a rebellion that led to David being temporarily overthrown. David was eventually restored, and Absalom killed, but Psalm 3 was written at the time when David was an outcast with an uncertain future. It is important to remember this when studying the Psalm.

Psalm 3 opens with a familiar statement from David about his troubles (v. 1-2):

*Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
"God will not deliver him!"*

Selah

You may notice that these verses, and several others in this Psalm, are the basis for a popular devotional song. In this beginning, David expresses very succinctly the grave danger he faces, and he describes the way that most humans are looking at his situation: they think it is hopeless. To the outside observer, a situation such as David's can seem to be a "proof" that God does not deliver anyone from trouble. Of course, when they see the outcome, and see David restored to his throne, they will see things differently. But the challenge for us is to have David's attitude, which was an attitude of faith and hope even when things looked the worst.

David spends no further time detailing his troubles, but describes his confidence in God (v. 3-4):

*But you are a shield around me, O Lord,
my Glorious One, who lifts up my head.
To the Lord I cry aloud,
and he answers me from his holy hill.*

Selah

There are several simple but powerful things to notice here. First, God is called a shield, symbolizing both his protection and his strength. A strong shield protects its wearer not out of good intentions alone, but because of its strength, its impenetrable nature. David is saying that God is able to protect him because these earthly problems and troubles cannot harm or threaten God. That makes God much more worthy of our trust than other humans, most of whom are vulnerable to many of their own problems, and who are themselves constantly in need of care and help.

Next, he emphasizes in several ways that God is the source of his hope. It is God who will lift up his head, and who will answer his cry. David has no problem humbling himself and acknowledging his deep dependence on God. Instead of insisting on being a macho man who can take care of himself, David rejoices in knowing that God is there to rescue him.

He expresses an even deeper sense of security in the next verses (v. 5-6):

*I lie down and sleep
I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.
I will not fear the tens of thousands
drawn up against me on every side.*

Despite many dangers, discouragements, and sorrows, David is able to sleep peacefully and securely, because he knows that God is keeping him in his care. He goes about the routine aspects of his life without letting his heart be pre-occupied with the things he wishes were different. This attitude is one worthy of our careful consideration. Even many Christians find it impossible to live their lives normally when there is some current circumstance or event that is not at all the way they wish it to be. So many of us allow the negative things in our lives to convince us that God may not really be there after all.

In Psalm 4, which has a somewhat different tone (being more of an appeal for help than a statement of faithfulness), a similar statement is made in verse 8. In both cases it is very possible that David may have been thinking of one of God's promises in Leviticus 26:6.

To complete the Psalm, we have an image of God as the only true source of deliverance (v. 7-8):

*Arise, O Lord!
Deliver me, O my God!
For you have struck all my enemies on the cheek
you have broken the teeth of the wicked.
From the Lord comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.*

Selah

David is so frequently an example not only of faithfulness in the middle of trials, but also of charity and justice towards his enemies, because he knew that God's judgment was more powerful than any he could render. In looking at his enemies, he knew that the time would come

when God would deal with them, and this relieved him of the heavy burdens that resentment and hatred impose on those who insist on harboring them. This is just one of the many benefits of a faithful attitude towards trials.

Psalm 16: Refuge In God

Psalm 16 does not have a specific historical context, but rather is a general statement of the faith and security that come from knowing God and walking with him. Though it may not seem as familiar at first, it is extensively quoted in Acts 2, as part of the most famous gospel sermon ever preached.

It opens with a description of God as a refuge (v. 1-2):

*Keep me safe, O God,
for in you I take refuge.
I said to the Lord, O you are my Lord
apart from you I have no good thing.*

The idea of God as a refuge is also seen in many other passages in the Psalms - 2:12, 5:11, 7:1, 11:1 and many others. It is also a description sometimes used by the prophets - for example Jeremiah 16:19, 17:17 and Nahum 1:7. A refuge symbolizes a safe, secure haven where one can go when troubled or in danger. Describing God as a refuge is meant to give us a picture of him as a safe place to go whenever we need help, comfort, or rest.

The next two verses show us a contrast (v. 3-4):

*As for the saints who are in the land,
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.
The sorrows of those will increase
who run after other gods.
I will not pour out their libations of blood
or take up their names on my lips.*

While there are many like David among God's people who seek God and his will, there are likewise many who run after other gods. We ought not to dismiss this as applying only to the type of crass and obvious idolatry that thrived in the ancient Middle East. Today there are many "sophisticated", "modern" men and women who chase after equally ridiculous gods, such as materialism, technology, popularity, power, fame, and the like. Like the idolaters of the ancient world, they do not sit passively and wait for their idol to come to them, but they run after it eagerly, foolishly thinking that their idol will make them happier. The Psalm says that running after these other gods, of any form, will only increase one's own sorrow in the long run. Christians know this, but they must remember it and exercise spiritual discipline when they too are tempted to de-emphasize the spiritual aspects of their lives for the sake of short-term earthly gods.

Instead of pursuing worthless things, the psalmist knows he has something that is lasting and of genuine value (v. 5-6):

*Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup
you have made my lot secure.
The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places*

surely I have a delightful inheritance.

Just as God told Abraham, "I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1), David here realizes that knowing God is far more valuable than anything else. And to whatever degree that worldly blessings can make him a little happier, he knows that he is far better off settling for the ones that God provides, not seeking what he wants for himself. Even great persons of faith such as Abraham and David found out by bitter experience what happens when a person tries to grab blessings in an expression of self-will instead of allowing God to decide what we really need, and what would truly benefit us.

Along with this, the psalmist is able to have a complete confidence in God's guidance (v. 7-8):

*I will praise the Lord, who counsels me
even at night my heart instructs me.
I have set the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.*

There are certainly many Christians who love God and appreciate what he has done for them, but who then have great difficulty submitting to his will when it conflicts with their own. True faith, based on a humble realization that God is wiser and more far-seeing than we are, will always lead to a joyful acceptance of God's will. This in turn leads to great confidence, because when we are always doing what God has told us to do, we need never be shaken by doubts or regrets.

Verse 8 is the beginning of a long quote from this Psalm in Peter's sermon in Acts 2. He quotes from here to almost the end of the psalm (omitting only the last line of verse 11), in the middle of his discourse on Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. It is a good idea to study through the whole sermon in Acts 2, and not just the familiar climactic verses, to see how Peter leads up to the proper response to the gospel. He does so not only with the facts of Jesus' sacrificial ministry, but also with important ideas about faith and trust in God, as are expressed very convincingly in Psalm 16.

The next two verses are at once an emphatic statement of security in God, and a prophetic image that Peter used in proclaiming the gospel (v. 9-10):

*Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices
my body also will rest secure,
Because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your holy one see decay.*

In its original context, this is a poetic (that is, exaggerated) statement of David's trust in God. Even though the ancient Jews were not given as complete an understanding of the afterlife as we are, David, being so close to God, has an assurance that somehow even death cannot harm him if he is living in God's care. Compare, for example, the last verse of Psalm 23. (See how many other such verses you can find in Psalms.)

The Jews in Old Testament times conceptualized the afterlife as taking place in Sheol, a vaguely conceived shadowy realm where one would at least retain his or her identity in some form. You can get a good idea of their conception by looking up the Old Testament references to "Sheol" in a concordance.

In the New Testament, both Peter (Acts 2:26-27) and Paul (Acts 13:35 - be careful to read the context in both cases) saw these verses as having their ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. The faith that David had, with his limited human perspective, saw a more complete realization in Jesus, both in terms of the perfect faith and obedience that Jesus showed

to the Father, and in terms of the powerful fulfillment of God's promise not to abandon his "Holy One".

The Psalm concludes with a similarly strong statement of assurance (v. 11):

*You have made known to me the path of life
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures in your right hand.*

Besides the repeated emphasis on David's permanent assurance, note the phrase he uses to describe his existence, as a "path of life". We see often in the Psalms, as noted in Psalm 1:3 last week, this emphasis on life. Much of the material in the Psalms anticipates Jesus famous promise in John 10:10 that his followers will have "life to the full". This promise by no means assures us of the kind of "life" that pagans crave, full of irresponsible fun and slothful ease, but rather assures us that our lives will have a genuine meaning, a worthwhile purpose, and that our lives will never lack direction or hope as long as we continue to walk in the way God sets before us.

Summary/Preview of Next Time

The ideas in these two Psalms help us to focus on what it means to have deep faith and trust in God. We see that this does not mean an expectation that we shall never have trouble, but rather an understanding that God's care and wisdom enable us to face our problems with quiet calm. Genuine faith and trust in God also make it very easy to resist and reject worldly temptations, because we can see the far greater value inherent in the things of God.

For an additional study along these lines, take a look at Psalm 11 on your own if you have time. This is a short Psalm that reiterates the assurance of faith that we saw in this week's study (v. 1-3). Then (v. 4-6) it brings forth an image of God's reign and judgment. Consider these in view of the points we learned from our study in class. There are of course many other Psalms that emphasize similar ideas. Next week we shall study two well known Psalms on this topic, Psalms 23 and 42. If you get a chance before next week's class, take a look at them, keeping in mind also the things we have discussed this week.

- Mark W. Garner, March 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Three: Psalms of Faith and Trust Part 1

This week, we continue our study of Psalms about faith and trust in God. The two Psalms featured in this week's study are among the most familiar in the whole book. Among many other important points, they will teach two key principles about faith: first, that humility is necessary for genuine faith, and second, that when things seem bad for us, the most important thing for us is to look to God himself, not necessarily for the circumstances themselves to change.

Psalm 23 The Lord is My Shepherd

This famous Psalm contains many familiar and powerful images of God's protective care and guidance for his people. We are particularly interested in seeing how we can make this assurance a reality in our daily lives. The images are meant to give us a memorable picture of the ways that God takes care of us, so that we will notice more of the ways he keeps us under his protective care. David is often used as an example of great faith, and psalms such as this give us some direction on how we can follow the same path as him.

It is especially important to notice the many expressions of humility in this Psalm. It is impossible to appreciate, or even acknowledge, the ways that God takes care of us if we are stubbornly determined that we can live our lives on our terms and under our own strength. We cannot have any real faith in God until we admit our need for him. When we study this Psalm, make sure to notice the many ways that, in addition to praising and glorifying God, David is also admitting his deep dependence on God. Our flesh hates to admit dependence on anything, and getting past this is a vital part of nurturing a deeper and more satisfying faith in our hearts.

The Psalm begins with the first of many famous expressions (v.1):

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

The image of a shepherd caring for a sheep sets the tone for the rest of the Psalm. A sheep is one of the most defenseless of God's creatures (and not particularly intelligent, either). In calling God his shepherd, David is first of all identifying himself as a sheep, needing constant protection from predators and needing constant guidance from the shepherd, to find food and safety. Then too, in calling God his shepherd, the psalmist gives God the multi-faceted role of caring for him in many different respects. A shepherd has several important responsibilities, and God also does in our lives. He is not only a lawgiver, not only a provider, not only an encourager, he is all these and many more to us. Compare this image to Jesus's comments about the Good Shepherd in John 10.

Next is an image of the quiet security that comes from living in the care of the Shepherd (v. 2):

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters.*

Primarily, these verses are meant to emphasize the peace that the psalmist has in his heart, because of knowing that the shepherd is looking over him and meeting his needs. His life is filled with green pastures, quiet waters, and other pleasant, safe experiences. This does not mean that there are no dangers out there, as David knew better than any of us. His tumultuous life was

hardly a literal succession of quiet scenes of refuge. What he means is something deeper - that the person who lives in God's care has found a permanent place of refuge and quiet, a sanctuary for the soul that more than makes up for the dangers and pains that the physical body will suffer. If David had been a proud man, he would have resented the complications and disappointments in his life, and could not have written the thoughts in this Psalm. But his humility enabled him to see that his life with God really had everything he needed, and compared to what it would have been if he had tried to run it himself (compare his life with Saul's), it was much better.

Secondarily, note that we see again in this psalm the kind of nature images that are common in the book. Recall that these are deliberately used to connote the idea of life. Here in this psalm, we see a good description of the idea of "life to the full". In the next verse, he continues this thought and then considers God's own perspective (v. 3):

*he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

We can count on God both because of his love for us and because of his character. God will take care of us as he has promised "for his own name's sake". God cannot lie, cannot go back on his promises, and can never act in a way that contradicts his righteous and sinless nature. That enables us to place our full confidence in him, in a way that would not be possible when dealing with flawed human beings or weak material things. It also means that things do not depend on us - even God's care and love for us are not conditioned on our merit, but on his own nature. This is hard for the proud to accept, but for the humble it is a powerful assurance and promise.

This also enables the faithful to go through life's dangers without living in the fear and insecurity that dominate the lives of so many humans (v. 4):

*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.*

As the sheep lives contentedly in the shepherd's care, assured and guided by the shepherd's rod and staff, so the Christian can always be assured that God, with his infinitely greater wisdom and power, is ever watching over us and will always give us the comfort and protection we need. Once again, the proud will not be assured by this, because they think they are better equipped to look after themselves. But the humble will find great assurance in knowing that they can look to God.

As the next verse says, he will not only protect us, but will also meet all our needs (v.5):

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

God "prepares a table" in that he constantly anticipates our needs and fills them. The proud do not see this, because they think they know their needs better than God does, and so they ignore the many, many needs that he meets for us every moment. Humble believers learn to see and appreciate the many ways that God sustains our lives, gives us what we need to live, and gives us many pleasurable things that we don't absolutely need, to show us his love and concern.

All of this enables the humble, faithful believer to look at the whole of his or her life with a feeling of security and hope (v.6):

*Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

The psalmist expresses a confidence that life will always be filled with not only everything needed, but with blessing and joy as well. There is nothing in the future that we need to fear if we are living in God's presence. There will be plenty of things in our lives that are not perfect, but we can be assured that we will always have the things we absolutely need.

Psalm 42: My Soul Thirsts for God

In this Psalm we see a somewhat different expression of faith and trust. This time, the Psalmist is proclaiming a faith in God despite many sorrows and disappointments. It is an example to us of the possibility of retaining a deep faith during the most demoralizing of times. That means this Psalm (which incidentally was not written by David, but by the "Sons of Korah" - see below) can give us a general perspective when we are struggling with our faith. The Psalm's main point is made right away (v. 1-2):

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*

The psalmist has a deep desire to be with God. We see below that it comes at a time of grave disappointment and discouragement. The deer longs for water because it is necessary for life and refreshment. So too, the faithful believer accepts the deep need for God that we all have. So many times, even Christians look at their problems and determine that what they really need is something of this world: something material, some privilege, some opportunity. This psalm reminds us that our most essential need is always God himself.

Now we learn a little about the psalmist's problems (v. 3-4):

*My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long,
Where is your God?
These things I remember as I pour out my soul:
how I used to go with the multitude, leading the procession to the house of God,
with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive throng.*

Note that the psalmist's problems are never specifically enumerated, but are only summarized in a general way. (Many scholars have speculated on exactly what these statements refer to, but without arriving at any useful consensus.) Often our discouragement does not really even come from a particular problem or event, but is just a vague feeling that things could be a lot better, or (very common) that they were a lot better at some time in the past. These feelings are perfectly understandable, even natural for anyone living in this troubled world, but they are also indicative of a loss of focus. A general feeling of demoralization should suggest to us that we have a great need to refresh and restore our personal closeness with God.

As the psalm continues, the writer works through this very thing (v. 5-7):

*Why are you do^uncast, ^o my soul^o Why so disturbed ^oithin me^o
Put your hope in God, for I ^oill yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

*My soul is do^uncast ^oithin me^otherefore I ^oill remember you.
from the land of the ^ordan, the heights of ^oermon - from Mount Mi^oar.
Deep calls to deep in the roar of your ^oaterfalls^o
all your ^oaves and breakers have s^oept over me.*

He knows on the one hand, that his soul is troubled and disturbed. He also knows that he "should" be trusting in God, but how can he do it when he feels like this^o First of all, he knows that he simply needs to remember God. There are no quick fixes, no magic words, no clever solutions to the deepest needs of our soul. We must simply remember God's majesty and glory, and the vast difference between him and the things of our world. This is the meaning of the symbols of waterfalls, waves, and breakers in verse 7 - the forces in this world are too much for us to handle, but they are all under God's control.

There follows another important point to remember (v. 8):

*By day the Lord directs his love, at night his song is ^oith me -
a prayer to the God of my life.*

He reali^oes that God is always with him. Whether be day or night, whether humans notice or not, when we are awake and when we are asleep, in great events that we notice or tiny areas of life that we never think about, in all these things God is all-knowing and all-powerful, and his hand is at work for the good of those who belong to him. And so the writer is able to conclude with hope that things will be better (v. 9-11):

*I say to God my rock, ^oWhy have you forgotten me^o
Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy^o
My bones suffer mortal agony as my foes taunt me,
saying to me all day long, ^oWhere is your God^o*

*Why are you do^uncast, ^o my soul^o Why so disturbed ^oithin me^o
Put your hope in God, for I ^oill yet praise him, my Savior and my God.*

He knows in his heart that God has not really forgotten him, but he feels as if that has happened, and so it is important for him to share his heart with God. Although his discouragement and confusion are still with him, he is able to resolve firmly in his heart that the most important thing to do is to continue to put his hope in God. Here is the lesson for us: we will not always be able to avoid discouragements, and we will frequently give in to demoralization and frustration. Our fleshly nature is too weak to stand up to the powerful ways that the world has of attacking our joy and security. But what we can always do is resolve to stay close to God, to remember that he is in control, and that he will work for our good, and will do so in ways that are much more important than the considerations and needs that may be foremost in our fleshly minds.

Summary/^ourther Study

The next few Psalms, all written by the Sons of Korah, deal with similar topics as well as touching on some of the other concepts we'll study in later lessons. This collection of Psalms 42-49 are thus recommended to use for further study on faith and trust. Psalm 43 is a good place to continue, because it is essentially a continuation of Psalm 42, and in many ancient manuscripts Psalms 42-43 were combined into one Psalm. Psalm 46 is also particularly recommended, and it echos the refuge theme that we saw last week in Psalm 16.

A technical note on the "Sons of Korah": While it is not possible to know for certain whom this refers to, most commentators conclude that this is a group of descendants - not necessarily literal first-generation sons - of the infamous Korah who rebelled against Moses in Numbers 16. Note that in that rebellion, the families of his co-conspirators Dathan and Abiram were destroyed, but only Korah's "followers" were, and it is specifically stated later that Korah's line continued (Numbers 26:11). It is certainly noteworthy if his descendants deliberately identified themselves as such. Most likely they would only do so as an emphatic gesture of humility.

As you study faith on your own, make sure to remember the basic points of this week's lesson. That is, that to build genuine faith, the kind that sustains us in difficult times, requires humility. We must be able to accept and rejoice in our dependence on God, and must be able to see the things he does for us that we cannot do for ourselves. Then, we should also keep always in mind that the deepest need of our soul is to be with God himself, to stay in his care. Anything he does for us or teaches us or helps us do is secondary to knowing him and becoming one with him.

- Mark W. Garner, March 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Lesson Four: Psalms of Praise Celebrating God's Glory Part A: A New Song

Our next topic, in this class and the next too, will be a study of selected psalms of praise that celebrate God's glory. This kind of psalm does not deal directly with any of our own problems, needs, or concerns. Instead, they are meant to provide us with valuable perspective. They help us to take our eyes off of our own lives for a short while, so that we can focus on God, his nature, and his divine qualities. The willingness to do this is an important part of spiritual health.

The praise psalm is another basic and important type of psalm. As with our previous topic, this is another theme that in a sense is found in all of the Psalms. In fact, the Hebrew name for the book of Psalms, *Shema*, simply means "Praises". But there are also certain of the Psalms that focus exclusively on praising God. That is, they almost entirely ignore or set aside any reference to human needs or situations, in order to focus exclusively on a celebration of God's glory and majesty. There is thus a difference - subtle perhaps, but important - between praise and thanksgiving (which we shall study in a later lesson). Thanksgiving necessarily refers to showing appreciation for the things that God has done for us. Praising God centers on his own nature and character, and usually does not refer to specific things he has done for us, at least as individuals. Both praise and thanksgiving are important aspects of our relationship with God.

Psalm 96 Sing to the Lord A New Song

This week's study comes from a series of Psalms (93-99) that emphasize praising God for his glory, majesty, and other outstanding personal qualities. The two that we shall study contain a common call, for us to "sing to the Lord a new song". The theme is established at the beginning of Psalm 96 (Psalm 96:1-2):

*Sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name, proclaim his salvation day after day.*

It is important to consider what the psalmist means by a "new" song. Genuine praise to God is new in the sense that it is an important departure from the natural, fleshly way that we all have of looking at the world. Even for "religious" persons, it is a breakthrough to take one's eyes off of oneself, and off of the world and its needs and problems, to focus truly on God himself. Looking at God gives us an entirely new and different perspective on everything else. We can then lift our minds and hearts above the imprisonment of our earthly body and lives. This is the song he wants us to sing!

God has many great and awesome qualities that should be praised by his whole creation (v. 3-4):

*Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise, he is to be feared above all gods.*

As so many other Scriptures remind us, God's divine qualities and his glorious power are evident to all persons everywhere who have any powers of perception whatsoever. We have no real excuse for failing to see them, other than our pre-occupation with the fleshly and worldly. We do not need to have God do anything uniquely or specifically for us in order to be aware of who he is. Now, we know that this principle applies to unbelievers: as Romans tells us, God is fair in holding all of humanity accountable, because it is so obvious that there is a living God whom we need to seek. But do we accept the equally challenging implications for Christians? This also tells us that there is no excuse for a believer to allow his or her attention to wander from God, or to claim that God has not given him or her enough reasons for faith. We have every reason to leave behind the temptations of the world, and to "sing a new song".

And unlike the many other things that humans (even Christians) look to for meaning and purpose, he is a living God, not an idol (v. 5-6):

*For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him—strength and glory are in his sanctuary.*

We could once again detail at length how foolish it is for atheists and pagans to expect to find meaning in material things, fame, popularity, and the like. But do we also realize how foolish and unnecessary it is for Christians to live in uncertainty, doubt and despair? Do we ever stop to think about the obvious reminders God has given us that he lives and that he is there for us? The same incredible creation that convicts atheists of their error also convicts us of the need to pull our eyes off of ourselves and the physical world around us, and to sing a new song of undying faith.

An important part of this is to give God credit for his outstanding - and obvious - qualities (v. 7-9):

*Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name—bring an offering and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness—tremble before him, all the earth.*

Another way of saying "ascribe to" would be simply, "give him credit for". Although most of us are willing on the surface to state that God is glorious, powerful, and all-knowing, do these facts really affect the ways that we think and act? Do we truly credit God in our hearts with the qualities he has? If so, it will be evident in the peace and joy we are able to have in the face of adversity and when living in a world filled with sin and decay. It will show in the great respect and reverence we show to his word and will, not only in the lives of others, but in our own. We sing a new song by thus honoring him and humbling ourselves before him.

Unlike the rulers and forces of this physical world, God's word and reign are forever (v. 10):

*Say among the nations, The Lord reigns. The world is firmly established,
it cannot be moved—he will judge the peoples with equity.*

Of all God's wondrous and wonderful attributes, the most important of all might be his immortality, because that guarantees all the others. Any person or thing in this world, no matter how valuable, can always cease to exist at any time. But God will always live and reign, and so all the other things we need and value in him will always be there, too. What he has done cannot be destroyed by any other force in the universe, and his decision to judge his creation someday is a guarantee. In a perishable world, in which we have so little that we can rely upon, God stands out brilliantly, and gives us something truly to sing about.

For all of these reasons, God receives gratitude from a joyful creation (v. 11-13):

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad, let the sea resound, and all that is in it
let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them.*

*Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy,
they will sing before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.*

We shall explore this theme more fully next week, in a study of Psalm 148. For now, it is important mainly to notice the emphasis on the entire creation returning joy and praise to its Creator. Figuratively, the writer is saying that even the inanimate parts of the creation can sing praises to God, because he is that great and awesome.

Psalm 96: The Lord's Salvation Known

This Psalm also begins with the call to "sing to the Lord a new song", and it contains many of the same images and languages of Psalm 96. What it adds is a focus on God's salvation, celebrating this especially in addition to his other glorious works and characteristics. This makes it an appropriate companion study to our first psalm for the week.

The first verse reprises the "new song" theme (v. 1):

*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things:
his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.*

This time the psalmist wants to celebrate the "salvation" that God has brought. The first thing we notice is that God receives full credit himself for what he has done. His hand, his arm, his decision have done the work. The world is filled with humans who think they can "save the world" through their own goodness or their hard work, but God refutes all such pretensions. And his work has been revealed to the entire world (v. 2-3):

*The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel,
all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.*

The psalmist celebrates God's salvation reaching not only Israel, but the ends of the earth. Considering the context, this is clearly a figurative expression, celebrating not geographical extent but completeness. Also, considering the historical context, this is not referring to

Christian salvation (although it certainly anticipates salvation through Christ) but salvation on a more basic level. The psalmist is simply celebrating the fact that this world, so filled with both sadness and joy, good and evil, hope and despair, has a purpose. The knowledge that God created it automatically gives the universe a meaning, just as knowing that God created you and I gives our lives intrinsic meaning. As Christians, we repeatedly tell unbelievers of their need to be saved. Do we ever stop to praise God for this more basic form of salvation? Knowing that everything has a purpose and meaning, given by its Creator, gives us a new song to sing.

We are thus called to burst into jubilant song (v. 4-6):

*Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music;
make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing,
with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn-- shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*

This is a partly literal, partly figurative call to "sing a new song". The psalmist is urging us to lay aside our own concerns and needs for a moment, in order to give our whole heart over to a celebration of the purpose we have in our lives because of knowing the living God. Once we grasp who God is, even on a very basic level, we have something to celebrate that will change our attitude towards much else in our lives.

Psalm 98 finishes with another image of the joyful creation (v. 7-9):

*Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy;
let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.*

As mentioned in the discussion of Psalm 96, we shall devote next week's study to this theme.

Summary & Preview of Next Week

Psalms 93-99 are an extended celebration of God's glory, and they are all very similar in style and expression. (Compare the way that Christian songbooks sometimes group together hymns of similar styles or songs for a particular occasion.) The other Psalms in this short series thus make good follow-up studies to the ones we chose for our class discussion. They also teach us some new themes, in addition to echoing some of the ideas we have seen in this study.

Particularly recommended for your own study would be Psalm 97, which is filled with graphic images of God reigning over his universe. As you study it, make sure to read verses 2-4 very slowly and repeatedly, to let the images come alive. These are the kinds of images that can move us to a greater appreciation of God, provided we do not skim over them too quickly.

Next time, we shall continue our study by looking at a Psalm that emphasizes the "joyful creation" theme with which Psalms 96 and 98 both conclude. Psalm 148 is devoted to the theme of the praise given to God by a joyful creation. It too contains many memorable images for us to study.

- Mark W. Garner, March 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Five: Psalms of Praise Celebrating God's Glory Part 1: The Joyful Creation

Last week, we began a study of selected psalms of praise that celebrate God's glory. These psalms do not deal directly with any of our own problems, needs, or concerns. Instead, they encourage us to take our eyes off of our own lives for a short while, to focus on God, his nature, and his divine qualities. This week we shall study Psalm 148, which will amplify one of the important themes from last week's study, that of a joyful creation returning praises to its Creator.

Psalm 148: The Praise of a Joyful Creation

Both of the Psalms we studied last week ended with an image of the creation - not just humanity, but the entire creation - singing joyful praises to God. This week's Psalm will dwell at length on that idea, to give us a memorable picture of the glory of God as the Creator. Psalm 148 gives us a picture of every part of God's creation returning praise to him. This Psalm and its images served as the basis for the hymn "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah".

We will consider first the purposes of this imagery, and then we can keep them in mind as we study the Psalm verse-by-verse.

Psalm 148: Themes & General Thoughts

It is a good idea to begin by skimming over the numerous images of the joyful creation that we find in Psalm 148. We see God receiving praise from both animate and inanimate sources, from both heavenly and earthly beings, by humans and animals alike. These images are of course not intended to be taken literally, but rather as indicators of some powerful truths. The Psalm teaches us that, in important ways, the entire creation does return praise to God, and it also calls us to be an active part of praising our Creator.

The range of the images is deliberately intended so that we will not think that the psalmist is referring only to literal (i.e. verbal) giving of praise to God. As we discussed in last week's class, it is quite easy to praise God with our lips, but much harder to give him the praise he deserves in our minds and hearts, in how we really think and feel. This Psalm is intended to get us to think about the deeper ways that God should be praised.

There are many ways of giving praise to God that go beyond mere verbal expression. The images in Psalm 148 can help us develop some thoughts on this principle. For example, the sun, moon, and stars praise God (see verses 3-4) not by talking, but by being what they are, and revealing the perfection of God's handiwork. They reflect God's glory, power, and wisdom, both by their massive and extraordinary physical presence and by being part of a vast, perfectly planned universe.

As we study the Psalm verse-by-verse (below), it is a good idea to stop and ponder, for each category or group of beings or objects that the Psalm portrays as praising God, how they return praise to God. Sometimes they do so in literal ways, sometimes otherwise. They are all portrayed as actively praising him, signifying that they each rejoice in their place in his creation.

The Psalm also should encourage us to consider our attitudes, as Christians, towards God's Creation. Too often, Christians view the facts of God creating the universe as only a weapon with which to reproach atheists. Many Christians can quote Bible references and scientific facts that demonstrate that the universe was created by a living God - but far fewer Christians have a truly deep appreciation and respect for what God made. Unbelievers and skeptics often find our arguments for Creation to be unpersuasive, and one of the reasons is that we really don't have much of a sense of the real power and majesty that God revealed in what he has made. If a genuine awe for the Creation does not permeate our own hearts, we can hardly expect atheists to be persuaded. (We shall also study this topic next week, in Psalms devoted to the topic of the Creation.)

□analysis of Psalm 1□□

We shall now look at Psalm 148 verse-by-verse. Most of it consists simply of listings of all types of beings, forces, and objects giving praise to God. First comes praise from the heavens (v. 1-2):

*Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his heavenly hosts.*

The account begins with perhaps the most obvious place where we would expect God to receive praise. Unlike the residents of this planet, the angels and other heavenly beings can see clearly all that God has done and made. □et, we know that even some of these beings rebelled against God, so their praise and appreciation are not involuntary or forced. One day we, too, shall be able to see things from the same spiritual, eternal perspective, and can fully appreciate the whole plan of God.

Moving from the heavens to the physical universe, we next see praise come from the skies (v. 3-4):

*Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars.
Praise him, you highest heavens and you □aters above the skies.*

We briefly noted above how astronomical objects such as these can "praise" God, by their own vastness as individual objects and also as part of an ama□ing whole. It is well worth the time to learn about, and carefully to consider, the vastness of the physical universe that God has created, by no means solely to generate anti-atheist material, but to come to a deeper appreciation for the awesome power and wisdom behind it. It is a noteworthy feature of the way God creates that he does not make glit□y, showy things that can be fully appreciated in 15 seconds. Many of his most ama□ing expressions of creativity are buried well out of normal sight, and are missed by most humans. God has never wished to hit us across the face with his creative powers, but has preferred to wait patiently for us to shed our self-centered and fleshly ways of thinking long enough for us to begin noticing just how ama□ing our universe is.

These objects also differ in their nature and their origins from the things humans make for themselves (v. 5-6):

*Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they □ere created.
□e set them in place for ever and ever□he gave a decree that □ill never pass a□ay.*

These verses remind us first, that God created by his will and transcendent nature, and second, that the universe exists as long as God wills it to, not for the pitifully short time spans that characterize human works. In both of these respects, God's Creation should be thought of in much different ways than the works and accomplishments of the human race.

Next, the Psalm's survey comes down to the physical planet Earth (v. 7-9):

*Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding,
you mountains and all hills, ...*

Once again, we have "praise" proceeding from inanimate forces and objects. The earth's atmosphere and weather, and its physical terrain such as mountains and waterways, are all important parts of the world that God made for us. They are all, again, indicative of an amazing Creator who both conceived and created each of these natural wonders, and they are also part of a complex and delicate natural balance that even many Christians fail to appreciate, or even to notice.

In addition, some of the forces shown as "praising" God, such as lightning and storms, are often thought of in negative terms by humans. Because we humans too often think that the world revolves entirely around our personal urges and whims, we are quick to criticize the aspects of this world that are inconvenient to us. But these storms and other overpowering forces are part of God's creation, and behave just as he meant them to. This world was not meant as a permanent home for humanity, but as a temporary place that would serve two purposes that are sometimes in conflict. God uses this world to show us his love and concern for us, and his eagerness to meet our needs. But God also designed this physical world to point us to our real need for him and for a more lasting home in heaven. Thus, this world must contain some persuasive reminders that no physical, temporary world can ever be perfect, and it must contain some forces too powerful for us to contend with, to keep us humble and remind us of our need to depend on a higher power than our own.

The Psalm now moves to the praise that comes from living creatures (end of v.9 - v. 10):

*fruit trees and all cedars,
wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds,*

The psalmist here chooses only a representative sample of plants and animals to get across the point. The vast variety of living things on earth is one of the most obvious indications of a Creator. Christians would do well to ponder the remarkable variety of life around us, and to think of each plant and living creature as a creation of the living God. Once again, we do God's handiwork a grave disservice if we merely search through it for ammunition to use to win arguments. God is the real giver of life, including our own life, and the many indications of life that surround us every day can nourish our faith if we take the time to notice them.

Finally, humanity itself is called to join in the praise to the Creator (v. 11-14):

*kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth,
young men and maidens, old men and children.
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted—his splendor is above
the earth and the heavens.
He has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his saints, of Israel, the people*

close to his heart. Praise the Lord.

Like everything else that God has made, humans reflect praises and glory to him, even when they do not intend to. We are the finishing touch to the whole masterwork, and give the rest of the universe its purpose. We ought to stop and ponder the amazing nature of ourselves as created beings. It is a humbling thought to think of ourselves as "made", but it is an important part of developing a proper perspective on our relationship with God.

But we also have a capacity to praise God that goes beyond the capability of the rest of the physical creation. We can actively notice what God has done, and can give him the praise and glory that are due him for it. We also have much more to be thankful and appreciative for than the mere fact of being made. The awareness of the many spiritual blessings we have, as celebrated throughout the Psalms, combined with the knowledge of being an important part of a created universe, gives us a joyful and heartfelt song to sing to our Creator.

Further Study/Preview

The last two Psalms in the book (149 and 150) are also praise psalms - it is of course fitting for the collection to end with that type of psalm. Psalm 149, in particular, would be a good companion to our class studies, as it also uses the "new song" theme that we discussed last week.

Next week, we will continue with the creation theme, looking at some different aspects of it using Psalms 8 and 19. So we shall continue then with some of our thoughts from this week's lesson.

- *Mark W. Garner, April 2000*

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Six: Psalms of Praise & Celebration of God's Glory Part C: Honoring the Creator

We are concluding our study of Psalms of Praise with a look at two Psalms that honor God as our Creator, and which also call us to consider some of the important implications of the realization that he created us and our world. Before we can even begin to understand the ways that God works in our daily lives, we must develop an appreciation and respect for his power as the Creator and life-giver. Psalms and I can help us to develop these qualities.

Psalm 8: The Creation & Humanity

Psalm 8 looks at God's creation from a different perspective than did Psalm 148 (last week's study). In this Psalm, David is overawed by the thought that he lives in a universe that reveals such a glorious Creator, and his mind is boggled by the thought that we humans not only get to be a part of it, but are allowed to be the most important part. The meditations in this Psalm give us some important thoughts to help us develop humility and awe in our relationship with our Creator.

The main theme of Psalm 8 can be found in verse 4: "What is man that you are mindful of him". David finds it remarkable that God would create such an awesome world and then turn it over to creatures such as us. There are two important facts that David wants to understand: the perfection of the creation, and the imperfection of humanity. Despite these undeniable facts, humans are still the centerpiece of the creation. An awareness of these amazing facts can give us some important insights into our relationship with God.

We shall now begin a verse-by-verse survey of Psalm 8. David begins with a simple observation on the magnitude of God's glory (v. 1-2):

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.

From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.

God's glory and majesty, his strength and wisdom, are all plain to all who look for them. Any enemies or foes of God will find themselves confounded and silenced by the praise on the lips of his people, and the strength and love in their hearts. This means that not only is it foolish and hopeless to fight against God, it also means that being on his side leads to a guaranteed victory.

Technical note: In verse 2, "praise" (in the NIV) may be better translated "strength", and some other versions reflect this. The word is not the usual word for "praise", as used in many other verses we have studied. Either way, what the verse means is that God reveals his power especially through the young and weak, in order to refute any pretensions of strength on the part of anyone who would oppose him. God can work even through infants and children when he wishes.

Now the psalmist contemplates God's creation (v. 3):

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,

As we have discussed in previous lessons, it is vital for Christians to take time occasionally to step back from our worldly distractions and affairs, in order to meditate upon God's creation. The marvels and delights in his universe are not meant to overwhelm us with advertising-style glit­and hype, but rather they wait patiently for us to give them some thoughtful attention. But once we do this, we shall find that it does not take much difficulty to begin to be overawed with the vastness of God's creation, and the astounding variety of wonders it contains. No one who takes the time to appreciate the creative power and life-giving force behind the creation will ever again be unduly impressed by any human achievements.

A natural and important question now comes to mind for the psalmist (v. 4-5):

What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

When we lift the eyes of our heart above our narrow fleshly perspective, and begin to see the magnitude of God's universe, we naturally feel small. It is then an obvious question to ask: where do we humans fit into this great creation?

Even asking the question, as David does here, takes some real humility. This is one of the primary reasons why some persons who are faced with irrefutable evidence of the living God choose to ignore it. It can be simply overwhelming to the prideful to admit how small we are in the grand scheme of things. But, ironically, if it is God who shows us how small we are, it is also God who restores important meaning to human existence. In a universe without God, we would truly be meaningless and insignificant. But in God's creation, humanity has a privileged place (v. 6-9):

You made him ruler over the works of your hands—you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Although we are the one part of the creation that often fights his will, we are also the part of the creation for which the rest was made. God made things that in themselves are worthy of eternal praise, and instead of retiring them to a museum, he placed them in our hands. This is both an expression of outstanding love and trust, and a convicting call to be more appreciative and respectful towards what God has given us. Most human creators are intensely jealous of the things they make, craving attention and demanding that others honor their creation, reward them for it, and take care of it. God instead hands over a universe full of wonders to an often thankless and barbaric species, which all too often prefers slothful ease and its own infantile forms of entertainment to the glorious blessings that God wants to give us. The pagans are not going to

snap out of their dullness and self-centeredness any time soon. It thus falls to us to give him some of the glory, honor and praise that he so richly deserves!

Psalm 1 □□God & □is □reation

In this Psalm, David again draws some important insights from God's creation. This time, there are new lessons to be learned. While meditating on the ways that the creation teaches us about the Creator, he uses these thoughts to build his faith and confidence in his God.

The main theme of Psalm 19 is the way that the creation points to the living God, and teaches us about him. This is another important aspect of appreciating the creation, in addition to the kinds of lessons we saw in Psalm 8. Most Christians are familiar with Paul's statement that "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (□omans 1:20). But do we understand this only as a refutation of the claims of atheists, or do we also reali□e the numerous implications for believers□ It is to both believers and unbelievers alike that (v. 1-2):

*The heavens declare the glory of God□the skies proclaim the □ork of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech□night after night they display kno□ledge.*

Christians need to be reminded to keep their perspective on God as much as anyone. The distractions and discouragements of the world affect us all, and prevent us from focusing on God. As believers, we ought to be able to remind ourselves periodically to re-focus, and to be quicker to notice the great many ways that God speaks to us through his creation. The message is unmistakable and universal (v. 3-4a):

*There is no speech or language □here their voice is not heard.
Their voice goes out into all the earth, their □ords to the ends of the □orld.*

God's message of salvation is a universal one, and one to which every human has the responsibility to respond. But do we also see the implications for believers□ This also takes away our own excuses for la□iness, doubt, or resistance to God's will. The message of God is spoken through so many things around us that we have no excuse for anything other than an eager acceptance of God and his will for our lives.

Next, David looks at the creation and chooses an example of its perfection (v. 4b-6):

In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, □hich is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion re□icing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other□nothing is hidden from its heat.

Among the many, many possible examples, the psalmist looks at the sun, as an example of the perfection of God's creation. Both the design and purpose of the sun are obvious and magnificent, even to a non-scientific mind. It does not take scientific genius to appreciate God's creative wisdom and power. All it takes is a mind focused on God, as David's was, to see the

beautiful balance and the ways that God channeled his abilities into creating a world that would be a suitable home for humans, his most special creatures.

The psalmist could have added many more examples, and it is a good spiritual exercise, especially for a doubting or struggling believer, to think of further illustrations of this point. But just this one is enough here to lead the psalmist to his next point (v. 7-11):

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold—they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

By them is your servant warned—in keeping them there is great reward.

The connection here is simple but powerful. The same God who created an amazing and perfect universe is also the best source of wisdom and knowledge for the beings who inhabit it. What breathtaking arrogance it is when human beings think they know more about what is good for them than God does! And what dismaying ignorance and hardness of heart it shows when even believers in God think that his Word is out-of-date, and that it needs to be revised for a "new" era in history! How shameful that a created thing could presume to correct or educate its Creator. The psalmist here celebrates what we also ought to celebrate, the fact that we have the living Word of the living God to turn to for the answers to our most important questions and problems. To the human who thinks, in his or her heart, that we humans really know better than God, God's Word is a constant frustration and annoyance. But if we humbly admit that God's laws, precepts, and ordinances are indeed "sweeter than honey", we soon find that indeed "in keeping them there is great reward".

The Psalm ends with more thoughts on the relationship between created and creator (v. 12-14):

Who can discern his errors—Forgive my hidden faults.

Keep your servant also from willful sins—may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.

The psalmist wants the humility he has learned to be a foundation of his relationship with his Creator. He wants more than anything else to please God and to be blameless before him. He

also knows that the only way he can realize these goals is through God's own power and guidance.

Summary of Praise Psalms Preview of ***Next Topic***

We have now finished our study of selected praise psalms, but there are many others that you can study on your own if you wish. We have noted in previous lessons the two main groups of praise psalms: Psalms 93-99 and Psalms 144-150. There are also others, for example Psalms 33 and 104, in which the creation theme is significant, as it was in this week's class studies.

Psalm 104 is especially recommended for further study. This is a beautiful Psalm, which we would have studied in class if it were not so long. It would provide some great material for personal or small group studies. In it, there are many wonderful images of God as the caring Creator, who looks after every aspect of his creation. This is the kind of Psalm that repays careful meditation on each of its images. It would be an especially valuable study for those who need to develop a greater sense of God's care and guidance in their lives.

Psalm 33 is also a good study, which links up some of the themes we have seen in class. It is yet another Psalm that uses the "new song" theme (see verse 3). The leading idea is the link between God as the Creator and the blessedness of the created when we are willing to put our trust in him.

Next week, we shall begin a new topic, studying Psalms about sin, penitence and forgiveness for two or three weeks.

- *Mark W. Garner, April 2000*

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Seven: Psalms About Sin – Penitence – Confession

This week, we shall begin a new topic, studying Psalms about human sinfulness. This is not usually a featured topic in the Psalms, but it is often understood as an important concept behind the main themes in many Psalms on other topics. Our first study will be on two Psalms that emphasize the need for penitence and confession when we are convicted of sin. Next week, we shall study Psalm 12, a celebration of God's grace and forgiveness of sin.

Sin is not generally the main topic of a Psalm, but in many of the Psalms an awareness of human sin and the need for forgiveness is present as a background concept. For example, in Psalm 19 (see last week's outline and notes), as part of David's celebration of God as his Creator, he acknowledges (verses 12-13) his own numerous faults and sins, and his awareness of the need for God's strength to overcome his weakness. This week we shall study two Psalms in which sin, penitence, and confession are the central topic.

Psalm 51 – Confession & Penitence

One of the best-known of all Psalms, Psalm 51 was written by David after he was convicted of his sin in the disgraceful incidents involving Bathsheba and Uriah. It is a memorable expression of penitence and complete humility, and is given to us as an example not only of these, but of many other practical considerations to keep in mind when we ourselves are convicted of sin. No one likes to be convicted of sin, or to accept responsibility when we have sinned. But we all do commit sins that hurt others, and thus it is important for us to learn to handle in a godly fashion those occasions on which we, like David, are convicted of sin.

The background to this Psalm is the sordid episode of David's adultery with Bathsheba, his subsequent proxy-murder of Uriah, and his later exposure by the prophet Nathan. This is one of the best-known narratives in the Old Testament, so we shall not recount it here. If you are rusty on any of the details, see 2 Samuel 11-12. Note also that these incidents were the catalyst for a long chain of misfortunes in David's family life, including the rebellion by his son Absalom, which was the background to Psalm 3, one of our previous studies.

These sins that David committed are, by any standard, serious. It is interesting to compare David with King Saul, since God found it necessary to eject Saul from the kingship for his sins. By most human standards, Saul's sins (unauthorized sacrifices, lying, impatience, pride, and the like) were far less "serious" than David's. But Saul's attitude towards his actions was unacceptable to God. His constant excuses, denials, and self-serving rationalizations are in strong contrast with David's sincere penitence and spiritual perspective.

Making an overview of Psalm 51 quickly helps us to see David's perspective. Everything he says centers around God: his relationship with God and how sin has affected it, his realization of the ways he has hurt God, his desire to please and serve God. The things he asks of God likewise are not selfish requests, nor does he plead to be exempted from the consequences of his sin. Rather, his concern is that he does not want to lose the closeness he has with God, and is tormented by the thought that his sin has made him less useful and pleasing to God.

Beyond these important general perspectives, we can find many specific details in this Psalm that can teach us to have a godly attitude towards our sin. The first points are simple, but powerful and of vital importance in looking at our own sinfulness. David begins by acknowledging his wrongdoing without excuse or rationalization (v. 1-3):

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love—according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.*

David realizes that covering up his sin, or trying to explain it away, would only make the situation worse. When his sin was exposed, he had been hiding it for some time, but when Nathan confronts him on it, he immediately ceases all attempts to deny it. He knows at once that the real need he has is not to deny the sin, but to seek spiritual healing for it.

This also comes out in the perspective David has on the damage he has caused (v. 4-6):

*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Surely you desire truth in the inner parts—you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.*

These statements are sometimes misinterpreted, and it is important to understand that David is deliberately exaggerating the extent of his guilt. He is not expressing literal truths, but is vividly communicating, in poetic language, the horrors of realizing one's sinfulness.

When David says he has sinned "only" against God, he of course is not denying or ignoring the real damage that he has caused in others' lives. Instead, he is powerfully expressing an important truth, that while he is going to have to take the responsibility for the problems he has caused, his ultimate judge is God. In our own lives, when we sin we will often have to answer for it in certain ways before other humans, but this is a minor matter compared to the need to repair our relationship with God. Too often, even Christians find it more of a deterrent to sin to worry about the punishment or embarrassment they would feel if caught. David correctly knew that it was far more of a serious matter to have to answer to God.

Likewise, David does not literally believe that he, or any other infant, was born sinful or in need of forgiveness for any "original sin". Instead, he is expressing the depth of the conviction he has experienced, realizing what awful things he has done, and how lucky he is to even be tolerated in God's presence. This leads him at once to yearn for spiritual cleansing (v. 7-9):

*Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean—wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness—let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.*

David knows that the deepest need he has as a sinner is not to escape the consequences of his sin, or to manipulate humans into excusing it. His deepest need is to have his heart cleansed, and to be forgiven, even though he does not deserve it. His most urgent needs are spiritual (v. 10-12):

*Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

These are verses that repay thoughtful meditation and prayer. A mere factual summary cannot adequately emphasize the importance of this perspective. David understands very well the worst things that have happened as a result of his sin. He has grieved the Holy Spirit, he has lost his focus on God, he has dirtied his heart, he has made himself unclean, he has pushed away God's presence for the sake of sensual indulgence. He wants to make a fundamental change of heart - a repentance - in all these ways. Carefully consider each of the things David pleads for: a purified heart, a renewed sense of the presence of God and his Spirit, a renewed joy in God and in his salvation. David's spiritual virtues did not prevent him from ever sinning, but even when he fell, the "man after God's own heart" knew what was really important in his life.

David also knows that confession and penitence produces good fruit (v. 13-16):

*Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.
Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.*

David always enjoyed serving and praising God. More than that, he realized that these come much more naturally when a believer lives in humility and purity. David knows that he cannot make amends on his own, by any number of sacrifices or good deeds. He must rely on God's mercy, and this also will produce renewed joy and renewed life. God wants a change in his heart (v. 17-19):

*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.*

This well-known verse tells us that God does not expect us to make frantic, legalistic attempts to repay him for our sin and weakness, but simply to live before him in humility, to accept his grace and his guidance, and to enjoy the good fruits in the knowledge that they came from God, not from our own righteousness.

Psalm 51 The Consequences of Sin

This Psalm is not given a historical context, but it is again set at a time when David is convicted of his sin. The emphasis here is on the consequences of sin: David understands that a great many other unpleasant situations and feelings in his life have come as a result of sin. We again see David's humility in confessing his sin, in making no excuses, and in knowing that the only possible source of healing is God's mercy.

The leading thought in this Psalm is simply the numerous consequences of sin. As before, David accepts the responsibility when he has done wrong, and realizes that humility is the only possible response he can have. This is a Psalm that is best studied by taking brief note of the main points, and then taking time to think about them and accept the perspective being shared. Thus, our analysis of Psalm 38 will not be detail-oriented, but rather is meant to serve merely as a starting point for those willing to consider its lessons.

The Psalm begins with an emphatic acknowledgment of guilt (v. 1-4):

*○ Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your ○rath.
For your arro○s have pierced me, and your hand has come do○n upon me.
Because of your ○rath there is no health in my body○my bones have no soundness
because of my sin.
My guilt has over○helmed me like a burden too heavy to bear.*

As before, David has no interest in denying his sin or in escaping the consequences. He knows he needs to be forgiven, not excused, and that he needs to display humility, not offer arguments. He also accepts the burden that his sin places on himself, as he continues (v. 5-8):

*My ○ounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly.
I am bo○ed do○n and brought very lo○all day long I go about mourning.
My back is filled ○ith searing pain○there is no health in my body.
I am feeble and utterly crushed○I groan in anguish of heart.*

These cries of anguish are not filled with self-pity, but with self-realization. David blames no one, and especially not God, but rather realizes the spiritual pain that comes from straying from God. Note also that, though David certainly experienced his share of physical pain, these verses are not meant to be interpreted in a literal sense only. This is a metaphoric way of saying how unhappy and unhealthy his life has become because of his sin. And he knows that God is aware of this (v. 9-12):

*○ll my longings lie open before you, ○ Lord○my sighing is not hidden from you.
My heart pounds, my strength fails me○even the light has gone from my eyes.
My friends and companions avoid me because of my ○ounds○my neighbors stay far
a○ay.
Those ○ho seek my life set their traps, those ○ho ○ould harm me talk of my ruin○all day
long they plot deception.*

Unlike many sufferers, David does not accuse God of not noticing his pain. He knows that God is fully aware of the trials and agonies he is dealing with, and he knows that if God allows them to continue, there is a reason. This is an important part of humility. It is very common for those who suffer, whether for their own sin or for other reasons, to charge God with being unaware or uncaring. This can be a great impediment to spiritual healing.

David continues with another physical metaphor of his spiritual condition (v. 13-16):

*I am like a deaf man, ○ho cannot hear, like a mute, ○ho cannot open his mouth○
I have become like a man ○ho does not hear, ○hose mouth can offer no reply.
I ○ait for you, ○ Lord○you ○ill ans○er, ○ Lord my God.
For I said, ○Do not let them gloat or exalt themselves over me ○hen my foot slips.○*

These images of being unable to speak or hear are a way of symbolizing the spiritual condition of a person entrapped by sin. The sinner cannot understand God, cannot communicate meaningfully with God, and is powerless in so many ways. Again, this is something to consider when we have to face up to our own sin.

The Psalm concludes with a final statement of the psalmist's need (v. 17-22):

*For I am about to fall, and my pain is ever with me.
I confess my iniquity—I am troubled by my sin.
Many are those who are my vigorous enemies—those who hate me without reason are numerous.
Those who repay my good with evil slander me when I pursue what is good.
Lord, do not forsake me—be not far from me, O my God.
Come quickly to help me, O Lord my Savior.*

As we have seen before, the psalmist knows that God is his deepest need. He confesses his sin and commits his heart and life to God, relying not at all on himself or his deeds, but trusting only in God to give him spiritual healing.

More Psalms About Sin—Next Week's Study

While sin is not usually the featured subject in the Psalms, there are a few other Psalms that examine topics similar to those discussed in this week's studies. Psalm 39 is an especially good follow-up study to this week's class topics, and it is another fine expression of humility. In this case, David writes of his desire to be kept from sinning through developing a deeper sense of humility. Psalm 36 looks at the sin of the unrepentant, and its bad fruit. Psalm 41 is primarily a short plea for mercy for the psalmist's sin. Next week, we shall look at Psalm 32, which celebrates the forgiveness from God that the penitent sinner can experience.

- Mark W. Garner, April 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Eight: Sin & Forgiveness Psalm 32

Last week, we studied two Psalms 32 and 51 that emphasize the need for penitence and confession when we are convicted of sin. This time, we shall study Psalm 32, a celebration of God's grace and forgiveness. This Psalm can both help us to appreciate the value of forgiveness, and can help us see what we need to do to receive the deepest joy from experiencing God's grace.

Psalm 32 Celebration of Forgiveness: Overview & Themes

This Psalm is a heartfelt celebration of God's forgiveness. The psalmist rejoices in having received forgiveness for his sin, and meditates on the implications of having his sin blotted out. Then, he meditates on how clear it is that living in God's grace, and according to his will, is the healthiest and happiest way to spend a human life. Psalm 32 is also quoted in Romans 4:7-8, as a key piece of Paul's exposition of the gospel of grace through Christ, and so it deals with principles that are also of vital spiritual importance for Christians. We shall first take note of some of the major themes.

As mentioned last time, in Psalms the concepts of sin and forgiveness are usually concepts that are assumed to be understood in many Psalms that deal primarily with other topics, rather than themselves being the main focus. The Psalms we have studied in these last two classes are exceptions. The word "forgiven" is used in Psalm 32, but nowhere else in the Psalms. The words "forgive" and "forgave" are used a total of 7 times, but most of those refer to God's relationship with his people as a whole - a different topic, and one we shall study in a later lesson (see the topics list on the General Introduction to this class). Here in Psalm 32 (and in one passage of Psalm 25 - see "For Further Study" below) forgiveness for an individual is discussed. There are also over two dozen uses of the word "mercy", but in almost all of these cases, the psalmist is pleading for mercy in the form of deliverance from danger, not from sin - this will be next week's topic! Although there are only these few direct references, the perspective that the psalmists, especially David, have on sin and forgiveness is ever-present, and the Psalms we are studying can help us to build a godly perspective on our sin that will help us in many other areas as well.

Psalms 32 and 51 (see last week's notes) give us several significant images or expressions that refer to forgiveness for sin. Make sure not simply to skim over these expressions, as if they were merely speed bumps on the way to the main point of the passages. It is a good idea to consider carefully the symbolism behind the language used in these Psalms.

The expressions used in Psalm 32 are mostly straightforward, and are meant to help us to realize the implications of receiving forgiveness. Sin is described as being "forgiven", "covered", and not "counted against" someone. In other words, forgiven sin is permanently hidden, no longer part of the record, no longer a part of a person's identity as far as God is concerned. Psalm 51 has some even more vivid images of forgiveness, using terms such as "blot out", "wash away", and "cleanse", the latter two being used more than once. These images give us an intimate picture of the process of sin being forgiven (remember that Psalm 51 was written right after David was convicted of a series of severe sins). Considering these images can help us to appreciate the thoroughness of the cleansing that occurs when our own sins are washed away by Jesus' blood.

They also tip us off of our need for forgiveness in a way that more straightforward, legal-style terms cannot. One only needs to be "cleansed" or "washed" if there is something dirty or filthy to be washed away.

Both in Psalm 51 and Psalm 32 we also see humility play a significant role. We have discussed (see last week's notes) David's humility when convicted of sin. Now, we also see the joy and security that this humility brings, in his positive expressions in Psalm 32 about his relationship with God. He realizes that he would not have such spiritual blessings if he had not been so humble.

This week's Psalm begins with an expression of who is "blessed". Like the Beatitudes and many other such passages in the Bible, these verses show us that what God considers "blessed" and what humans consider "blessed" may be very different. The fleshly perspective on what it means to be "blessed" usually involves short-term satisfaction ("having fun") or achievement of superficial goals, whereas God looks to bless us on a more meaningful and more genuinely beneficial level.

In particular, the psalmist describes as "blessed" the person who lives in a state of grace, and who lives humbly before God. Many individuals find it a repellent thought to acknowledge their weakness and sinfulness before God, because it demands a sacrifice of pride. But David, speaking from his own experience as well as from God's Word, tells us that the rewards of humble confession and penitence are so great that there is no real decision to be made, if one truly understands the options. Thus the last few verses of the Psalm (see analysis below) are a fervent call for us to see the futility of resisting God's will for our lives, and to embrace a life lived in God's grace, and in the care he gives to his people.

Psalm 32:1-5: Declaration of Forgiveness: Analysis

Now we shall take a look at this Psalm verse-by-verse, keeping in mind the themes we have mentioned. The first part of the Psalm (Psalm 32:1-5) concentrates on David's observations about our featured concepts of sin, confession, and forgiveness. In the second part, he will consider the broader lessons about life that can be learned from an appreciation and awareness of God's perspective on sin and forgiveness. The Psalm begins simply with David's statement of the blessedness of forgiveness (v. 1-2):

*Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit
is no deceit.*

As discussed above, this presents an immediate challenge to the prevailing perspective that most human beings have (whether today or in David's lifetime) about what constitutes blessedness. David, like Jesus, does not reckon how blessed he or anyone else is on the basis of material or financial prosperity, worldly power or fame, or fleshly skill or achievements. The greatest blessings come from a genuine relationship with our Creator and Heavenly Father, since only these will endure when the physical universe has ended. Obvious though this may be, in the rush of everyday life and all its distractions, it can be very difficult to remember what is really of long-term value.

The psalmist now recalls the burden that sin can become when it is not dealt with (v. 3-4):

*When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.
For day and night your hand was heavy upon me—my strength was sapped as in the
heat of summer.*

It is completely natural, even understandable, when humans want to keep their sin hidden. But it is a very fruitless and unhealthy practice. Hiding our sin can never lead to anything of spiritual value. The best that it can accomplish is a temporary exemption from some fraction of the worldly consequences of our sin. Even this relief is usually only temporary. At the same time, hidden sin causes decay in our hearts and souls, from the combined effects of guilt, fear of exposure, deceit, and many other unpleasant features of the foolish practice of covering up sin. It is also a silly idea in a more basic way, in that God can never be fooled, even if we somehow succeed in fooling the rest of the universe. It is only confession and humility that brings true relief and cleansing (v. 5):

*Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.*

David learned from his own experience the results of trying to cover up one's sin, and the very different fruit of confession and repentance. It is a basic and vital lesson that even longtime Christians forget (or perhaps willfully ignore). The only thing that this costs us is pride! Pride is a very small price to pay for the spiritual healing and renewal that comes when we receive God's grace. Let this reluctance to sacrifice our worthless pride keeps us from experiencing so many of the blessings that come with a truly faithful attitude towards our lives.

David knows all this, and pleads with his listeners to adopt the right perspective for their lives, in the second half of the Psalm (Psalm 32:6-11). He calls us to make use of this opportunity (v. 6-7):

*Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found—surely when the
mighty waters rise, they will not reach him.
You are my hiding place—you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of
deliverance.*

Once again, the psalmist reminds us of the protection, the refuge, the shelter that God offers to the sin-sick soul and the spiritual orphan. We cannot earn or deserve his blessings—all we need to do is to go to him in humility and allow him to reign in our lives. We must simply give up our foolish pride that tells us how good we are at running our own lives. If we cling to our pride, we are resisting not only God, but our own true nature, and that is why so many human lives are filled with so much frustration and disappointment.

David reminds us that willing submission to God is not burdensome, but healthy and wise (v. 8-9):

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go—I will counsel you and watch
over you.
Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled
by bit and bridle or they will not come to you.*

It is such a shame when humans dig in their heels like mules, refusing to obey God solely because of their worthless pride and capricious self-will. So many persons refuse to accept what

God's Word teaches, or refuse to soften a hard-headed attitude, solely because they have an exaggerated sense of their own importance. (Humans usually call this "a matter of principle".) Those individuals who think they need to remind everyone of "who they are", and those persons who think that they have thoughts that are wiser, or more "up-to-date", than the Scriptures do, are simply brute, unreasoning beasts. The psalmist actually shows mercy by comparing them merely to a horse or a mule. The self-willed would actually merit comparisons with organisms far lower than those.

To enjoy the lasting peace and security that God offers, we simply must make a choice (v. 10-11):

Many are the foes of the picked, but the Lord's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him.

Rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous, all you who are upright in heart!

So many of the Psalms remind us that we just cannot have things both ways. We cannot experience the spiritual blessings that God offers, while simultaneously remaining the Lord of our own lives and the center of our own universes. This is by no means an arbitrary rule that God made up. It is the very nature of things. God says these things because he knows us: he knows the evil that we often harbor in our hearts and minds, and he also knows the wonderful potential for love and for good that we have in those same places. He knows that any attempt to straddle the fence with our lives will do no one any real good at all, and he simply calls us to make the rational choice to live a life based on faith and grace.

For Further Study

This concludes our brief study on Psalms about sin, confession, and forgiveness. For further study related to this week's Psalm, see Psalm 25, especially verses 8-15, and Romans 4, especially verses 4-8, where Psalm 32 is quoted by Paul. These passages will help you to consider further these ideas on forgiveness.

- Mark W. Garner, April 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Nine: Prayers For God's Help & Deliverance Part A: Our Constant Need For God

Our next topic will be a study of several Psalms that are prayers or calls to God for help or deliverance. This is the most common type of all the Psalms, and we shall only fully study a few of them in class in the three weeks or so. We will begin today with a general look at our dependence on God, and our constant need for him, focusing on David's perspective in Psalm 40.

Prayers for Help Introduction

There are a great many Psalms which are primarily a cry for God's help or deliverance. These are in fact more common than any of the other kinds of Psalms that we are studying in our series. We shall begin by making a brief survey of some verses from a few of the earliest Psalms, in order to think in a general way about our perpetual need for God's care and wisdom, and then we shall pick just a few of these to study more carefully in the next few classes.

Psalms 4, 5, 6, and 7 are typical of the "Call For Help" Psalm. Take a look at the beginnings of these Psalms - 4:1, 5:1-3, 6:1-3, 7:1-2. Notice some of the expressions and images that are used as calls for God's help. David (the writer of all four) says things like, "give me relief", "be merciful to me", "give ear to my words", "consider my sighing", "I am faint", "I take refuge in you", "rescue me". He is aware of his deep need for God, and of his inadequacy to deal on his own with the problems of life. He also uses vivid poetic images such as being torn apart by lions (7:2) and aching in his bones (6:2), dramatizing how badly he needs help.

There are some simple but important implications to these expressions. David is not ashamed to admit his need for God and his dependence on God. He does not attempt to take matters into his own hands (as Saul so often had), having learned from experience that bad things would result. He is not embarrassed to pour out his heart to God, and to allow his helplessness to be exposed. In fact, the expressions he uses are deliberately chosen to emphasize how completely dependent he is on God to help him with his problems.

We also have a continual dependence on God, but most humans are far too prideful to admit it, even to themselves. Most persons view prayer or other ways of seeking God's help as emergency-only solutions, being willing to humble themselves only when all else has failed. Sometimes it is good even for Christians to ponder all the ways that we need God's help and wisdom. It is very easy for us to fall into the trap of thinking that we are mostly self-sufficient, with only an occasional need for God to help us out. In reality, we need God's help every second of our lives. He supplies so many crucial needs in our lives that any one of us would immediately die the moment he withdrew his caring hand.

Even our most basic needs in life - such as food, water, shelter, and clothing - would not be there if God willed otherwise. Naturally, the pagans take these for granted. They consider it a "right" to have these things, and feel no obligation to be thankful for them. As Christians, we ought instead to stop once in a while, and let God know that we understand how fortunate we are that he is a compassionate God who makes sure that these basic needs are met, not only for his own people, but for billions of unbelievers who will never thank him. Beyond these basic needs, we

also have numerous situational needs that arise every day. The decisions we make, the problems we face, the burdens we bear, all of these and many more are much easier to respond to and to deal with if we have placed them in God's hands. Finally, and most importantly, we have spiritual needs deep within us, which can only be truly met by God. Our need for security, love, identity, purpose, and many more such needs can only be completely filled by God. Most humans have many other things that they look to, in the vain hope that they can find lasting security, peace, and contentment without God. But Christians should both appreciate God for providing real answers to these needs, and should also put their full faith in him to meet them.

In considering these needs, we ought also to examine our expectations of God when it comes to caring for us. God's wisdom and will are usually on an entirely different level from ours, and his responses to our needs will be from his perspective, not ours. When we ask God for help, we will gain the most relief and satisfaction from turning our problems over to him completely, trusting that he will not only understand the problems better than we ever could, but will also have solutions much better than any we could devise.

We shall see all of these principles at work in the Psalms we shall examine in the next few classes.

Psalm 40:1-3 e Set by Feet On a Rock

In Psalm 40, David considers both past and present situations in which he was completely dependent on God. David had an attitude of hope and faith, even in the midst of the greatest difficulties, and this Psalm helps us to see how he was able to do it. His humble and joyful acceptance of the need to let God take care of him, his remembrance of the many previous times when God rescued him or cared for him, and his trust that God would always act for the best, all can be seen in this Psalm.

Psalm 40 is arranged in two parts. First, David praises God and expresses his willingness openly to acknowledge God's help for so many things in the past (v. 1-10). After this comes his plea for help in his current difficulties (v. 11-17). This is a simple arrangement, but it has important implications. Much of David's faithfulness in the present is attributable to him both remembering the past and learning from it. And one of the prime lessons he learned was humility.

The psalmist opens by remembering times from the past when God rescued him (v. 1-3):

*I waited patiently for the Lord—he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire—
he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.*

Note the poetic description of the deliverance that God provided. David describes himself as having been lost in slime, mud, and mire—that is, he was helpless, dirty, and unable to stand firmly. But God pulled him out of his messy difficulties, and gave him firm ground to stand upon. God made him feel secure and confident. Notice also the recurrence of the "new song" theme that we have seen so often. Whenever we see God's hand at work in our lives - which only takes paying a little attention - we shall develop a fresh and joyful perspective on many things.

David's only part was to call on God and then to wait patiently. Note that both of these - calling and patience - are important when we need God's help. Trusting in God contrasts sharply with the false trust that so many persons put in human pride (v. 4-5):

*Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not
look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders you have done. The things you planned for us no
one can recount to you where I to speak and tell of them, they would be too many to
declare.*

David had learned over and over again in his life that when he trusted in himself or in worldly things, it turned out badly, but when he trusted in God, he not only was kept safe spiritually, but learned valuable lessons in the process. This is a simple lesson, and an obvious one, but one often forgotten. Christians will do themselves a great favor by disciplining themselves to remember, in any difficult situation, that they must overcome the urge to trust themselves or other humans more than God, no matter how strong the temptation may be.

Next comes a statement about God's perspective (v. 6-8):

*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced burnt offerings
and sin offerings you did not require.
Then I said, where I am, I have come-- it is written about me in the scroll.
I desire to do your will, O my God your law is within my heart.*

You might remember that these verses are quoted in Hebrews 10:5-7, in a somewhat different context. After considering the lessons they are teaching here in Psalm 40, you might want to go back to Hebrews 10, to gain further insight on the way that the verses are used there in connection with Jesus Christ and his sacrificial ministry.

Here, the psalmist is considering God's perspective when it comes to helping his people in times of distress. That is, that God did not want David to come with sacrifices and other offerings in order to persuade God to help him, but simply wanted David to come before him with humility and a readiness to listen, that is, to allow his ears to be "pierced", or opened. That is important to remember when we want God's help. What he is looking for at such times is not for us to persuade him that we deserve his help, but rather to show him that we know how badly we need him, and to pledge our willingness to do his will, both as part of solving our immediate problems and in a broader context.

The Hebrew word here literally means "dug out". When this Scripture is quoted in Hebrews, it is quoted as "but a body you prepared for me" instead of "but my ears you have pierced". The New Testament writers quoted from the Septuagint - that is, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament - instead of the original Hebrew. This is one of a number of examples when a small difference in the vocalization of Hebrew words can change the meaning considerably. For a fuller discussion of the implications of this, see the references for Psalms that were listed on the Lesson One handouts. Note also that the reference to David's ears being pierced almost certainly does not refer to Exodus 21:6, as is occasionally suggested by commentators. The ritual for a slave committing himself permanently to his master involved the piercing of one ear only, not both, as the Hebrew for this verse specifically indicates.

Next comes an expression of the psalmist's willingness to proclaim what God has done (v. 9-10):

*I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly I do not seal my lips, as you know,
O Lord.
I do not hide your righteousness in my heart I speak of your faithfulness and salvation.*

I do not conceal your love and your truth from the great assembly.

It is pleasing to God when we admit and acknowledge to him that we know he has rescued us from some evil. It is even more pleasing when we are willing openly to proclaim this to others, so that they can see for themselves what God has done. It requires an additional dose of humility to make this a regular practice, but it benefits both our own souls and those around us when we do it.

Now, after an extended expression of praise and humility, comes David's plea for help (v. 11-12):

Do not withhold your mercy from me, O Lord—may your love and your truth always protect me.

For troubles without number surround me—my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me.

In this case, we do not know what specific problems David was facing when he wrote this. But we can tell that they were beyond his ability either to endure or to solve. Further, he indicates that, at least to some degree, they were the result of his own sins or mistakes. Despite all this, we see once again that David has the right perspective, and he sees his situation for what it is. He does not hold back from giving his problems over to God completely. He does not try to hold on to some of his pride, by pretending that he has the situation "in control". His plea continues (v. 13-17):

Be pleased, O Lord, to save me—O Lord, come quickly to help me.

May all who seek to take my life be put to shame and confusion—may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace.

May those who say to me, "Ha! Ha!" be appalled at their own shame.

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you—may those who love your salvation always say, "The Lord be exalted!"

Let I am poor and needy—may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer—O my God, do not delay.

The psalmist here elaborates both on his troubles - we see that they involve opposition and persecution, which are always very discouraging to anyone - and also on the vast difference that he knows exists between those who turn their problems over to God, and those who trust in themselves. David perceives clearly the shame, futility, and viciousness that accompany all human attempts to trust in their flesh or in other worldly sources of apparent strength and power.

Summary/Preview

This week's study has given us some basic perspective on our great need for God. For further study to emphasize this week's points, go back and study through Psalms 4, 5, 6, and 7, to catch the details we omitted in our brief survey of them. These general "call for help" Psalms can help you gain an appreciation of the importance of genuine reliance on God in times of need.

See also Psalm 70, another one by David, which is very similar to Psalm 40:13-17. The sentence structure is almost identical, and only a couple of words in each verse are different, giving it a slightly different emphasis. Clearly, this kind of appeal to God was very common for David.

Next time, we shall study Psalm 90, a prayer of Moses. This Psalm will provide us with an additional perspective on calling to God for help.

- *Mark W. Garner, April 2000*

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Ten: Prayers For God's Help & Deliverance Part 1: Moses' Prayer Psalm 90

We are currently studying selected Psalms that are prayers or calls to God for help or deliverance. This week, we shall look at Psalm 90, the only Psalm written by Moses. Moses' perspective and experience should give us some new insights into our desire to seek God's help from the heart. Like David, he was especially close to God. But unlike David, his concerns were less personal, being interested almost exclusively in the needs of the community of God's people.

Psalm 90: Overview & Perspectives

Moses' Psalm 90 makes an interesting companion study to the Psalms that David wrote when he sought help from God. David's life was much different from Moses', and his perspective was also different. Amongst other contrasts, we see that these two faithful believers have different concerns that they take to God. Yet both learned and embraced the very same lessons about relying on God in all things, and both devoted themselves to seeking God prayerfully whenever they recognized an important need.

In making an initial overview of the Psalm (we shall do a verse-by-verse analysis below), we notice first Moses' source of confidence. While Moses, like David, draws confidence from remembering what God has done in the past, the specific things that mean the most to him are different. David had a highly personal perspective in his relationship with God, and noticed the very smallest of things that God did for him. In contrast, Moses has a more timeless perspective, and dwells on the things God has done on a wider scale.

Specifically, Moses is highly conscious of the long-term nature of God's plans. He mentions how God's creation and his relationship with his people have been in place for many years, and realizes that God and his purposes will long outlast anything happening in Moses' own lifetime. Moses also recalls seeing extraordinary displays of God's power and discipline. In Moses' lifetime, God's plans called for repeated showings of both, not only to the Egyptians and others who opposed the people of Israel, but also to the Jews themselves. Unlike many of the less attentive Israelites, Moses never forgot the ways that God had displayed his power, and he knew with certainty that God would always be able to act powerfully in guiding and protecting his people.

We also notice in reading over the Psalm that, while the concerns that David expresses in his Psalms are most often personal, Moses is strictly concerned with the needs of God's people as a whole. The words "I", "me", and "my" do not appear at all in Psalm 90! Moses accepted the enormous burden of leading a large, often unwieldy and unruly nation, and he realized and accepted the need to make his personal needs secondary to those of the community. Of special concern to Moses was the spiritual health of the Israelites. No one was more conscious than Moses of how often the people had wavered or crumbled spiritually in the past. Moses was deeply aware of how completely the whole nation relied on God's grace for its very existence, and he constantly beseeched God to continue his merciful treatment of a rebellious and stubborn people.

Moses' perspective is thus an encouragement and a challenge to us, and this Psalm makes an interesting and valuable complement to the Davidic Psalms we have previously studied. Neither David's perspective nor Moses' should be considered "right" or "wrong", but are instead both good examples to us of how to share our concerns with God, and of allowing him to take the responsibility for meeting the needs in our lives.

We can especially identify with Moses' perspectives when we notice how badly our society needs genuine Christianity, and when we notice the weaknesses and faults that are present in God's people. Moses' prayer can serve as a model for us in communicating this type of concern to God.

Psalm 90 Prayer of Moses the Man of God

The heading for Psalm 90 simply tells us that it is "a prayer of Moses the man of God", with no further description of either the psalmist or of his purpose in writing it. It is not necessary to elaborate on either - not only would readers most certainly know Moses' significance in the history of God's people, there is also no question about the single concern that weighed heavily on his heart day after day, year after year. Moses' single-minded purpose in life was the preservation of his people. Once he accepted the responsibility of leading God's people out of Egypt, there was never again anything else of any importance to him other than the well-being and spiritual health of the Israelites. The sentiments he expresses in this Psalm would have been appropriate on many different occasions in his life and the lives of the Israelites.

Psalm 90 is structured in a fashion similar to that of last week's study, Psalm 40. As did David in that Psalm, Moses devotes the first part of Psalm 90 to an expression of confidence in God (Psalm 90:1-11). Then, Moses pours forth his concerns to God, praying for help, and expressing his longing that God and his people would enjoy a close and fruitful relationship (Psalm 90:12-17).

To Moses, there is no greater source of comfort and confidence than knowing that God has always been there for his people, and that he will always be God (v. 1-2):

*Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.
Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from
everlasting to everlasting you are God.*

Every generation tends to think it is unique and special, and tends to overlook the ways it resembles and depends upon past generations. God has seen it all, and his perspective is timeless. His plans were never designed to fit into the temporary whims or fashions of one era or culture. Moses understood that, and took great comfort in it. He appreciated and admired God's eternal qualities, seeing them as a source of security, strength, and confidence. He knew that God's wisdom far surpassed his own, and instead of being disturbed by that, he was encouraged by it.

Moses continues by considering some further implications of this (v. 3-4):

*You turn men back to dust, saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men."
For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in
the night.*

Humans are often trapped within their own time, becoming so self-centered that they can only see the temporary and perishable. God sees the eternal, the permanent. His will, his Word, his plans, his wisdom are all focused on the lasting, not the ephemeral. When we accept this, and when we can reject the impulse to cater to the trivial and changeable fancies of those around us, we suddenly find a tremendous source of strength. Accepting once and for all the supremacy of God's will and wisdom can enable us to rise above the selfish din of controversy, division, and ambition. For it is also important to see our own lives in this same light of eternal versus temporary (v. 5-6):

*You sleep men away in the sleep of death—they are like the new grass of the morning--
though in the morning it springs up new, by evening it is dry and withered.*

Everything else in our lives besides God will soon wither away, and will be unable to provide us with help or encouragement. The material things for which so many persons toil and sacrifice will disappear suddenly without leaving a trace. The other humans whom we try so desperately to please, wanting so badly for them to "like" us, will be unable to answer for us or to defend us before God - they will themselves be called to account. We simply must learn to develop this perspective. Many believers struggle terribly with wanting to be faithful Christians, but still trying to be "friends with the world" as well. As James forcefully explains in James 4:1-10, such spiritual adultery is simply not meant to be. It should be no surprise that it brings frustration.

Moses knows of God's love, wisdom, and care, but also of God's power and discipline (v. 7-11):

*We are consumed by your anger and terrified by your indignation.
You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence.
All our days pass away under your wrath—we finish our years with a moan.
The length of our days is seventy years-- or eighty, if we have the strength—yet their span is
but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away.
Who knows the power of your anger? For your wrath is as great as the fear that is due
you.*

Moses was a man who knew very well how painful and challenging life could be. He had many opportunities to see God's discipline at work in his own life, in the lives of God's people, and of course in the lives of those who opposed God. Moses' attitude, though, was not one of resentment or bitterness towards the difficulties that mortal beings must face in this world. Rather, he saw clearly that the pain of this world is intended to pull us towards God, as the only way to bring identity and purpose to this otherwise tumultuous, meaningless existence of ours. Though Moses and the other men and women of the Old Testament were never blessed with a comprehensive picture of eternal salvation, they still grasped the important lesson that God was the only way to give them a lasting meaning and purpose to their lives.

Moses also wanted very much for his people to share that same sense of faithfulness and appreciation for God. Thus the second part of the Psalm begins (v. 12-13):

*Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Relent, O Lord! Do not long till it be late—have compassion on your servants.*

Even Moses himself occasionally forgot the things God had taught him. He knew how much easier it was for the other Israelites to forget about God, and to do foolish, destructive, and

blasphemous things as a result. It therefore was a deep concern of his that the people might know God a little better, and might see their own lives in a more spiritual light. Moses well knew that the many acts of folly, rebellion, and sensuality that the people committed all stemmed from their insufficient awareness of spiritual realities.

Moses knew the incomparable satisfaction of knowing God, and wanted the same for others (v. 14):

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.

This beautiful expression is Moses' way of pleading that God might help his people feel the presence of their God more clearly. Moses knew what joy and peace it could bring to know that God was with him. Living in God's presence brings much greater joys than any of the second-rate forms of amusement that the world manufactures.

Moses also looked beyond the present, and prayed for a lasting relationship between God and his people (v. 15-17):

*Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.
May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to their children.
May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us—establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands.*

Moses was well aware of the sacrifice and hardship that the Israelites had to endure, but he was also well aware that there was an important purpose behind it. God had told him of the Promised Land, but God had also revealed to him that future generations would not always remember what it took to bring them to the promised Land, and would backslide as a result. Moses wanted very much for coming generations, not just the one he was a part of, to have the spiritual blessings God had promised. To this he devoted his life, and he is a powerful example to us. In a world filled not only with self-centeredness but also with short-sightedness, Moses' spiritual perspective calls us also to look beyond the needs of the moment, to appreciate that we are part of an eternal and glorious plan of God that is fully worthy of our complete admiration and devotion.

For Further Study

This week's study has given us some additional perspectives on our need for God and on expressing that need to God. Moses' perspective and David's are rather different, but they complement each other well. There are many more Psalms of David that are prayers for God's help, and that would be good for those who would like to take a deeper look at the themes we have been studying. Particularly recommended for further study would be Psalms 25, 55 and 142.

Psalm 25 is the source of a popular devotional song, "Unto Thee, O Lord" (do I lift up my soul ...). In it, David expresses his certainty that living his life according to God's will is the only real choice, and he pleads with God to help him overcome his own weakness and sin, so that he can experience the spiritual joys of a close relationship with God.

Psalm 55 was written by David at a time (one of many in his life) when he faced opposition and persecution. In this Psalm, he movingly expresses how faithful God has been to him, being a source of support and guidance even when everyone else had deserted or opposed him.

In Psalm 142, we see a short, simple, but powerful expression of our inability to rise above ourselves and the world under our own power. David's plea here is summed up in verse 7, "Set me free from my prison". Both this perishable world, and our own fleshly selves, can indeed be prisons, hindering our spiritual awareness and blessings. David knew that only God's superior love, wisdom, and power could free him from the pains and constraints of the fleshly world.

Next week, we shall study another "Call For Help" Psalm, by taking a look at Asaph's Psalm 77.

- Mark W. Garner, May 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Eleven: Pra^{is}ers For God's Hel^p & Deliverance Part C: The Lord Restore Us Forever (Psalm 124)

We shall conclude our study of "Call For Help" Psalms with a look at Psalm 124, written by Asaph. The Psalms of Asaph are characterized by a completely honest expression of feelings, as the psalmist trusts God to guide him into truth. In Psalm 124, we see an example of how a faithful believer works through discouragement and his feelings that God is not with him. In some respects, the perspective of Asaph may even be easier for us to identify with than those of David and Moses.

Background & Overview: Asaph & Psalm 124

Asaph will provide us with yet another perspective that can teach us about calling on God for help. Asaph wrote Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83, and his Psalms are noteworthy for their open and honest expressions of emotion, even negative emotions such as doubt and discouragement. He is an example to us that a faithful, devoted believer can nonetheless struggle with all kinds of spiritual difficulties, and his Psalms also teach us that we can overcome such things.

Note that The name Asaph was not an uncommon one among God's people, and several persons of that name appear in the Old Testament. The psalmist Asaph is the most prominent of these, and is mentioned numerous times, most of them in Chronicles. He was a Levite, one of King David's directors of music, and his ministry apparently combined music with prophecy. The most descriptive references to Asaph appear in chapters 16 and 25 of 1 Chronicles: see 1 Chron. 16:4-7, 16:37, 25:1-2, and 25:6-9.

In 1 Chronicles 15-16, we read the account of the ark of the covenant being returned to Jerusalem, and Asaph was entrusted with an important part of the ensuing ministry. Asaph was named the chief of those appointed to minister before the ark, and was also given David's psalm of thanks to celebrate. Then, in chapter 25, we see that Asaph was one of three men appointed to direct a musical ministry of prophecy. One of the others was Jeduthun, to whom Asaph dedicated this week's topic of study, Psalm 77. Some other references to Asaph include 1 Chron. 6:39 and 9:15, and 2 Chron. 5:12.

Portions of the psalm of thanks that is given in 1 Chronicles 16:8-36 actually appear in the book of Psalms in three different places. The first 15 verses are the same as Psalm 105:1-15, the next 11 verses consist of most of Psalm 96, which we studied in an earlier lesson, and the final three verses are basically the same as Psalm 106, verses 1 and 47-48.

Asaph himself is credited as the author of 12 Psalms, most of them collected together in one stretch. His Psalms are often striking in the openness with which Asaph expresses himself. His perspective is not quite as lofty as that of David or Moses, and he often has to struggle to control his feelings, but in that way he often is representative of the kinds of struggles the average Christian often has in understanding God's will and in developing a relationship with God. Asaph never pretended to feel emotions that he did not, and never tried to hide things in his heart. He knew that God knew everything in his heart, and consequently Asaph understood that open, honest communication with God was the best thing to do when he felt in ways that he knew he

should not. This gives Asaph's Psalms a real value in directing us, whenever we face spiritual discouragement.

A survey of Psalm 77 shows that the psalmist's struggle can be summed up by what he says in verse 7: "will the Lord reject us forever". Asaph is struggling with many negative emotions. Most of all, he feels in his heart that God has deserted him and his people. Before we criticize Asaph for feeling this way, we should note how easy it is for the most faithful of believers to become discouraged when it seems that all of our best efforts to grow and bear spiritual fruit are met with frustration and defeat. The significant thing about Asaph is that he knew where to go with his feelings - he talked about them openly to, and directly with, God. He knew that God himself would best be able to understand and to relieve these spiritual ailments. Other persons can help and encourage, but can never substitute for sharing one's problems in prayer directly with our Creator.

We can thus learn from Asaph's example, first, that having such negative feelings will happen to us from time-to-time, and that in itself this is no grounds for censure. The challenge and the call are for us to handle them in the right way, so that God can not only help us in our present trials, but also can teach us the more significant spiritual lessons that we need to learn for the future.

Notice Asaph's sources of confidence in this Psalm. As did David and Moses, Asaph gains encouragement from remembering what God had done before. He also is strengthened from thinking about God's power. In verses 16-19, he expresses some vivid images of God's power as it is expressed through nature, in pictures reminiscent of the "Creator" Psalms we studied in an earlier lesson. This is a slightly different source of faith from David's memory of God's personal care for him, and Moses' keen awareness of the ways that God had worked in the past to lead and discipline his people. All of these are important and valuable sources of strengthening our faith when we struggle, and some may be more meaningful than others at certain times in our lives.

Psalm 77 Will the Lord Reject Us Forever

Once again, this Psalm is a call for help for which no specific context is given. From the text, it is most likely a general plea for help, strength, and understanding, after a period of discouragement, rather than a call for help in some specific, short-term crisis. (The lessons it contains are just as significant, given either possibility.) As discussed above, the feelings expressed in this Psalm are very honest, and are also struggles that most Christians can identify with very well. There are often times when a believer's life seems hopelessly difficult, and this Psalm can give us a start on responding to such feelings when our own hearts are weighted down with discouragement.

Psalm 77 has a pattern very similar to our previous studies, with one significant difference. Whereas David and Moses both approached their pleas to God (in Psalms 40 and 90) by beginning with an expression of faith and confidence, and then presenting their plea for help, Asaph reverses the order. In the first part (verses 1-9), he expresses a deep spiritual despair, which weighs heavily on his mind and heart. Only then does he think about sources of encouragement (v. 10-20), which pick him up and help him to draw closer to God. We may not always be able to have the self-control of a Moses or a David, who in the midst of trials were usually able to think of God first! Psalms such as Asaph's assure us that God understands, and still helps us, even when we have to get out all of our despair and anger first, before we are ready

to listen to him. The key is that we must at some point accept our need to turn to him and allow him to work as he wills, not as we will.

The Psalm begins with an expression of darkest despair (v. 1-2):

*I cried out to God for help I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord at night I stretched out untiring hands and my
soul refused to be comforted.*

There are times when all of us can identify with the statement that "my soul refused to be comforted". Sometimes things in this world get so frustrating and confusing that we do not even want to be encouraged or comforted—we just want everything to change. Even a faithful believer like Asaph could feel that way. The key is that he was honest about it. He did not pretend that others were the problem, he did not complain that no one was encouraging him, he did not make petulant demands to God. He just honestly and openly admitted where he was spiritually.

Asaph also compares his present state to how he has felt in the past (v. 3-6):

*I remembered you, O God, and I groaned I mused, and my spirit grew faint.
You kept my eyes from closing I was too troubled to speak.
I thought about the former days, the years of long ago
I remembered my songs in the night. My heart mused and my spirit inquired:*

It is again a common thing for Christians in times of distress to do this - to think back to earlier times when things seemed happier, or at least simpler. This is by no means wholly bad! Sometimes we ought to remember that God has shown us the way to spiritual peace and contentment before, and he will do so again. It is good to use the past as a gauge to what is possible in the future. Looking at the past only becomes a problem when we wallow in it and refuse to move forward to new challenges.

Asaph now sums up his feelings with an expression of deep spiritual sorrow (v. 7-9):

*Will the Lord reject us forever Will he never show his favor again
as his unfailing love vanished forever as his promise failed for all time
as God forgotten to be merciful as he in anger withheld his compassion*

Jesus himself uttered essentially the same thing in his own most extreme pain of spiritual anguish: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" He did, of course, feel that way for an entirely different reason. Once again, we can often identify with these feelings. This is the way that we feel when circumstances, sin, or worldly pressures have overwhelmed us and pushed us away from God. The key is to notice that these feelings do not result from God withdrawing himself from us! As Asaph now begins to do, we must remind ourselves and convince ourselves that God is still there, and if it seems otherwise, it is our perspective that needs changing (v. 10-12):

*Then I thought, To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High.
I will remember the deeds of the Lord yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds.*

On the brink of giving up, the psalmist reminds himself of some vital spiritual realities. There have been a great many things he has seen in the past to persuade him of God's power, wisdom, and care, and he simply must remember them. It is significant that he says "to this I will appeal". As other psalmists have also done, Asaph realizes that the grounds on which he should place his pleas before God are not those of his own goodness, but those of God's nature.

Asaph now begins to gather strength and confidence (v. 13-15):

*Our days, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?
You are the God who performs miracles—you display your power among the peoples.
With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.*

Thinking about God's nature has encouraged him. He begins to remind himself that there is absolutely no better place to take his concerns and discouragements than to the mighty, wise living God. These are not new facts to Asaph - he has known them all along, and just needed to remind himself of them. Often when we find ourselves in spiritual despair, we want to find something brand new to comfort us. But in reality, the most comforting things will be those we have always known, which we just need to remember and cherish anew.

The Psalm's climax contains some vivid images of God's power (v. 16-19):

*The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and thrilled—the very depths were convulsed.
The clouds poured down water, the skies resounded with thunder—your arrows flashed back and forth.
Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world—the earth trembled and quaked.
Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen.*

These images are similar to some of the images we have studied earlier, in the Psalms that celebrate God as the Creator. The psalmist concentrates on seeing God's mighty hand at work in the natural world around him. We so often see God's hand at work in front of our eyes without noticing! The flashy toys of the world grab our attention, but the power they contain is negligible compared to the unsurpassed power of God. Even the mighty forces of nature demonstrate but the tiniest fraction of God's total power. These images comforted Asaph because, although he felt he was at the mercy of forces much greater than himself, he suddenly remembered that everything troubling him was itself subject to the far greater power and control of God.

After these powerful images, the last verse is almost an anti-climax (v. 20):

You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

It is interesting and noteworthy that Asaph ends not on a note of God's power, but God's care. He recalls the gentle shepherding of the flock of Israel that God has always done. God is always ready to take his people by the hand and show them where they need to go. All that stands in the way of this is our own stubborn self-will. Asaph wants to re-experience this kind of a relationship with God, and he has now realized the spiritual lessons he needs to re-learn in order to re-establish the closeness with God that he so treasures. God has been waiting all along, and it is time to come back.

Summary & Further Study

We have now seen three distinct perspectives on calling on God for help. Each of them can help us in our own prayers and relationship with God, especially in those times when we feel a deep need for God to deliver us. All of these Psalms, different though their approaches are, were written by persons with an unshakable conviction that God was the only place to turn in times of distress.

For further study of this week's topics, some of Asaph's other Psalms are similar to Psalm 77. Psalms 74 and 79 have something of the same note of desperation that we see in Psalm 77, and these two are good companion studies to this week's class. By comparison, Psalms 80 and 83 also call for God's help, but in a more confident tone. They form an interesting contrast to Psalm 77. In Psalm 83, in particular, Asaph almost seems as too confident that God will deal with his enemies!

We shall also see a couple of Asaph's other Psalms, 73 and 78, in future lessons on other topics. (See the class topics list for where they fit in.)

There are also many other general examples in the Psalms of prayers for help. Just a few examples, working from the beginning of Psalms, where we left off earlier, are Psalms 12, 13, 17, 28, 31 and 35. See also notes from the past two weeks, where more were mentioned. There are also numerous others - when you get done studying all of these, see how many more you can find later in the book! Truly, God knows how much we need him, and knows how much help we need even in seeking his help, that he has provided us with so many good examples of how to call on him for help when we know we need it.

Next week, we shall begin a new topic.

- Mark W. Garner, May 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Lesson Twelve: A Celebration of God's Word Survey of Psalm 119 Part A

We shall spend the next two classes studying portions of Psalm 119, which is an extended celebration of God's Word. While all Christians acknowledge the importance of God's Word, there is still much that we can learn from this Psalm. It is important for us to see how many ways God's Word is active in our lives, and how many different roles it is meant to play. This Psalm is also significant in calling us to find a renewed joy and delight in God's Word.

Psalm 119 Background & Overview

This Psalm is not only the longest Psalm, it also is easily the longest chapter in the entire Bible. (The shortest chapter is not long before it - Psalm 117) Psalm 119 is an extended celebration of many different aspects of God's Word, and will give us much to consider in the ways that we should allow God's Word to affect our lives. Given the length of the Psalm, our study this time will be thematic, rather than verse-by-verse.

Psalm 119 is also an example of a device occasionally used in Hebrew writings, the acrostic structure. The first eight verses all begin with the letter "aleph", the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet. The next eight verses all begin with "beth", which is the second letter, and so on. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and each in turn is the first letter of eight verses of the Psalm, for 176 verses total. Besides being aesthetically pleasing, this method was meant to be an aid to memorizing the Psalm. (Recall that memorizing Scripture was a high priority to the ancient Jews.)

Thematically, Psalm 119 is also somewhat different from most of the others we have studied. It is not so much a series of points in progression - as, for example, Psalm 40 begins with a statement of why the psalmist trusts God, then proceeds with his plea for help - as it is an extended meditation on a few basic points. Each eight-verse section of the Psalm contains very similar points and images, and could almost stand independently. This arrangement, combined with the length of the Psalm, will influence our plan of study.

Our plan will be not to study the entire Psalm verse-by-verse, but to select a representative portion of it that will establish the most important points that the Psalm communicates. Specifically, we shall study mainly the first 40 verses in class. Although the rest of the Psalm is also filled with valuable and encouraging material, we shall leave that for those who wish to do further study.

We shall focus the class discussions this week and next week on three particular aspects of God's Word that are emphasized in this Psalm. While there are other worthwhile details in this Psalm, these are the three main themes that are covered in Psalm 119: the ways that God's Word is described, the value and significance ascribed to God's Word, and examples of our response to and attitude towards God's Word. This lesson shall cover the first of these (the descriptive terms given to God's Word), and the other two topics will be covered in the following lesson.

The ways that God's Word is described (see below) help prepare our minds for the other two main themes. The words that the psalmist uses give us indications of the roles that the Scriptures are meant to play in our lives, and of how we should respond. The psalmist also expresses many different ways in which the Word is important to our lives, giving us motivation to know and appreciate it more. The Psalm points out many ways that it is important, and which we may not always notice. Finally, there is much we can learn from the psalmist's example, in the delight and joy he shows in knowing and following God's Word. He realizes not only the practical benefits that come from studying the Word—he also realizes the spiritual value that comes from having communication with the Creator of the universe.

Descriptive Terms for God's Word from Psalm 119:1

Many humans hold one-dimensional views of the Bible that frequently prove to be stumbling blocks to understanding it. In Psalm 119, the psalmist mentions and appreciates many different sides of God's Word, and this can serve as a good example to us. Our goal in this part of the study will be to appreciate how many different aspects there are to God's Word, so that we can avoid a trivialized view of the Bible, and can develop an increased respect and appreciation for it. Note that we shall go back and look at some other points in these same verses next time—for now we will focus on the numerous ways that the psalmist refers to the Word of God.

There are 9 different Hebrew words that are used throughout Psalm 119 to refer to God's Word. In most English versions, distinct words are used to translate each of these. Though many of them are very similar in meaning, they all have slightly different connotations, and they illuminate several different aspects of the Word and its function in our relationship with God. Note that different versions will often use different terms to translate the Hebrew words. We shall look at the terms as used in the NIV, NASB, KJV, and ESV, and shall go in the order that they first appear in the NIV text of Psalm 119. The excerpts quoted from the Psalm are the NIV translations.

The first of these terms that we see is "law" in verse 1:

Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord.

This is the Hebrew word torah ("torah"), which was generally used to refer specifically to the Mosaic Law or to the Hebrew Scriptures as a whole, and which explicitly includes the implication of divine inspiration. The word is translated "law" in all of the NIV, NASB, KJV and ESV, and is found in verses 1, 18, 29, and 34 in our sample, as well as many occasions later in the Psalm. This implies that God's Word is authoritative, meant for obedience, not speculation or dispute. With all of the other aspects of God's Word that we shall discuss, it is always important to remember this most basic feature of it, which sets it apart from any human-made legal code or philosophy.

In verse 2, we see a slightly different word, translated as "statutes" in the NIV:

Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart.

The Hebrew word is edot ("edot"), and it is translated "testimonies" in the NASB, KJV, and ESV. In our sample reading, it is found in verses 2, 14, 22, 24, 31, and 36 (and again, it is found in many other verses later in the Psalm). In this case, "testimonies" is a better way of communicating the word's significance. An "ed" () meant a witness, and while the term was

a legal one, referring to enacted laws, rules, or statutes, it was meant to emphasize the fact that they were not arbitrary rules, but that God had explained them and given the people plenty of good warnings not to break them, so that the laws served as witnesses or testimonies to the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of the people. This concept is also very important for today's believer. It is always popular amongst unbelievers, and even many vacillating believers, to evaluate and reconsider many of God's commands, in the mistaken belief that we have a right or privilege to adjust God's commands to make them fit better into the temporary trends of our own sinful and benighted generation. In reality, it is the other way around: the Word of God is instead a testimony about us, as to whether we follow it faithfully or whether we choose to follow our own blinded self-will.

A very basic term, "ways", occurs in verse 3:

They do nothing wrong they walk in his ways.

This comes from the Hebrew ("derakim"), the plural of the everyday word for "way", which was used in most of the same ways that our English word is. The NIV, NASB, KJV, and ESV all use the same translation. The most basic meaning is simply that of a path or a road, and so the psalmist here has in mind the quiet, faithful act of following in the path that God has laid out for us. In our sample, the word is found in verses 3 and 15. (Essentially the same word is also frequently used when referring to the "way" or "ways" of humans - for example, in verses 1 and 9.)

A fourth term for the word of God comes in verse 4, "precepts":

You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed.

Once again, the same translation is used in the NIV, NASB, KJV and ESV. The word is found in verses 4, 15, 27, and 40 in our selected reading. The Hebrew word is ("piqqudim"), and it refers to instructions or directions given by an overseer or an official. It strongly suggests that the one making the instruction has looked into the situation, and has made a careful evaluation as to what should be done. The English word "precept" usually has a slightly different meaning, that of a general concept or rule of thumb, but it also usually carries the connotation of a principle learned from carefully considering past experience. Either word, then, signifies to us that God's instructions to us are based on reason, not on whims or on an arbitrary expression of his will. In this way, God's law contrasts sharply with many human-made rules and regulations.

In the next verse, we see the word "decrees" (verse 5):

Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees!

The Hebrew word is ("huqqim"), and it is a form of the verb for "inscribe" or "engrave". For example, see Isaiah 30:8, where the verb form is used. It is translated "statutes" in the NASB, KJV, and ESV, but in neither case do these English words connote the full impact of the Hebrew, which has no one-word English synonym. The word suggests that these decrees or statutes have been engraved forever, that they are permanent. A good Christian parallel concept is the way that the book of Hebrews interprets Jeremiah's prophecy that God will "put his laws in

our minds, and write them on our hearts". In our selection, the word is found in verses 5, 8, 12, 16, 23, 26, and 33.

The familiar word "commands" is found in verse 6 (NIV translation):

Then I would not be put to shame when I consider all your commands.

The NASB, KJV, and ESV use the almost identical term "commandments", and the word is found in verses 6,10,19,21,32,35 of our reading. The Hebrew word is miswot ("miswot"), and it means about the same thing as the English word. It connotes a simple, but important, statement of authority. There are many things in God's Word that are not meant to persuade or convince, but to command. There will be many times when a faithful believer simply must swallow his or her pride, and obey what God has said.

Next comes a word that the NIV translates "laws", and some other versions as "judgments" (v. 7):

I will praise you with an upright heart as I learn your righteous laws.

The Hebrew word, mishpatim ("mishpatim"), refers to the act of a judge who has heard all arguments and has now rendered a final decision. It occurs in verses 7, 13, 20, 30, and 39 of our reading sample. The NASB uses "judgments" in verse 7, and "ordinances" for the rest of these, while the KJV uses "judgments" for all of these verses, and the ESV uses "ordinances" for all of them. In English, both laws and ordinances are rules that have been enacted after due legislative process, so both are useful translations, but the original word also emphasizes the role of an individual judge. In any case, this word is meant to emphasize that God's instructions are based on a full knowledge of humanity and of the situations in which we find ourselves.

The familiar word "word" first appears in verse 9:

How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word.

This is the most general term of all, and "God's Word" in English can also refer to God's Word in both written and unwritten forms. The Hebrew word is dabar ("dabar"), and means simply a spoken word. In our reading, it is found in verses 9, 11, 16, 17, 25, 28, and 37, and is translated as "word" in all of the NIV, NASB, KJV, and ESV except for verse 37. The word is meant to embrace God's truth in all of the various forms which he has used to communicate with humanity.

In verse 37, the NIV follows a different manuscript than the others, and ends the verse "according to your word", while the KJV uses "in thy way", the NASB has "in our ways", and the ESV has "in thy ways", because they translate different Hebrew words from alternate manuscripts.

Most of the rest of our sample repeats these same words. One more, "promises", appears in v. 38:

Fulfill your promise to your servant, so that you may be feared.

The NIV and ESV both use "promise", while the NASB and KJV have "word". The Hebrew word is imrah ("imrah"), and it derives from the word for "to say". As used here, it carries

some of the sense of the English term "word" when we use it as in "I give you my word". Thus it carries the sense that God's directives to us are not merely to be obeyed for their own sake, but that they carry a promise behind them of God's blessing. The word is used more often later in the Psalm than in the part we have chosen to study. See, for example, verses 41, 50, 57, and 58.

Summary & Further Study

Next time, we shall continue our survey of Psalm 119 by going back through these verses and looking at some other aspects of what they teach us about God's Word. For further study on this week's topics, go through the rest of Psalm 119, and continue to note the number of times the terms listed above are used. You will see that almost every verse contains one of the terms we have analyzed! As you read, meditate on the many different aspects of God's Word that these terms are meant to bring out, and use this to consider the roles that God's Word is meant to play in our lives. This will summarize this week's topic and will also prepare you for next week's study.

Only verses 84, 121, and 122 contain none of these words. In some versions, verse 91 does not have any of them, but it contains the same word that appears in verse 7, meaning "laws" or "judgments" or "ordinances".

We all know how important it is for Christians to study, understand, and meditate upon God's Word. An important part of this is appreciating what it is and what it is meant to do. That is what Psalm 119 celebrates, and the goal of our study of this Psalm is to nourish and strengthen our motivation to devote ourselves to learning the Word of God.

- Mark W. Garner, May 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Thirteen: A Celebration of God's Word Survey of Psalm 119 Part 1

This week, we shall conclude the survey of Psalm 119 that we began last time. There are many encouraging and motivating thoughts in this Psalm which we will not have time to cover in class, so these two lessons are intended to give you a basis for further study of the Psalm on your own. Thoughtful study of Psalm 119 can give us a renewed appreciation for the importance of knowing, studying, and meditating on God's Word.

This lesson will cover mostly verses that we looked at in last week's class (Psalm 119:1-40), plus a few others. It would be a good idea to review the terms for God's Word that we studied last time. The terms law (v. 1), statutes or testimonies (v. 2), ways (v. 3), precepts (v. 4), decrees or statutes (v. 5), commands or commandments (v. 6), laws or judgments or ordinances (v. 7), word (v. 9), and promise (v. 38) all bring out different aspects of God's Word. This week's study will look at two other main themes of Psalm 119.

Psalm 119 Thoughts on the Value & Significance of God's Word

Besides the terms that the psalmist uses to describe God's Word (see above), Psalm 119 is filled with comments and insights on the many ways that God's Word is important in our lives. We shall first take a brief look at some of the many benefits of God's law and Word that the psalmist mentions (using verses 1-40 as a sample, as we did last time), and then shall look more carefully at just a couple of the most important ones. As we discussed last week, our goal is to develop a fuller appreciation of all of the ways that the Word of God is important in our lives.

Just browsing through the first 40 verses of the Psalm reveals a lengthy list of benefits that come from knowing and applying God's laws, commands, and principles. They allow us to live without wrong, blame, or shame (v. 1, 3, 6), and they enable us to live a life of purity (v. 9). We are able to rejoice and take delight (v. 14, 16, and others, see also below) because we have found the source of all knowledge, wisdom and understanding (v. 18, 34, see also below). We find protection and defense against the sinful and predatory (v. 21, 23). We find a source of relief from sorrow (v. 28). These and many others are mentioned throughout the Psalm, showing us how many different ways that God's Word is valuable and significant in our lives.

We want now to take a more detailed look at just three of the things that this Psalm mentions. First, it emphasizes that God's Word is a source of light and understanding, as in these selected verses:

Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. (v. 10)

Our word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. (v. 105)

The unfolding of your words gives light—it gives understanding to the simple. (v. 10)

The psalmist reminds us frequently that only God has the real answers to the most important questions and needs in our lives. This is most memorably expressed in the famous verse 105, with its image of God's Word serving as a source of light, guiding us as we walk through life in this dark, often intimidating world. Peter likewise said that we should "pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19), and Jesus described himself as the light of the world. Jesus also warned that our response to his light will reveal whether we are lovers of evil or lovers of truth (John 3:20-21). Most humans grope their way through life, lurching from one thing to another, in a desperate attempt to find meaning. In their pride, they refuse to look to the most obvious place, their Creator, and thus bring added misery to themselves and those around them. The Christian, though, learns to love the light that God offers us. Although the light may sometimes blind us, and although it often reveals unflattering aspects of our lives and personalities, it also brings us the security of knowing that we have found the truth, and the answers to our deepest needs.

Second, the psalmist tells us something that we may at first find paradoxical, namely that God's Word brings us freedom, for example:

I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free. v. 2

I will talk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. v. 5

Many pagans refuse to accept the Bible or to accept God's will for their lives because they perceive God as a threat to their freedom. The pagan concept of "freedom" is the right to disregard any inhibitions, obligations, or responsibilities, and this illusory dream of "freedom" is the motivation for a great many of the sins that humans commit. But is this really freedom? If we allow our flesh to do as it wishes, if we allow free rein to our passions and cravings, this is in fact slavery. The sensually indulgent unbeliever is by no means free, but is in fact a slave to his or her own body. The soul of such a person lives in a fleshly prison, calling for its God, while these persons are then mystified that they cannot find any lasting peace or joy, despite ever-increasing selfishness and sin.

Genuine freedom is not found in indulgence, but in submission to God. Only by giving our minds, hearts, and bodies to God, allowing his will to prevail in our lives, can we experience any real freedom. Only thus can we allow our true selves to come out, and to live the lives that our Creator called us to live. The psalmist knew what freedom really was, and rejoiced in it.

Another theme stressed in the Psalm is how God's will and word both give and preserve life:

I am laid low in the dust—preserve my life according to your word. v. 25

Turn my eyes away from worthless things—preserve my life according to your word. v. 33

Oh, I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness. v. 40

My comfort in my suffering is this: your promise preserves my life. v. 50

Besides these, verses 88, 93, 107, 149, 154, 156, and 159 all use this identical phrase, "preserve my life" (in the NIV). The NASB uses "revive" where the NIV uses "preserve" in these verses, while the KJV uses the older word "quicken", and the ESV uses a variety of words, including the

simple "give me life" for some of these. All of these words refer in different ways to the psalmist's awareness that God is the ultimate source of all life, and thus that any "life" worthy of the word can only come from following God, his will, and his laws.

Once again, unbelievers find this to be a paradoxical thought. They think that they can map out their lives better than anyone else, and they ignorantly disdain not only God's Word, but also any human who talks of what is right and wrong. ¶et we must not over-indulge in bashing unbelievers, for we Christians must ourselves learn this lesson, and apply it more consistently in our lives. Many Christians allow themselves to be caught up in the frantic pace of contemporary society, and allow temporary pagan standards of behavior to intimidate them into thinking that maybe it would be a good idea to take the Scriptures less seriously, just in case they are "missing out" on something really good in this world. We must constantly resist the temptation to live for this world, and for that reason must constantly reinforce the convictions of the truth that we have learned.

Psalm 11: Our Response To & Attitude Towards God's Word

One of the fundamental problems that many believers have in their relationship with God is that of a lack of genuine enthusiasm for learning, meditating on, and applying God's Word. It is not possible to "force" ourselves to be excited about God's commands and principles, though many try to do so. A true appreciation for the Word of God must start with humility and understanding. This Psalm gives us a remarkable example of a believer who truly loves and appreciates the laws and ways of God, and who is not reluctant either to give himself to them whole-heartedly, or to let others know how much he enjoys studying and obeying the Word of God. The lessons of the Psalm can thus help us to develop these attitudes in ourselves.

Most basically, the psalmist is an example of finding joy in searching God's Word, as in these examples, which contain one of his most-used phrases:

I delight in your decrees ¶I will not neglect your Word. ¶v. 1

Our statutes are my delight ¶they are my counselors. ¶v. 2

Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. ¶v. 5

for I delight in your commands because I love them. ¶v. 1

Besides these verses, the expression "delight" is used in verses 70, 77, 92, 143, and 174. In these verses, the word "delight" is used in all four of the versions we have been comparing. These verses describe a simple feeling of pleasure, of happiness, in knowing and learning God's Word. "Delight" is not necessarily a deep feeling, but it is a demonstration of an innate recognition of having found something pleasing and valuable. The psalmist has developed such an appreciation for the Word that just thinking about it produces this sincere reaction of pleasure and happiness. Other verses use somewhat different words such as "rejoice" (v. 14, 162) or "joy" (v. 111) to describe other sides of the psalmist's feelings when contemplating the Word of God.

These verses call us to examine our own attitudes towards God's Word. Studying the Scriptures, learning God's will for our lives, and striving better to understand God's wisdom ought not to be a burden, but a delight. If we find it to be a tedious responsibility, if we only find the Bible to be

useful for winning arguments, if we only see the Bible as a rulebook, if we cannot enjoy God's Word, this tells us that we have perspectives that could be changed. This Psalm can give us a start on developing better and more positive perspectives. Alternatively, Christians who do enjoy and value God's Word can provide much help and encouragement to those who wish to develop those perspectives. But whatever you do, if you really do not enjoy God's Word, do not simply go on observing a painful routine. God very much wants to help you to find delight in his Word.

Deeper than the feeling of delight is the feeling of love and longing for the Word that the psalmist expresses in verses such as these:

My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times. v. 20

I long for your precepts! Preserve my life in your righteousness. v. 20

I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love, and I meditate on your decrees. v. 21

How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! v. 10

These verses echo the feelings of the Sons of Korah, as we studied earlier in Psalm 42: "my soul pants for you, O God" "when can I go and meet with God" (Psalm 42:1,2). These psalmists have both gone beyond the simple realization of the practical ways that God's Word is important in their lives, and have realized something even more important than an acceptance of the wisdom and authority behind the Word. They have grasped the intimate link between the Word of God and God himself. They know that an appreciation and understanding of God's laws, commands, and principles is indispensable to having a relationship with him, which they very much desire. They love God, both for who he is and for what he has done, and because of that, his Word is sweet to them, and they want as much of it as they can get.

We shall conclude with a look at an important practice that helps us to develop both an appreciation for God's Word, and also an awareness of its connection with our personal relationship with him:

I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. v. 15

Though rulers sit together and slander me, your servant will meditate on your decrees. v. 21

Let me understand the teaching of your precepts then I will meditate on your commands. v. 21

Besides these references, the idea of meditating on God's Word is also mentioned in verse 48 (see above) and verses 78, 97, 99, and 148. Meditating on God's Word is a practice different from reading it or even studying it, and it is a practice often neglected by believers in their search for God. Perhaps we too closely associate "meditation" with mystical man-made religions, or perhaps we are just too "busy" to take time for something that does not involve a bustle of activity. But in any case, setting aside time to meditate on God's Word is an invaluable way to draw closer to God and to develop an enthusiasm for his Word. There are many wonders in the Word, many deep insights into reality, that cannot be appreciated or even understood accurately without devoting some thought to them. In our rush to catalogue "do's and don'ts", we too often

want to reduce everything in the Bible to a one-line statement that takes no time to understand. In our insecurity, we often sidestep difficult questions, and are afraid to look at things beyond the surface level. All of these impatient practices deprive us of many satisfying discoveries in the Word of God. By no means does this mean that through meditation we should find obscure points that no one else has ever seen. (If we do find such things, they will almost certainly be incorrect!) But what we can find, by focusing more effort on meditating and otherwise carefully considering God's Word, is that we can develop a deeper understanding of the simple but vital teachings that we already "know" on a surface level. This is the way to deal with the all-too-common condition of believers who loyally espouse a set of teachings that they learned from others in the church, but who never really embraced those beliefs as their own, or learned to rejoice in them.

Our relationship with God is meant to be a personal one, and is meant to be a source of satisfaction, joy, security, and many other positive things. But it cannot be so without the Word of God playing an important role, and that in turn will not take place unless we follow the example of the Psalm 119 psalmist, and learn to delight in and love the Word through a careful consideration of its wonders.

Summary & Further Study

Since there are so many ideas in this Psalm that we have not had time to cover in class, if you are able to do some study on your own, it is recommended this time simply to continue studying Psalm 119. In the outline and class notes, there are numerous references to other verses in the Psalm that will continue developing the themes we have discussed in class during the past two weeks. It would also be a good study to look for more ways that God's Word is valuable in our lives (as in Part B), and to search the Psalm for further examples of the right attitude and response that we should have to the Word of God (as in Part C).

God's Word is many-sided, and studying the numerous terms used for it throughout Psalm 119 can help us to appreciate aspects of it that we may have overlooked. God's Word is a source of light, freedom, and life, as well as many other benefits. We ought actively to look for these, and to show our appreciation when we see them. And we can indeed learn to respond to God's Word with delight and longing, and a commitment not only to read it but to ponder and meditate on it, in order fully to appreciate and understand it.

- Mark W. Garner, May 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes for Lesson Fourteen: The Struggle between Right and Wrong Psalm 1: He Will Make Your Righteousness Shine Like the Dawn

Our first Summer topic will be a pair of Psalms that look at the struggle within us between righteousness and sin. Each of us was created in God's image, with an inner desire to seek God and to be like him. But each of us also has a fleshly nature, which is inclined towards sin, rebellion, and death. We constantly face the decision of which path to choose. In this week's Psalm, David gives us some sound advice to keep us on the right path. Next week, we shall look at a Psalm of Asaph, in which the psalmist himself agonizes over this struggle.

We began our Psalms series in March with a look at Psalm 1. That Psalm gave us the main theme for our studies, of delighting in God and his law. Since then, we have studied selected Psalms representing several of the major types of Psalms: Psalms expressing faith and trust, Psalms of praise to God (including those honoring him as Creator), Psalms about sin, confession, and forgiveness, prayers for help, and finally the celebration of God's Word in Psalm 119. For our summer studies, we shall begin a new set of topics, beginning with a Psalm that will return to the theme of delighting in God.

Psalm 1 Overview & Themes

The most well-known verse in this Psalm (verse 4) reprises our class theme of "delight yourself in the Lord". In this Psalm, David advises us to choose the right course for our lives. God knows all about the inner struggle we face, the temptations we must deal with, and the weaknesses we all have. He also knows that it will be far better for us to resist our own fleshly desires and also the deceptive appeals of the world, and instead to embrace his values and commands as the way to a healthy, joyful life. This Psalm (and next week's - see below) can provide us with valuable spiritual nourishment to help us with our inner struggle, as we constantly must choose between the temptations of the world and the will of God.

One very basic lesson we learn from the Psalms is that God acknowledges our struggle. He knows that it is not easy to overcome our worldly desires, habits, and values. We have already studied several Psalms in earlier lessons that touch on various aspects of this, and many other passages elsewhere in Scripture also tell us that God is aware of the difficulty of living a godly life in an ungodly world. Hebrews tells us that even Jesus himself suffered when he was tempted, and thus is able to help us when we struggle with overcoming our fleshly nature (see Hebrews 2:17-18). Therefore, when we find ourselves struggling with the temptation of worldly thinking or actions, we ought not to condemn ourselves, nor ought we to resign ourselves to a life of spiritual frustration. Instead, we should trust that God does know what we are going through, and that he has given us what we need to get through it, if we will only look and listen for his help.

Psalm 37 exposes for us the drawbacks of the superficial enticements of worldly living. If sin and selfishness did not appear attractive on the surface, then no one would succumb to them, and God does not deny that on the surface there seem to be some real advantages, at least in the short-term, to sinful behavior. But as this Psalm reveals, the lure of worldly living is deceptive, and destined to disappoint us. The advantages of selfishness are short-term only, and in the long run it cannot be beneficial to live in such a way that destroys our relationship with God and our relationships with other persons. The wicked usually pay for their sins in full even in this life,

suffering deep loneliness, guilt, paranoia, and other agonies, even as they accumulate ill-gotten material goods that they can never truly enjoy. And after this life, they have an even bleaker future awaiting them.

Some of the other major attractions of self-centered behavior - the freedom from inhibition that our flesh craves, and the lack of accountability and responsibility that so many humans think will bring peace - are also implicitly exposed as fraudulent by the psalmist. There is far greater peace and security in giving God our full trust and obedience, and thus knowing that our lives are heading where he wills them to go, than in substituting our own miserably small amount of knowledge and wisdom in a bi-*arre* attempt to prove that we know what is good for us. And while so many humans cannot bear the thought of not having the option to do anything their flesh wishes, the psalmist reminds us that living instead as God wills would never deprive us of anything truly desirable, and will also save us from many self-inflicted agonies.

Since it is not enough merely to expose the errors of worldly thinking and behavior, David also puts forth his advice on the positive values and characteristics with which we should replace the worldly thinking patterns that ruin so many lives. In particular, he describes or mentions several of the qualities that Paul calls "fruits of the Spirit" in Galatians 5. The psalmist urges us to be patient as God reveals his will and wisdom, he urges us to be self-controlled and peaceful so that we do not give in to anger and other sins that can ruin our lives, he calls us to live a life of faithful service to God, and many other such things.

Beyond these specific qualities, the Psalm also calls us to go even deeper, and to develop not only improved qualities in our personalities, but to re-evaluate our perspectives and values. We must learn to value spiritual blessings more highly than material or other worldly gains, and also must learn to develop a faithful, patient perspective on our lives, and reali-*e* that short-term gain is not, despite what the world tells us, they way to lasting peace and contentment. This Psalm reminds us that what God most wants to give us is not "fun", or even happiness (which depends on a temporary situation), but the more lasting quality of joy, satisfaction that transcends the here and now.

Analysis of Psalm 1: Do not envy the wicked our Righteousness Shine like the dawn

As we go through the Psalm, we see how David continually re-emphasizes the main themes of contentment, trust, and patience. We also see that he repeatedly anticipates any counter-arguments that someone might have, if he or she were reluctant to accept David's advice to commit our lives to God. While we too often look at our daily lives and see all the things that we don't have, and see all the injustices committed against us, the psalmist wants us instead to be able to look at our daily lives and see all of the ways that God's wisdom is proven true. To do so will require a continual renewing of our values and our perspectives, but will then result in overflowing spiritual blessings.

The Psalm begins with the call not to envy the wicked (verses 1-2):

*Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong
for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away.*

It is very easy for us to look at things that happen in our world and become outraged at the apparent prosperity of evildoers. But it is a basic lesson of faithfulness that we must discipline ourselves to reali-*e* that what is greatly valued in this world is often worthless to God. We also must learn to be patient enough to see how God's will plays out in the lives of those around us.

God is much more concerned with the spiritual well-being of his people, and with preparing them for the future, than he is with correcting temporary inconveniences or injustices in our lives. If we do not learn this lesson, we will live a life tormented by doubts. We also must learn to empty our hearts of the fruitless things that the world values, and fill them instead with things of real, lasting value (verses 3-4):

*Trust in the Lord and do good—well in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

The psalmist urges that instead of envying those who have superficial prosperity on the world's terms, we learn to value and appreciate the peace and other spiritual blessings that come from a life of faithfulness and righteousness. Ironically, worldly patterns of thinking are so entrenched in our minds that even many believers read verse 4 as a promise that if we will go along with God's will as far as possible, he is then promising to give us all the worldly things we desire. Nothing could in fact be further from what he is saying, and it is always saddening when someone reduces Christianity to something resembling a blessing account whereby whenever we do something God wants, he then gives us something we want in return. It is important to remove all traces of this bizarre and pernicious misconception of God from our thinking.

If we do delight ourselves in the Lord, then the desires of our hearts will become the desires in God's heart. When we truly set our hearts on God, we learn to appreciate his ways and his will, his plans and his promises. These then become far sweeter to us than the most glittering of earthly treasures. This is an incomparable blessing, and it both relieves us of the unremitting pain that comes from restless materialism, and also enables us to enjoy what is truly the best of what God has to offer. The pagan mind cannot understand how this could possibly be better than frantically scrambling to accumulate as much worldly trash as possible, and many pagans spend their entire lives piercing their own hearts, and spreading ruin and havoc in the lives of those around them, without ever even trying to live as God called them to.

The perceptive human instead comes to a point when he or she realizes that it is time to give up on selfish striving and ambition, and to instead allow God to lead and bless (verses 5-7):

*Commit your way to the Lord—trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.
Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him—do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.*

Once again, we have a promise that the ungodly can neither understand nor appreciate. Even if they understand that genuine "righteousness" does not mean a reputation with which to impress others, but rather a wholesome way of living that makes life more worthwhile, they still cannot bring themselves to sacrifice their material rubbish and infantile pleasures to try to live God's way. The Christian must likewise realize that this promise is not a quick-fix payoff: "be a good boy today, and God will give you a treat tomorrow in return". God is promising instead an entirely new and different way of life, one that will transcend our old values and habits. If we wait patiently for godly living to show its fruit, we shall experience an entirely different kind of harvest, far more fulfilling than that offered by the world. We shall overcome the world (see John 16:33 and 1 John 5:5).

This new life involves qualities like patience, self-control, and trust (verses 8-17):

*Refrain from anger and turn from wrath—do not fret—it leads only to evil.
 For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.
 Little while, and the wicked will be no more—though you look for them, they will not be found.
 But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.
 The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them—
 but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming.
 The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay
 those whose ways are upright.
 But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.
 Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked—
 for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous.*

The evil face certain punishment, and even if they can outwardly escape for a short time the natural consequences of sin, they will pay the price in themselves even in this world, and cannot escape everything their deeds deserve on Judgment Day. Indeed, it is extraordinarily foolish to envy or admire the worldly, no matter how dashing or heroic they seem on the surface. Their doom is certain. But there is no law against the fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:23), and qualities such as self-control and peacefulness carry their own reward. The way of the righteous is described more fully in the verses that follow (verses 18-26):

*The days of the blameless are known to the Lord, and their inheritance will endure forever.
 In times of disaster they will not wither—in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
 But the wicked will perish: The Lord's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they
 will vanish—vanish like smoke.
 The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously—
 those the Lord blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off.
 If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm—
 though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.
 I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their
 children begging bread.
 They are always generous and lend freely—their children will be blessed.*

This is the type of passage that is most fruitfully understood by thoughtful meditation, rather than detailed analysis. God is again hardly promising that the life of the righteous will be free of inconvenience or suffering or difficulty. Instead, he is promising that we will always have what we truly need, and will have a security and hope that the ungodly will never know. We ought therefore to turn from evil worldly ways of thinking once and for all (verses 27-33):

*Turn from evil and do good—then you will dwell in the land forever.
 For the Lord loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones. They will be protected
 forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off—
 the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.
 The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just.
 The law of his God is in his heart—his feet do not slip.
 The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives—
 but the Lord will not leave them in their power or let them be condemned when brought
 to trial.*

Once again, the picture the psalmist presents is not one of an easy life in fleshly terms, but of a life lived in security, contentment, and hope, despite whatever the world and its sinners do. In choosing to live a godly life, we only forsake things that have no real value, while what we gain is priceless. The Psalm thus closes with a final appeal to "wait for the lord and keep His way" (verses 34-40):

Wait for the Lord and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land when the wicked are cut off, you will see it.

I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil, but he soon passed away and was no more though I looked for him, he could not be found.

Consider the blameless, observe the upright there is a future for the man of peace.

But all sinners will be destroyed the future of the wicked will be cut off.

The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord he is their stronghold in time of trouble.

The Lord helps them and delivers them he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him.

In this final passage, we see the themes of the Psalm re-emphasized. To enjoy, or even understand, the value of a godly life is not possible without patience and faithfulness. But if we take the time to listen to God, and if we have the humility to allow him to direct our paths, we shall learn that there is a way of living in which things do make sense, in which we learn our real purpose, and in which, though we may lack many of the things the world thinks are important, we shall always have hope, security, and the other things we really need.

Further Study & Preview of Next Week

For further study of this week's topics, two recommended Psalms would be Psalms 14 and 36. In both of these, David gives us a convincing look at the futility of sinful and fleshly living. When we understand just how hopeless it is to live for worldly or selfish gain, it enables us better to appreciate the perspective of trust and patience that the psalmist advocates in Psalm 37. These two Psalms can help us to see inside the minds of sinful persons who rebel against God, and can warn us against being enticed by their example. Psalm 14 contains the famous saying that "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'". Psalm 36 describes the stark contrast between the filth and squalor of human sin and pride, and the glory and majesty of God and his designs.

Next week, we shall look at Psalm 73, written by Asaph. As we might expect, Asaph will openly and honestly share with us his own struggle to keep the right attitudes and perspectives, which will give us some additional insights on approaching our own inner struggle between right and wrong.

- Mark W. Garner, June 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Fifteen: The Struggle Between Right and Wrong Psalm 73: Surely In My Sin Have I Sinned, My Heart Pure

This week, we shall look at Asaph's Psalm 73 as a companion study to David's Psalm 37, which we studied last time. As we would expect from him, Asaph will be completely honest about the struggles he has experienced with his perspective, and with his understanding of what God was doing in his life. Many of the things that troubled him are things that also cause Christians to lose heart, and his thoughts can help us both realize that our struggles and doubts are not unique, and also that there are answers to them if we look to the right place.

In last week's study (Psalm 37), David assured us that if we walk in God's ways, and delight in him, "he will give you the desires of your heart, and "he will make your righteousness shine like the dawn". David warned us with confidence against the deceptive enticements of worldly living, and gave us resources for godly living, holding up the fruits of the spirit and many significant spiritual values and spiritual perspectives. This week's study will look at the same topics from the viewpoint of a believer who at times has great difficulties being convinced of the value of godly living.

Psalm 73 Introduction & Overview

In Psalm 73, we find the honest account of a faithful believer's struggle to resolve his doubts, and to relieve his sense that righteous living may not be worthwhile after all. Many of the basic themes and concepts are the same as in last week's study, so we shall take note of them only briefly. The major difference is in the depth of the struggle that this psalmist has. His inner conflict runs deeper than merely needing to be re-assured of what he believes. Asaph finds two things particularly important in resolving his struggle: he learns to see himself better, and he learns to see the importance of a personal closeness with God. It is an important lesson to remember that what appear on the surface to be doubts about God's will, or about the validity of Scriptural teachings, often turn out to be symptoms of deeper and more personal needs in one's relationship with God.

For background on the life and ministry of Asaph, see the notes to Lesson Eleven (from the Spring series). He had an important and multi-faceted ministry under King David, who trusted him with many important spiritual responsibilities. But even the most devoted of God's servants still have inner struggles, and Asaph often wrestled with some severe doubts and discouragement. This by no means should detract from our opinion of him, nor should having doubts, or being discouraged, detract from our view of ourselves or other believers in the church. What is significant is how we deal with such problems, and in this respect Asaph is an excellent example to follow.

Asaph struggled to avoid many of the same pitfalls that David alerted us to in Psalm 37. In particular, Asaph is sorely troubled by the apparent invincibility of the wicked. They seem to him to be strong, confident, and invulnerable. Of course, he knows in his heart that this perception is inaccurate, and he eventually comes to see that more clearly. But at times he is deeply discouraged by the way that the ungodly seem to enjoy such success, and do not appear to pay a price for their sins. Even worse, his own devotion to righteous living seems often to be

futile. Like so many of us, he found it easy to forget the real rewards and promises that come with godly living, and became disheartened with the lack of short-term visible results.

Although Asaph's struggles may be common ones, his way of handling it is not. Unlike so many persons, he was able to be completely honest with himself about his weaknesses and faults, and this enabled God to pull him out of his struggles much more quickly. Asaph knew that, no matter how bad he felt, no matter how discouraging he found the world around him, and no matter how many doubts and fears he suffered from, the fault did not lie with God, but with his own lack of understanding. For example, he was able to admit that his "feet had almost slipped" (v. 2) when he found himself envying the wicked. He knew that his perceptions, though overwhelming at the time, were in error, and thus God was eventually able to clear his mind and heart of them. Likewise, when looking at the wrong attitudes he had developed, in suspecting that the righteous life was pointless and futile, he was able to confess that "I was a brute beast" (v. 22). He acknowledged that there was no excuse or reason for his wrong attitudes, no matter how strongly he felt them emotionally. His example is an important one, because so many Christians have the same struggles, but cannot admit their own fault. They thus deprive themselves of the healing that comes when we turn to God in assurance that he knows what is true and right, infinitely better than we do.

Asaph also knew something even more important, that his deepest need in times of trouble was not getting the answers to his questions, but knowing God, the source of those answers. Too often we humans are more concerned with getting specific answers to our questions than with drawing closer to God himself, for his own sake. We often are so convinced of our own wisdom that we refuse to pull closer to God unless he can satisfy us on our own terms. Instead, we should be like Asaph, who started with an awareness of his need for God, and built his understanding on that, rather than making a condition that he would only pull closer to God if God could tell him what he wanted to hear. A genuine closeness with God himself is a much better cure for an ailing heart than all the logic or knowledge in the universe.

Analysis of Psalm 112: Surely In vain have I sought my heart Pure

With the above thoughts in mind as we go through the Psalm, we shall be looking for help with a couple of important matters. First, we want to look for the answers that Asaph finds to his confusion and doubts. Second, on a broader level, we want to see how he deals with his struggle. His honesty and self-examination are as important in their own right as are the answers he finds to his questions. In both ways, this Psalm can be a valuable example to us when we are beset by doubts and fears as to whether the Christian way of living is worthwhile.

Asaph starts with the admission that he has been side-tracked by envying the worldly (verses 1-3):

*Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped—I had nearly lost my foothold.
For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

In the previous lesson, we have discussed the various reasons why Christians often envy the wicked and their apparent "prosperity". The significant thing to note here is that Asaph knows all along that this is a mistake. We can save ourselves a lot of pain if we constantly remind ourselves that, no matter how bad things seem in this world, God has a higher level of

understanding, and purposes that transcends the here and now. We shall still suffer from doubts and misunderstandings, but if we emulate Asaph's example, they will not be as severe or as long-lived.

He mentions, as did David, the deceptive confidence and strength of the ungodly (verses 4-5):

*They have no struggles—their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man—they are not plagued by human ills.*

See the previous lesson notes (on Psalm 37) for a discussion of the reasons why we sometimes feel that the ungodly have more success, "fun", and happiness than we do. Asaph's expression here is even more drastic than David's. In his despair, the psalmist feels in his heart that the ungodly have no problems at all, no worries at all. He is truly discouraged! And he also has a strong awareness of the ways that the pagans intimidate the weak, and especially the godly (verses 6-12):

*Therefore pride is their necklace—they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity—the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice—in their arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?
This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth.*

Of all the things that demoralize us when we see the lives of pagans, this may be the worst of all. It would probably not trouble us nearly so much if unbelievers would live their lives of selfish indulgence someplace where it would not affect us. But true to their nature, a large part of their lives are spent in intimidating, exploiting, and oppressing anyone weaker than they. Whether this is expressed in overt physical threats or merely in cruel comments or "peer pressure", it is a painful thing for even the most faithful Christian to endure. Further, many of these reprobates revel in flaunting their sin and arrogance, living with panache and with a superficial confidence that often reinforces our sense of insecurity and timidity. It takes a deep awareness of spiritual truth, and a serious commitment to spiritual values, to hold up under the kind of onslaught that we sometimes face in the unbelieving world around us. There is no reason to fault ourselves or each other for our moments of fear and weakness, for what we are seeing is the power of Satan himself unleashed. By ourselves, we are helpless against it, and it is only through closeness to God that we can stand.

Because of this, the psalmist asks whether there is any point to righteous living (verses 13-14):

*Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure—in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been plagued—I have been punished every morning.*

As we have mentioned, Asaph already knows that this feeling is in error. But he honestly feels this way in his heart, and realizes that it is therefore important for him to express this to God, so that God can heal his heart and ease his spiritual discouragement. The church would be much stronger if we could learn this lesson! Too often we are concerned with wanting others, and even God, to think that we are stronger and more confident than we really are, and we hide such feelings, thus often never really resolving them. Even worse, we can at times be unjustly critical of our fellow believers who, like Asaph, are willing to admit honestly the things about God that

they struggle with. Each of us finds things about God that we understand clearly and are unlikely ever to doubt, but each of us also finds things about God's nature or will that are confusing or troubling. We would do well to learn how to help each other by gently sharing our faith with one another, instead of worrying about whether other Christians think that we are "strong".

Asaph's honesty enables him to come to a more godly understanding (verses 15-20):

*If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed your children.
When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me
till I entered the sanctuary of God then I understood their final destiny.
Surely you place them on slippery ground you cast them down to ruin.
So suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!
As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as
fantasies.*

We have previously discussed (again, see the notes to last week) the reasons why we should not envy the wicked, and the reasons why we can know that any benefits of their selfishness is short-lived. The key here is that Asaph already knew the factual answers, but needed an adjustment in his perspective. A great many times, the answers to our spiritual struggles are not going to be new facts, but a readjustment of perspective. And this often comes only through an honest self-examination, and a humble willingness to listen to God, as Asaph displays here. He is also willing freely to admit the depths of his folly in ever doubting God's wisdom (verses 21-22):

*When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant I was a brute beast before you.*

Recall once more that Asaph is not a spiritual novice or weakling, but a man with many years of faithful service and righteous living. Yet not only is he still vulnerable to doubt, he is also remarkably humble about his errors. So often, when our hearts become embittered, we desperately cling to any conceivable scapegoat - whether God or another person(s) - to place the burden of responsibility for change elsewhere. Clinging to the fiction of our own blamelessness is a good way to guarantee that we shall continue to struggle indefinitely with the pain and confusion in our hearts. The cost of getting these things relieved is very often paid in humility.

More important still than all of these is the psalmist's awareness that the focal point of understanding (and of so much else) is a person's personal closeness with God (verses 23-25):

*Yet I am always with you you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you and earth has nothing I desire besides you.*

It is always good to remember that, however helpful it is to receive answers to our questions, or to adjust our thinking to a wiser, more long-term perspective, nothing is as important or as irreplaceable as personal closeness with God. It is only the living presence of God in our lives and ministries that gives anything else meaning, and that provides sensible answers to our questions. It is only because we can have an eternal relationship with the immortal Creator of the universe that makes it possible for us to have any degree at all of spiritual understanding when we look at the world around us. Conversely, the lack of a personal closeness with God is the reason why so many persons who believe in Christianity still have grave difficulties in accepting

the truth of many of the teachings of the Scriptures, which leads in turn to so many of the disorders in the church.

Asaph knows that God is both our ultimate source of strength and our ultimate reward (vv. 26-28):

*My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish, you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge, I will tell of all your deeds.*

Thus the Psalm closes with a re-affirmation of faith in God and of the assurances we have in following God. The psalmist has not only found the answers to questions which also may well be of interest to us, he has also left us an example of the way a godly but struggling believer resolves this kind of doubt and confusion.

Further Study

For a comparison to this week's study, take a look at Psalms 75 and 76, both by the same psalmist. In these two Psalms, Asaph urges us to live according to God's will, and this time he does so with great confidence. They express certainty that the ungodly will regret their sinful ways, and thus that their way of life is not worthy of our consideration, despite its deceitful example of short-term gain. It is helpful to remember that Asaph was able to have such confidence in these Psalms because he knew how to handle his doubts and wrong attitudes, as we have studied in this lesson.

See also the Notes to Lesson Eleven for more on some of Asaph's other Psalms.

Next time, we shall begin a new topic.

- Mark W. Garner, June 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Seventeen: Messianic Psalms Part One of Three Introduction to Psalms

Within the types of Psalms we have been studying, there are several Psalms that not only are significant in their own right, but that also contain significant references to the ministry of Jesus Christ. We shall spend three weeks studying a selection of these: Psalms 2, 22, and 110, and shall also begin this week with a general introduction to the study of Messianic Psalms.

Introduction to Study of Messianic Psalms

The study of the Psalms that contain Messianic references is somewhat different from studying Messianic passages in the prophets. In studying prophecies about Jesus Christ in books such as Isaiah and Daniel, the specific predictions about Jesus' life and ministry are often of central importance. The prophets presented a comprehensive picture of God's plan of redemption, and emphasized both the principles of God's plan and the predictions he made to prove that he had the power and authority to carry out his will. In the Psalms, on the other hand, the predictive element is less important, and it is the thematic content that is meant to take center stage. In particular, in Psalms we are meant to see some of the significant unifying features of the Old and New Covenants. In our studies, then, we shall usually make only a brief mention of the predictive elements in the Psalms (with notes as appropriate), in order to concentrate on the spiritual themes that the Psalms were meant to emphasize.

We shall not do anything like a detailed analysis of how to identify an Old Testament passage that refers to Jesus, since we have done that in classes on other books and topics. But it is good to remember some useful principles in identifying Messianic passages in the Old Testament. This can help us both to avoid unreasonably stretching a Scripture to suit our convenience, and also to avoid missing the encouragement and edification that genuine Messianic passages provide. There are at least three good basic guidelines to keep in mind.

The most certain identification is possible when the New Testament quotes a passage from the Old, and identifies it as referring to Jesus. If an inspired writer states that the passage refers to Jesus in some way, we can then interpret it that way with confidence. The next most certain identification, which usually coincides with the first, is when the contemporary understanding - that is, the belief of the Jews before the time of Christ - was that a passage referred to the coming Messiah. The Old Testament Jews were certain that a Messiah would come, and knew that many passages of Scripture referred to various details of his life and ministry. Finally, we can consider that a passage may refer to Jesus if it uses terminology that the New Testament associates with Jesus, such as Anointed One (Messiah), lamb, and so forth. This does call for some caution, as we cannot conclude with certainty that such passages refer to Jesus without corroborating evidence such as the above.

Note that even in this case, it is important to observe the context of the NT use, because in some instances a writer is not claiming that the original Scripture referred to Jesus, only that the principle taught in the OT passage applies in some similar way to Jesus. Much of the time, though, passages quoted directly in the NT are claimed as specifically referring to Jesus.

Psalms 2, 22, and 110, which we shall be studying in class for the next three weeks, are good examples of Psalms that stand out as clearly having Messianic significance. All of them are quoted several times in the New Testament (see below for references to Psalm 2). They bring out

aspects of the Messiah's ministry that were generally known by those Jews who understood the Scriptures, and knew that, for example, the Messiah would be a descendant of David. The three Psalms also use terms that we associate with Jesus, such as Anointed One and Son (see below).

It will be helpful, in our studies of these Psalms, to keep in mind some additional principles that apply particularly to Messianic passages in Psalms. First, as with any passage of Scripture, it is always important to start with the original context. Anything else that a passage can or does actually mean will always flow somehow from the original context. With the Psalms, a good question to ask before making applications to Jesus is, what would one of the Jews (*i.e.* before Christ) have gotten out of the passage. That can then lead into the second principle, of looking for the spiritual themes being emphasized. While the prophets took it as part of their responsibility to prove God's authority through predictive prophecy, the psalmists generally assume God's authority as a given, and so their emphasis is not on prediction as much as it is on spiritual themes. Then, in particular, those Psalms with Messianic passages generally look to demonstrate a unifying principle between the covenants, a point or a value that applies to both and can help us understand both better. We shall see below how all of this applies in practice in studying Psalm 2.

Psalm 2: You are my Son, today I have become your Father

Like Psalm 1 (see Lesson One from the Spring series), this Psalm has no heading or title. It is often considered to have been placed, with Psalm 1, at the beginning of the collection, since it introduces some of the major themes that many other Psalms cover. In Acts 4, where this Psalm is quoted, it is ascribed to David, and so we shall assume that David wrote it, though most of the interpretation would be the same even without this assumption. In our study, we shall begin by noting the basic message of the Psalm, and some of the significant terms and New Testament references. Then, following the principles mentioned above, we shall go through the Psalm, taking note first of the original meaning of each portion, and then its Messianic significance.

The basic message of Psalm 2 is apparent even upon a quick first reading. The psalmist stresses God's control over events, his power to do as he wills, and his authority over all peoples and nations everywhere. This general principle would have influenced the other lessons that its original hearers would have learned, and it also is the same basic lesson that the Psalm has for Christians. God, his plans, his anointed, are over all, and all who oppose them are destined for defeat and humiliation.

Two Messianic terms stand out in reading through the Psalm. Verse 2 uses the term "Anointed One", and verses 7 and 12 use the term "Son". These words, of course, refer to two of the most important aspects of Jesus' identity. In the Psalm's original context, they were significant in a more limited sense, and the Psalm links the original meaning with the broader Messianic significance, to provide one of many examples of the way that the New Covenant both replaces the Old, and fulfills it on a much broader level.

We want to take note also of passages that are directly quoted in the New Testament. Verses 1-2, "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot in vain ..." are quoted in Acts 4:25-26. And verse 7, "You are my Son, today I have become your Father.", is quoted no fewer than three times in the New Testament - Acts 13:33, Hebrews 1:5, and Hebrews 5:5. Also, verse 9, "you will rule them with an iron scepter—you will dash them to pieces like pottery" is referenced, with a changed emphasis, in Revelation 2:27. Besides these, there are other passages in the New

Testament which are not direct quotes, but use either allusions to Psalm 2 or language parallel to the Psalm.

We shall now go through the Psalm verse-by-verse, and for each few verses shall look first at the general points which would have been significant to its original hearers, and then shall examine the passage for its meaning for Christians. The Psalm begins with a brief but vivid picture of the worldly in rebellion against God's authority (verses 1-3):

*Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain
The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord
and
against his anointed one.
Let us break their chains, they say, and throw off their fetters.*

In every era, in every culture, many or even most humans have resented and resisted God's authority. The details of how they express their rebellious impulses change, but the attitude of hardened rebellion is a constant presence in any human society. Even from within God's people, divisions, factions, and insurrections are not unheard-of.

The original hearers of the Psalm would certainly have associated the term "Anointed One" with the king. Each king was anointed in a solemn ceremony, signifying that he had been chosen by God, and had not seized the kingship of his own initiative. It was also understood that the anointed king was chosen to fulfill various important responsibilities that God had prepared for him. For this reason, the anointing had much more than a symbolic importance to those Jews who understood its meaning. As just one example, recall David's absolute unwillingness to harm Saul, even though Saul repeatedly tried to kill him. David was not willing to harm "the Lord's anointed". (See 1 Samuel 24:6, 24:10, 26:9, 26:11, 26:16, 26:23. Note also 2 Samuel 1:14 and 1:16.)

The title of "Messiah" comes from the Hebrew word for "to anoint", and means simply, "the Anointed One". In Greek, the term for "anointed one" is *χριστος* ("christos"), rendered into English as "Christ". Thus the terms Messiah or Christ are in part extensions of the Old Covenant concept of an anointed king, chosen by God to fulfill an important ministry. Jesus Christ fulfills this important concept in a more far-reaching, complete, and permanent way than did any king. Note that the Psalm indicates that the rebellion of pagans against God extends to his anointed one. Just as the Gentiles in the Old Covenant constantly threatened and attacked the Jews, their God, and their kings, so too do pagans today reject not only God but his Anointed One. This might occur through outright mockery or rejection of Jesus, or it may come through more subtle means, such as the bizarre and self-serving attempts of so-called "scholars" to reduce Jesus Christ to a "good moral teacher" or a "philosopher", rather than giving him his rightful place as the Lord's Anointed.

We might think that God would be alarmed at this perpetual tendency of humans to rebel against him and to try to cast off his authority. But the next few verses assure us of the invulnerability of God and of his Kingdom (verses 4-6):

*The one enthroned in heaven laughs
the Lord scoffs at them.
Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
I have installed my king on Zion, my holy hill.*

When human leaders are threatened, they usually respond with anger, hostility, and force. But God is not insecure, unstable, or self-centered, as are most humans in positions of authority. Thus God is able to laugh at the futile and inept attempts of humanity to dethrone him. We Christians ought to remember that this is just as true now as it ever was. No President, Supreme Court, professor, or any other self-appointed expert can ever take away God's authority. The best that they can do is to delude themselves (and gullible persons around them) for a short time into thinking that they can ignore God, and soon their miscalculations will be revealed. We ought not to be so constantly surprised at the ongoing efforts of slothful wastrels and self-important pseudo-scholars to deny God's authority, and ought instead to concentrate more on putting forth a stronger example of the genuine joy and security that comes from living as God called us to, rather than by following and rationalizing the urges of our physical bodies. We have nothing to fear, but the ungodly do. God's rebuke is coming to them, and instead of responding to the destructive antics of benighted unbelievers with anger and fear, we ought to resolve to save a few of them from the coming wrath.

The next verse shows us that God invests his authority in his Son and Heir (verses 7-9):

*I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my Son" today I have become your Father.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.
You will rule them with an iron scepter—you will dash them to pieces like pottery."*

Verse 7 is quoted three times in the New Testament as being a fore-shadowing of Jesus as God's Son and Heir. In its original context, the use of "son" would most naturally have suggested the king, as the nearest embodiment of God's authority among the people, and as the visible symbol of the inheritance in which all of God's people shared. The physical Kingdom of Israel was at best a stop-gap, and was at least in part an accommodation of the people's weakness (see, for example, 1 Samuel 8). It is in Jesus Christ that God has his true Son and Heir, and through him we receive our full spiritual inheritance, which is so much greater than a parcel of land or an assortment of material goods. Note in these verses the stress on the Son's authority. Recall that Jesus himself said in Matthew 28:18, "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me". (See if you can also find other such claims in the New Testament.) Once again, it is important to acknowledge Jesus as not only our Savior, but also as our Lord.

The concentration of God's power in the Anointed One, the Son, calls us to make a choice. Depending on what our choice is, the Son will either become a source of fear to us, or will instead become a place of refuge (verses 10-12):

*Therefore, you kings, be wise—be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear and reverence with trembling.
Bless the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your day, for his wrath can flare up
in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

The Jews living in the days of the Kingdom of Israel had a choice to make, of whether to support and obey the king as God's anointed, or to resist and rebel for their own purposes. When the king had God's authority and backing behind him, such rebellions did not last. David himself had to beat back more than one rebellion, but in the end God's power always resulted in him being victorious. Likewise, Christians can have the even deeper security of certain eternal victory. Satan and his legion of goons, physical and otherwise, shall someday be utterly defeated and cast

into eternal destruction. All the reprobates and hedonists who have flouted God's authority shall soon face his wrath, and indeed each of us merits the same for our sin. But we who have humbled ourselves and accepted our need for God's grace, and who have clothed ourselves with Christ, will find the Son a refuge from every spiritual trouble, and shall be able to serve him with joy forever.

Further Study & Preview of Next Week

A good follow-up study would be to look up the New Testament quotes from Psalm 2, since we do not have time in class for a thorough study. Note particularly how the key spiritual themes remain the same under both covenants. A different project would be to do a study of the numerous New Testament uses of Psalms 8 and/or 16 (covered in earlier lessons). In some cases these are not quoted in an explicitly Messianic setting, but you will also notice that they are used to refer specifically to Jesus as well.

To help you if you wish to do such a study, note the following New Testament uses of these Psalms. Psalm 8:3 is quoted in Matthew 21:16, Psalm 8:4-6 is quoted in Hebrews 2:6-8, and Psalm 8:6 is quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:27. Psalm 16:8-11 is quoted in Acts 2:25-28, and Psalm 16:10 is referenced in Acts 2:31 and quoted directly in Acts 13:35.

Sources & References

Since some of you were not in the Spring class, I am repeating here the list of suggested books for further study of Psalms. Each one has different strengths and its own perspective. If you would like to do further study on your own and would like to know what books may be especially helpful, just let me know. (This list already appeared in the "General Introduction" for the Spring class.)

Frank Gaebelin (editor), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 5: Psalms - Song of Songs*

Derek Kidner, *Psalms, Volumes 1 & 2* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)

James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation Commentary)

Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon on the Psalms* (also published as *The Treasury of David*)

John T. Willis, *Insights From the Psalms* (3 volumes), ACU

- Mark W. Garner, June 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Seventeen: Messianic Psalms (Part Two of Tree) Psalm 22: Suffering of the Righteous

We shall continue our study of Messianic Psalms with a look at Psalm 22. To its original hearers, this Psalm spoke of the sufferings that the righteous must endure at the hands of a sinful world. It also provides a preview of the cross, from the perspective of the Psalms. Several verses from this Psalm are quoted in the gospels' accounts of the crucifixion, and there are many parallels between the words of the Psalm and Jesus' experiences on the cross.

See last week's notes for an introduction to the study of Messianic Psalms, including some basic notes on identifying prophetic passages in the Old Testament, and comments on the appropriate emphasis in interpreting Psalms with Messianic passages.

Psalm 22: Themes, Terms, & References

Before going through the Psalm verse-by-verse, we want to identify its major themes, and want to take note of the terms and references that are significant from a Messianic perspective. We shall follow basically the same pattern as we did in last week's study of Psalm 2, although of course there are some differences between the two.

This Psalm focuses on a couple of major themes that are important in both Covenants. If we were to categorize it along the lines of some of our previous lessons, we would call it a "Prayer For Help" Psalm. The psalmist clearly is in need of help and guidance from God, and at the same time he is convinced that God is willing and able to help him. In these respects it is very similar to the Psalms we studied in Lessons 9-11 (Psalms 40, 90, and 77). To its original hearers, it would have been helpful in the same ways as those Psalms were.

But there is another dimension to Psalm 22 that is not emphasized in the others. The last 10 verses of the Psalm speak prominently of the spread of the message of God, indicating that it will go to "the ends of the earth" and be heard by "future generations". The presence of this theme is, of course, especially appropriate in a Messianic passage. The ancient Jews rarely thought along these lines, yet it has always been a significant part of God's plans. For an interesting comparison passage, see Isaiah 42:5-7.

In reading through Psalm 22, we notice several examples of Messianic terms or images. There is the term "Holy One" in verse 3, and then there are several images that we associate with Jesus' experience on the cross. The very opening words, then the references to being mocked, encircled, having his clothes divided by his enemies, and other struggles endured by the psalmist, are all mentioned in the gospels' accounts of the crucifixion.

There are several direct quotes of Psalm 22 in the New Testament. The saying in the first verse, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" is uttered by Jesus on the cross in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34. Verse 18, "They divide my garments among them ..." is quoted directly in John 19:24, and the incident to which it refers is also described, without quoting the Psalm, in Matthew 27:35, Mark 15:24, and Luke 23:34. Finally, verse 22, "I will declare your name to my

brothers, in the congregation I will praise you" is used in Hebrews 2:12, with a slightly different emphasis.

There are also some indirect references to events involving the crucifixion. The description in verses 7-8 of the psalmist being mocked, and having others "hurl insults" and "shake their heads", closely parallels the descriptions in Matthew 27:39, 43, Mark 15:29, and Luke 23: 35-36. Likewise, the images of the psalmist's great thirst in verse 15 are reminiscent of John 19:28. So in reading through the Psalm, we are constantly reminded of the crucifixion.

Psalm □: The Sufferings of the Righteous

With the above ideas in mind, we shall now survey the Psalm verse-by-verse. As before, we want to take note first of the significance that the Psalm would have held for its original hearers, and then shall consider its Messianic meaning and lessons. Its original hearers would have associated most of its images with David himself, knowing the many trials he went through in his life. By extension, they would also have been induced to think about the general pattern of hardship and opposition that the godly must often endure. The Psalm's description of suffering reached its complete fulfillment in Jesus' experience on the cross, but for Christians, we should consider the lesson for our lives as well, as Peter said, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

The Psalm opens with a statement we associate closely with the cross (verses 1-2):

*My God, my God, □hy have you forsaken me□Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the □ords of my groaning□
□ my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.*

To its original hearers, and to us as well, this opening statement expresses the way we often feel when we are doing our best to live a righteous life, and are feeling overwhelmed by the world, by its sinful inhabitants, and by our own weakness and inconstancy. Jesus, of course, is the one blameless person who made this same cry. Our lesson from this verse ought to be two-fold. First, this despairing cry should convict us of the heavy price in spiritual desolation that Jesus paid on our behalf. Then too, we ought not to be so outraged at the hardships we endure. If Jesus himself endured discouragement to this degree, we certainly shall not be exempt from occasional sorrow.

The psalmist next assures us that there is no disappointment when we trust in God (verses 3-5):

*□et you are enthroned as the □oly □ne□you are the praise of Israel.
In you our fathers put their trust□they trusted and you delivered them.
They cried to you and □ere saved□in you they trusted and □ere not disappointed.*

This pattern is similar to those we have seen in our studies of the "prayer for help" Psalms. In the midst of recounting his woes, the psalmist stresses that he knows where to go for help, and that he knows that God really does care, and really is able to help, in spite of temporary appearances. Naturally, Jesus Christ is the perfect embodiment of the knowledge that God's will is always good and perfect, and that if our flesh or our earthly minds should ever think differently, it is surely a fault of our own fallible perception, not of God's nature or will. Even knowing the full range of horrors that his body was about to endure, he was still able to pray, "not my will, but yours".

One particularly painful struggle that the righteous must endure is ridicule (verses 6-8):

*But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.
All who see me mock me—they hurl insults, shaking their heads:
I trust in the Lord—let the Lord rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him.*

There are times when a hurtful or derisive remark can be more disheartening than anything else. Mocking and insults, whether directed at ourselves or at what we believe, can make us feel small and worthless. That is exactly what scornful, abusive pagans want - in their own hearts, they know that their lives hold nothing of value, so the only means of distracting themselves from the horrifying abyss of self-examination is desperately to demean and belittle those of us who are trying to find genuine meaning in our lives through God. Their scorn, ridicule, and sneering attacks on our beliefs do not reveal strength, but weakness and a gaping emptiness in their hearts. Thus Jesus said, when exposed to more taunting and derision than we shall ever face, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing". We too can learn from his forbearance, by forgiving those who insult us, and at the same time thereby strengthening our own hearts against discouragement.

Again the psalmist alternates relating a struggle with an expression of faith in God (verses 9-11):

*Let you brought me out of the womb—you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast.
From birth I was cast upon you—from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help.*

In the midst of his troubles, the psalmist celebrates God's constant presence in his life. From the moment he was born, God was always there, whether he recognized God's presence or not. Thus, in his present anguish, God cannot be far, if only he will look for God's nearness. Jesus, of course, always kept in his mind the memory of having been with his Father through eternity, and he realized the equal certainty of returning to his Father forever: "I know where I came from and where I am going" (John 8:14). This is a valuable example for us to follow.

In the next few verses, the psalmist recounts a multitude of additional troubles that parallel several things Jesus had to endure at the cross (verses 12-18):

*Many bulls surround me—strong bulls of Bashan encircle me.
Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me.
I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint. My heart has turned to wax—
it has melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth—you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me—a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones—people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.*

See above for a comparison of some of these verses with the accounts of the cross (and see if you can find additional parallels). Beyond the noteworthy details that the psalmist's troubles had in common with those of Jesus, these images teach us an even broader truth. The believer always has faced, and always will face, a difficult battle living in a perishable world filled with sinners. This was true 1000 years before Christ, it was true in Jesus' lifetime, it is true today, and it will be true as long as this world exists. We cannot avoid suffering for the gospel's sake, but we can spare ourselves from doubt and spiritual anguish by being better prepared for it, instead of always being so surprised and outraged when it comes. Like the psalmist, we ought to remind ourselves not to turn to worldly solutions for our problems, but to call out for God to rescue us (verses 19-21):

*But you, O Lord, be not far off— my Strength, come quickly to help me.
Deliver my life from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs.
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions—save me from the horns of the wild oxen.*

Like the psalmist, we ought to remember that God is the only one worth turning to in times of trouble. Even believers so often seek salvation and purpose from some worldly source of power, wisdom, or achievement, only to find themselves even more bitterly disappointed afterwards. Once again, Jesus knew to look to the Father alone for salvation from the sinful world he lived in: "he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission" (Hebrews 5:7).

The Psalm now shifts emphasis, as the psalmist eagerly speaks of God to others (verses 22-26):

*I will declare your name to my brothers—in the congregation I will praise you.
You who fear the Lord, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, honor him! Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!
For he has not despised or disdained the suffering of the afflicted one—he has not hidden his face from him but has listened to his cry for help.
From you comes the theme of my praise in the great assembly—before those who fear you
I will fulfill my vows.
The poor will eat and be satisfied—they who seek the Lord will praise him-- may your hearts live forever!*

To the psalmist, merely expressing his private thanks to God is inadequate. He wishes others to know how he feels about God! He shares with others his joy, his relief, and his praises of God. He wants them to know what God has done and who God is. Jesus, of course, lived with this in mind at all times. Hebrews 2 also quotes verse 22 in an additional sense: when we give our devotion to him, he likewise is pleased to acknowledge and claim us as his own, giving us the privilege of being called his brothers. As Jesus himself said, "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33).

The Psalm concludes with images of God's message spreading without limit (verses 27-31):

*All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him,
for dominion belongs to the Lord and he rules over the nations.
All the rich of the earth will feast and worship—all who go down to the dust will kneel before him-- those who cannot keep themselves alive.*

*Posterity will serve him—future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn-- for he has done it.*

Two especially noteworthy expressions appear: the message will go to "all the ends of the earth", and to "a people yet unborn". God's message cannot and should not be contained, but is meant for everyone, everywhere, in every era. Note how these same goals were stressed by Jesus: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8), and Peter: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off - for all whom the Lord our God will call." (Acts 2:39). God's plans have always had this in mind, even at times when his people have not understood it or valued it. The psalmist is comforted, in the midst of his own struggles, by realizing that in some small way he is contributing to the message of God being heard by many persons who now are far away.

For Further Study

For another study very similar to this week's class, read Psalm 69. This Psalm bears a close resemblance to Psalm 22: it is a prayer for help, and is quoted several times in the New Testament. Like some of the other Psalms we have studied, Psalm 69 is an example of maintaining faithfulness and zeal in the midst of trouble. In particular, it deals with holding up under persecution.

Here is a list of the direct New Testament references to Psalm 69, if you wish to do a study of it on your own: verse 4 is quoted in John 15:25—two different portions of verse 9 are referenced in John 2:17 and Romans 15:3—verses 22-23 appear in Romans 11:9-10—and verse 25 is quoted in Acts 1:20. Note also verses 21 and 28 (of Psalm 69). The New Testament several times uses language very similar to each of these two verses - see if you can find the New Testament parallels.

Next time, we shall study Psalm 110, which will conclude our survey of Messianic Psalms.

- Mark W. Garner, June 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes for Lesson Eighteen: Messianic Psalms Part Three of Three Psalm 110: Sit At My Right Hand

We shall conclude our study of Messianic Psalms with a look at Psalm 110. This Psalm is a promise of complete and permanent victory for the people of God through his Messiah. It includes dramatic images of authority and power, and contains some descriptions of Jesus, different from those we saw in earlier studies, that are very significant in the New Testament.

Psalm 110: Themes & New Testament References

We shall begin our study by identifying the Psalm's major themes, and by taking note of the terms and references that are significant from a Messianic perspective. This Psalm focuses on some themes we have seen before, and at least one new one. There are also two key verses (verse 1 and verse 4) that are of particular interest for us, in that they contain key images of Jesus, and are quoted frequently in the New Testament.

Psalm 110 could be considered a Psalm of thanksgiving, a type of Psalm that we shall study in detail later in the Summer. Thanksgiving Psalms are typically songs of praise specifically associated with victory or blessing, which could be in the past or present. This Psalm is unusual in being a thanksgiving for future victories, which the psalmist anticipates will come through God. As such, it stresses God's authority and majesty, and in a Messianic context stresses the Messiah's authority and majesty. There is also an additional theme in the second half: priesthood. The Psalm celebrates an unusual combination of priest and king in the same person, a combination we also associate closely with Jesus and his multi-faceted ministry as Lord and Christ.

It is likewise easy to find Messianic terms and images in this Psalm. In the very first verse, David says "The Lord says to my Lord", implying that he, despite being king and the highest human ruler, has another "Lord" in addition to God. The same verse puts forth the image of the Lord sitting at God's right hand, an image frequently associated with Jesus. Then, verse 4 provides the image of a priest "on the order of Melchizedek" that the book of Hebrews parallels with Jesus.

There are only two verses from Psalm 110 that are directly quoted in the New Testament, but they are quoted often. Verse 1 is directly quoted no fewer than 5 times, and for a variety of purposes. Jesus used the point made above, of David having a "Lord", to outwit the Pharisees and their reliance on human authority. Peter quoted the verse in his famous sermon in Acts 2, to persuade the crowd to put their faith in Jesus. Then, the writer of Hebrews used the verse to demonstrate Jesus' spiritual supremacy above everyone, even angels. The references for these quotes are Matthew 22:44, Mark 12:36, Luke 20:42-43, Acts 2:34-35, and Hebrews 1:13. The other verse quoted directly is verse 4, with its teaching about Melchizedek. This is used as a parallel of Jesus, as a high priest of a type different from the Levitical priests. It is quoted in Hebrews 5:6, 7:17, and 7:21, and is also referenced indirectly in Hebrews 5:10 and 6:20-7:3.

There are also at least two important images of the Messiah that appear in Psalm 110 and that are used in the New Testament without direct reference to the Psalm. The most common is the

image of Jesus sitting at the right hand of God the Father (from verse 1). The lengthy list of uses of this image includes Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62, 16:19, Luke 22:69, Romans 8:34, Ephesians 1:20, Colossians 3:1, and Hebrews 1:3, 8:1, 10:12, 12:2. Another significant image is found in verses 1 and 5, which describe everything being placed "under the feet" of the Messiah. This was a common expression in the Old Testament era for complete dominion, and was based on an ancient custom of a defeated ruler lying on the ground while his conqueror placed his foot on his neck. (The conqueror then had the choice of killing him or sparing him.) Hebrews 10:13 and 1 Corinthians 15:25 both refer to everything being under the feet of Jesus.

Psalm 11: Sit at my Right and

With the above ideas in mind, we shall now survey the Psalm verse-by-verse. We want again to take note first of the significance that the Psalm would have held for its original hearers, and then shall consider its Messianic meaning and lessons. In this case, the exact original context of the Psalm is the topic of speculation and dispute by scholars, due to the unusual nature of its content.

What is clear is that David composed this Psalm as a song of Thanksgiving for anticipated victories and triumphs in the future. He had a clear anticipation of the certainty of God's victory. What the rest of the original context may have been is dependent on the exact original meaning of the phrase "The Lord says to my Lord". The first "Lord" (rendered in most English translations with all capital letters, LORD) is the Hebrew word "yahweh", which can only refer to God. The second "Lord" is the more generic Hebrew word "adonai", which can mean "lord" in a variety of contexts, spiritual and earthly, just as the English word "lord" can have both divine or earthly meaning.

Because of the explicitly Messianic content of the Psalm, some commentators suggest that David wrote this in full awareness of the Messiah. On the other extreme, liberal scholars who are disturbed by the Messianic content have often claimed that David did not write the Psalm at all, but that it was composed much later and had David's name put on it. (This tactic of claiming that "it was really written much later" is a laughable, but very common, liberal technique of evading the frightening implications of biblical prophecy.) Most commentators have taken a position in the middle, suggesting that it was a song composed for a coronation or other ceremony in honor of David or another king. (Verse 1 would thus mean, "God says to my lord the king".) It is quite possible that David could have composed it himself for such a situation, given that he and many others in his era saw in him and his lineage the embodiment of God's authority in their lifetimes, and as the seed of Israel's future as well. David could also have composed it for use as part of ceremonies for his future descendants' coronations. Regardless of which of these theories is closest to the truth, it is clear that not only does this Psalm refer to Jesus, it also spoke to its original hearers of the ways that God would always triumph through those he chose and anointed.

The Psalm opens with an invitation and a promise (verse 1):

The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.

God honors his chosen, his anointed, with a place of honor by his side. As noted above, this image is a favorite of the New Testament writers in their descriptions of Jesus. We too shall enjoy his honor for eternity (e.g., see Romans 2:7-10), and also have the privilege of being called his sons and heirs. It is sad that so many humans are willing to do foolish, dangerous, and sinful

things solely in order to win the applause and "respect" of other humans, and yet they do not value the praise that comes from God (see John 5:44, 12:43).

God also promises that the enemies of his chosen shall be utterly defeated and conquered. This does not, of course, guarantee victory in a fleshly sense, but instead promises something even more important, namely that our enemies can never take us away from God, but will instead suffer eternal defeat. Once again, even we believers are so often pre-occupied with winning minor victories in our earthly life that we can fail to appreciate the magnitude of the eternal victory we have been promised.

The Psalm continues with images of majesty and authority (verses 2-3):

*The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion; you will rule in the midst of your enemies.
Your troops will be killing on your day of battle. Arrayed in holy majesty, from the womb of the dawn you will receive the dew of your youth.*

A scepter, of course, is a symbol of authority. God allowed David and other faithful kings to exercise his full authority in their reign, and allowed Jesus an even more complete expression of divine authority, as we discussed in earlier classes. And God's authority is always used for genuine good. Human rulers usually hanker after power for its own sake, and although they offer rationalizations and phony claims about how they'll use it for good, most of the time they would have no interest in power if they could not use it to benefit themselves. God is different. He is not an arbitrary, authoritarian ruler, but one who bestows an extraordinary amount of grace and patience on his ungrateful, disorderly, and often ignorant subjects. Verse 3 also stresses the power available to God. All of the human displays of power and technology that so impress and awe us are nothing compared to the heavenly host available to God. It is only because of his great grace, love, and patience that he does not render judgment immediately for human evil and folly. Let us not repay his love with disrespect, by taking his strength less seriously because he is so good!

The next verse is another one that is important from a Messianic perspective (verse 4):

The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

This is the verse so frequently referenced by the writer of Hebrews, in explaining Jesus' superiority over the Old Testament priesthood. In its original context, it was probably seen as referring metaphorically to David's line, which God had promised would never die out. The association would come through David himself, who in his unique position was at times allowed to perform priestly duties - see, for example, 1 Samuel 23:9-11, 30:7-8, and 2 Samuel 6:14 (an ephod was priestly garment, as we studied last year in Leviticus). David, like Jesus, was not from the right tribe to be a Levitical priest. Recall that God had always planned to replace the Levitical priesthood by the Messiah's superior priesthood, and he had chosen David's lineage (of Judah, not Levi) to do it.

The Psalm ends with a promise of victory (verses 5-7):

The Lord is at your right hand; he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.

He will judge the nations, heaping up the dead and crushing the rulers of the whole earth.

He will drink from a brook beside the way—therefore he will lift up his head.

These are images of complete victory: the utterly defeated foe, and the victor who is so calm that he can stop to drink from a brook. God promises all of his people, in both Covenants, both victory and peace. In David's day, this was delivered through the king's spiritual wisdom and faithfulness. In the church, we can enjoy these things because we live under the loving care and perfect law of Jesus Christ.

For Further Study

We have now looked at several Psalms containing Messianic passages. A good follow-up would be to study the New Testament uses of each of these Psalms. The key principle in studying these, or other Psalms with Messianic significance, is to look for principles that show the unity of God's plans. Psalmists such as David spoke of timeless spiritual principles, which are the same in both Covenants and in every era. Jesus usually exemplifies or fulfills these principles to a degree far greater than was possible for the Old Testament prophets, priests, or kings, but the principles are often the same. As we better understand the completeness and unity of God's plan through Christ, we strengthen our own faith and our readiness to fulfill God's will in our lives.

- Mark W. Garner, July 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Nineteen: The Songs of Ascents Introduction Psalm

This week, we shall begin a new topic. The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) were most likely sung or recited by the Israelites on the occasions when they went up to Jerusalem for special occasions of worship. This likely historical practice, and the content of these Psalms, make them good material for study and meditation on our own preparation for worship and ministry.

Songs of Ascents Introduction

The Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134) contain several individual Psalms that are quite well known, but they are rarely studied as a group. While it is certainly possible to gain encouragement and insight from these Psalms without making use of the somewhat uncertain description "A Song of Ascents" that they each carry, it can help us to get even more out of them if we realize the purpose that they most likely had for the ancient Jews.

The best available evidence suggests that these Psalms were used especially on those occasions when the ancient Jews assembled in, or "went up to", Jerusalem for feast days and other special occasions of worship. On such occasions, Jews would come from all over Israel to meet in Jerusalem. Later in their history, as the Jewish people became scattered throughout western Asia, northern Africa, and southern Europe, some of the most significant holidays also saw Jews travel to Jerusalem from distant nations. (Recall, for example, the crowd in Acts 2.) It would thus be appropriate for them to recite Psalms that would help them to prepare their minds for the occasion, and in fact the content of all of the Songs of Ascents, with only a couple of exceptions, is clearly and directly related to appropriate attitudes in, and preparation for, worship. That will thus be our primary interest in studying them. We want to see how they can help us to develop perspectives and attitudes that will be valuable in preparing our minds and hearts for the times when we minister and worship together as the body of Christ.

In particular, Psalm 120 seems, at first glance, to have little connection with this theme or with the other Songs of Ascents. Psalm 124 also has an emphasis different from the others. See the commentaries listed earlier for more on these Psalms. Most of the other Songs of Ascents have themes directly related to community worship.

Taking a look at some representative passages from the songs of ascents will provide us with examples of what we expect to find there. We shall select a few particularly well-known verses, beginning with Psalm 121:1-2 - "I lift up my eyes to the hills, where does my help come from". This "upward" focus is typical of these Psalms, and is an important concept in understanding the God we worship. Our Psalm for today's class begins with an even more familiar verse (Psalm 122:1) - "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'". We shall start with this, since the most basic of all needs in worshipping or serving is the willingness to do so. Psalm 127:1 contains a truth with which we are familiar in other contexts: "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." This is especially important in our worship of God together. It is easy for us to focus on the physical and visible, but it is only God that makes worship or ministry, of any kind, meaningful and unifying. A final example is in Psalm 133:1, which tells us "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." Once again,

this is significant in other contexts, but it has special importance as it applies to the time we spend together as a body.

The songs of ascents thus focus especially on two important themes: our attitudes in worship, and our preparation for worship. Note that, in this discussion, we are talking specifically about worshipping as a body, since that is the occasion for which these Psalms were particularly written. You will find that many of the same principles will apply to other, more private, forms of worship, but we shall leave those applications as further study topics. Our interest will be in the specific area of the practical lessons that can help us to be ready when it is time to "go to the house of the Lord".

Psalm 122: Let Us Go To The House Of The Lord

We shall begin our study of individual Songs of Ascent with Psalm 122, and its famous opening verse. This Psalm teaches us first of all the most basic of important attitudes in worship, the attitude of eagerness and readiness to worship our God. When this basic willingness and positive outlook is not present, many other things become more difficult. But when we have the kind of anticipation and eagerness that the Psalm promotes, we can all be ready to edify and encourage each other from the heart, while at the same time we give God the heartfelt praise that he deserves. The rest of the Psalm is meant to furnish us with several positive reasons to assemble together before our God for ministry and worship.

Note that, in Psalm 122, much of this eagerness centers around the city of Jerusalem, as the focal point of so much of Jewish worship. Jerusalem represented many important spiritual principles, as we shall discuss. In our study of the Psalm, one of our jobs will be to translate the psalmist's thoughts about Jerusalem into our own Christian context. Christian worship is of course not centered around a particular physical location. Although being at our church "building" can and should inspire positive thoughts, they should center around the fact that the body has chosen that place to assemble, not around any inherent characteristics of the location itself.

Psalm 122 begins with the psalmist's familiar expression of joy (verse 1):

I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord."

Here is our ideal, and our goal for this study is to consider ways in which we can come closer in our own lives to having this same attitude in our hearts whenever the body is meeting. The important point is that this does not "just happen". The only way that we can feel the way we ought to - and want to - about worshipping God together is if we are prepared in our hearts and minds. Living in a sinful world wears on our hearts and constantly distracts us, and it is only with some conscious effort that we can be fully prepared to focus our minds on God.

The next verse has an expression that we will want to understand in our own context (verse 2):

Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem.

To the psalmist, and other ancient Jews, there was something special about standing in the gates to Jerusalem. Merely approaching the city filled them with important thoughts and memories. In a Christian context, when we recognize the body of Christ in our brothers and sisters, and when we remind ourselves of the reasons why we worship God, we too can suddenly see more

spiritually and can have the same kind of anticipation that the psalmist feels. Indeed, as he goes on, many of the psalmist's feelings about Jerusalem have a similar meaning to us (verses 3-5):

*Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.
That is where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to praise the name of the Lord
according to the statute given to Israel.
There the thrones for judgment stand, the thrones of the house of David.*

The psalmist sees Jerusalem as a place of strength, unity, God's history and victories, and justice. All of these things can also be meaningful to us in our own context of worship and ministry together. We should be able to perceive and appreciate all of these same themes in our own body.

The psalmist continues with prayers for peace (verses 6-8):

*Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure.
May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.
For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, Peace be within you.*

Both the peace he prays for, and the prayer itself, are significant. Prayer is one of the most important preparations that we ought to practice when it is time to "go to the house of the Lord". Prayer is one of the most effective ways to pull our minds off of worldly distractions and to ready them to focus on spiritual matters. Likewise, it is significant that he prays so much for peace: both peace and security to withstand outside threats, and peace and harmony within. If we want to have a fruitful and edifying experience in the body, we too must pray for peace and work to promote it.

The Psalm closes with an appropriate dedication (verse 9):

For the sake of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your prosperity.

Whatever other blessings we seek or receive, whether for ourselves or others, ought to be with this same perspective in mind. Nothing has any meaning unless it centers around God and his purposes. All of the other blessings and positive feelings that we anticipate from worshipping and serving God will either be missing or meaningless if we do not center everything around God. And when we dedicate everything to God, this then gives a meaning and purpose even to the apparently routine aspects of Christian life and service.

For Further Study

There are two other songs of ascents that also contain well-known opening verses, but that we shall not have time to study in class. We mentioned these above, as examples of the lessons that we see in this group of Psalms. Psalm 127 teaches us the basic, but important, lesson that God must be the foundation and center of all that we do, and it is a good study for focusing our worship and ministry around him. Psalm 133 contains some famous imagery about unity, which can both encourage us with the value of unity, and also challenge us to maintain it. For further study on your own, read these Psalms and consider the lessons they are teaching, especially in the context of what you now know to be the primary purpose of the Songs of Ascents.

- *Mark W. Garner, July 2000*

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Twenty: The Songs of Ascents (continued) Psalm 121: Lift Up My Eyes to the Hills

This week, we shall continue our study of the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). Our topic will be Psalm 121, which with the similar Psalm 122 call us to develop an upward focus in our worship and ministry in the body of Christ. The images and theme of this Psalm have even impressed and encouraged unbelievers, and this is one of the chapters of the Bible most highly regarded by secular scholars.

See last week's notes for an introduction to the Songs of Ascents, including our general perspective and goals for studying them.

Psalm 121: Introduction & Themes

The content and language of Psalm 121 have one main goal: to develop an upward focus, to pull our eyes off of ourselves and to look at God, a focus which can then give us peace, hope, and security. The way this theme is expressed in Psalm 121 is so noteworthy that the passage has received considerable attention purely for its literary qualities alone (see below). From our perspective, we want to allow this Psalm to instill thoughts in our hearts that can help us to develop the heavenward focus we need to have, and especially in our interactions with the body of Christ. We shall start by discussing the main theme and some examples of the imagery in the Psalm.

Psalm 121 has received more positive literary attention than most other parts of the Bible. The King James version of this Psalm is often included in poetry anthologies, alongside famous secular poems. It is generally considered one of the very best passages of the Bible, from a literary standpoint. For example, in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, the standard reference for well-known quotes throughout history, there are numerous excerpts from the Bible, but most are very short, consisting of only one line or verse. Psalms 23 and 121 are the only two chapters of the Bible quoted in their entirety, a distinction the editors accord only to the most well-known and highly-valued pieces of literature. At the end of these notes, you will find the King James version of Psalm 121, which is the one most frequently seen in literary works.

Although such scholarly attention focuses, of course, strictly on the literary value of the Psalm, and not on its teachings about God, it should still indicate to us that this Psalm is worthy of careful thought. If its language about God is moving enough to win praise from skeptical unbelievers, we Christians ought to be able to find something in this Psalm that can move our own hearts, and that can draw us closer to our God.

The theme of Psalm 121 is set forth at once, in the psalmist's decision to "lift up my eyes to the hills". The focus is upward, off of self and off of this world, and onto God, his nature and his will. The Psalm goes on to celebrate the rewards of this upward focus, in the confidence, security, and peace that we can enjoy. Of course, we always have God's promises, but we will only perceive them as real and meaningful if we can take our eyes off of ourselves long enough to think about what God gives us. This Psalm is very similar to the "Psalms of Faith and Trust"

that we studied in the Spring, and it contains similar themes and imagery. The only real difference is that its inclusion in the Songs of Ascents reminds us to apply its lessons most of all to the body of Christ as a whole.

Recall that these Songs of Ascents do have a particular significance to the assembly of the body of believers. This theme, of the upward focus and its rewards, is especially important in this collective context. Whenever we meet together in the name of Jesus - whether for Sunday study and worship, Wednesday Bible class, small group, or any other activity - we are meeting with many other believers who often have little in common with us in a worldly sense. We have different personalities, backgrounds, families, careers, and the like. The one thing we have in common is our belief in God, our willingness to worship and serve him. This one basis of fellowship is deeper and more important than all of the superficial dissimilarities between us, but it will only provide an effective basis for fellowship and service if we allow it to come to the fore, if we make it our focus, and set aside the fleshly preferences and identities that normally dominate our thinking and actions.

Notice also the various images used in this Psalm to pull our focus off of ourselves and onto God. The image of hills in the opening verse strongly suggests "up". Then, the psalmist portrays a constantly watchful God who never sleeps. Later, he uses the sun and moon as examples of the powerful forces which God has under his control and authority. All of these poetic images are intended to help us to focus on God and to give him our full attention, faith, and devotion.

Psalm 121: I lift up my eyes to the hills

Keeping in mind the themes we have discussed, we shall now take a look at Psalm 121 verse-by-verse. We want to allow its images of God to encourage us to pull our focus off of ourselves, and thus to develop confidence and security in God's care and protection for us. Our particular goal is to keep such a perspective in mind as it applies to the ways we minister and worship together.

The Psalm begins with an image designed to emphasize an upward focus (verses 1-2):

*I lift up my eyes to the hills-- where does my help come from
My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

The psalmist's image of looking to the hills conveys the upward, or heavenward, focus that we have been discussing. There is also an initial sense of distance, as he searches for help. Then he describes God as the source of help and life. These basic realizations are naturally important for every individual believer, and they are also important when we meet together as Jesus' church. We can help, encourage, challenge, and edify each other, but only God is fit to be our central focus.

One of the attributes of God is indicated in the next two verses (verses 3-4):

*He will not let your foot slip-- he who watches over you will not slumber
indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.*

We often (and correctly) make mention of the fact that our times spent together as a body are not the only form of worship, and furthermore that God is with us always, and not just when we are

together. But instead of down-playing the role of worship and ministry as a body, these realizations should enhance the ways we interact together before God. They should help us to set aside unreasonable or unrealistic expectations, they should remind us of the object of our worship and devotion, and they should call us to develop the higher focus that changes so much else. It is indeed true that God is there for us when no other Christians are present, but it is also true that when we are together, as Jesus' body we make it possible for God to display his power and glory in many more ways than he can through us as isolated individuals.

The next image emphasizes God's presence (verse 5):

The LORD watches over you-- the LORD is your shade at your right hand

It is certainly encouraging to know that God is somewhere out there, on the job. But it is a greater step forward when we realize that God is present - "at our right hand" - all of the time. This is, of course, especially true and important to remember when we assemble in Jesus' name. As Jesus said, "where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20).

The next verse gives us an image of God's protection from everything (verse 6):

the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

The sun, moon, and stars are the largest objects that can be seen by human eyes. They represent forces and objects far beyond any human control. And yet God is their Master and their Maker. No force in the universe can do lasting (spiritual) harm to a faithful believer who puts all of his or her faith and hope in God.

The psalmist closes with one final aspect of God's care (verses 7-8):

*The LORD will keep you from all harm-- he will watch over your life
the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.*

The psalmist has told us that God is always watching over us, that he is very near us, and that he will protect us from every force in the universe. Now, he emphasizes that these things will always be true. There will never come a time when God is not there, or when he loses any of his divine qualities or eternal powers. We worship the very same God, with the very same attributes, as the apostles did in the 1st century AD, and as David did 1000 years before Christ. This tells us that genuine worship and ministry is based on timeless principles established by an eternal God.

For Further Study

Psalm 123 is a good companion study to Psalm 121. While it starts with a very similar opening line - "I lift up my eyes to you" - the emphasis is quite a bit different. While the "upward focus" theme is again dominant in Psalm 123, this time the emphasis is on God's mercy, and the images used in the psalm are designed to give us a better sense of our dependence on God's mercy. It thus provides a different side to the theme of upward focus from what we saw in Psalm 121.

If you study Psalm 123, take note first of the similar general theme as in Psalm 121, as suggested by the opening verses of these Psalms. Then consider how the same basic theme is taken in a different direction. The two Psalms are by no means in conflict with each other, but rather fit together to complement each other. Make sure also to consider how the ideas in Psalm 123 are particularly applicable to collective service and worship.

Appendix: King James Version of Psalm 121

For those of you who do not have a King James Bible, here is the King James translation of Psalm 121. It is this version that you will sometimes see in poetry anthologies and literary references.

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.
He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.
Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand.
The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.
The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul.
The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.*

- Mark W. Garner, July 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Twenty-One: The Songs of Ascents concluded Psalm 125: Son of Zion

This week, we shall conclude our study of the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). We shall do so with a look at Psalms 125 and 126, which celebrate the security and joy that come from knowing that we are God's people, and that he has a home for us. These Psalms focus on the image of Mount Zion, which held both literal and figurative significance for the ancient Jews.

See the notes for Lesson Nineteen for a general introduction to the Songs of Ascents, including general perspectives and goals to keep in mind when studying them.

Psalm 125: Those who Trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion

The key image in Psalm 125 is that of Mount Zion, which is used both to emphasize the physical and geographical focus of many of the Songs of Ascents, and to draw a parallel between the stronghold of Zion and the stronghold that God's people become whenever they stand firm together in him. As we have done before, we will consider what this image would have meant to the ancient Jews, and also what it means in a Christian context.

Mount Zion held both a literal and figurative significance to the Jews. As we have mentioned before, Jerusalem and the area surrounding it contained numerous peaks and valleys. Before the Jewish occupation of Canaan, Mount Zion had been turned into a fortress by the Jebusites, who held on to it long after the Jews had settled most of the rest of the land. David took it from the Jebusites, and founded the city of Jerusalem beside it (see 2 Samuel 5:6-10). Mount Zion was just outside the walls to the north of the original part of Jerusalem, the City of David. This area north of the City of David was higher than the city itself, and was later chosen by Solomon as the site of the temple. After the temple and the walls surrounding it were built, the whole area (also called the "Temple Mount") began to be referred to as Mount Zion. The name soon became associated in a figurative sense with Jerusalem, and then with the Jewish nation as a whole, due to the great spiritual, civil, and social importance of the temple and the Mount Zion area. The terms Zion and Zionism are still used to refer figuratively to the nation of Israel and to its goals and dreams. From our perspective, we can also associate many features of the image of Zion with the stronghold that God makes out of the body of Christ.

It is thus with a reference to this image that Psalm 125 begins (verses 1-2):

*Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and forevermore.*

"Mount Zion" was seen as both the center of Jewish life and also as an invincible stronghold. Unlike the rest of the city, there was a double wall around the Temple Mount area. Indeed, in AD 70 when the Romans besieged Jerusalem, the Temple area proved by far the toughest part of the city to take, and when the Romans had taken it, the fall of the rest of Jerusalem was then assured.

Verse two is a reference to the fact that some of the mountains outside of Jerusalem were even taller than the Temple Mount. In particular, to the east of the City of David, across the deep Valley of Kidron, rose an extended ridge called the Mount of Olives. Although the ridge actually held four separate peaks, this name was usually used to refer to the entire ridge. Farther to the north was Mount Scopus, which in the New Testament era was not far outside of the city, since Jerusalem by that time had extended far beyond its original walls. Thus, not only was Jerusalem seated on an easily defended plateau, it was also partially surrounded by mountains across the valleys that shielded a large stretch of its walls. Altogether it was a position of great security, both literally and figuratively. As Christians, we celebrate God as our "mighty fortress" in a different and broader sense. Our God's love and grace provide even better protection than does a walled city on a hill.

The psalmist next expresses his confidence that God would drive out the wicked (verse 3):

The scepter of the wicked will not remain over the land allotted to the righteous, for then the righteous might use their hands to do evil.

There were times in Israel's history when the greatest threats to the Jews came not from foreign armies themselves, but from the mere influence of idolatrous peoples, or even from those Jews whose sin and materialistic focus threatened to draw others away from God. The psalmist knows that the city's walls and mountains are no help in protecting the people of God from this kind of threat, and could only trust God to keep him and others pure by driving out evil influences when they arose. So too, in the church we are often so concerned with the influence of all the obvious sin in pagan society and culture, that we can neglect to be on our guard against more insidious distractions from within, from our own human weakness. And we likewise must lean heavily on God to protect our own hearts and each others' hearts, to keep us spiritually healthy.

This short Psalm concludes with a prayer for blessing and peace (verses 4-5):

*Do good, O LORD, to those who are good, to those who are upright in heart.
But those who turn to crooked ways the LORD will banish with the evildoers. Peace be upon Israel.*

Once again, the psalmist expresses his hope and confidence that God will protect him and his people, not only materially, but spiritually. He also prays for peace, as we Christians ought also to do. The psalmist gives us a good example of the priorities we should seek in our lives together in the body of Christ, and of his trust in God to provide us with what we need.

Psalm 124: The Lord has Done Great Things for Us

This short Psalm is a vivid celebration of the victories and blessings that God gives to his people. In image and language, it parallels some of Isaiah's prophecies about the return from Babylonian exile. (See, for example, Isaiah 35:1-10 and 51:1-11.) For the ancient Jews, the Psalm also referred, in a broader sense, to the many ways in which God delivered them from so many hardships and perils. The memorable imagery can also help Christians to consider the security and joy that come when we stand together as God's people.

There is one minor difficulty in interpreting the Psalm, in its opening line: "When the Lord brought back the captives to Zion" (NIV). There is an alternate translation of the Hebrew that is

possible and is found in other versions: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion". It is possible that the Psalm was composed specifically for the return from exile, if the NIV choice is the correct one. Or, it is possible that it refers in a more general sense to the feeling of joy and victory from any occasion on which God has delivered his people. For the technical points involved, see the commentaries listed as sources in earlier lessons.

The Psalm begins with this expression of deliverance, and the feeling it instills (verse 1):

When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, they were like men who dreamed
or When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, they were like men restored to health

Whatever the occasion may be, the psalmist describes the feeling as being so good as to be dreamlike. It seems almost unreal to him that God could have done what he did. Such a feeling comes from a deep appreciation of what God has done, and a humble heart that is willing to see God's hand at work, rather than dwelling on one's own human effort. As a body, we can also share this feeling if we are faithful enough to allow God to act through us as he wills, and then are humble enough to avoid claiming credit in our hearts. Only this combination can allow us to feel the depth of joy that the psalmist is expressing. His expression of joy then continues (verse 2):

Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, The LORD has done great things for them.

The people's joy was so deep and so sincere that it was noticed by those around them, and this called attention to what God had done through them. This is a good example to us of something we often forget. If we sincerely celebrate God and his blessings in our lives, it will be clear to those around us that we have found something special, something that also can benefit them. Insecurity and defensiveness do not help unbelievers to see God. Joy and confidence will.

Next, the psalmist expresses a feeling of restoration and return (verses 3-4):

*The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.
Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev.*
or Bring back our captives

We have seen the image of a stream of water in other Psalms. It connotes a peacefulness and security, in this case coming from the appreciation for, and hope of, God's continued care. It describes a faith that is confident, but also humble. From the pilgrim perspective, this attitude was particularly appropriate, and from a Christian perspective, this is a good attitude to instill in ourselves as we anticipate God's blessing upon our ministries.

The Psalm closes with a memorable image, which is incorporated in a Christian hymn (verses 5-6):

*Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.
He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.*

The psalmist reminds us that our relief and appreciation for God's help will be the greatest when we have known what it is to endure hardship and sorrow. Even as tears are being sown in our

lives, we should hold on to our trust in God, for God already will be at work, nurturing our faith and using it to produce a harvest of spiritual joy in the future.

For Further Study

There are a few of the Songs of Ascents that we have not yet specifically studied or mentioned in our classes. Following are brief descriptions of the main themes of each of these:

At first glance, it may seem problematical why Psalm 120 was included in this collection. It was originally composed as a call for deliverance from dangerous sinners. It was probably included in this group of Psalms because the psalmist's feelings can be seen as expressing the longing to be with others who worship and honor God. Psalm 124 is a celebration of victory, and an acknowledgment of the disaster that would have occurred had God not been with his people. Psalms 128 and 129 both echo the " Zion" theme we have just studied, as an image of God providing blessings (128) and as an image of God protecting his people from the wicked (129). Psalm 130 is a plea for mercy, noteworthy for the psalmist's willingness to wait with the utmost patience for God's reply. The "mini-Psalms" 131 and 134 express, respectively, a humble willingness to trust God, and a desire to see God praised by his people. Finally, Psalm 132 is a celebration of God's relationship with his people, emphasizing his irrevocable promises.

As you study these Psalms, make sure always to take particular notice of the applications that they have for our service and worship as a body.

- Mark W. Garner, July 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Twenty-Two: Psalms of Thanksgiving & Victory Introduction Psalm 20 Psalm 124

Our next topic will be survey of some of the Psalms of Thanksgiving, another very common type of Psalm. Giving thanks to God is a simple principle, but one easily forgotten or neglected. The Psalms we shall study in the next couple of weeks can help us to take better notice of the things that God does for us, to enjoy them more, and to appreciate them more.

Psalms of Thanksgiving & Victory: Introduction via Psalm 20

Although we are all familiar with the need to give thanks to God, it is still important to remind ourselves of some familiar, yet simple concepts. Even Christians sometimes do not realize how important it is for us to be thankful, and even Christians can find it hard to develop an awareness for God's blessings, and a habit of regularly giving sincere thanks to God. It is easy for all of us to take God's blessings for granted, especially since so many of the things he does are subtle, and will only be noticed if we look for them.

Psalm 20, which is a prayer for blessing, will introduce several helpful ideas for our study:

May the LORD answer you when you are in distress may the name of the God of Jacob protect you.

May he send you help from the sanctuary and grant you support from Zion.

May he remember all your sacrifices and accept your burnt offerings. Selah

May he give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed.

We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the LORD grant all your requests.

For I know that the LORD saves his anointed he answers him from his holy heaven with the saving power of his right hand.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.

They are brought to their knees and fall, but we rise up and stand firm.

LORD, save the king! Answer us when we call!

Note that this Psalm is a prayer for blessings, not yet a thanksgiving for blessings received. And yet the psalmist comes across as certain that there will be blessings - he is thankful in anticipation, knowing that God will answer. Note also that most of his prayers are asked on behalf of someone other than himself. His prayers cover a wide range of basic areas of need in our lives: he asks that we receive help when we need it, that God will notice and bless our sacrifices and offerings, that God will satisfy the desires of our heart, and that God will bless the plans we have made in our lives and ministries. It is a good exercise to consider some specific prayer requests in each of those general areas, both for yourself and for those you are close to.

The importance of thankfulness is brought out in this Psalm through the confidence with which the psalmist asks God for these things. When we are thankful for what we do have, and are able to train our eyes to see the things God has done for us, it then gives us confidence in approaching him with further needs. Once again, it is a good exercise to think of things that God has done for you and others recently, and then to consider how you can gain confidence in God's present and future care through an appreciation of what he has already done.

Note also the images used in this Psalm. As often in the Psalms, we see the image of God's "right hand" reaching down from heaven to help us. We also are shown poetically the difference between the object of our trust, and that of the unbelievers. "Chariots and horses" could be literal in some cases, but is also an image for the broad range of material and perishable things in which so many persons put their trust. In contrast, we put our trust "in the name of the Lord our God", an intangible object in worldly terms, but a firm foundation of hope, joy, and security to believers.

These images also re-inforce the psalmist's message of anticipatory thankfulness. One of the most important reasons to study the Psalms of Thanksgiving is that thankfulness and hope are inter-twined. As our thankfulness for God's blessings grows, so will our confidence and hope that he will continue to bless us and care for us in the future.

Psalm 34: I will extol the Lord at all Times

Psalm 34 is an extended expression of thanksgiving in a variety of circumstances. The experiences shared by the psalmist David, and the images he uses, can both help us to notice and appreciate the ways that God is at work in our lives.

The brief statement of historical context before the text of Psalm 34 refers to the incident described in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. David had to flee from Saul, and sought temporary refuge in the land of the Philistines, the enemies of Israel, and the losers in many of David's famous victories. Realizing that the Philistines would not accept him in friendship as a mutual enemy of Saul, but rather were deeply suspicious of him and antagonistic towards him, David feigned madness before King Achish, in order that the king would not harm him, but would merely eject him from the king's presence. This was an odd, and in some ways discreditable, part of David's life, and one that makes his expressions of thankfulness in Psalm 34 all the more noteworthy.

The heading to Psalm 34 refers to the king as "Abimelech", while 1 Samuel 21 calls him "Achish". This is not a discrepancy - "Abimelech" was a dynastic (or possibly family) name applied to the line of rulers in the area where the Philistines lived (see, for example, Genesis 20:1-18 and 26:1-18—these are probably two different individuals). This is similar to the way that the name "Caesar", originally Julius Caesar's family name, became a name attached to all Roman emperors. Achish was the personal name of the specific king in 1 Samuel 21.

There are at least two basic themes that Psalm 34 is meant to emphasize. First, of course, is the emphasis on thankfulness in the midst of trial. The experience that formed the background to David's composition of this Psalm must have been frightening, humiliating, and depressing, to say the least. But this Psalm contains many emphatic statements of faith and trust in God, and many lavish expressions of thanks and praise. As you read the Psalm, make sure to keep in mind what has been going on in the psalmist's life.

The other theme that becomes apparent with study of this Psalm is that of God's presence. David mentions one way after another in which God proves himself to be near, to be attentive, and to be effective in caring for his people. Later in the Psalm (verse 11), the psalmist expresses the wish that his hearers also develop an increased awareness of God's nearness. The psalmist throughout displays a keen sensitivity to God's presence, his power, and his awesome nature.

The psalm opens with a simple but emphatic statement of perpetual thankfulness (verses 1-3):

I will extol the LORD at all times—his praise will always be on my lips.

*My soul will boast in the LORD—let the afflicted hear and rejoice.
Glorify the LORD with me—let us exalt his name together.*

From the first verse, David states unconditionally that he will always give thanks and praise to God. This is a key reason why he was called "a man after God's own heart". Trusting and thanking God in advance, before knowing how he will deal with a given situation, is much different from waiting to see what God does, and only then deciding whether to thank him or not. The psalmist calls us also to follow his example, and to glorify, exalt, and thank God in all circumstances.

The next verse gives us a poetic image of the effects of trust and thankfulness (verses 4-7):

*I sought the LORD, and he answered me—he delivered me from all my fears.
Those who look to him are radiant—their faces are never covered with shame.
This poor man called, and the LORD heard him—he saved him out of all his troubles.
The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*

The image of a "radiant face" is a deliberate reference to the effect that meeting with God face-to-face had on Moses (see Exodus 34:29-35). The psalmist is telling us that, when we live a life of faith and thanksgiving, we will reflect the same effects of God's presence that Moses did. The "radiance" will be apparent to all around us. In Moses' case, the Israelites, in their spiritual torpor, were unsettled by Moses' radiant face, and he had to cover himself. May we in the church always allow ourselves, and each other, to reflect God's glory with unveiled faces (2 Corinthians 3:7-18)!

The psalmist then asks us to see for ourselves whether God is worthy of thanks (verses 8-11):

*Taste and see that the LORD is good—blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.
Fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him lack nothing.
The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.
Come, my children, listen to me—I will teach you the fear of the LORD.*

While David is certain that God will always provide what he truly needs, and is sure that God will never let down anyone who trusts in him, he also knows that the only way we can believe this is to see for ourselves! His own witness can only serve as a reason for them to seek God on their own. He therefore urges his hearers to live a life of faith and thanksgiving themselves, to see what happens. God always wants a first-hand relationship with each of his people—he does not want our assurances of faith to rest solely on someone else's testimony.

He then elaborates on his call to "listen to me—I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (verses 12-16):

*Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days,
keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies.
Turn from evil and do good—seek peace and pursue it.
The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry—
the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to cut off the memory of them from the earth.*

This passage is quoted directly in 1 Peter 3:10-12, where the apostle sets it in a very similar context of faithfulness in the midst of hardship and persecution. God wishes us to pursue right

living, right speaking, and right thinking, regardless of the circumstances around us. He wants us to see that we should and can live a godly, faithful, thankful life even if things do not go as we wish. For, finally, we have the assurance at all times of God's care (verses 17-22):

The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them—he delivers them from all their troubles.

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all—he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken.

Evil will slay the wicked—the foes of the righteous will be condemned.

The LORD redeems his servants—no one who takes refuge in him.

As we have now discussed several times, God does not guarantee that he will always deal with our trials in the way we wanted him to. But he does assure us that he is always present in our lives and attentive to our needs. If we are able to develop an awareness and appreciation for the things he does, if we make ourselves more observant of the many things he provides for us and does for us, this in turn will increase our faith and our joy in living as he calls us to do.

For Further Study

Psalm 21 is a good companion study to Psalm 20, in that the psalmist there gives thanks for the fulfillment of many of the things he prayed for in Psalm 20. A good study would be to list the various things that the psalmist prays for in Psalm 20, and then look for examples of their fulfillment in Psalm 21. To take it further, for each general prayer he offers, think of specific fulfilled prayers that would be applicable to yourself and those around you.

- Mark W. Garner, July 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Twenty-three: Psalms of Thanksgiving Psalm 30 Psalm 124

The two Psalms of Thanksgiving that we shall study this time, Psalms 30 and 124, will give us some additional considerations to help us grow in our awareness of God's blessings, and to help us better and more consistently express our thanksgiving to him.

Psalm 30: His favor lasts a lifetime

In this Psalm, David not only gives thanks to God for some significant specific blessings, but also shares some encouraging thoughts about the nature of God's blessings. In particular, he reveals one of the keys to his great faith - the awareness that, to the believer, all discipline, persecution, and hardship is temporary, but God's love, blessing, and favor are permanent.

Note: the occasion of the Psalm, as given above the text, is "for the dedication of the temple". "Palace" may be a better translation, and of course the actual temple was not yet built in the lifetime of David, the psalmist. There is the possibility that the Psalm was originally composed by David for no particular occasion, and that Solomon or someone else later decided that the Psalm was appropriate to use as part of the temple dedication.

The main theme in Psalm 30 is expressed several times, most memorably in the familiar verse 5: "his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime—weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning". This awareness is fundamental to a deep, close relationship with God. All of us are held back so many times by the tendency to become pre-occupied or fixated on the temporary. Given our fleshly and mortal nature, it is inevitable that we should find such things most urgent and easiest to understand, but if we wish to draw close to God, and to develop a deeper joy in our relationship with him, we must learn adjust our perspective. A secondary theme is God as the source of the psalmist's security, as expressed in verses 6-7. This flows from the primary theme, in that the psalmist's realization that God is with him always, despite temporary setbacks or hardships, helps him to place his full trust and security in God, where it belongs.

Psalm 30 opens with an expression similar to some we have seen before (verses 1-3):

*I will exalt you, LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me.
LORD my God, I called to you for help and you healed me.
LORD, you brought me up from the grave—you spared me from going down into the pit.*

Here, the psalmist gives thanks for the ways that God has delivered him in the past (perhaps very recently). He describes his trials as having been saved from the "depths" and the "grave", indicating the serious peril from which God rescued him. Then, instead of elaborating on the troubles, as in some of our previous studies, the psalmist now wants to share a lesson he has learned (verses 4-5):

*Sing to the LORD, you saints of his—praise his holy name.
For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime—weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

Here is the key point of the Psalm. The psalmist has not only learned to appreciate what God has done for him, but has learned that there is a pattern to God's care for him. He has understood that God does not promise that the life of a believer will be free from trial, but rather promises to watch over us during those trials, to bring us out of them spiritually safe, and to provide us with more permanent blessings that will outlast the most discouraging of hardships.

On the heels of that vital lesson comes another (verses 6-7):

*When I felt secure, I said, "I will never be shaken."
"LORD, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm" but "when you hid
your face, I was dismayed."*

To express his security, the psalmist uses the image of a mountain, an emphatic symbol of certainty and immobility. Note the link with the lesson that David taught in the previous verses. His sense of security and firmness comes from having learned not to doubt or waver just because things are tough in the short run. We all want this kind of secure feeling, but we shall only be able to enjoy it if we first learn to look less at the short-term things and more at God's spiritual and eternal values. The psalmist also indicates one of the reasons he can be confident in his faith (verses 8-10):

*To you, "LORD, I called" to the Lord I cried for mercy:
"What gain is there in my destruction, in my going down into the pit" Will the dust praise
you" Will it proclaim your faithfulness"
"ear, "LORD, and be merciful to me" "LORD, be my help."*

David has repeatedly expressed his confidence that God will deliver him when needed, and here he expresses one of the many reasons why he is sure this is true. The "man after God's own heart" knows what is in God's heart, and he knows what is important to God. In particular, he is aware of the value that God attaches to his relationships with those who love and follow him. God loves and enjoys the faithfulness, the praise, and the loyalty that he receives from those who truly respect and honor him, and for that reason he will never expose us to anything beyond what we can bear (recall 1 Corinthians 10:13) he will not put us in a situation that will destroy our faith.

The Psalm closes with a final expression of thanksgiving (verses 11-12):

*"You turned my "ailing into dancing" you removed my sackcloth and clothed me "ith "oy,
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. "LORD my God, I "ill give you thanks
forever."*

The psalmist's transformed circumstances have led to a thankful heart. Although it may seem obvious that a person who has been rescued by God would be thankful, in practice this is so often not the case. Too often, in the relief and joy of a victory or a blessing, we can forget their source. This usually happens because we make our thankfulness conditional on receiving what we want, and this policy never leads to any real level of appreciation for God. David had a thankful heart in his time of blessing because he already had one even when he was enduring trials and hardships.

Psalm 124: "Praise "waits "ou in "ion"

This Psalm, in many respects similar to the Psalms of Praise we studied in the spring, celebrates several aspects of the psalmist's relationship with God. He gives God praise for some of the same things that we saw in those Psalms, such as his Creation and his transcendent nature. In addition, David here also shares a more specific sense of how those qualities are of personal benefit to him and to the rest of God's people, and he also gives thanks for the personal aspects of his relationship with God, such as prayer and the forgiveness of sins. As we have noted in an earlier study, praise and thanksgiving are distinguished primarily in that praise centers on God's own qualities, while thanksgiving generally implies that God has done something of personal benefit or value to the one giving thanks. In Psalm 65, we see both. The first verse indicates what is to come (verses 1-2):

*Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion
to you our vows will be fulfilled.
O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come.*

The psalmist sets the tone with his interesting expression that praise "awaits" God (some versions say "befits"). He not only offers his own praise to God, but also gives us a picture of a multitude of God's people, waiting eagerly to sing their praises to him. He then, in the second verse, further emphasizes the eagerness of the people to be in God's presence.

Next he elaborates on the privilege and blessing of living in God's presence (verses 3-4):

*When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.
Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.*

The psalmist's joy at being able to live in closeness with God is combined with the awareness of why he is able to do so. It is not because of his own righteousness or achievements that he can share in this honor and blessing, but because of God's mercy and forgiveness. To the prideful, it is an insult that they cannot earn their way into a relationship with God. To the humble, it is a joy and a relief to learn that their standing with God depends primarily on God's mercy.

David then begins to expound on some of the wonderful things God has done (verses 5-8):

*You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas,
who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength,
who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations.
Those living far away fear your wonders—
here morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of glory.*

God responds to the praise and devotion of his people by revealing his wonders to them. It is amazing to consider all the glorious things that God has done - the Creation and similar miracles - and to know that he waits patiently for our ignorant and blind species to take notice of even a small part of what he has done. Not only has he done extraordinary and incredible things, he is patient and humble in his hope that we will come to find him on our own, not because he forced us to.

The tender attitude of God towards his Creation is emphasized in the next verses (verses 9-10):

You care for the land and water it—you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled

with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it.

You drench its furrows and level its ridges—you soften it with showers and bless its crops.

These verses paint the image of God himself tending and caring for the land he has given his people. We so often forget, in our prideful focus on our own works and what we have "earned" through them, that without God there is not only no fruitfulness or blessing - there is not any life to begin with. The Psalm then concludes with images of fruitfulness from God's care (verses 11-13):

You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance.

The grasslands of the desert overflow—the hills are clothed with gladness.

The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain—they shout for joy and sing.

These verses are true both literally and figuratively. We must never forget that God is the source of all life and growth. Our lives in this world will be the most peaceful and secure when we trust him to tend to our basic needs, and when we never forget to give him thanks for the easily overlooked ways he gives us all his tender care. Further, this is also true in a broader sense. Our emotional and spiritual lives will also be most abundantly blessed when we entrust them to God, and when we are thankful in our hearts for the ways he works in our individual lives in specific ways. A truly thankful and humble heart will always lead to spiritual fruitfulness and blessing.

For Further Study

There are numerous other Psalms of Thanksgiving and Victory that we have not studied in class. One especially worthy of attention is Psalm 18, which contains many familiar and memorable images of the way God has acted on behalf of the grateful psalmist. Especially vivid and moving is the imagery in verses 7-19. These are the kind of passages that are best appreciated through prayerful meditation, rather than by analytical study, so rather than study it in class, I would encourage you to read this Psalm on your own. Finally, two other Psalms that contain themes similar to our class studies are Psalms 9 and 68. Take a look at them if you have the time, and see how many of the concepts from our class studies are re-emphasized in those Psalms.

- Mark W. Garner, August 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Twenty-Four: God & His People Psalm 78: The Past & Future

We shall now start the last major study in our topical survey of the Psalms. These final Psalms will be focused on some of the most important aspects of God's relationship with his people Israel, aspects which also are significant in the church of Jesus Christ. These Psalms give us a poetic and personal perspective on many facets of our relationship with God as a body.

Psalm 78: Background & Main Themes

In this Psalm, Asaph provides God's people with an extensive review of their past history, from a thematic and poetic perspective. He reminds them of the mistakes made by past generations, and of the hope God offers for the future, so that in the present they will live as God calls them to. All of Asaph's main points have significant spiritual parallels for the church. We have seen in earlier studies that Asaph is a man with a deep desire to understand God, and a man of enduring faith even in the worst of circumstances. At the same time, he openly acknowledges his many mistakes and misunderstandings, honestly and humbly admitting the times when he has failed to understand or appreciate God's designs. When in Psalm 78, then, he gives God's people a stirring warning to learn from the past, we know that he is warning them (and us) in all humility, knowing that he is as fallible and as in need of enlightenment as anyone.

This Psalm focuses on God's relationship with his people as a whole, as a body, as a nation. Many of the same themes that we have studied regarding our personal relationship with him hold true here as well, but there is also a different dimension. We have not only a personal responsibility to seek God and trust him in our private lives, but as a body we also have a mutual responsibility to do what we can to keep each other faithful. We often study these topics from a doctrinal and practical perspective in many Bible classes and sermons, but when studying the same topics in the Psalms, it is important to keep in mind the poetic and personal emphasis of the psalmists. Asaph is not trying to teach us something new, or to prove doctrinal points, but rather is trying to convict us more deeply of principles that we already believe but that have not penetrated further into our hearts.

The main themes in Psalm 78 are the ways the past, present, and future intertwine in a healthy relationship between God and his people. Verses 11, 22, and others show the dangers of forgetting the past, and much of the Psalm is a recounting of events in the past that God's people must remember and learn from. The beginning, especially verses 7-8, emphasize the importance of the present. The psalmist's reproofs are not intended to provoke guilt or dismay, but to spur the present generation to a deeper faithfulness towards God. Indeed, this is the purpose of any of God's discipline. The closing verses, especially verses 68-70, tell us of the hope that God has for the future. Asaph knew that God was planning to use the faithful tribe of Judah as a remnant, to preserve God's Word and further his plans for future generations. The church today must also realize that every generation is, in a sense, the same kind of remnant, as Isaiah often explained in his prophecies. We must learn to think not only of our own lifetimes—we must always keep in mind the impact of our decisions and our faithfulness on future generations.

Psalm 78: The Past & The Future

We shall now survey this lengthy Psalm, with the goal of familiarizing ourselves with the main points. Our perspective here is to look for the key spiritual parallels between what God did for Israel (and how Israel responded or should have responded), and our own interaction with God, as the body of Christ. This survey will leave out many details, and even parts of the text of the Psalm. See below for some suggestions on studying this Psalm in more careful detail on your own. The Psalm's beginning explains how lessons from the past are important today (verses 1-8):

*Let my people, hear my teaching—listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
what we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children—we will tell the next generation the
praises worthy
deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.
We decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our
forefathers to teach their children,
so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in
turn
would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his
commands.
They would not be like their forefathers-- a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose
hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him.*

The Old Testament is always noteworthy for its emphasis on passing along the truths of God to the next generation. This principle is just as important in Christianity. It is dangerous and selfish when we simply want God's church to get us through this life more comfortably. And it is reckless and foolhardy to discard the past, and the things God did for and taught to earlier generations. No generation is special, and none is unimportant. Each is part of something far greater than itself.

The psalmist next convicts his hearers of how easy it is for God's people to forget (verses 9-18):

*The men of Ephraim, though armed with bows, turned back on the day of battle—
they did not keep God's covenant and refused to live by his law.
They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.
We did miracles in the sight of their fathers in the land of Egypt, in the region of Goshen.
We divided the sea and led them through—we made the water stand firm like a wall.
We guided them with the cloud by day and with light from the fire all night.
We split the rocks in the desert and gave them water as abundant as the seas—
he brought streams out of a rocky crag and made water flow down like rivers.
But they continued to sin against him, rebelling in the desert against the Most High.
They willfully put God to the test by demanding the food they craved.*

Perhaps God has not done such obvious miracles for us. But not only should we still draw the same encouragement as earlier generations did from these outstanding proofs of his power, we also can find things he does in our own lives that are just as remarkable, if not as obvious or as large-scale. We ought to develop a more appreciative eye for the "miracles" God does every day, simply by guiding us through life. The main reason why so many persons cannot develop this perspective is because they spend too much time grumbling and complaining (excerpts from verses 19-31):

*They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the desert?
 When he struck the rock, water gushed out, and streams flowed abundantly. But can he
 also give us food? Can he supply meat for his people?"
 When the LORD heard them, he was very angry.
 . . . "Let he gave a command to the skies above and opened the doors of the heavens."
 . . . "He rained meat down on them like dust, flying birds like sand on the seashore.
 . . . They ate till they had more than enough, for he had given them what they craved . . .*

It is remarkable that God is so willing to meet our needs despite all our grumbling. He never stops caring about us, despite our hardness and ingratitude. But remember what happened to the generation that Asaph describes: they were left to die off while wandering through the desert, and their main significance to future generations was to serve as a bad example. May that not happen to us! May today's church learn to be grateful for what we have, and stop complaining about the things we wish were easier or more trendy about Christianity. May we instead serve God with a joy and faith that will be an example to the world in both the present and the future. To do this, we must avoid another problem the psalmist warns about: that of phony repentance (verses 32-39):

*In spite of all this, they kept on sinning—in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.
 So he ended their days in futility and their years in terror.
 Whenever God slew them, they would seek him—they eagerly turned to him again.
 They remembered that God was their Rock, that God Most High was their Redeemer.
 But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their tongues—
 their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant.
 "Let he was merciful—he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time
 he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath.
 "He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return.*

It is so easy to flatter God with our mouths, but dishonor him with our lives. Asaph warns us most emphatically against this behavior, because it will quickly destroy our relationship with God. The entire generation of the Exodus went astray, in large part, because they never sincerely admitted their errors, and never changed in their hearts. Even the few faithful persons of that generation were penalized severely by their brothers' superficial relationship with God. The same thing can happen in the church. Not only do phony repentance and worldly sorrow destroy individuals' relationships with God, but if there are enough of them, they can drag down the whole church. Let another root problem in Israel's history was ingratitude (excerpts from verses 40-64):

*"O often they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland!
 "Gain and again they put God to the test—they vexed the holy one of Israel.
 They did not remember his power-- the day he redeemed them from the oppressor . . .
 "He drove out nations before them and allotted their lands to them as an inheritance . . .
 But they put God to the test and rebelled . . . they did not keep his statutes.
 Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless, as unreliable as a faulty bow . . .
 When God heard them, he was very angry—he rejected Israel completely . . .
 "He sent the ark of his might into captivity . . . "He gave his people over to the sword . . .*

The same generation that saw the plagues and the Exodus also made the golden calf, grumbled constantly, and supported rebels like Korah. The same generation that entered the Promised Land disobeyed God's directions, and soon wandered off into idolatry. It is not the quantity of

blessings that produces gratitude, but the quality of the heart. Many of the most blessed persons are also the most ungrateful, and many of the most grateful persons are those with the fewest blessings. With this in mind, the Psalm closes with the hope of a new beginning (verses 65-72):

*Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, as a man awakes from the stupor of wine.
He beat back his enemies—he put them to everlasting shame.
Then he relected the tents of Joseph, he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim
but he chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loved.
He built his sanctuary like the heights, like the earth that he established forever.
He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens
from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel
his inheritance.
And David shepherded them with integrity of heart—with skillful hands he led them.*

In Asaph's day, God was choosing the tribe of Judah to preserve a faithful remnant after the rest of Israel broke away. Judah was important not only as a physical nation, but as a means of preparing the way for Jesus Christ many centuries in the future. In our own day, God's people must see our relationship with God as not only a means for him to bless us—we must not view the church only as a means of being fulfilled or of getting our needs met. It is vital to the body's spiritual health to understand that we are always but one link in God's plans for the past, present, and the future.

For Further Study

One good study would be to go back through Psalm 78 more thoroughly. The psalmist uses many historical examples, poetic images, and practical analogies to emphasize the key points in God's relationship with his people. See how many of each of these you can find, and then consider how they help convict us or motivate us better to appreciate the Psalm's main themes. Another recommended study is Psalm 89, a poetic celebration and interpretation of God's covenant with his people. Psalm 89 is based on many of the principles of the various covenants God made with his people in the Old Testament, especially with David. Study how these same principles apply to the church. Jim McGuiggan's book *The Reign of God* contains a good Christian study of Psalm 89.

- Mark W. Garner, August 2000

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DELIGHT YOURSELF IN THE LORD: STUDIES IN THE PSALMS

Notes For Lesson Twenty-Five: God and His People Psalm 105: He Remembers His Covenant Forever

We are currently studying selected Psalms that focus on some of the most important aspects of God's relationship with his people Israel, and which also are significant for the church of Jesus Christ. This week's Psalm is filled with historical references and poetic imagery that emphasize God's faithfulness to the covenant he made with his people.

Psalm 105: Main Themes The Covenant

The goal of this Psalm is to move us to a deeper awareness of and appreciation for the ways that God has remained true to his covenant. God has always acted consistently with his promises, and has always acted in the best interests of his people, whether that meant disciplining them, giving them blessings, or something in between.

The dominant thought in this Psalm is God's Covenant, and especially as verse 8 says, that he "remembers his covenant forever". God's covenant with his people was important to the Israelites in many respects, in confirming that they were his people, in confirming his special purpose for them, and in confirming his promises to them. For God's part, it was a vital part of his plans for both the present and the future. It ensured that he would always have a people, whether they were a thriving nation or only a broken remnant. And it ensured that his plans for the future would be known, fulfilled, and remembered. Christians, of course, celebrate the New Covenant. The covenant made through Jesus Christ has all the same glorious features as the old one, with the added feature of full, complete forgiveness attained once for all through the blood of Christ.

There are several basic features of both covenants that are important to remember. First, that God's covenants always contain promises. And these are usually promises of a spiritual nature, showing that God has the best for his people in mind. He promises them what they really need, not just what they desire in the short-term. God also makes commitments in his covenants. He commits himself to accepting his people as his own no matter what happens. When they hurt him, when they sin, when they wander away from him, they are still his, and he will never reject them utterly. But God also has expectations of his people, and he does not expect to be taken for granted. For the covenant spells out what he calls his people to give him in return. The Old and New Covenants contain differing specifics of the response he asks for, but they both have in common the expectation that God's people will live by faith, that they will remember whose they are and act accordingly, making every reasonable effort not to be distracted by the world.

The theme of Psalm 105 is that God has always remained faithful to his covenant. Through historical example and poetic imagery, it calls us to ask ourselves, how faithful have we been to the covenant of which we were made a part

Psalm 105: The Remembers His Covenant Forever

Like last week's Psalm, this is a rather lengthy one, and so we shall only attempt to survey some of the most important ideas and verses in our class time. It would again be recommended to go

back through the Psalm on your own later, to see how much more you can learn after we have talked about the most important ideas.

The opening verses of the Psalm dwell on God's faithfulness to his people throughout history, emphasizing that every generation finds new reasons to praise him (verses 1-11):

Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name—make known among the nations what he has done.

Sing to him, sing praise to him—tell of all his wonderful acts.

Glory in his holy name—let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

Look to the LORD and his strength—seek his face always.

Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,

—descendants of Abraham his servant, —sons of Jacob, his chosen ones.

—He is the LORD our God—his judgments are in all the earth.

—He remembers his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations,

the covenant he made with Abraham, the oath he swore to Isaac.

—He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree, to Israel as an everlasting covenant:

—To you I will give the land of Canaan as the portion you will inherit.

The living God is not just a God for one generation, at one time, or in one place. Nor is Christianity merely a human "religion" that can be described in purely social terms, as if it were somehow only designed for the first century world, or for certain cultures. God's plan and the spiritual needs it is based on are timeless.

The psalmist next, before moving into some historical illustrations, talks about the ways that God has always been devoted to his covenant people (verses 12-15):

*When they were but few in number, few indeed, and strangers in it,
they wandered from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another.*

—He allowed no one to oppress them—for their sake he rebuked kings:

—Do not touch my anointed ones—do my prophets no harm.

Although God has frequently disciplined his people, he has also always protected them. Never has he allowed them to be destroyed, never has he put them in a situation they could not handle. Whenever they were oppressed, it was not at the whim of pagans, but because God allowed it as discipline. Believers in any era must learn to find God's caring hand at work in protecting them. We need to look past the pain and inconvenience of discipline, and even past the injustice and tragedy of life, to understand that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28)

The rest of the Psalm consists of the psalmist recalling historical examples (verses 16-45). First, he describes Joseph's experiences in Egypt (verses 16-22):

*—He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food—
and he sent a man before them— Joseph, sold as a slave.*

They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons,

till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true.

The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free.

*—He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed,
to instruct his princes as he pleased and teach his elders wisdom.*

God's use of Joseph to pave the way for Israel to go to Egypt is a perfect example of the way that God can work both in the life of a treasured believer, and on a grander scale, at the same time. God's blessings on Joseph overflowed to thousands of others who were saved by Joseph's administrative abilities, and also were an important building block for the future.

Next the psalmist discusses the period of discipline in Egypt (verses 23-25):

*Then Israel entered Egypt—Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Am.
The LORD made his people very fruitful—he made them too numerous for their foes,
whose hearts he turned to hate his people, to conspire against his servants.*

Even discipline is a sign of God's faithfulness to his covenant. As Hebrews 12 reminds us, it is a sign that we truly are God's children, and that he cares enough to make us better. And of course, the discipline in Egypt was followed by the plagues on Egypt and the miracle-filled Exodus under Moses (verses 26-42):

*He sent Moses his servant, and Aaron, whom he had chosen.
They performed his miraculous signs among them, his wonders in the land of Am.
He sent darkness and made the land dark-- for had they not rebelled against his words—
He turned their waters into blood, causing their fish to die.
Their land teemed with frogs, which went up into the bedrooms of their rulers.
He spoke, and there came swarms of flies, and gnats throughout their country.
He turned their rain into hail, with lightning throughout their land—
he struck down their vines and fig trees and shattered the trees of their country.
He spoke, and the locusts came, grasshoppers without number—
they ate up every green thing in their land, ate up the produce of their soil.
Then he struck down all the firstborn in their land, the firstfruits of all their manhood.
He brought out Israel, laden with silver and gold, and from among their tribes no one
faltering.
Egypt was glad when they left, because dread of Israel had fallen on them.
He spread out a cloud as a covering, and a fire to give light at night.
They asked, and he brought them quail and satisfied them with the bread of heaven.
He opened the rock, and water gushed out—like a river it flowed in the desert.
For he remembered his holy promise given to his servant Abraham.*

The series of the plagues and the resulting Exodus not only were an impressive array of miracles, but also an emphatic indication of God's faithfulness to his Covenant. When it is time for his people to move on, to break free from bondage, whether external or internal, there is no doubt. God acts in ways that his people cannot mistake, and he gets the attention of the world. We never need to look for secret signs, we never need to search for obscure tips in the Bible for what God has planned. He has openly told us the important aspects of his eternal plan, and our responsibility is to remain faithful to the truth and with how he has called us to live by it. If we do that, he will act unmistakably in our lives when it is time.

The Psalm closes with a reminder of the conquest of Canaan (verses 43-45):

*He brought out his people with rejoicing, his chosen ones with shouts of joy—
he gave them the lands of the nations, and they fell heir to what others had toiled for--
that they might keep his precepts and observe his laws. Praise the LORD.*

The conquest showed God's people what the previous 40 years had been about. It showed the reasons for so much of what God had in the past, tying together many long-standing promises. But it also opened a new era of challenges and opportunities in the Promised Land. God is always faithful to his covenant, and always knows where he wants his people to go next. May we always listen, and may we always remember that it is his faithfulness, not our cleverness or even our goodness, that takes us where he wants us to go.

For Further Study

One good study would be to go back through Psalm 105 more thoroughly, to see how the many details illustrate the main themes and points. This psalm relies especially on historical references to emphasize the key points in God's relationship with his people. For each of the major eras and events that the Psalm describes, consider both the lessons they held for the psalmist's generation and the lessons they hold for Christians.

Another recommended study is Psalm 106, which emphasizes how God has remained faithful to his people even when they have wandered from him. It is a companion and a contrast to Psalm 105. The frequent idolatry, rebellion, and slothfulness of God's people form an often sad comparison to God's own faithfulness. But it also reveals the depth of God's love for his people. Only a God who loves deeply could show such compassion on a group of such flawed, but nevertheless endearing, creations.

- Mark W. Garner, August 2000

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