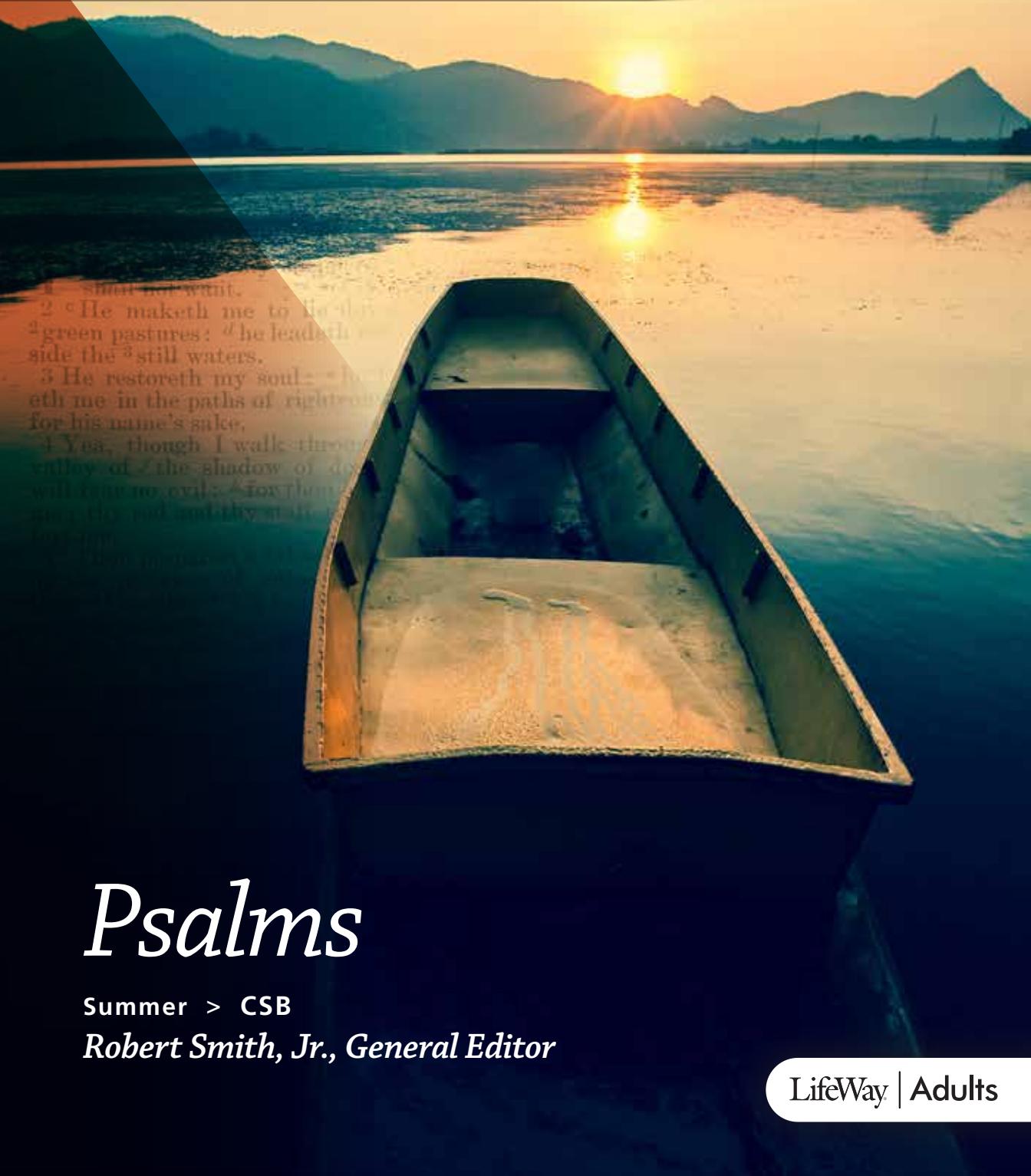




Explore the Bible.®

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



1 I shall not want.
2 He maketh me to lie down
in green pastures: 3 he leadeth
me beside the 4 still waters.
5 He restoreth my soul: 6 he
leadeth me in the paths of righte-
ousness for his name's sake.
7 Yea, though I walk through
the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: 8 for thou
art with me, and thy staff and thy
rod shall comfort me.

Psalms

Summer > CSB

Robert Smith, Jr., General Editor

LifeWay | Adults

LIFE BY DESIGN

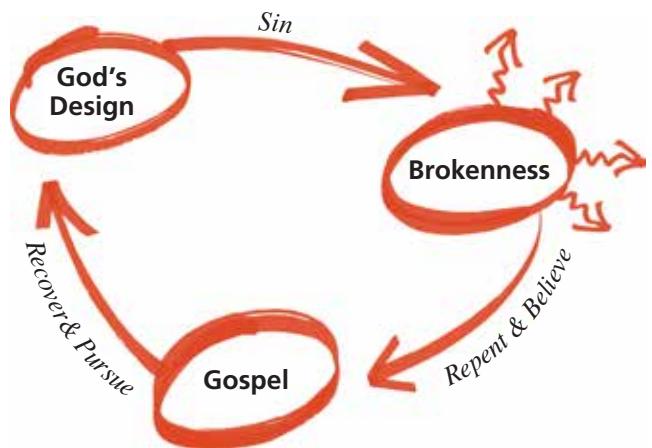
We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Excerpted from Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel.

CONTENTS

FEATURES

Word Wise	6
Bible Reading Plan	7
Introduction to Psalms	8
Shepherds: A Biblical Image	142
Coming Next Quarter	146
Map: Egypt and the Holy Land	147



SESSIONS

	Title	Page
Session 1:	The Path* (Ps. 1:1-6)	11
Session 2:	The Past (Ps. 78:5-8,32-39)	21
Session 3:	The Shepherd (Ps. 23:1-6)	31
Session 4:	Our Response (Ps. 138:1-8)	41
Session 5:	His Presence (Ps. 84:1-12)	51
Session 6:	The Creator (Ps. 95:1-11)	61
Session 7:	God Revealed (Ps. 19:1-14)	71
Session 8:	His Love (Ps. 136:1-5,10-15,23-26)	81
Session 9:	His Faithfulness (Ps. 146:1-10)	91
Session 10:	The Confession (Ps. 51:1-17)	101
Session 11:	The Cleansing (Ps. 32:1-11)	111
Session 12:	The Protector (Ps. 141:1-10)	121
Session 13:	The Longing (Ps. 42:1-11)	131

*Evangelistic emphasis



» MEET THE WRITERS

LeBron Matthews wrote sessions 1-7 of this study guide. Dr. Matthews is pastor emeritus of Eastern Heights Baptist Church in Columbus, Georgia, and is the director of the Columbus extension of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Allen Tilley wrote sessions 8-13 of this study. Dr. Tilley is senior pastor of First Baptist Church, Carthage, Texas. He has earned degrees from Dallas Baptist University, BMA Theological Seminary, and Southwest Seminary.

Explore the Bible: Adult Personal Study Guide CSB (ISSN PENDING; Item 005075121) is published quarterly by LifeWay Christian Resources, One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234, Thom S. Rainer, President. © 2017, LifeWay Christian Resources.

For ordering or inquiries, visit lifeway.com, or write LifeWay Church Resources Customer Service, One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234-0113. For subscriptions or subscription address changes, email subscribe@lifeway.com, fax (615) 251-5818, or write to the above address. For bulk shipments mailed quarterly to one address, email orderentry@lifeway.com, fax (615) 251-5933, or write to the above address.

We believe that the Bible has God for its author; salvation for its end; and truth, without any mixture of error, for its matter and that all Scripture is totally true and trustworthy. Read LifeWay's full doctrinal guideline online at lifeway.com/doctrinalguideline.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Christian Standard Bible®, Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers®. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible® and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

The suggestions for pronouncing Bible names are from *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* by W. Murray Severance, © 1997 by Broadman & Holman Publishers. Used by permission.



ADULT PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

SUMMER 2017

VOLUME 3 • NUMBER 4

ERIC GEIGER

VICE PRESIDENT,
LIFEWAY RESOURCES

ROBERT SMITH, JR.

GENERAL EDITOR

MIKE LIVINGSTONE

CONTENT EDITOR

DWAYNE MCCRARY

TEAM LEADER

KEN BRADY

MANAGER, ADULT ONGOING
BIBLE STUDIES

MICHAEL KELLEY

DIRECTOR, GROUPS MINISTRY

SEND QUESTIONS/COMMENTS TO:

CONTENT EDITOR

EXPLORE THE BIBLE:
ADULT PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE
ONE LIFEWAY PLAZA
NASHVILLE, TN 37234-0175

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES
OF AMERICA

COVER PHOTO © Shutterstock.com

PAGES PHOTOS © iStockphoto.com

A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR

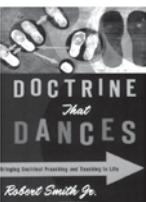


Sometimes, when reading the Bible, it seems as if our lives are worlds apart from those included in the pages of Scripture. It is easy to ponder, sometimes with guilt and secrecy in our hearts, whether the Bible is relevant to feelings we have today, thoughts we have today, struggles we have today, or situations we face today.

This study in the Book of Psalms holds good news for you. A psalmist has likely written about whatever feelings you might experience in any situation in which you find yourself. These lessons speak to those who are soaring on the heights of spiritual growth and to those who are in the depths of spiritual weakness. It legitimizes the feelings of those seeking God's recompense for persecutors and those seeking forgiveness for doing wrong to others. It teaches lessons for dealing with the perils or the successes of life with great grace, patience, and faith while extolling the loving kindness of our God, who is always worthy of praise.

This journey through the Book of Psalms is for you. If you earnestly apply its lessons, it will benefit you and those around you as you seek to walk the narrow path surrounded by distractions, faith challenges, and contemporary thought.

Robert Smith, Jr.



Dr. Smith serves as the Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity and professor of Christian preaching at Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of *Doctrine That Dances: Bring Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life*.



WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

Hallelujah [ha luh LOO yuh]—exclamation of praise meaning “Praise Yahweh!”

Hermon [HUHR muhn]—place name meaning “devoted mountain” and located in the extreme north of Israel

Hyssop [HISS uhp]—a small, bushy plant well suited for use as a brush to dab the doorposts of Israelite homes with the blood of the Passover lambs (Ex. 12:22); also associated with purification rites, such as the cleansing of lepers (Lev. 14:4)

Iniquity—one of several Old Testament terms for sin (Hebrew, *awon*); denotes a deliberate overstepping of the limits of God’s law

Massah [MASS uh]—from a root word meaning “to test,” a place near Mount Sinai where the Israelites put God to the test by demanding water (Ex. 17:7)

Meribah [MEHR ih buh]—from a root word meaning “to complain” or “to find fault,” a place near Mount Sinai where the Israelites put God to the test by demanding water (Ex. 17:7)

Mizar [MIGH zahr]—place name meaning “little hill” or “little mountain”; probably part of the same mountain range as Mount Hermon in the extreme north of Israel

Rebellion—one of several terms for sin in the Old Testament; Hebrew word (*pesha*) denotes defiance and willful disobedience

Redeemer—a term that referred to a kinsman who pays a price to secure the release of someone or something, or who delivers his relatives from difficulty or danger; when used of God, the idea is redemption from bondage or oppression, typically from one’s enemies

Selah [SEE luh]—the exact meaning is unknown, but likely indicated a pause or intensification of instruments or voices in worship

Sheol [SHEE ohl]—in Jewish thought, the abode of the dead or death in general

Sin—one of several related terms for sin in the Old Testament (Hebrew, *kata*); means to miss the mark

Valley of Baca [BAY kuh]—a place name that means “weeping” or “a place of weeping”; used figuratively to describe brokenness or barrenness of the soul

Zion [ZIGH uhn]—a biblical term that sometimes refers to Jerusalem, to the temple built by Solomon, to the whole nation of Israel, or to the heavenly city of God in the new age

BIBLE READING PLAN

JUNE

- 1. Psalm 1
- 2. Psalm 2
- 3. Psalms 3–4
- 4. Psalm 5
- 5. Psalms 6–7
- 6. Psalms 8–9
- 7. Psalms 10–11
- 8. Psalms 12–14
- 9. Psalms 15–17
- 10. Psalm 18
- 11. Psalms 19–21
- 12. Psalm 22
- 13. Psalms 23–24
- 14. Psalms 25–26
- 15. Psalms 27–28
- 16. Psalms 29–30
- 17. Psalm 31
- 18. Psalms 32–33
- 19. Psalm 34
- 20. Psalms 35–36
- 21. Psalm 37
- 22. Psalms 38–39
- 23. Psalms 40–41
- 24. Psalms 42–43
- 25. Psalm 44
- 26. Psalm 45
- 27. Psalms 46–47
- 28. Psalms 48–49
- 29. Psalm 50
- 30. Psalm 51

JULY

- 1. Psalms 52–53
- 2. Psalm 54
- 3. Psalm 55
- 4. Psalm 56
- 5. Psalms 57–58
- 6. Psalm 59
- 7. Psalms 60–61
- 8. Psalms 62–63
- 9. Psalms 64–65
- 10. Psalms 66–67
- 11. Psalm 68
- 12. Psalm 69
- 13. Psalms 70–71
- 14. Psalm 72
- 15. Psalm 73
- 16. Psalms 74–75
- 17. Psalms 76–77
- 18. Psalm 78
- 19. Psalm 79
- 20. Psalm 80
- 21. Psalms 81–82
- 22. Psalms 83–84
- 23. Psalms 85–86
- 24. Psalms 87–88
- 25. Psalm 89
- 26. Psalm 90
- 27. Psalms 91–92
- 28. Psalms 93–94
- 29. Psalms 95–96
- 30. Psalms 97–99
- 31. Psalms 100–101

AUGUST

- 1. Psalm 102
- 2. Psalm 103
- 3. Psalm 104
- 4. Psalm 105
- 5. Psalm 106
- 6. Psalm 107
- 7. Psalm 108
- 8. Psalm 109
- 9. Psalms 110–111
- 10. Psalms 112–114
- 11. Psalm 115
- 12. Psalms 116–117
- 13. Psalm 118
- 14. Psalm 119
- 15. Psalms 120–122
- 16. Psalms 123–125
- 17. Psalms 126–128
- 18. Psalms 129–131
- 19. Psalms 132–134
- 20. Psalm 135
- 21. Psalm 136
- 22. Psalms 137–138
- 23. Psalm 139
- 24. Psalms 140–141
- 25. Psalms 142–143
- 26. Psalm 144
- 27. Psalm 145
- 28. Psalm 146
- 29. Psalm 147
- 30. Psalm 148
- 31. Psalms 149–150



INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS

The Book of Psalms has a broad range of content and style. New Testament writers quoted from Psalms and Isaiah more than any other Old Testament book. Paul stated the early church sang psalms in their worship (Eph. 5:19).

»» BACKGROUND

Writer—Numerous people wrote psalms. The writers of some are unknown. Many psalms have a superscription with names such as David, Moses, Asaph, Korah, and Solomon. However, the Hebrew preposition “of” may mean “by,” “for,” “about,” or “concerning.” Thus, “a psalm of David” or “Davidic psalm” may mean that David wrote the text, or in a few cases it may mean something else. The sons of Korah were descendants of the Levite who died for rebelling against Moses and Aaron (Num. 26:10-11). Some served as singers and musicians in the temple choir. Heman was the founder of the choir during the monarchy of David. Asaph and Jeuthum were choir directors.

Date—Each psalm must be dated independently. They were written, used, and collected over the entire period of Israel’s history. They were the result of both personal and national experiences. The Book of Psalms was in its present form by the fourth century B.C.

Titles—All but 34 of the psalms have individual titles. Although these titles are very ancient, many scholars conclude that they likely were added after the poems were written. Nonetheless, it is very unlikely that later scribes would have inserted titles to psalms that did not clearly reflect the situation described in the title.

Outline—Since ancient times, Psalms has been divided into five books, presumably corresponding to the five books of the Law. Each division ends in a doxology (Pss. 41:13; 72:19, etc.). Psalm 1 serves as an introduction to Psalms, Psalm 150 as the conclusion.

»» PSALM TYPES

Many psalms are not neatly or easily categorized. However, identification of type helps readers gain insight into the psalm’s use and original context. The religious feelings and expressions found in the psalms may overlap between classifications. A few psalms

(25; 34; 119) are acrostically arranged according to the Hebrew alphabet, probably to aid memorization.

Lament—A lament can be expressed by the community (44; 79) or an individual (22; 54). Both are prayers due to distressful situations. Differences are related to the type of trouble and the experiences of salvation. For the community, the trouble may be an enemy; for an individual, it may be an illness. The basic pattern includes an invocation of God, a description of the petitioner's complaint(s), recollection of past deliverance, petitions, a divine response, and a concluding vow of praise.

Thanksgiving—Thanksgiving psalms likewise originate in the community (106; 129) and in individuals (9; 30). They are expressions of joy in response to rescue from distress.

Hymn—The hymn is closest to a modern song of praise. These psalms normally include a call to praise then describe reasons for praising God.

Royal—Royal psalms celebrate Israel's earthly king. They may include an oracle for the king. In some cases, intercessory prayers were offered on behalf of the king. Some royal psalms have messianic implications and fulfillments (2; 89; 110).

Enthronement—Enthronement psalms celebrate Yahweh's kingship. They are closely related to the hymns. The main difference is a celebration of Yahweh as King over all creation.

Penitential—Penitential psalms are expressions of contrition and repentance. They plead for restoration to a right relationship with God.

Wisdom/Didactic—This type has poetic form and style but is distinguished because of content and a tendency toward the proverbial. These psalms contemplate questions of theodicy (73), celebrate God's Word (119), or deal with two different ways of living—that of the godly person or the evil person (1).



TYPES OF PSALMS

LAMENT—emotional cries to God for deliverance from distressful situations

Pss. 3–5; 7; 12–13; 17; 22; 25–27; 35; 39–44; 54–60; 62; 64; 69–71; 74; 77; 79–80; 83; 85–86; 88; 90; 94; 120; 123; 126; 134; 137; 140–142; 144

THANKSGIVING—expressions of gratitude to God for His abundant blessings

Pss. 9–11; 16; 23; 30–31; 34; 48; 62; 66–68; 75; 91–92; 106–109; 115–116; 118; 121; 124–125; 129; 131; 138–139

HYMN—declarations of the greatness of God

Pss. 8; 15; 19; 24; 29; 33; 46; 52; 65; 81–82; 87; 100; 103–105; 111; 113–114; 117; 122; 135–136; 145–150

ROYAL—prayers for God’s blessings on Israel’s king, some with messianic implications/fulfillments

Pss. 2; 18; 20–21; 45; 50; 61; 63; 72; 84; 89; 101; 110; 132

ENTHRONEMENT—celebrations of God’s rule over all His creation

Pss. 47; 93–99

PENITENTIAL—expressions of contrition and repentance

Pss. 6; 28; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143

WISDOM/DIDACTIC—practical guidelines for godly living

Pss. 1; 14; 36–37; 49; 53; 73; 76; 78; 112; 119; 127–128; 133



Session 1

THE PATH

Believers should embrace godly wisdom because obedience to God's Word is the path of true life.

PSALM 1:1-6

¹ How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers! ² Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. ⁴ The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand up in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.



Observe the variety of imagery employed in Psalm 1. What do these assorted, real-life sketches suggest about the importance of making correct choices?

Notice the number of times that the word “wicked” occurs in Psalm 1. Why do you think the writer repeated this term so many times?

FIRST THOUGHTS

The road forks, but your GPS indicates no such fork. You are on your own for this decision. Do you go right or left? Sometimes the decision determines how long the journey will take. In some rare cases, the decision determines whether you will reach your destination. Either way, you have to make a decision.

With whom or what would you consult if faced with making a decision about a road that is off the map? Would you admit that you needed any help deciding which road to take?

The Bible repeatedly describes life as a journey. On this journey we face daily choices about which path to take. Do we follow God’s instructions, or do we listen to what the world says? Some people reject God’s way completely. Others constantly struggle to make godly choices. No one gets it right every time; nevertheless, we must always seek to choose correctly.

Psalm 1 describes two paths that people can select. One path leads to life, and the other leads to death. At the beginning of Israel’s history, Moses set two ways before the people.

The Israelites had to choose the way of life and blessing or the way of death and adversity (Deut. 30:15). Later, Jesus likewise identified two ways—the narrow way that leads to life and the wide way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). These two ways are the only two options available. Every person will decide which way he or she lives. While the right choice seems obvious, most people make the wrong choice. Believers should embrace godly wisdom because obedience to God’s Word is the path to true life.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 1

Psalm 1 is commonly classified as a wisdom psalm. Wisdom may be defined as the appropriate application of knowledge. For example, understanding that a light socket conducts electricity is knowledge. Wisdom is keeping one’s finger out of the socket. On the other hand, screwing a light bulb into the socket in order to illuminate the darkness shows an even higher form of wisdom. Wisdom psalms present examples of human behavior to demonstrate that some behaviors are wise and some are foolish. These examples are intended to point the reader to choices that please God. Wisdom psalms tend to be proverbial. Indeed, many of the ideas in this psalm have parallels in the Book of Proverbs.

Psalm 1 must be viewed in relation to the entire Book of Psalms. This first psalm serves as an introduction to the entire psalter. In like manner, Psalm 150 functions as the conclusion to the book. In Psalm 1 the righteous are blessed by God, and in Psalm 150 the righteous bless God. Psalm 1 describes what God does for His people, and Psalm 150 instructs God’s people to bless God.

Psalm 1 divides easily into two parts—the path of life (vv. 1-3) and the path of death (vv. 4-6). The two lifestyles are contrasted in the first two verses. Then in verses 3 and 4 the nature and value of each lifestyle are sketched with a botanical analogy. The last two verses then disclose the ultimate fate of each lifestyle.



EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PATH OF LIFE (PS. 1:1-3)

VERSE 1

¹ How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers!

The righteous person, according to biblical standards, is the one who is in right relationship with God. This right relationship is achieved not by a person's good works, but through faith in Christ. However, genuine faith generates good works.

The word *happy* is translated "blessed" in some translations (KJV, ESV, NIV). The term (Hebrew, *esher*) is best understood as the sense of joy, blessedness, or contentment of those who faithfully walk in a right relationship with God. This state is the consequence of godly choices. The word essentially points to the best possible life that an individual may achieve. This Hebrew word occurs more than 40 times in the Old Testament, and at least half of these are in the Book of Psalms.

The Book of Psalms reveals much about how to have a blessed or happy life. Consider, for example, these passages:

- "How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" (32:1). God's people are happy or blessed when God forgives their transgressions.
- "How happy is anyone who has put his trust in the LORD and has not turned to the proud or to those who run after lies!" (40:4). Trusting God results in a state of blessedness and contentment. It is the foundation for a happy life.
- "How happy are those who reside in your house, who praise you continually" (84:4). Worshiping God leads to joy.
- "How happy are those who uphold justice, who practice righteousness at all times" (106:3). Doing right makes God's people happy; sin results in sadness.

Take note in Psalm 1:1 of the progressive action from walking to standing to sitting. In the imagery of life as a journey down a path, the traveler stops to listen to the banter of bystanders. The unsuspecting journeyer soon joins the conversation and eventually

takes a seat among these gabbers. The traveler in verse 1 does not do these things. He does not stop, stand, or become one of the wicked.

The **wicked** person is one who is corrupt in his heart. **Sinners** continuously practice sin. **Mockers** scoff at God. To **walk** refers to the decisions one makes in life. To **stand** refers to one's commitments, and sitting represents one's attitudes and the disposition of his or her heart.

The words the psalmist used depict a progressive decline, but one that is avoidable. The negative construction of this verse warns the reader that each step is a choice. Therefore, the psalm encourages readers to avoid that choice. Do not be influenced by the wicked. Refuse to walk down the sinful path. Do not align yourself with those who scoff at that which is holy. The psalmist is not presenting a methodology for avoiding the wicked. The apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth "not to associate with sexually immoral people" (1 Cor. 5:9). He then clarified that he did not mean to avoid all sinners completely. To do so, "you would have to leave the world" (v. 10). Paul's words, like the psalmist's, serve as a warning to be careful about our close associations.

VERSE 2

² Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night.

If certain behaviors must be avoided in order to attain biblical happiness, then what conduct is acceptable? The answer is not a catalog of activities but dependence on a single source that will produce appropriate behavior in any situation. Unlike a to-do list, this source alters the individual's total perspective. The source is **the LORD's instruction**, literally "Yahweh's law." This phrase is synonymous with Scripture. Scripture transforms the nature of those who delight in it. Such people read the Bible because they hunger for God. They eagerly absorb its instructions and constantly seek to abide by them.

The righteous person not only reads the Bible, **he meditates on it day and night**. In order to understand the admonition of this verse, we first must know what the verb *meditates* means. Biblical meditation is not related to Eastern religions, transcendental meditation, or syncretistic contemplation. The Hebrew verb means



to make a low sound; here the sense is to read or repeat Scripture in an audible whisper. The specific nuance can best be comprehended by the qualifying command to meditate on it *day and night*. Clearly this does not mean God expects people to read the Bible 24 hours a day, seven days a week. However, it does mean that the actions of the righteous are steered by the truths of Scripture at all times. Their conduct quietly reinforces truths from the Bible because God's Word has become an integral part of their thinking.

Though the Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in this verse, the Spirit and the Word are inextricably connected. The Spirit was responsible for the writing of the Bible (2 Pet. 1:20-21). He likewise abides permanently in the life of every believer. Consequently, the Holy Spirit implements this continuous application of the Word, recalling for Christians the applicable passage or appropriate biblical principle at the moment it is required. His participation enables the righteous to avoid the influence of the wicked by embracing the power of Scripture to live.

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Scriptures*

The Holy Bible is a perfect treasure of divine instruction.

VERSE 3

³ He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

The psalmist compared the person who follows God's counsel to a productive **tree** planted near a river or irrigation canal. The verb **planted** reveals that the tree did not sprout in this location by chance. God set it in this place. The phrase **flowing streams** focuses on the watercourse as the source of the liquid that is essential to life. The analogy points to the Bible as God's resource for living in a manner that keeps an individual right with Him.

God declared that the person who follows the counsel of His Word (as opposed to listening to the advice of the wicked; see v. 1) would flourish and produce fruit. Therefore, God's Word supplies everything

necessary for living a fruitful and rewarding life. The phrase ***whatever he does prospers*** does not guarantee financial prosperity or career advancement. Rather, because this person follows the counsel of God's Word, his or her ambition is to glorify God, not to obtain monetary or personal reward. We are saved by grace alone, but grace never stands alone. Grace produces confirming works. Belief will be succeeded by godly behavior. Fulfillment in life is found through faithful obedience to God and His Word (Jas. 1:22-25). So this promise points to success in honoring the Lord through our behavior.

What is the godly fruit that God desires for His followers to produce? How can worldly wisdom hinder growth? How does reading the Bible nurture the development of this godly fruit?

THE PATH OF DEATH (PS. 1:4-5)

VERSE 4

⁴ The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.

The psalmist pointed out that ***the wicked*** are like worthless ***chaff that the wind blows away***. The words ***not like this*** are emphatic in the Hebrew text. The wicked are the opposite of all that was said about the righteous in the previous three verses.

In ancient Israel, harvested grain stalks were laid out on a threshing floor to dry. The threshing floor commonly was a shallow pit cut in the stone bedrock of a hilltop. After the stalks dried in the hot sun, the grain was beaten on the rock surface either with a large stone or with the hoofs of animals walking on the grain. In the evening, the wind normally blew harder across the hill. At that time, the farmer used a winnowing fork to toss the beaten crop up into the evening breeze. The heavy kernels of grain dropped back into the stone depression. In contrast, the chaff was blown away. John the Baptist employed this same imagery in his preaching about the coming of the Messiah: "His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out" (Matt. 3:12).



VERSE 5

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand up in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

Listening to the deceptive advice of the wicked leads to instability and destruction. The psalmist warned his readers that **the wicked** face sure **judgment** and eternal separation from God’s righteous people. The word **therefore** functions to indicate that the fate described here is the direct consequence of a wicked lifestyle.

Standing is a posture of confidence. In an ancient trial it signified the validity of one’s testimony. When the wicked are brought before the Almighty in judgment, they will not be able to maintain their erect posture. The facts will condemn them, and they will be humbled by their guilt. They will be unable to defend the choices that produced their lifestyle. God’s verdict will result in eternal separation from Him.

How should God’s warning about the future of the wicked affect you? How should you feel? What should you do?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

The psalmist wasn’t the only one to emphasize the importance of life choices. Compare Psalm 1 with Deuteronomy 30:19-20 and Matthew 7:24-27. How are these passages similar? What common themes are found in all three passages? Write a summary statement of the teaching found in all three passages.

THE CONCLUSION (PS. 1:6)

VERSE 6

6 For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

The psalmist stated that God protects the righteous while allowing the wicked to move toward disaster. It must be noted that ultimate collapse and expulsion take place at the final judgment, but divine judgment is a present reality. Regardless of the effort, any attempt to refute God is futile and ultimately will fail. Likewise, estrangement from God's people is in reality the manifestation of that failure. It should always be remembered that condemnation is not a future fate but a present reality.

The grammatical construction of the Hebrew statement translated ***the LORD watches over the way of the righteous*** stresses that God's knowledge of the righteous is a present reality. The verb itself means "to know through experience." God's knowledge of His people is not intellectual knowledge but knowledge that is derived by walking with His people.

In addition, God is identified by the divine personal name. The word **LORD** is the Hebrew *Yahweh*. This is the name God used in His covenant with Israel and therefore indicates that the relationship is an intimate one. The intimacy of God's knowledge guarantees His presence to secure His people. Believers can live with confidence, knowing that God guarantees His protection to the obedient.

Again, *the righteous* are those individuals who are right with God. Their way is a lifestyle of faith. They have been saved by faith and live by faith. Faith is not merely saying words but is a trust that produces obedient acts that develop the believer into the likeness of Christ.

While the lifestyle of a godly man or woman reflects growth toward being Christlike, the lifestyle of the ungodly ultimately leads to ruin.

What does this verse teach about the security of those who follow God? How does this security impact our behavior?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Fulfillment in life is found through faithful obedience to God and His Word.
- We have been warned that falling for the deceptive advice of the wicked leads to instability, worthlessness, and destruction.
- Believers can live with confidence, knowing that God guarantees His protection to the obedient.

What is the role of the Bible in your life? How much time would you say you spend reading and studying the Bible on a weekly basis? What actions can you take to increase that time?

As a group, list ways ungodliness is promoted in our world today. How can your Bible study group help one another not be influenced by this misinformation?

What are some situations in your life in which godly living is difficult? How do you determine what God wants you to do in these situations? What are some Bible verses that can provide you with confidence to do what God wants?

MEMORY VERSE

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin. —Psalm 1:6



Session 2

THE PAST

We can learn from the past as we observe God's faithfulness in contrast to humanity's unfaithfulness.

PSALM 78:5-8,32-39

⁵ He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children ⁶ so that a future generation—children yet to be born—might know. They were to rise and tell their children ⁷ so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God's works, but keep his commands. ⁸ Then they would not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not loyal and whose spirit was not faithful to God. [...] ³² Despite all this, they kept sinning and did not believe his wondrous works. ³³ He made their days end in futility, their years in sudden disaster.



³⁴ When he killed some of them, the rest began to seek him; they repented and searched for God. ³⁵ They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer. ³⁶ But they deceived him with their mouths, they lied to him with their tongues, ³⁷ their hearts were insincere toward him, and they were unfaithful to his covenant. ³⁸ Yet he was compassionate; he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them. He often turned his anger aside and did not unleash all his wrath. ³⁹ He remembered that they were only flesh, a wind that passes and does not return.

Notice all of the occurrences of the words “God,” “he,” and “his” in Psalm 78:5-8,32-39. What are some characteristics of God that are associated with these occurrences?

Observe the descriptors of the past generations in 78:8. What effect do you think these descriptors had when this psalm was first sung?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Coaches and athletes spend significant time watching video footage of previous games. They examine each play and analyze every mistake. In the same manner, they also scrutinize the things they did well. They then seek to correct their errors on the practice field and duplicate their successes as they prepare for the next contest. Likewise, in life, we can learn from the past.

What are some ways we can learn from the past? As we analyze our own past, what should we be looking for?

Psalm 78 called for Israel to learn the lessons of its history. Verses 5-8 directed each generation to teach the next generation about God. In verses 32-37, the psalmist looked back at Israel's failures in history. He observed that repentance was the sole means for a growing relationship with God. In stark contrast to Israel's repeated unfaithfulness, verses 38-39 point to God's compassion and His willingness to forgive. We can learn from the past as we observe God's faithfulness in contrast to humanity's unfaithfulness.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 78

The title of Psalm 78 describes it as a "Maskil of Asaph." The exact meaning of the word *maskil* is uncertain. Some scholars connect it with a root meaning "insight," implying a psalm of instruction. Like Psalm 1, Psalm 78 can be classified as a wisdom psalm. Its historical narrative contrasts Israel's unfaithful past with God's faithful activity. It anticipates a future generation that will be faithful to God. Asaph was one of King David's chief musicians (1 Chron. 6:39; 15:17; 16:5,7). His descendants became temple singers (Ezra 2:40-41). Whether the name here refers to the individual or to the subsequent group is unclear.

Psalm 78 narrates Israel's history from slavery in Egypt to David's monarchy. The emphasis of the historical narrative is twofold. First, Israel's behavior was consistently disloyal and unfaithful. Second, God's behavior was always faithful and compassionate. Because of His mercy, Israel did not perish. These two realities must be taught to every generation so that each future generation might be presented with the potential to be faithful to God.

The past experience of Israel warns that God's judgment is certain if His people fail to repent. Superficial expressions of remorse are inadequate. A genuine change of attitude and behavior is essential. While the implication of judgment permeates this psalm, it is not God's final word. God's unparalleled goodness becomes the ultimate hope for His people.



EXPLORE THE TEXT

TEACH FOR THE FUTURE (PS. 78:5-8)

VERSES 5-6

⁵ He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children ⁶ so that a future generation—children yet to be born—might know. They were to rise and tell their children

Ancient Hebrew poetry was based on replicating ideas rather than rhyming sounds. Frequently the second line of a verse simply repeated the previous line using synonyms. The first two lines of this verse follow that pattern. At the same time, each line provides slight variation in the essence of the statement.

The noun *testimony* is derived from a verb that means “to repeat” and is related to the noun “witness.” A witness has firsthand knowledge of an event and can testify about that event. But the term *testimony* goes beyond merely repeating what is known; it likewise serves as a warning. This same word often was identified with the ark of the covenant that contained the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were engraved. The Commandments were given as warnings against certain behavior.

The word *testimony* is a synonym for *law*. Today people tend to conceive of the law as a legal code. While this idea certainly is correct, it is not the primary meaning of this Hebrew term. The basic sense of the word is “teaching.” The law of God sets forth instructions for living life in a manner that pleases God.

Jacob and *Israel* are also synonyms. These two proper nouns can either designate the patriarch or his descendants. While here they denote the latter, the Israelites’ ancestor offers valuable insight into how they were to be used as God’s people. The name *Jacob* means “he cheats.” Jacob was a consummate con artist. *Israel* was the name that God gave Jacob after the patriarch had wrestled with the divine messenger (Gen. 32:28). The name change signified a covenant relationship with God. Israel’s covenant was not based on Israel’s righteousness, but on divine grace.

The psalmist called on the people of Israel to ***teach to their children*** God’s commandments and the danger of disobeying

those commandments. The purpose of teaching the children about God's law was to enable subsequent generations to know about God and obey His instructions for life. When the children who witnessed God's deliverance out of Egypt grew up, Moses commanded them to teach God's law to their children (see Deut. 6:6-9). The parents of every generation are obligated to teach their children about God and how to live in His presence. By doing so, their children will grow up in the fear of God and in turn teach their children.

VERSES 7-8

⁷ so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God's works, but keep his commands. ⁸ Then they would not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not loyal and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

Recounting God's activity in the past enables new generations to trust in Him. The Hebrew word rendered **confidence** is sometimes translated "hope." Biblical hope is not wishful thinking; it involves assurance that what God has promised will take place. If He can split the Red Sea (78:13) or bring water from a rock (78:20), God can provide for the needs of a new generation. The word **commands** denotes the terms of a contract. In the context of Israel's covenant with Yahweh, the word can refer to the Ten Commandments. However, the sense here is more comprehensive. Because this new generation has heard of God's works in the past, they will have personal faith in God. The phrase **not forget God's works** points to a continuous awareness of His presence and directives. Because they trust completely in God, they will live in obedience to His instructions.

The psalmist wanted his generation to remember the past so **they would not be like their fathers**. Hearing accounts of God's past deeds is an antidote to repeating the errors of earlier generations. The psalmist painted an abysmal portrait of his ancestors. They were immovable in their determination not to conform to God's desire for them.

The procedure of teaching each generation remains as valid under the new covenant as it was under the old covenant. The New Testament clearly declares that salvation comes through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8). It also plainly states that such faith results from hearing the good news of Christ's death and resurrection



(Rom. 10:14). Since no one today was alive when Jesus was crucified, all of us learned about His death and resurrection because someone told us about it (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:1-11).

What are some ways people teach future generations about God and His love? What types of teaching will most likely touch a future generation?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Education*

An adequate system of Christian education is necessary to a complete spiritual program for Christ's people.

REMEMBER THE PAST (PS. 78:32-37)

VERSES 32-34

³² Despite all this, they kept sinning and did not believe his wondrous works. ³³ He made their days end in futility, their years in sudden disaster. ³⁴ When he killed some of them, the rest began to seek him; they repented and searched for God.

In verses 9-31, the psalmist fused examples of God's miraculous provision, Israel's recurring rebellion, and God's inevitable judgment. The phrase ***his wondrous works*** demonstrates the magnitude of Israel's impudence. The phrase denotes acts of God that elicit wonder because the action is beyond human capabilities. Despite indisputable evidence of God's supremacy and compassion, Israel continued to reject His leadership.

Because of their sinfulness, ***their days*** and ***their years*** were marked by futility and fear. Israel's neighbors constantly raided its frontier, killing inhabitants or carting them into slavery. Natural disasters such as drought and health epidemics often struck down large numbers of people. The grammar of these verses indicates recurrent alternations of judgment and repentance. The verb ***repented*** means they turned toward God. The verb ***searched*** implies they desired fellowship

with God. Every time judgment fell on Israel, the survivors sought to repair their relationship with God.

VERSES 35-37

³⁵ They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer. ³⁶ But they deceived him with their mouths, they lied to him with their tongues, ³⁷ their hearts were insincere toward him, and they were unfaithful to his covenant.

Rock symbolized security and refuge. It was a place of safety. Here it is in parallel with **•Redeemer**. The term *redeemer* denoted the next-of-kin who liberated a near relative from difficulty or danger. Together these two terms refer to the power and salvation of God.

Two different titles designate the Lord in verse 35. The first is **God**, the generic term for deity. The second is the **Most High God**, an ancient name going back at least to the time of Abraham. This was the name by which the mysterious priest-king Melchizedek worshiped God (Gen. 14:18). The absence of God's covenant name, Yahweh, may hint that something was amiss in the people's search for God.

Israel's repentance proved insincere and self-deceptive. They had a form of belief that was in response to God's severe judgment but not in response to His compassion. They recognized that their troubles were the consequences of their sin, and they understood that God had brought the trouble on them. Therefore, they said that they repented and that they would be different in the future. They promised they would be faithful to their covenant with God. However, their words were lies. Time would prove them devoid of substance.

The word **insincere** literally means "not fixed." The people's choices were not consistent. They said one thing but did another. Previous generations of Israelites did not comply with the terms of their covenant with Yahweh. The covenant was the one God made with Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:1-8). In the ancient world, a covenant was equivalent to a legal contract. Hence, Israel and God were in a binding legal relationship. While God always remained faithful to the agreement, Israel repeatedly violated its stipulations.

Believers today are also in a covenant relationship with God (see Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). Inevitably, we too sin. However, when we confess and repent of our sin,



God will forgive us and restore our fellowship with Him. True repentance will lead to a growing relationship with God that includes willful obedience.

Why do tragedies cause people to turn to God? How would you define the difference between a genuine turning to God and a temporary turning to God?

BIBLE SKILL: *Compare Bible translations to gain a clearer understanding.*

Compare Bible translations of Psalm 78:38. Look for synonyms and different ways translators approach this verse. Use a Bible dictionary to compare the meaning of the words translated differently. How does the translation comparison give you a greater understanding of the key words and ideas in this passage?

COMPASSION IN THE PRESENT (PS. 78:38-39)

VERSES 38-39

³⁸ Yet he was compassionate; he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them. He often turned his anger aside and did not unleash all his wrath. ³⁹ He remembered that they were only flesh, a wind that passes and does not return.

Asaph contrasted Israel's repeated unfaithfulness to God's unwavering compassion. The reason for Israel's survival in the face of its sinful behavior can be found in the nature of God. When Moses requested to see the invisible God, God described Himself to Moses (Ex. 34:6-7). One of the characteristics of God revealed in His self-disclosure was that He is **compassionate**. The root of the Hebrew word denotes a deep love of a superior for an inferior that is rooted in some natural bond.

The Hebrew word for a woman's womb is also derived from the same root. An ordinary incident in the life of a mother with a newborn child illustrates the sense of God's compassion. After a long, difficult day, the mother finally lays her weary body down to rest. She has barely fallen asleep when she is awakened by her baby's scream. Despite her fatigue and frustration, she goes to the crib, picks up the infant, and holds the child tenderly as she contemplates the reason for the crying. Israel's continued existence was rooted in God's comparable love for His people.

Because He loved Israel, God **atoned for** their guilt. This verb *atoned* means to offer a substitute. There was no doubt concerning the people's guilt. They committed the crime. That fact was undeniable. God's anger and wrath point to His attitude toward that sin. He cannot and will not tolerate the existence of sin. He responds to its exposure by acting to eradicate it. Although sin still plagues humanity, Christ's atonement assures its ultimate extinction (1 John 2:17).

Herein lies the heart of the good news of Jesus Christ. Although each and every one of us has sinned against God and therefore has earned the full measure of His wrath, Christ has instead received our punishment on the cross. God offers divine forgiveness to sinners through faith in Jesus.

In contrast to Israel's remembering then promptly forgetting that God was their rock and redeemer (vv. 35-37), God **remembered** their weak nature. **Flesh** denotes human weakness. Indeed, human life is so fragile and transitory that it can be compared to an elusive **wind**. The link between human weakness and divine compassion is echoed in Psalm 103, where God's remembrance is also paired with His compassion (vv. 13-17).

God's greatest expression of His compassion for sinners is in the Person and work of Jesus. God incarnated Himself in human flesh because of His love and mercy. His death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin was the perfect expression of His righteous wrath against sin and the perfect expression of His love for sinners.

How does God's compassion shown in the past give us hope for the present? What is the connection between God's compassion and humanity's limitations?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are responsible for teaching future generations about God and His compassionate dealings with humanity.
- True repentance leads to a growing relationship with God that includes willful obedience.
- God provided atonement for our sin and rebellion, offering forgiveness through faith in Jesus.

List some ways your Bible study group can teach younger individuals about God and His compassion for humanity. Ascertain practical methods for achieving these ideas.

Evaluate your relationship with God. How are you demonstrating growth through obedience? Identify areas in your spiritual life that need attention and the steps you will take to give those areas the needed attention.

With whom this week can you share the good news of God's offer of forgiveness through faith in Jesus? Seek God's guidance for giving you an opportunity to share the gospel with these individuals.

MEMORY VERSE

They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer. —Psalm 78:35



Session 3

THE SHEPHERD

God can be trusted since He is always good.

PSALM 23:1-6

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need. ² He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters. ³ He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake. ⁴ Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.



Circle the first-person pronouns found in Psalm 23. What do these suggest about the psalmist's view of God?

Notice the shift from the pronoun "he" in verses 2-3 to "you" in verses 4-5. What importance do you attribute to this shift?

FIRST THOUGHTS

We use many terms to describe stress—*anxiety, pressure, tension, angst, burnout*. Many people experience its symptoms. Writers, talk show hosts, and other "experts" offer their remedies. Some of the common themes are to slow down, avoid stressful people, take more vacations, sit in a hot tub, get more exercise, and drink less caffeine.

What factors cause the greatest stress today? What remedies have you heard offered for dealing with these factors?

When we experience anxiety, it affects every part of our lives. In our homes we are less prepared emotionally to meet the needs of our family members. Anxiety also affects job performance since it results in absenteeism and burnout. Most of society's remedies for anxiety are flawed because they do not address humanity's most basic need—a love relationship with the one true God who made us, knows us, and has the power to restore us. God relates to us as a loving shepherd who provides for all our needs. Therefore, we need not be anxious. We can rest in Him and His providential care. Others may disappoint us or abandon us. He will not.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

God is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 23

David was a shepherd in his youth (1 Sam. 16:11). As a shepherd, he would have spent long hours alone with his father's sheep. Sheep not only provided food and wool for the family, but they were also a measure of family wealth. Therefore, a shepherd's responsibility for the sheep's welfare impacted the family's survival and status. The wilderness of Judah could be an inhospitable place for sheep. Water and grass were scarce. Consequently, David would have frequently moved his flocks to new locations to feed and water them satisfactorily. He fought predators such as bears and lions in order to protect his sheep (1 Sam. 17:34-37).

During David's night watch over his flocks, he would have had the opportunity to gaze at the infinite stars twinkling overhead. Instead of feeling insignificant in the vastness of the universe, he recognized that God had given humanity a special role in creation. This outward paradox elicited great praise for the Lord from David (Ps. 8:1-9).

In Psalm 23, David depicted his relationship with God in terms of a shepherd and his sheep. He drew from his own experience of what his sheep needed and what he offered them. Just as David supplied nourishment, protection, and shelter for his sheep, God provided direction, security, and care for him.

Like numerous other psalms, Psalm 23 is identified as Davidic. The Hebrew title is ambiguous. It can mean "written by," "belonging to," "about," or "for." Therefore this title does not always prove David was the author. However, David was also a musician (1 Sam. 16:18-23), and the content of this psalm easily fits the life experience of David. Therefore, although one cannot be absolutely certain, David likely was the writer. Later, others would pick



up on his metaphor here and identify the Lord as the Shepherd of Israel (Ps. 80:1; Isa. 40:11; Ezek. 34:11-16). Jesus also used the imagery to depict His relationship to His followers (John 10:1-21). He described the Good Shepherd as one who gives His life to prevent harm to His sheep. His sheep have an intimate relationship with the Good Shepherd, and they respond to His voice. God is our personal Shepherd, just like He was for David.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PROVIDES (PS. 23:1-3)

VERSE 1

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need.

Whenever ***the LORD*** is printed in capitalized letters in the Old Testament, the term denotes the covenant name of Israel's God, Yahweh (or Jehovah). God's name is more than a label for identification. It communicates His nature and character. God is a personal being. While God certainly is not human, figurative language describing God in human terms reveals a profound reality which abstract terminology often cannot portray. *The LORD* is a God who desires an intimate personal relationship with people. Using this name, God entered into a covenant relationship with Israel (Ex. 20:2).

In the Hebrew text of this verse, *the LORD* is emphatic. The covenant God of Israel was David's ***shepherd***. The relationship between the Shepherd and His sheep is personal. The pronoun ***my*** conveys the intimate nature of David's relationship with God. It also implies God can become the reader's Shepherd as well. Jesus described Himself as our Shepherd if we are His followers (John 10:14). The words of Jesus accentuate the personal nature of our relationship with Him. The Good Shepherd knows us, and we know Him.

The primary function of the shepherd is care. Docile sheep cannot care for themselves. They are dependent on the shepherd for protection, food, water, and shelter. These needs demand the physical presence of the shepherd at all times. Since *the LORD is my shepherd*, anxiety about my needs is not appropriate. God will take care of me. The true scope of this profound reality is driven home with each subsequent line in this psalm. God does take good care of me.

I have what I need does not mean believers will have every material, financial, and physical benefit they want. We will not. Just as the shepherd owns the sheep and uses them for his benefit, Christ is the believer's Lord. We exist to serve Him. Therefore, our Shepherd provides us everything we require to accomplish the tasks He assigns to us. Believers will not lack in being filled full and fulfilled for Christ, and this is all we truly will need.

VERSE 2

² He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters.

In this verse the psalmist emphasized the shepherd's care for the physical needs of his sheep. In the Hebrew text, the verb translated ***he lets me lie down*** stresses God's role. He made His flock lie down in the noonday heat. But the action involves more than simply reclining. It incorporates the provisions of the location. A green pasture was a place where the sheep could eat and then lie down safely to rest when full and satisfied. The adjective ***green*** denotes that the field has tender young sprouts, the sheep's preferred meal. God's involvement in our lives includes the provision of nourishment, safety, and rest.

The verb ***leads*** suggests gentle guidance. A good shepherd leads his flock rather than driving it. Sheep require water daily because of the climate in the Middle East. However, sheep are afraid of flowing water. Therefore the shepherd must provide quiet waters for them to drink. He knows where to find such pools of water, and his sheep instinctively follow him there.

Christ said that the Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name and they follow Him (John 10:2-5). Believers will be led by Christ, not to springs of still water but to springs of living water (Rev. 7:17). He will give His followers an inexhaustible supply that will cause eternal life to spring up within the individual who drinks this living water (John 4:13-14).

What are some ways God provides safety and the necessities of life? What keeps people from recognizing His involvement in providing these things?



VERSE 3

³ He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake.

He renews my life recalls the shepherd's bringing back the straying sheep. Regrettably, all Christians wander away from God on occasion. In doing so, we expose ourselves to many dangers. Fortunately, when we do stray, God seeks to bring us back into His fold. Jesus compared God to a shepherd who lost one sheep. This shepherd left 99 other sheep in order to search for the one who strayed (Matt. 18:12-14).

The idea of the shepherd as a leader is repeated. In order to reach the safe pastures, the flocks must move. The shepherd selects the route of travel. It is ***along the right paths***. These are safe paths that are free from dangers. This does not mean the path is without peril, but that God's presence eliminates our fear. God guides His followers down the right paths ***for his name's sake***, to uphold His own reputation. In Hebrew thinking, one's name was a reflection of one's character. When God's people do right, they vindicate God's character.

God takes an individual who is exhausted or sorrowful, and He instills fresh life. He guides that person in what is right and fair in personal dealings with other people. God directs His sheep to do what is right in these relationships.

David drew metaphors from his life experience. How would you convey the biblical truth in these verses using contemporary analogies from your own life experience?

GUARDS (PS. 23:4)

VERSE 4

⁴ Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

In this verse, the psalmist ceased to write *about* God and began to speak *to* God. David characterized God as guarding His sheep, walking with them when they face challenges. Following the right path sometimes leads through dangerous sites. The ***darkest valley***

describes an extreme danger that seems life-threatening. Predators lurk in the dark shadows of the valley's rocky slopes. It is there that one's footing is most precarious. Even though the path goes into a place of danger, there is no need to fear because the Good Shepherd is present with His sheep. The Good Shepherd is also the light, and the light illuminates the darkness (John 1:5).

The **rod** and the **staff** describe the shepherd's crook. This tool can be employed as a club. With it the shepherd defends his sheep. He also may use it as a stick on which he rests himself. He uses the hook at one end to seize the legs of the sheep that are prone to run. Thus it can be used to resist danger that threatens the flock or to prevent sheep from wandering into danger. A good shepherd would risk his own life in order to protect his flock. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). He gave His life, but He also took it back up just as He promised (John 10:17-18). Now He is alive and present with His sheep. His presence guards their path even in the most hostile circumstances.

How do the sheep express trust in the shepherd? In what ways is obedience a function of trust?

HOSTS (PS. 23:5-6)

VERSE 5

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

David reminded his readers that God serves as a gracious host to His sheep, offering them protection, healing, and shelter. Some Bible scholars think the metaphor here changes from a shepherd to a dinner host. The ancient Jewish banquet was a public event. While invited guests might be seated at the table, anybody could come into the dining room, stand around, and watch the proceedings. **Enemies** were anyone who sought to cause one discomfort and anguish. Other scholars continue to see the metaphor of a shepherd and his sheep. In that case, the table refers to a leather strip laid out on the



ground by the shepherd when grazing was not available. He spread fodder out on it for the sheep to eat. *Enemies*, in this case, were the numerous predators and dangers of the region. In either case, the analogy indicates that God's people are never removed completely from trouble. However, God is always present to help them in times of trouble.

Pouring *oil* on the *head* was an act of honor. In the ancient Middle East, ointments and perfumes were customarily poured on certain guests at banquets. Shepherds also carried flasks of oil to doctor their sheep. Sheep's faces routinely were cut and scratched while foraging in thorny areas.

The *cup* frequently is used in a figurative sense in Scripture. Here it denotes God's provision and protection. The description of the cup overflowing depicts abundance and prosperity. The supply in the cup exceeds what the guest needs. In reality, God furnishes His people abundantly, not just with enough to get by. Remember, the security is in His presence, not in the material goods He might furnish.

VERSE 6

6 Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.

The word *only* reflects a deep belief that a godly person will always prevail. No crisis will overpower and destroy the person who trusts God to supply his or her needs. God desires a personal relationship in which we depend upon Him for comfort and support during times of crisis. An even stronger bond with Him is forged by our dependence upon Him in such troubles.

The psalmist listed two attributes of God that ensure God's people will prevail. First is His *goodness*. The Hebrew term denotes that which is desirable and beneficial. Here it has a sense of superior quality. Thus it describes God's nature and actions working for the welfare of His people. His *faithful love* is an expression of His relationship to His people. The Hebrew term is one of the most difficult to translate into English. The word always appears in the context of a covenant relationship, usually that of Yahweh and Israel. It signifies the conduct expected of parties in a covenant relationship and includes their loyalty to its terms. Therefore it denotes faithfulness to a covenant. However, that loyalty is born

out of love. Consequently, the term emphasizes Yahweh's love for His covenant people. The connecting of *goodness* and *faithful love* identified this assurance in God's nature rather than in the psalmist's good behavior. Together these two attributes produce worship and gratitude in God's people.

The psalmist's absolute confidence is expressed in the words ***I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.*** This statement doesn't suggest that he was moving into the temple—it had not been constructed in David's lifetime. Rather, the house of the Lord represents the place where God dwells with His people. No structure erected by humanity could contain God (Isa. 66:1-2). He is greater than His creation. Hence, the psalmist asserted that he would always live in God's presence.

What characteristics of God give confidence in times of trouble and in times of prosperity? How do verses 5 and 6 encourage a person facing a time of trouble? How do these verses bring perspective to those experiencing a time of prosperity?

.....

.....

.....

BIBLE SKILL: Memorize verses and apply them to a real-life situation.

Memorize or refresh your memorization of Psalm 23. Recite it aloud. Read it aloud again, putting emphasis on the personal pronouns. Write the psalm in your own words, reflecting on how the truth of this psalm can be seen in your own life.

.....

.....

.....

.....



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers can be confident that God provides for all their needs.
- We can be comforted knowing that God promises His presence in every life experience.
- Believers can be thankful for God’s eternal care for them.

Examine the stressors in your life, looking for any areas that reflect a need to trust God and His provision for you. Ask God to help you trust Him to provide for your needs (be specific), and record your prayer below.

Sometimes, when we are overwhelmed by a situation, it becomes difficult to discern God’s provisions. Enlist your Bible study group to analyze some of each other’s troubling times. Determine practical ways to incorporate mutual support into the life of your Bible study group.

Make an inventory of the essentials you need in order to survive. In what ways has God supplied each of these in your life? Record the name of one person with whom you can share how God provides for you.

MEMORY VERSE

The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need. —Psalm 23:1



Session 4

OUR RESPONSE

Thanksgiving is the proper response to God's answer to our prayers.

PSALM 138:1-8

¹ I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings. ² I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your constant love and truth. You have exalted your name and your promise above everything else. ³ On the day I called, you answered me; you increased strength within me. ⁴ All the kings on earth will give you thanks, LORD, when they hear what you have promised. ⁵ They will sing of the LORD's ways, for the LORD's glory is great. ⁶ Though the LORD is exalted, he takes note of the humble; but he knows the haughty from a distance. ⁷ If I walk into the thick of danger, you will preserve my life from the anger of



my enemies. You will extend your hand; your right hand will save me.

⁸ The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me. LORD, your faithful love endures forever; do not abandon the work of your hands.

Underline the verbs used in Psalm 138 to define God's actions. What connections do you see between the verbs used?

Identify words or phrases in this psalm that point to God's being intimately acquainted with people individually. How do these words and phrases impact your view of God?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Some reactions are instinctive. For example, whenever people see an object flying toward their head, they duck. Other reactions are developed through experience. When a batter hits a ball, the outfielder begins moving to the spot where he can catch it. Other responses are shaped by personal allegiance. If the outfielder catches the ball, fans of his team cheer. If they are fans of the batter's team, they groan.

What other categories for reactions would you suggest other than instinctive, developed, and allegiant? What example would you give to justify that category?

Psalm 138 encourages believers to develop a thankful heart. This mindset begins with thanking God for everything He does. But a thankful heart entails more than saying "thank You." It also acknowledges that eventually everyone will recognize that God is sovereign. Some will joyfully embrace His sovereignty. Others He

will subjugate. Thus believers can trust God's promise to complete His purpose in their lives and can find a reason to be thankful even in the tough times.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 138

Psalms, unlike most other biblical books, does not have a single cohesive theme. It finds its unity in the one true God, not in human experience. Various psalms reflect vastly different emotions, from irresistible awe (Ps. 8) to extreme bitterness (Ps. 137). But the Lord is constant. He does not change. His nature and activity permeate every word in Psalm 138.

In this psalm David speaks directly to God. His enthusiasm in thanking God for an unspecified deliverance cannot be muted. David's praise is accentuated by the continued existence of his enemies. Although God has saved him, God has not yet eradicated all of the psalmist's enemies. Their suppression must await a future date. David's faith allows him to grasp that ultimately the Lord will achieve all of His divine purposes. The authority of all monarchs, including David, would yield to the sovereignty of the Lord God.

The psalm sets forth the meaning and means for thanksgiving by the individual and by the community of faith. Believers rightfully should praise God for their salvation. Our redemption not only delivers us from our sins, it also assures our participation in the coming kingdom of God (see Rev. 11:15).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

I WILL THANK (PS. 138:1-3)

VERSE 1

¹ I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings.

The Hebrew text that is translated *I will give you thanks* is more comprehensive than the English version. In English, we distinguish between praise that focuses on the character or being of God (who God is) and thanksgiving that concentrates on the acts of God (what God does



or has done). Often this distinction is significant. However, believers must always praise God for who He is even when they do not perceive benefit in His activity. The verb translated *give you thanks* in verse 1 can include both thanksgiving and praise. Too often believers neglect praising God even though they thank Him repetitively. Giving thanks to God should always incorporate praising Him for who He is.

Once more we are reminded that the biblical concept of the heart is much more than poetic imagery. Whenever people make consequential choices, their heart rate increases, their blood pressure rises, and they feel a sensation in their chest. Hence, in Israelite thought, the heart symbolized human volition. Therefore, giving thanks ***with all my heart*** indicated that gratitude and praise so saturated the writer that it determined every choice he made.

In Hebrew poetry, the second line frequently repeats the sense of the previous line using different vocabulary. Hence ***I will sing your praise*** furnishes additional insight into giving thanks to God. Adoration and gratitude are expressed through vocal communication. Wholehearted praise involves the whole self (cognitive, intuitive, affective, and emotive). This forthright worship is uttered before an audience of the heavenly beings. Genuine thankfulness permeates one's entire being and so overwhelms an individual that it banishes all timidity in declaring it publicly, even though the audience includes the heavenly host!

Believers are urged to thank God not for everything but in everything (1 Thess. 5:18). Such praise is generated through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Believers know how God's answer will shape and work in all situations for their good, even those that initially may seem disastrous (Rom. 8:28). God works in all things to accomplish His purpose. Consequently, whenever God denies our petition or seems to be silent, we can be confident He has a reason that is ultimately in our best interests.

What may cause a person to hesitate in giving thanks to God? What roadblocks get in the way of a person developing an attitude of thankfulness?

VERSE 2

² I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your constant love and truth. You have exalted your name and your promise above everything else.

The temple had not yet been constructed in Jerusalem during David's lifetime. The primary meaning of the Hebrew term **temple** is "the dwelling place of God." In David's reign, the designation was applied to the temporary edifice he erected to contain the ark of the covenant (Ps. 27:4). David prayed that he might dwell in God's house as long as he lived (Pss. 23:6; 27:4). Since according to God's law only priests from the tribe of Levi could live in the temple, and David came from the tribe of Judah, the earthly king's petition surely implied something else. The sense of his wish was to always be in God's favor and presence.

The physical temple in Jerusalem housed the ark, and Yahweh was said to be enthroned above the ark's cherubim (2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1). Bowing down before one's sovereign ruler conformed to royal protocol. It denoted submission and devotion. The psalmist declared his intent to obey and honor God.

In the Old Testament, God's **name** is more than an identification tag. It represents His essential nature. Since His name can only be known because He discloses it, it is a revelation of His authority, holiness, power, and other attributes. Here the psalmist cites God's constant love and faithfulness. The citation itself is a quotation of God's own words during His revelation to Moses (Ex. 34:6).

The Hebrew word for **constant love** is one of the most difficult to translate. No single English word even begins to approximate its depth of meaning. It has been translated "faithful love," "kindness," "love," "lovingkindness," "loyal love," "mercy," "steadfast love," and "unfailing kindness." In one sense the term is close to the New Testament concept of God's grace—divine favor without regard to merit. At the same time, it also approximates *agape* love. The term always appears in the context of a covenant relationship, usually that of Yahweh and Israel. Hence the word designates Yahweh's love for His covenant people.

The Hebrew term for **truth** contains the underlying sense of certainty and dependability. It occurs 126 times in the Old Testament. The word describes a characteristic of God's nature. God never changes. Therefore this attribute enables people to know and trust God. People can place complete confidence in God's word and work.



VERSE 3

³ On the day I called, you answered me; you increased strength within me.

In this verse the psalmist recalled a previous prayer request. The specific incident is not identified. However, David was obviously in desperate circumstances, and so he **called** on God to help him. He does not immediately divulge how God **answered**, only that God did answer.

While the situation remains unknown, David was clear about God's answer to his prayer. Whether God changed David's circumstances is not stated. Instead, David unmistakably testified that God changed David. God provided him with the inner **strength** necessary for the situation. This Hebrew verb only occurs four times in the Old Testament and here literally means "you caused me to behave proudly." The idea is similar to Paul's testimony that God manifested His strength in Paul's weakness (see 2 Cor. 12:1-10).

What motivates a person to express thankfulness? Are some motives better than others? Explain.

KEY DOCTRINE: *Jesus*

He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission.

THEY WILL BOW (PS. 138:4-6)

VERSE 4

⁴ All the kings on earth will give you thanks, LORD, when they hear what you have promised.

The New Testament reveals that the day is coming when every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (Phil. 2:10). Here David proclaimed that all kingdoms of the earth will ultimately recognize God as

their sovereign. Whenever God speaks, His words are potent and effective (Isa. 55:11). He spoke, and His words created the universe. His promises are certain realities, not hopeful possibilities. Not the least of these pronouncements is the declaration of His sovereignty over all creation. Ultimately, all human authorities must submit to the establishment of His coming kingdom (Rev. 11:15).

In stark contrast to being vanquished by rival earthly kingdoms, subjugation by the Lord is cause for thanksgiving. Even deposed rulers will rejoice in God's new regime.

VERSE 5

⁵ They will sing of the LORD's ways, for the LORD's glory is great.

The Hebrew word *ways* is derived from a verb meaning "to tread or walk repeatedly." This recurring walking tramples the dirt and vegetation into an obvious path. The term is used figuratively here to denote the conduct that the sovereign Lord God Almighty demands of His subjects. It is virtually a synonym for God's law. In the unrepentant human mind, God's laws are oppressive and taxing. However, in reality, they are the reason for rejoicing. The subdued monarchs will praise God in song.

Their mirth is due to *the LORD's glory*. The *LORD's glory* is not some ambiguous emotional concept. While its form can vary greatly, it is a tangible manifestation of God's presence and power. In the Old Testament, God's glory commonly came in the form of smoke and fire. However, the external appearance of God's glory is secondary to the reality that it is compelling and consuming.

VERSE 6

⁶ Though the LORD is exalted, he takes note of the humble; but he knows the haughty from a distance.

David reminded his readers of God's recognition of the *humble* and the *haughty*. God is vastly different from humanity. He is infinite; we are finite. He is holy; we are sinful. He is omnipresent; we are locked in one location in time and space. Despite the grandfatherly images in popular culture, God is not our peer. He is without peer. Nevertheless, God sees the humble. These are those individuals whose self-reliance has been crushed. They recognize their inability to deal with their own weakness, particularly their sin. Therefore God will provide what they require.



In contrast, the haughty do not perceive their need for God. Hence, God does not draw near to aid them. However, they will ultimately acknowledge His sovereignty over their lives.

In what ways could this verse be seen as a promise and a threat? How would you describe the difference?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

Review the Old Testament Book of Ruth, paying particular attention to Ruth 2:20. In chapters 1 and 2, Naomi was portrayed as bitter because of the great hardships the Lord had allowed to enter into her life. In Ruth 2:20, however, Naomi recognized God's kindness. Compare Ruth 2:20 to Psalm 138:6, looking for common words and ideas. What do the similarities teach us about God's love and the fulfillment of His purpose? How are His love and purpose connected?

GOD WILL FULFILL (PS. 138:7-8)

VERSE 7

⁷ If I walk into the thick of danger, you will preserve my life from the anger of my enemies. You will extend your hand; your right hand will save me.

David affirmed his confidence in God's love, omnipresence, and power to fulfill His purposes for David. Whatever the exact circumstance, David realized it could easily grow worse. The root word behind ***thick of danger*** referred to a narrow or confined space that hindered action. The derivative word used here denotes intense inner turmoil, such as the anxiety people experience when an overwhelming enemy force approaches, or the anguish they feel when besieged. While there is no record of David's facing a siege, he repeatedly encountered ***enemies***.

Over and over these enemies sought to kill him. By every human measure they should have succeeded.

David's enemies failed because he trusted God, not his own skill. On this occasion he sought divine intervention. The **hand** is what people use to grasp and hence to implement their thoughts and ideas. A vast majority of the world's population is and was right-handed. Consequently, their **right hand** is stronger than the left and represents strength. David knew that God was stronger than his enemies and so possessed the power to impose His will over David's enemies. David's life was secure in God's hands. No foe could take David's life as long as God protected him.

VERSE 8

⁸ The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me. LORD, your faithful love endures forever; do not abandon the work of your hands.

David ended this psalm with three related conclusions. First, his life had meaning, but that meaning was determined solely by God. David was merely an instrument God employed to achieve His **purpose**.

Second, David's security rested in God's nature, not David's virtue. David addressed God by His covenant name, **the LORD** (Yahweh). Hence, David recalled his covenant relationship to God. Furthermore, **your faithful love** refers to God's love for His covenant people. This is the same Hebrew word that occurs in verse 2. This covenant love never varies. It never ends because it characterizes God. It is an essential component of His unchanging nature.

Third, God was intimately engaged in David's life. While the form here is a plea for help, that petition reflects an important reality. God had created David as certainly as He had formed Adam (Gen. 2:7). Moreover, God had continued to shape David's life. As David penned these words, he realized he was the man he was because of God's involvement in his life.

How does enduring a danger or a trial make a person more aware of God's will and working in his or her life? How does enduring it foster a thankful attitude?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers should joyfully give thanks to God for what He does, including answering prayer.
- Everyone will ultimately recognize God's sovereignty, some out of thankfulness and others out of fear.
- Believers can rely on God's power to fulfill His purposes in their lives.

Review your prayer journal, looking for expressions of thanksgiving. What actions do you need to take in your prayer life to reflect in a greater way the attitudes found in Psalm 138?

With your Bible study group, share reasons for being thankful. Discuss how the group can work at incorporating more thanksgiving into the prayer life of the group. Record steps that you can take.

Look for ways God is working His purposes in your life. What has God taught you over the past three months, and how did He teach you that truth? Take time to thank Him for working in your life, and commit to trusting Him to bring about His purposes through you.

MEMORY VERSE

I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings. —Psalm 138:1



Session 5

HIS PRESENCE

Security is found in the assurance of God's presence.

PSALM 84:1-12

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of Armies. ² I long and yearn for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God. ³ Even a sparrow finds a home, and a swallow, a nest for herself where she places her young—near your altars, LORD of Armies, my King and my God. ⁴ How happy are those who reside in your house, who praise you continually. *Selah* ⁵ Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a source of spring water; even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings. ⁷ They go from strength to strength; each appears before God in Zion. ⁸ LORD God of Armies,



hear my prayer; listen, God of Jacob. *Selah* ⁹ Consider our shield, God; look on the face of your anointed one. ¹⁰ Better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than live in the tents of wicked people. ¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield. The LORD grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity. ¹² Happy is the person who trusts in you, LORD of Armies!

Note the titles and designations used for God in Psalm 84:1-12. Identify the title or designation used the most. What are some implications of its repetition?

Identify the things the psalmist said produce happiness. How did these things impact the decisions the psalmist made?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Some locations evoke emotion. A monument to soldiers who lost their lives may move you to great emotion. Visiting the place where you and your spouse became engaged or honeymooned can rekindle your love for one another. What makes a place important to us is what happened there and the symbolism it carries in our lives.

What locations or memorials cause you to react with intense emotion? Why do you respond with intense emotion at that specific location?

Psalm 84 recounts the emotions the psalmist felt when he visited the temple in Jerusalem. The sacred structure reminded ancient Israelites of God's close presence. They regarded it as God's house,

His dwelling place on earth. The psalmist's experiences at the temple created an intense longing for God's sanctuary. When he was absent, he ached to go there. When he was present, he yearned to stay there. He understood that his personal happiness was coupled with the presence of God, and for him the sense of that presence was strongest at the temple. So, in a real sense, the psalm is a prayer for God's presence. Security is found in the assurance of God's presence.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 84

According to its title, Psalm 84 is a psalm of the sons of Korah. The Korahites were gatekeepers in the temple and likely also served as musicians. Eleven psalms are connected to them. The note that this psalm is "for the choir director" supports the idea that it was used in temple worship. The meaning of the notation "on the Gittith," however, is unclear.

What is undeniable is the writer's yearning to be at the temple in Jerusalem. This longing came out of the role of the temple under the old covenant. The heart of the temple was the holy of holies. The only furnishing in this room was the ark of the covenant. God was said to be enthroned above its cherubim (2 Sam. 6:2; Ps. 80:1). Yet only once a year did anyone enter this most sacred space. On the Day of Atonement the high priest went inside alone. Nevertheless, because God's people recognized the holy of holies as God's throne, the temple represented the invisible presence of God on earth. To enter into the temple was to be in His presence and to fellowship with Him.

Furthermore, the temple was designated in the law as the prescribed site for performing the mandatory and voluntary offerings. While each had distinct purposes, they all functioned as elements of worshiping the one true God.

As Jesus died on the cross, the veil that separated the holy of holies from the rest of the temple was torn from top to bottom. In that act, God invited all people to approach Him boldly through the blood of Jesus (Heb. 10:19-22). Moreover, under the new covenant inaugurated by Christ's blood, God is present permanently within every believer through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.



EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PASSION (PS. 84:1-4)

VERSE 1

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of Armies.

This psalm depicts a pilgrim going to the temple. He referred to the temple as God's *dwelling place*. The Hebrew word is the plural form of tabernacle, the portable structure fabricated during Israel's exodus out of Egypt. It accentuates the nearness and closeness of God inside the temple precincts. The term *lovely* designates something exceedingly loved. The psalmist spoke directly to God and expressed his desire to be in the temple. This initial statement unveils almost a giddy reaction as he comes near to the sacred structure.

Yet the pilgrim cannot escape the awesome nature of God. He addressed God as *LORD of Armies*. *LORD* is God's personal name, Yahweh. It is compounded with a military term for armies. At first this title affirmed Yahweh as the true commander of Israel's army. However, this does not fully account for all of its usages. Israel quickly acknowledged that God likewise commanded an angelic army. Later the word also was coupled with "heaven" (2 Kings 17:16) to denote God's authority over the heavenly bodies. Thus, *LORD of Armies* is an exalted title that expresses divine sovereignty. God commands. Humanity, angels, and even inanimate objects must obey.

VERSE 2

² I long and yearn for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God.

The psalmist employed two intense verbs to express his unquenchable craving to stand inside the temple. His yearning was not for the physical facility but to enter into God's presence. He knew the purpose of the temple was for the worship of God.

The living God distinguishes the Lord from false deities. The word *living* denotes physical life. When used of God, it takes on a comparative sense. Other nations worshiped numerous gods. Customarily these gods were fashioned as idols. Ironically the idols expressed the nature of their deity. An idol cannot move. It cannot speak or hear. And it cannot act in response to a given situation.

An idol just sits in its place. However, the living God moves without assistance. He speaks and listens. He acts. He is not dead stone, metal, or wood. He is alive! He is the only living God.

VERSE 3

³ Even a sparrow finds a home, and a swallow, a nest for herself where she places her young—near your altars, LORD of Armies, my King and my God.

The courtyard of the temple was open, and the structure itself was bursting with ledges and crannies. Birds of various species nested on its eaves and raised their young in its precincts. The psalmist envied the birds because they dwelt in the temple. The altar represented the site where worshipers offered their sacrifices to God. Near the spot designated for humanity—the crown of creation—to give to God, God gave homes to His lesser creatures. Jesus used a similar illustration to teach His followers to seek God rather than growing anxious about their physical needs (Matt. 6:25-34).

Once more the psalmist called God the **LORD of Armies**. Here God's unlimited sovereignty narrows to focus on the pilgrim's relationship to God. Note the personal pronoun **my**. Worship begins in a personal relationship with God, a relationship in which the individual freely submits to God's authority.

VERSE 4

⁴ How happy are those who reside in your house, who praise you continually. *Selah*

Happy denotes an optimal life that results from choosing to obey God. In some translations of the Bible it is rendered "blessed." The verse points to two components for being happy. The first was attendance at the temple. According to the New Testament, the temple in Jerusalem has been replaced by a new reality. The Holy Spirit now makes His abode in the believer (John 14:27; 1 Cor. 6:19). Paul indicated that the church is a new temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19-20). At the same time, the New Testament clearly indicates that the church should assemble together regularly (Heb. 10:24-25).

The second component is the choice to praise God **continually**. The Spirit and the truth are inextricably related to worship (John 4:24). Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the symbolism portrayed in the



Old Testament by the temple and the ark of the covenant. The ark represented the presence of God in the midst of His people. However, John 1:14 declares that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”

The meanings of some Hebrew terms in Psalms are unknown. Therefore, they are usually transliterated in English versions. •*Selah* is probably a musical notation and may refer to a musical interlude (giving the worshiper time to reflect upon the meaning of the words) or to raising the voice to a higher pitch.

What role does passion play in worship? How does the expectation of God’s presence impact that passion?

THE PRIORITY (PS. 84:5-7)

VERSES 5-7

⁵ Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a source of spring water; even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings. ⁷ They go from strength to strength; each appears before God in Zion.

Happy is the same word used in the previous verse. The psalmist continued to describe the choices that produced an optimal life. The term *strength* primarily denotes an attribute of God in protecting His people. Hence, the idea is finding security in God rather than in one’s own assets. The Hebrew word rendered *pilgrimage* is less specific. The context of yearning for the temple gives the sense of a sacred trip to the temple. However, implicit in that journey is the idea of abiding by God’s revealed truth.

The psalmist recognized the value of making a pilgrimage to the temple but characterized the trip as having difficulties and hardships. The •*Valley of Baca* was not a specific geographical location. The name either means “valley of weeping” or “valley of desolation.” It serves as an idiom for sorrow. God turns the pilgrim’s dry places into an oasis.

This blessing is compared to the early rain. The early rains came in October and November. Western winds brought moisture off the Mediterranean Sea and dropped it on Palestine. In a region that

averages only 25 inches of rain annually, the arrival of these rains brought joy and relief to its agrarian inhabitants.

The phrase **they go from strength to strength** indicates that the lengthy journey did not weaken pilgrims. Instead, they grew stronger as they moved closer to their destination. The anticipation of appearing **before God in Zion** invigorated them. *Zion* originally was the name given to the hill on which Jerusalem stood. In the Book of Psalms it most often denoted the temple built by Solomon. Later, it also came to refer to the heavenly Jerusalem, the site where the Messiah will appear at the end of time. When the pilgrims entered the temple they saw what they perceived as the visible manifestation of God on earth at that time.

What was the value of God's presence for the psalmist? How does God's presence serve as a source of strength?

BIBLE SKILL: *Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words or phrases.*

Use a concordance to find other uses of the term "anointed" in the Bible. Read selected passages and make notes of findings that help you better understand the term. Read the entry for the term in a trusted Bible dictionary, adding to your notes. What key insights did you gain about the term?

THE PRAYER (PS. 84:8-9)

VERSES 8-9

⁸ **LORD God of Armies, hear my prayer; listen, God of Jacob. *Selah***

⁹ **Consider our shield, God; look on the face of your anointed one.**

Two essential truths about prayer are presented in this verse. The first concerns the place of prayer. The psalmist was still a great distance



away from the place where God had promised to hear Israel's prayers (1 Kings 8:29,38-39). Nevertheless, the **LORD God of Armies** is sovereign over all creation. Therefore He can hear His people wherever they might pray.

The second truth comes out of the designation **God of Jacob**. Jacob was the patriarch whose descendants formed the nation of Israel. The name *Jacob* means "he cheats." Jacob deceived his blind father and cheated his older brother out of his inheritance. God's choice of Jacob over Esau reminds us of God's grace. Neither Jacob nor Esau deserved God's favor. Likewise, God hears His people's prayers not because they merit His ear, but because of His grace.

The psalmist called on God to look with favor on the king, whom he called **our shield**. Soldiers used shields to block incoming blows. Israel's king was responsible for the protection of God's people. Kings were ceremonially **anointed** as a sign that God had appointed them to their office. This act signified that God's power was present to enable them to carry out the duties of the office.

Why was it so important for the psalmist to ask God to direct the king? How did the realization that God anoints rulers and leaders impact how the psalmist prayed?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Religious Liberty*

Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God.

THE PRESENCE (PS. 84:10-12)

VERSE 10

**¹⁰ Better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else.
I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than
live in the tents of wicked people.**

The psalmist declared the joy of being in God's presence, even if that was in an outer court. A very brief time in the temple was better than a thousand times that long elsewhere. **Anywhere else** conveys the comparison's scope. The phrase **I would rather** signifies that this was a choice. Standing at the door denoted a humble supplicant. Keep in mind this psalm is designated "a psalm of the sons of Korah." As noted previously, the sons of Korah were doorkeepers in the temple (1 Chron. 9:17-24; 26:1-19). Serving as a doorkeeper can be an uncomfortable job. It requires being on one's feet and sometimes being exposed to cold and rain. Being inside a tent, on the other hand, was comfortable. Still, the psalmist preferred serving at the door of the temple. Clearly he loved the place of worship. Nothing on earth could compare to a moment near God. Israel's Gentile neighbors might appear superior to Israel, but they lacked such joyful experiences.

VERSES 11-12

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield. The LORD grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity. ¹² Happy is the person who trusts in you, LORD of Armies!

The psalmist called God **a sun and shield**. As the light of our lives, God provides illumination and direction. As our shield, God provides protection. But God's goodness does not cease there. To those who trust in Him, God gives an optimal life. Remember that what designates a good thing must be determined by God rather than by the individual.

One last time the psalmist addressed God by the exalted appellation **LORD of Armies**. Here it incorporates every attribute of God and summons people to make a choice. They must either trust in Him or depend on something less. The individual who decides to trust God will be happy. Elsewhere, Psalms makes clear that the one who does not trust God is doomed for destruction (Ps. 1:4-6).

What modern-day illustration might convey the same trust as the psalmist expressed? What makes God's presence so compelling?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are to worship God passionately in light of who He is.
- God offers strength for life to those who seek to worship Him.
- Believers are to pray for their leaders and for God's direction as they lead.
- Believers are to respond to God's presence with worship and praise.

As a Bible study group, share some of the blessings God has bestowed on you. Discuss how an awareness of these blessings impacts how you approach worship. Challenge each other to remember the blessings shared during your next worship experience.

List the names of leaders in your community, region, and country. Pray for God to direct their steps as they lead this week. Record your prayer below.

Evaluate your level of passion for being in God's presence. Look for things that lower your passion. What actions do you need to take to develop your passion for being in God's presence?

MEMORY VERSE

Happy is the person who trusts in you, LORD of Armies!
—Psalm 84:12



Session 6

THE CREATOR

Believers should worship God above all else because He is sovereign.

PSALM 95:1-11

¹ Come, let us shout joyfully to the LORD, shout triumphantly to the rock of our salvation! ² Let us enter his presence with thanksgiving; let us shout triumphantly to him in song. ³ For the LORD is a great God, a great King above all gods. ⁴ The depths of the earth are in his hand, and the mountain peaks are his. ⁵ The sea is his; he made it. His hands formed the dry land. ⁶ Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. ⁷ For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care. Today, if you hear his voice: ⁸ Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the wilderness ⁹ where your



fathers tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

¹⁰ For forty years I was disgusted with that generation; I said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray; they do not know my ways.”

¹¹ So I swore in my anger, “They will not enter my rest.”

Highlight words and phrases in Psalm 95 that point to God’s work in the world. What do these communicate about God’s interaction with His creation?

Notice the change in voice in this psalm. What makes the change in voice significant?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Highways are populated with warning signs. Traffic lights, stop signs, and yield signs govern the flow of travel. Flashing yellow caution lights tell of potential dangers. Speed limit signs indicate the maximum safe speed of travel. Whenever we fail to heed warnings or just ignore them, terrible consequences can occur.

What traffic warning sign would you rate as the most useful or important? Explain.

Psalm 95 calls us to worship God. He is worthy of worship. The psalmist lays out a case for worshiping God. He created everything, including humanity. He cares for His creation. He is the One who secures our salvation. However, God inspired the psalmist to abruptly interrupt this hymn of praise and warn people to be faithful to Him. Believers should worship God above all else because He is sovereign and has demonstrated loving kindness. Our lives should demonstrate our worship of Him through obedience.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 95

This psalm may have been composed for the Festival of Booths. This weeklong feast celebrated the ingathering of the harvest and commemorated Israel's exodus out of Egyptian slavery. During this sacred holiday, the Israelites erected temporary living quarters to remind them of God's providential care during the years when the nation wandered in the wilderness. Booths were not indications of privation and poverty but were symbols of protection and preservation. Living in booths for a week reminded Israel of God's protection during a critical period of its history.

Psalm 95 combines a hymn of praise with a warning from God. The Festival of Booths was a joyful time. For six days the people lived in the fields and labored from sunrise to dark gathering in the harvest. The agricultural principles that produced the crops were established by the Creator of heaven and earth (Gen. 1:11-12,29-30). The land where the Israelites farmed had been given to them by God. Therefore, harvesting food called for praising God (Deut. 8:7-10).

However, instead of rejoicing, the Israelites often complained. God answered the praise in verses 1-7a with a stern warning. He spoke directly to the worshipers and reminded them of His judgment against their faithless ancestors, the generation that perished during the 40 years in the wilderness. He mentioned only two examples but clearly implied they were symptomatic of a larger failure. God's warning was not confined to the Sinai covenant with Israel. It is equally applicable to Christians today. Verses 7b-11 are quoted and expounded upon in Hebrews 3:7-4:13. Therefore, God unmistakably warns that faithlessness to the gospel will incur an even worse fate.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WHAT (PS. 95:1-2)

VERSES 1-2

¹ Come, let us shout joyfully to the LORD, shout triumphantly to the rock of our salvation! ² Let us enter his presence with thanksgiving; let us shout triumphantly to him in song.



The psalmist called for everyone to **come** and offer celebratory worship to God. Two verbs convey the psalmist's exhortation. The first is **shout joyfully**. This Hebrew verb essentially means to express jubilation toward God, either by singing or shouting. The second verb is translated **shout triumphantly**. The primary meaning of this word is "to produce a noise by shouting or with a musical instrument." In relationship to worship, it denotes the adoration of people. Together these verbs suggest noise similar to that in a sports area when the home team scores.

The people's exhilaration is directed toward **the LORD**. The Hebrew name Yahweh is used here, distinguishing the one true God from all false deities. His name also reminded Israel that they enjoyed a covenant relationship with God.

The **rock of our salvation** is a metaphor that points to the security found in God as our Savior. God has shown Himself to be unchangeable and strong like a rock.

The invitation to worship God also directs worshipers in how to enter God's presence (v. 2). Corporate worship includes expressing love and encouragement to other believers, but the central Person of worship remains God.

It should be noted that worship is a noun before it becomes a verb. The believer's state of being is made ready before the believer's physical expression of worship is exercised. This is seen in Amos 5:23 where God rejected worship because the people's relationships with God and with one another were out of order. God said to take away the noise of their songs because those worshiping Him were defrauding the poor. Jesus also said there were those who worshiped Him with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (Matt. 15:8).

Humans were created to worship God. This is Paul's indictment of the Roman pagans who chose not to worship the God who had revealed Himself through natural revelation (Rom. 1:25). Revelation 5 and 7 indicate that worship will be our eternal activity in heaven. Therefore, the church's worship on earth should be a snapshot of the future state of worship in eternity.

Based on this passage, how would you define worship? What elements should be included in worship?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God*

There is one and only one living and true God.

WHO (PS. 95:3-5)

VERSE 3

³ For the LORD is a great God, a great King above all gods.

The psalmist highlighted God as the **great King**. He commenced by identifying God by His covenant name, Yahweh (**the LORD**). This eliminated any false impression about who God is. Ancient Israel occupied a small geographic area. The surrounding neighbors venerated idols. This verse compared Yahweh to their pantheons of false deities. The adjective *great* asserted His superiority over all other gods. The portrayal of Yahweh as a great King proclaimed His sovereignty over these gods. The psalmist's comparison did not imply that these gods were real. They were not (see Isa. 44:6-20; 46:1-7). Rather, it simply acknowledged that pagans worshiped these alleged gods.

VERSE 4

⁴ The depths of the earth are in his hand, and the mountain peaks are his.

The **depths of the earth** and the **mountain peaks** represent two extremes on the planet. The first is hidden beneath the ground. The center of the earth is approximately 3,950 miles from the surface. The world's tallest mountain is Mount Everest at 29,028 feet. The tallest mountain near Israel is Mount Hermon at a mere 9,100 feet. It can be seen from the Dead Sea, a distance of 120 miles. Regardless of the numerical measurements of these two extremes, they are insignificant when compared to their Creator. They are **in his hand**. This expression not only signifies the superiority of God, but also more significantly indicates that God firmly controls both!



VERSE 5

⁵ The sea is his; he made it. His hands formed the dry land.

Like “the depths of the earth” (v. 4), the **sea** represents a hidden mystery. Even today with all of our modern research tools and techniques, the ocean hides unexplored secrets. But the reference to the sea adds a new dimension to God’s sovereignty over His creation: danger. In ancient times the Mediterranean Sea was dangerous to navigate from mid-September to February. The Israelites were not a seafaring people.

The hand is the part of the human body that enables people to make and use tools and perform many other functions. It is used figuratively of God in the Bible as an idiom for God’s power and authority. Hence the statement here that God’s **hands formed the dry land** does not contradict the Genesis narrative where God created dry land by speaking (Gen. 1:9). Rather it supplements the earlier account with this metaphor. God’s power and authority over the sea were so absolute that when He spoke the sea obeyed and yielded up dry land. Both sea and land belong to God because He created them.

In what ways does the earth point to the greatness of God as Creator? What parts of creation cause the greatest fear? How do these feared things point to God?

HOW (PS. 95:6-7a)

VERSE 6

⁶ Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

The psalmist directed all of creation to approach God with humility and reverence, bowing before Him. An understanding of the respective roles in the relationship between God and humanity is essential to genuine worship. The Hebrew verb **worship** means “to prostrate oneself.” It is the most common term for worship. The verb rendered **bow down** means to fall to one’s knees and bend the back in homage. Hence the first verb conveys the spirit of worship and the second a

posture for worship. Bowing and kneeling are appropriate expressions of humility before God. At the same time we must remember there are numerous other postures for worshiping God in Scripture. For example, lifting up the hands is a posture of supplication (Ps. 28:2). Likewise, looking up can be appropriate (Ps. 123:1).

The verb **kneel** literally means “to bless” and may suggest kneeling in order to receive a blessing. **Before the LORD** literally reads “to the face of Yahweh.” Yahweh is **our Maker**. This term incorporates the idea that God is our Creator, but it likewise includes the sense that He continues to shape our lives today.

VERSE 7a

7a For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the sheep under his care.

Humanity’s role in the relationship cannot be limited to servitude alone. To do so would defame God’s nature. Elsewhere God defines His nature as love (1 John 4:8). Because love characterizes God, God cares for His covenant people. The relationship between God and Israel was comparable to that of a shepherd and his sheep. A shepherd protects his sheep from predators and other dangers. He ensures they have an adequate supply of fresh water and tender green grass. He treats their injuries in order to restore their health. Our Creator did not just create us. He actively works as our Shepherd. Everything we are or have must be attributed to God. Jesus asserted that He is the Good Shepherd (John 10:7-18). In Him God provided for our ultimate spiritual well-being.

How is the image of sheep a fitting metaphor for the relationship between God and His people?

WHEN (PS. 95:7b-11)

VERSE 7b

7b Today, if you hear his voice:

Listening to God is a vital component of our relationship with Him. Jesus said that the ideal shepherd called his sheep by name,



and the sheep responded to his voice. At the same time, sheep never respond to strangers. Therefore, since Jesus is the Good Shepherd, if we are His sheep, we will **hear his voice**. Obedience is implicit to hearing God's voice. **Today** warns that there is a time factor in responding to God. Obedience cannot be postponed. Delay can cause serious harm.

How does God speak to His people? What are some roadblocks that keep His people from listening to Him?

VERSES 8-9

⁸ Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the wilderness ⁹ where your fathers tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did.

The psalmist warned readers about ignoring God, failing to teach about Him, and failing to worship Him. He points to past failures in Israel's history as illustrations. When God's people come before Him, they must be pliable so that He can shape them. To **harden your hearts** connotes being so stubborn that change is no longer possible.

On two occasions during Israel's wandering in the Sinai wilderness, they rebelled against God and refused to trust Him to provide essential water. Both times God brought water from solid rock. One incident occurred shortly after the exodus from Egypt (Ex. 17:1-7). The other occurred just before entering Canaan (Num. 20:1-13). Between the two incidents, God performed a multitude of miracles demonstrating His care for Israel. Testing denotes proving the quality of something. Israel was commanded, "Do not test the LORD your God as you tested him at Massah" (Deut. 6:16). Nonetheless, the Israelites persisted in not trusting God even though they had seen the evidence of God's power and provision. Their attitude and actions were the opposite of worship.

VERSE 10

¹⁰ For forty years I was disgusted with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray; they do not know my ways."

The verb *I was disgusted* denotes a strong emotional loathing that causes the destruction of the object of the disgust. Thus, God expressed His total rejection of the generation that Moses led out of Egypt. They constantly made the wrong choices because they did not know God's ways.

VERSE 11

¹¹ So I swore in my anger, “They will not enter my rest.”

God holds people accountable for testing Him. Of the vast multitude that departed Egypt—there were 600,000 men of military age (Ex. 12:37)—only two, Joshua and Caleb, entered Canaan. The rest died in the wilderness. Here, entering into His *rest* refers to enjoying the fullness of God's blessing (see Heb. 4:1-13). This comes from worshiping God continuously both individually and corporately.

What are the dangers of failing to worship God? How does obedience impact worship? How are obedience and worship similar, and how are they different?

BIBLE SKILL: Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

Psalm 95 refers to the Israelites' hardening their hearts at Meribah and Massah in the wilderness. Read what happened at Massah and Meribah in Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-13; 27:12-14; and Deuteronomy 32:48-52. In what ways did the Israelites test God in these locations? What were the consequences in each case? How do these historical events shed light on the meaning and application of Psalm 95?



IN MY CONTEXT

- All of creation should celebrate its Creator.
- God should be worshiped as our Creator.
- All people should approach worship of the Creator with humility and reverence.
- Believers must consistently worship God, corporately and privately.

List ways to celebrate and worship God as Creator. What do you need to incorporate into your private worship practices? What do you need to incorporate into your public worship practices? Describe how you will do so.

Examine your attitude toward worship. How would you rate your humility and reverence when it comes to worship? What actions can you take to foster humility and reverence in your worship practices?

Discuss as a group ways of holding others accountable for actively worshipping God. How can the group encourage private worship? What actions should the group take to encourage corporate worship?

MEMORY VERSE

Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. —Psalm 95:6



GOD REVEALED

God reveals Himself through His creation and His Word.

PSALM 19:1-14

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge. ³ There is no speech; there are no words; their voice is not heard. ⁴ Their message has gone out to the whole earth, and their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun. ⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming from his home; it rejoices like an athlete running a course. ⁶ It rises from one end of the heavens and circles to their other end; nothing is hidden from its heat. ⁷ The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing



one's life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise. ⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart glad; the command of the LORD is radiant, making the eyes light up. ⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are reliable and altogether righteous. ¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold—than an abundance of pure gold; and sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb. ¹¹ In addition, your servant is warned by them, and in keeping them there is an abundant reward. ¹² Who perceives his unintentional sins? Cleanse me from my hidden faults. ¹³ Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule me. Then I will be blameless and cleansed from blatant rebellion. ¹⁴ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

Notice the metaphors used to describe how nature points to God. What idea do these words communicate to the reader of these verses?

Underline the words used to identify the written Word of God. What do these various terms suggest to you about the function of the Bible?

FIRST THOUGHTS

We often make poor judges of character. For example, we may judge people's leadership abilities solely on the basis of their height or other physical attributes. Visual observation, however, yields limited information, and that information may lead us to incorrect conclusions. Listening to people in a personal conversation provides greater and more accurate knowledge.

How can basing our impression of a person only on appearance lead to false conclusions? What are some things about a person that can only be learned by talking to him or her?

We can learn some about God by observing His creation, but He also reveals Himself through His Word. Psalm 19 considers both types of revelation. Observing God’s creation is like looking at a person’s appearance. It will tell you something about God. However, reading the Bible gives far more helpful insight into God’s character and His involvement in our lives. It is like listening to God tell you about Himself and about how He loves you. As we read, He invites you and me into a personal, growing relationship with Him.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 19

Psalm 19 consists of two parts. At first glance they appear to be different and unrelated. However, closer scrutiny reveals that two distinct ideas have been skillfully joined together to convey one vital truth: God has revealed Himself to mankind. The first six verses call attention to creation. God’s creation reveals His glory. We call this “general revelation.” Verses 7-14 describe the glory of God as revealed in His Word. We call this “special revelation” because it is more specific and known only through Scripture.

The dual realities of Psalm 19 are reiterated in the New Testament. Paul wrote that the revelation of His nature within creation is the basis for God’s condemnation of humanity (Rom. 1:18-23). General revelation provides enough revelation to condemn, but not enough to save. The Bible is God’s inerrant Word and provides people with an infallible guide for living in a right relationship with Him through faith in Christ.

The title of this psalm associates it with David; however, we know nothing about the historical circumstance behind it. The other phrase in the title does provide a general clue about the psalm’s background. “For the choir director” signifies that the psalm was intended for



worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Hence the psalm tutored worshipers to see God in His creation and to learn identifiable truths about Him from Scripture.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SEEN IN CREATION (PS. 19:1-6)

VERSE 1

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands.

The psalmist celebrated ways God is revealed in creation. In the Old Testament, *the glory of God* was the manifestation of God's presence, usually by some visible means. His power is inherent to His presence. Hence *the heavens* revealed the presence of God. The second line of this verse repeats the first line using synonyms. *The expanse* (sky) parallels *the heavens*. Likewise, *the work of his hands* parallels *the glory of God*. This phrase reminds the reader that God created the vast visible space that stretches above a person's head from horizon to horizon. Therefore, by looking into the skies people encounter God's glory. God is in nature, but nature is not God. The Bible does not endorse pantheism or worshiping nature. The Creator must be kept separate from His creation.

VERSE 2

² Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge.

Day after day and *night after night* point to the perpetual cycle of time. Both day and night came into existence by divine command (Gen. 1:3-5). God created the sun to dominate the day and the moon to dominate the night (Gen. 1:14-19). Day and night each present unique insight into creation. Bright sunlight illuminates the features and variety on the surface of planet earth. Night's dark sky hides the detail on earth but permits humanity to glimpse the enormity and beauty of the universe.

Here *speech* is equivalent to the proclamation of the heavens in the previous verse. The verb *pour out* depicts the incessant bubbling of a spring as it gushes forth water. The sky constantly declares the

glory of its Creator. Night or day is irrelevant. The particulars that are revealed may vary, but the greatness of the One who made them is the same.

VERSES 3-4a

³ There is no speech; there are no words; their voice is not heard.

^{4a} Their message has gone out to the whole earth, and their words to the ends of the world.

The word *speech* is the same Hebrew word as in verse 2. But here the word takes on a different sense. While in verse 2 it denotes the message, here it refers to the method that conveys the message. Day and night do not employ words or sounds to communicate the glory of God or the work of His hand. Nevertheless, they reveal both. The beauty and orderliness of creation proclaim God. Since the sun rises and sets across *the whole earth*, God's glory should be obvious to everyone.

VERSES 4b-6

^{4b} In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun. ⁵ It is like a bridegroom coming from his home; it rejoices like an athlete running a course. ⁶ It rises from one end of the heavens and circles to their other end; nothing is hidden from its heat.

Pitching a tent for the sun is poetic language for the disappearance of the sun at night. From the perspective of earth, the sun is the dominant object in the sky. Yet God takes care of it, just as a man might pitch a tent to provide shelter for his family.

In verse 5 the sun is personified as a *bridegroom* and as an *athlete*. Both metaphors convey the idea of youthful strength and vitality. Sunrise is compared to the festive mood of the groom emerging from the nuptial chamber. The sun's movement throughout the day remains as resolute and inevitable as an athlete racing on a marked track. Each step brings the runner closer to the finish line, and so the runner rejoices at his or her progress.

The daily course of the sun follows the constancy of creation. It rises each morning in the east and moves across the sky until it sets behind the western horizon. From our perspective, the earth appears visually to be relatively flat, and the sky looks like a giant inverted blue bowl resting on the earth's surface. The sun then circles inside this bowl from the rim to a spot directly over our heads down to another



spot on the rim opposite from where it emerged. As the sun traverses the sky, its heat radiates down upon everything beneath its path.

The analogy demonstrates at least two important characteristics of God. First, God does not change. He is neither erratic nor capricious. Second, nothing can be hidden from God. Therefore, hiding from God or lying to God is useless.

What conclusions can people draw about God by observing His creation? What misconceptions about God might people draw if they only depend upon what they see in creation?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

Compare Romans 1:18-32 to Psalm 19. How is Romans 1 similar to and different from Psalm 19? What can humanity learn about God from nature? How has humanity generally responded to the truths about God revealed in nature? How does and will God respond to humanity's idolatry and suppression of the truth?

SEEN IN HIS WORD (PS. 19:7-11)

VERSE 7

⁷ The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one's life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise.

The word *instruction* commonly is translated "law." The central idea of the word is instruction received from a higher authority on how to live. In scope, the word covers teachings given to children by a parent to regulations established by God for humanity. The laws of God are not imperatives that enslave humanity. Rather they are divine teachings that, when followed, free individuals for a better life.

Here the psalmist switched from the generic term “God” (v. 1) to **the LORD**. In the Hebrew text the proper name Yahweh is used. This change marks a dramatic shift in the type of revelation being considered. This latter revelation is specific and unambiguous. **Perfect** also defines it as without a single flaw.

The word **testimony** is a derivative of a verb meaning “to repeat.” This noun frequently designated the two stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. Here it is a synonym for God’s law. The **inexperienced** denotes immature people who believe anything. However, God’s Word transforms these individuals, giving them wisdom. As wise people they not only possess knowledge, they also make appropriate use of their knowledge. God’s Word contains everything needed to live a God-honoring life.

VERSE 8

⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart glad; the command of the LORD is radiant, making the eyes light up.

The term **precepts** denotes the responsibilities that the Lord places on His people. The **command of the LORD** refers to the terms of the covenant. These two terms reflect God’s authority over His people. Both focus on the behavior of those who conform to God’s instructions. This obedience results in a life of rejoicing. The idiom **making the eyes light up** likely emphasizes increased spiritual knowledge and wisdom.

VERSE 9

⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are reliable and altogether righteous.

The **fear of the LORD** was an expression of piety. Fear is the natural first response to the revelation of God’s presence and power (see Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 1:17). However, this initial terror is not what this phrase depicts. It describes people who live their life with the keen awareness of God’s nearness and an understanding of who He is. The awesome realization that God is holy and humanity is sinful dominates this awareness.

The word **ordinances** refers to past judicial decisions made by God. These are recorded in Scripture. Since God does not change, subsequent decisions will always be consistent with these earlier incidents.



VERSE 10

¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold—than an abundance of pure gold; and sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb.

Gold and **honey** were valuable wares in ancient Israel. Honey served as both a sweet food and a trade commodity. The purest honey came from the **honeycomb**. The two items suggest luxury and affluence. However, the benefits derived from God's Word are superior to either of these material possessions and yield the satisfaction of a good life.

VERSE 11

¹¹ In addition, your servant is warned by them, and in keeping them there is an abundant reward.

Two specific advantages that Scripture provides are presented in verse 11. First, the Bible warns us about certain dangers. These dangers transcend time and have eternal consequences. Second, doing what the Bible stipulates generates a far better life than one would experience otherwise. This also has eternal results.

How does God's Word help us avoid dangers and traps? If we know there are benefits to keeping God's Word, why do we so easily choose to disregard or disobey it?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Scriptures*

The Holy Bible is God's revelation of Himself to man, a perfect treasure of divine instruction.

CELEBRATED IN HIS PEOPLE (PS. 19:12-14)

VERSE 12

¹² Who perceives his unintentional sins? Cleanse me from my hidden faults.

In this verse the tenor of the psalm changes from praising God's provision of His Word to a sudden awareness of the psalmist's sinfulness. The phrase **unintentional sins** points to conduct generated out of ignorance or inadvertence. The question is rhetorical. People don't recognize their unintentional sin unless it is pointed out. Through the illumination of God's Word and the conviction of the Holy Spirit, we discover our sinfulness and find the only means to overcome it. Christ—the living Word and ultimate revelation of God—provides us cleansing and freedom from sin.

VERSE 13

¹³ Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule me. Then I will be blameless and cleansed from blatant rebellion.

Willful sins and **blatant rebellion** are strong terms used to point out that we sometimes deliberately disobey God. Therefore, the psalmist prayed that God would keep him from such flagrant sin. In the Model Prayer, Jesus taught us to pray similarly (Matt. 6:13). One day, believers will stand before God and will be presented **blameless and cleansed** before Him because the offering of Christ's blood was acceptable before God (Jude 24).

What role does Scripture play in revealing our faults and shortcomings? How does God use Scripture in our lives to correct us so we can better reflect His character?

VERSE 14

¹⁴ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

The psalm ends with the aspiration that the psalmist's own speech and thoughts will be **acceptable** to the Lord. **Rock** was a metaphor for a reliable refuge. Our security is found in God, not in ourselves. Identifying the **LORD** as **my Redeemer** is even more insightful in that the Hebrew word implies a close family relationship. As such, it foreshadows the New Testament idea that believers are adopted into God's family through the sacrifice of Christ.



IN MY CONTEXT

- All people are accountable to God since He reveals Himself through His creation.
- Believers should treasure God’s written Word.
- Forgiveness and freedom from sin are found through faith in Jesus, the living Word.

Reflect on the various ways God reveals Himself to you. What are you doing to put yourself in a better position to hear Him? What actions should you take to better hear Him?

As a group, discuss ways of making God’s Word more prevalent in the life of the group. What actions need to be taken to make sure God’s Word is central to all that is done by the group? How can these actions be implemented?

Examine your life, looking for areas of disobedience (both willful and unintentional). Ask God to reveal these areas to you so that you can ask for His forgiveness. What actions do you need to take so that you reflect to a greater degree His character in your life?

MEMORY VERSE

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands. —Psalm 19:1



Session 8

HIS LOVE

God's unchanging love gives us reasons to celebrate.

PSALM 136:1-5,10-15,23-26

¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. *His faithful love endures forever.* ² Give thanks to the God of gods. *His faithful love endures forever.* ³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords. *His faithful love endures forever.* ⁴ He alone does great wonders. *His faithful love endures forever.* ⁵ He made the heavens skillfully. *His faithful love endures forever.* [...] ¹⁰ He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹¹ and brought Israel out from among them *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹² with a strong hand and outstretched arm. *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹³ He divided the Red Sea *His faithful love endures forever.*



14 and led Israel through, *His faithful love endures forever.* 15 but hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. *His faithful love endures forever.* [...] 23 He remembered us in our humiliation *His faithful love endures forever.* 24 and rescued us from our foes. *His faithful love endures forever.* 25 He gives food to every creature. *His faithful love endures forever.* 26 Give thanks to the God of heaven! *His faithful love endures forever.*

Note the titles used for God in this psalm. What is the significance of identifying God by these titles when offering thanksgiving?

Notice the refrain “His faithful love endures forever.” How is the refrain a commentary on each action the psalmist remembered?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Most Americans point to a celebration between the Pilgrims and Native Americans in 1621 as the first Thanksgiving. However, other accounts exist of thanksgiving celebrations prior to 1621. The French Huguenots held a thanksgiving service when they arrived in 1564. Spanish conquistadors recorded that they celebrated a thanksgiving mass after they landed in 1565. In each case, at least part of the group celebrated in recognition of God’s grace and provision.

What makes giving thanks so important? What does a person’s willingness to give thanks to God reveal about his or her understanding of God?

Psalm 136 begins with a call to give thanks to God. The psalmist declared that all thanksgiving should begin with God (vv. 1-5). It is not about us; it is about God. If we make ourselves the focus, we starve ourselves spiritually. By first remembering God, we will then rediscover past blessings (vv. 10-15) and can trust Him with our present and future (vv. 23-26). When good things happen, He is behind it. Psalm 136 stresses the fact that God blesses His people because He loves us. All that God gives us and the love with which He gives it should cause us to give Him praise continually.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 136

Psalm 136 is a call to remember and worship God. Much like a responsive reading, the Levites and priests would sing or say the first line of each verse, then the people would respond by saying in unison: “His faithful love endures forever.” The refrain occurs 26 times, once in every verse. The great truth of Psalm 136 is that God’s love is inexhaustibly available for those who follow Him.

The Old Testament is replete with reminders of God’s unending love (Deut. 7:9; 1 Chron. 16:34; Ezra 3:11; Lam. 3:22), while the New Testament proves the depth of God’s love with the crucifixion of His Son (Matt. 27:31). Knowing the cross was in His future, Jesus told His followers that the greatest demonstration of love is when one lays down his life for his friends (John 15:13). Of course, the cross wasn’t God’s only act of love in the New Testament. During His ministry on earth, Jesus consistently executed the mighty acts of our loving God. He started His ministry by teaching about the significance of loving others just as God loves us (Matt. 5:43-48). He then showed the love of God by healing the sick, raising the dead, and befriending lost sinners (Luke 7:22).

The love of God is so strong that He carries out the promises of His covenant even when His people are unfaithful. Even the act of discipline is an example of God’s unending love (Heb. 12:6). God is not like a god of process theology or open theism who undergoes growth and development alongside His creation. Rather, like His steadfast, loyal love, He is faithful and fixed in His character. Even in heaven, the Lord who is faithful and true (Rev. 19:11) will be given thanks by the saints (Rev. 7:12) for His steadfast love.



EXPLORE THE TEXT

IN CREATION (PS. 136:1-5)

VERSES 1-3

¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. *His faithful love endures forever.* ² Give thanks to the God of gods. *His faithful love endures forever.* ³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords. *His faithful love endures forever.*

The worship leader reminded worshipers of the importance of thanking God for His many good gifts. The first of these is God's greatest gift—the gift of Himself.

A closer look at the Hebrew text gives us a better understanding of the One who is worthy of worship. He is **LORD**, translated from *Yahweh*—the independent (from anyone or anything) and self-existent (no one created Him) God who has always existed and will always exist. *Yahweh* is the preeminent name of God that reveals He alone is God.

He is **God**, translated from *Elohim*—the Creator who is strong in power, sovereignty, and majesty. *Elohim* is the descriptive name of God, giving honor for all He has done.

He is **Lord**, translated from *Adon*—the only true master and provider. He is far superior to all whom humans may call lord because only He can meet physical and spiritual needs.

He is good, and as a result, all that He does is good. Out of pure goodness flows, without any hint of evil, good works and good intentions (Jer. 29:11; Rom. 8:28). An emphasis on God's goodness is also found in Psalms 106; 107; and 118.

How you view God affects your worship. When we worship Him, we are not worshiping a nameless, faceless, powerless God. We are worshiping the Lord who is good. All that He does in our lives is for our good because *his faithful love endures forever.*

How do the names used for God speak into how a person should worship? How might a wrong view of God negatively affect our worship?

VERSES 4-5

⁴ **He alone does great wonders. His faithful love endures forever.**

⁵ **He made the heavens skillfully. His faithful love endures forever.**

The first essential element of worship is remembering who God is, but another key element is giving thanks for what God has done. One of His **great wonders** is creation itself. The Bible clearly teaches that God created all things (Gen. 2:4). Consider the complexity of our own galaxy. Revolving around the sun, all the planets follow a precise orbit that keeps them from crashing into each other. Our earth's orbit and the tilt of the axis bring seasonal weather changes on both sides of the globe. Our atmosphere contains the right mix of nitrogen and oxygen to support life, along with just enough gravity that keeps us from floating away. Only God could have created the heavens and earth (Ps. 89:11).

Consider the complexity of the human body. Inside our bodies are muscular, cardiovascular, digestive, endocrine, nervous, respiratory, lymphatic, urinary, and reproductive systems that work in perfect harmony with each other. As the psalmist David proclaims, the only reasonable conclusion is that we are remarkably and wonderfully made by God (Ps. 139:14).

By looking to **the heavens**, all generations are reminded of God's enduring love, pointing to the care with which God designed His creation. In His love, He created you and placed you in the midst of His creation. You can trust God and His plans because His purposes are always for your good. Like His people of old, we have no other alternative than to declare, **his faithful love endures forever.**

Why is it important for Christians to believe God created everything out of nothing?

How can you help others understand the necessity of affirming biblical creation?



BIBLE SKILL: *Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.*

Psalm 136 emphasizes by repetition the doctrine of God's love. Read the following Bible passages and take note of what they teach about God's love: Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Nehemiah 9:17; Isaiah 54:8; Hosea 3:1-5; John 3:16-18; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 1:3-6; 1 John 3:16; 4:8. How do the truths of these passages relate to what is found in Psalm 136?

.....

.....

.....

.....

IN CONQUEST (PS. 136:10-15)

VERSES 10-12

¹⁰ **He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians** *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹¹ **and brought Israel out from among them** *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹² **with a strong hand and outstretched arm.** *His faithful love endures forever.*

People are forgetful creatures. We forget names, phone numbers, and even birthdates. Forgetfulness isn't new. The **Egyptians** were forgetful too. They forgot about their heroic Hebrew deliverer, Joseph, who successfully guided them through seven years of famine (Ex. 1:8). As a result of the Egyptians' forgetfulness, the people of Israel were enslaved by the Egyptians for 430 years (Ex. 12:41; Gal. 3:17) until God sent His messenger Moses (Ex. 3:10). Because of Pharaoh's continued resistance, God brought 10 plagues upon the hard-hearted Egyptians, the last being the death of every **firstborn** (Ex. 12:29), including Pharaoh's own son, which led to the release of God's people (Ex. 12:31).

With a strong hand, God broke the prideful Egyptians. With an **outstretched arm,** God set His people free. While the Israelites thought they were a forgotten people, God's love was steadfast.

The exodus was evidence that God heard their cries (Ex. 3:9). And it was a reminder that God would continue hearing their cries.

While God loves every person, those who reject Him suffer His judgment. The cross reveals that a holy God cannot tolerate sin. All people sin, and those who cling to their sin will one day experience the wrath of God (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 20:11-13). If you are living a sinful lifestyle, turn from your sin and accept His forgiving love (1 John 1:9). The love of God covers the worst of sins.

VERSES 13-15

¹³ He divided the Red Sea *His faithful love endures forever.*

¹⁴ and led Israel through, *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹⁵ but hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. *His faithful love endures forever.*

After letting the Israelites go, Pharaoh suffered from the plight of forgetfulness again as he and his army rushed to recapture the people of God (Ex. 14:5-9). Confronted with the Red Sea before them and Pharaoh's army behind them, God's people felt as if their situation was hopeless (Ex. 14:10-12). Just when it seemed all was lost, God parted the sea, led Israel through, and destroyed Pharaoh and his army in the sea (Ex. 14:15-31). Each time the worshipers sang this hymn, they remembered how God saved them from sure destruction, serving as a verbal reminder of God's care for those who follow Him.

How often do we thank God? At more than just mealtime, let us practice giving God our deepest appreciation for His blessings in our lives. His provisions are numerous if we look for them. While they may not be as dramatic as the parting of the Red Sea, God orchestrates events in our lives each day. Too often we miss these events because we aren't looking for them or because our heart has grown ungrateful.

Why is it so easy to forget God's blessings? What are some of the pitfalls that come from forgetting?



IN COMPASSION (PS. 136:23-26)

VERSES 23-24

²³ He remembered us in our humiliation *His faithful love endures forever.* ²⁴ and rescued us from our foes. *His faithful love endures forever.*

Being humiliated is a terrible feeling. If left undone, this ugly feeling can destroy a person's self-worth and future. The Israelites knew what it was like to be humiliated. They trusted Egypt, and Egypt enslaved them. The Egyptians treated the Hebrews like worthless property and only hardened their plight when confronted with their horrible working conditions (Ex. 5:6-9). At their moment of greatest need, God was keenly aware of their **humiliation**. God had not forgotten His people. In a plan started long before, God proved His great love for His people by delivering them from their foes.

God sees our tears. He knows our humiliation and our pain. Nothing escapes His watchful eye (Zech. 12:4). Whether our humiliation comes from surroundings like work or school, or because we stand for Christ, God knows. Peter called on his readers to unleash their cares and lay them at the Father's feet, for He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7). In our times of distress, we must seek His face above all else. When we do, we will learn what Israel learned: ***his faithful love endures forever.***

VERSE 25

²⁵ He gives food to every creature. *His faithful love endures forever.*

There were no convenience stores or comfortable hotels when Israel traveled to the promised land. Whatever supplies they had ran out long before they reached the promised land. Tired, thirsty, and hungry, God met their needs with manna (Ex. 16:4) and quail (16:13) for food, along with water from a rock (17:6). Repeatedly throughout the wilderness experience, God demonstrated the depth of His love by providing for the daily needs of the children of Israel.

We must continually give the Lord our problems. He will never abandon us in our time of need because ***his faithful love endures forever.*** As He has done before in our Christian pilgrimages, He will continue to prove Himself faithful (Ps. 37:25). Just as the psalmist

called on the people to remember God's past provisions, we too must remember what He has done in our lives. What He has done in the past, He will do in the present and future.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace.

VERSE 26

²⁶ Give thanks to the God of heaven! His faithful love endures forever.

By remembering all that God had done, the children of God had ample reasons for thanksgiving. In creation, in conquest, and in compassion, the Lord was with them and provided for them, turning their hopelessness into joy. The command to **give thanks** means more than casually or carelessly expressing your appreciation for what God has done. The word means to throw (like a stone or arrow) and bemoan (with wringing of the hands). In other words, it means intently, passionately, and reverently giving God our deepest gratitude. As we cast our thankful worship on the Lord, we must seek to send our gratitude straight to the heart of God. We must not allow the hardships of life to drive us away from the Lord. Instead, we can allow those hardships to move us closer to God, seeking shelter beneath His wings (Matt. 23:37). God's unchanging love deserves our worship because **his faithful love endures forever.**

Why is giving thanks to God important for believers? How can you help others express their thankfulness to God?



IN MY CONTEXT

- People can trust God and His plans—namely, that His purposes will be accomplished for our good.
- Believers should thank God for providing them deliverance and an eternal home.
- Believers can celebrate God’s provisions, both His physical provisions and spiritual provisions.

In what areas is God asking you to trust Him in a deeper way? How can you overcome any fears you may have in those areas? List actions you will take to demonstrate trust in Him.

Create a list through the week of things for which you are thankful that you may have taken for granted. Review the list at the end of the week. With whom can you share your list?

Discuss with your Bible study group ways the group can celebrate God’s provisions. How can thanksgiving be incorporated into the regular life of the group? What actions does the group need to take to elevate thanksgiving?

MEMORY VERSE

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His faithful love endures forever. —Psalm 136:1



Session 9

HIS FAITHFULNESS

God can be trusted as the One who reigns eternally.

PSALM 146:1-10

¹ Hallelujah! My soul, praise the LORD. ² I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing to my God as long as I live. ³ Do not trust in nobles, in a son of man, who cannot save. ⁴ When his breath leaves him, he returns to the ground; on that day his plans die. ⁵ Happy is the one whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them. He remains faithful forever, ⁷ executing justice for the exploited and giving food to the hungry. The LORD frees prisoners. ⁸ The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD raises up those who are oppressed. The LORD loves



the righteous.⁹ The LORD protects resident aliens and helps the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.¹⁰ The LORD reigns forever; Zion, your God reigns for all generations. Hallelujah!

Circle the verbs in Psalm 146 that define God's actions in this world. How do these actions compare with the actions of others in whom people may put their trust?

Notice the contrast between God and the others identified in this psalm whom people trust for security. How is God differentiated from them?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Abused by a loved one. Cheated by a friend. Denied a promotion by a selfish boss. Then a confidant breaks the silence. Betrayal hurts. When people we trust shatter our confidence, recovery can take years, if we recover at all. Even worse, we carry these feelings of mistrust into other relationships, even into our relationship with God.

How does experiencing betrayal in one relationship in our lives impact other relationships? What makes it so hard for people to move past what they perceive to be a betrayal?

Trust, or the lack of it, is an integral part of our lives. When we speak, we count on other people to trust that we are telling the truth. When loved ones and friends speak to us, we trust them until that trust is violated. After it is violated, for a long time we may be reluctant to trust.

We trust doctors with our health, mechanics with our cars, teachers and babysitters with our children, investment advisers with our money, and the driver in the next lane with our lives. Our trust has been violated so often by public figures in politics, sports, and even religion that we may wonder whether to trust anyone at all in power. We are familiar with the principle that a person is as good as his or her word, and intuitively we know it is true. However, we know that every human being will fail at some point, including ourselves. Only God is worthy of our trust all the time. Therefore, only God is worthy of our worship.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 146

Psalms 146–150 are known as “Hallelujah psalms,” or psalms that praise the Lord. They each begin and end with “Hallelujah!” Many Old Testament scholars date the final five psalms to the period after the Jews had returned to Jerusalem from exile. In the Greek translation of this section of Psalms, the words “Haggai and Zechariah” appear in the superscriptions four times. Those two prophets served after the return from exile, in the final years of the sixth century B.C. How these psalms are related to those prophets is unknown, but perhaps they were written during their lifetime.

The theme of Psalm 146 is praise. It teaches that praising the Lord is worthy of a lifelong pursuit (v. 2) based on seven irrevocable truths:

- Only God can save (v. 3).
- Man’s wisdom is faulty because it lacks permanence (vv. 3-4).
- True joy and hopefulness are found in God (v. 5).
- As Creator, God can be trusted since He is permanent and faithful (v. 6).
- God knows and cares for those who hurt (vv. 7-9).
- Those who obey God experience His love (v. 8).
- God’s reign is eternal (v. 10).

God is both transcendent (above His people) and immanent (with His people), which is demonstrated by His faithful acts among the poor and strangers. God, the King of the universe, is immortal, and humans are mortal. For the Christian, praising God is not an option; it is an imperative based on God’s character portrayed in His faithful acts for



His people. In our human frailty, trusting God is not always easy, but when we exercise faith, the Holy Spirit empowers us to trust the Lord for help because the Holy Spirit is our paraclete, or helper (v. 5).

As believers, we don't naively trust in the Lord simply because we are told to do so. We trust God because His faithfulness proves we can trust Him (v. 6). Psalm 146 not only describes God's faithfulness to the people of that day, but it also speaks of God's promised faithfulness to future generations (v. 10), fulfilled with the coming of Jesus. Our Lord came to do what was promised not only by the psalmist but also by Isaiah the prophet (Ps. 146:7-9; Isa. 61:1-2; Luke 4:18-19).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE DECLARATION (PS. 146:1-2)

VERSES 1-2

¹ Hallelujah! My soul, praise the LORD. ² I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing to my God as long as I live.

The psalmist declared his intention to remain faithful to God, praising the Lord as long as he lived. Notice the depth of the psalmist's allegiance. He would **praise the LORD** with his **soul**. Not just with his lips but also with every fiber of his being, he would offer God his unending praise. He also would **sing** God's praise for the rest of his life. As he exalted God, he would unashamedly let others know of his lifelong commitment to the Lord.

How did God's faithfulness inspire the psalmist's faithfulness? God promised Abraham that his offspring would forever be His people and He would be their God (Gen. 17:4-8). God proved His faithfulness again when He delivered the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 13:14). The tabernacle (Ex. 40:38) and then the temple (1 Kings 9:3) reminded the psalmist of God's continual presence. In battle after battle, God showed Himself victorious over Israel's enemies. Whether it was an impenetrable wall at Jericho (Josh. 6:20) or a Philistine giant named Goliath (1 Sam. 17:50-51), God protected His people. Even the land the psalmist called home was a gift from God (Deut. 9:5). Faced with the evidence of God's faithfulness, the psalmist declared his undying loyalty and love to the One who had been faithful to him.

We too can praise God for His faithfulness. By faith in Jesus Christ, we belong to God (Eph. 2:12-13). He is our God and we are His children. Nothing can ever separate us from His love (Rom. 8:38-39). We have been delivered from the bondage of sin that once controlled our lives (Rom. 8:1-4). We have the assurance of God's presence through the indwelling of His Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). In life's battles, we can face our enemies with confidence, knowing God will fight with us and for us (Deut. 20:4; Eph. 6:11). We also have the assurance of an eternal heavenly home promised by God (2 Cor. 5:1). Overwhelmed with the evidence of God's faithfulness in our lives, we declare our undying loyalty and love to the One who has been faithful to us.

In what ways does God show Himself faithful to believers today? What are some appropriate ways of declaring God's faithfulness to us?

THE WARNING (PS. 146:3-4)

VERSES 3-4

³ Do not trust in nobles, in a son of man, who cannot save. ⁴ When his breath leaves him, he returns to the ground; on that day his plans die.

After announcing his undying loyalty to God, the psalmist gave this warning to others: ***do not trust in nobles*** (people who possess rank and influence). Certainly, no human leader is perfect. Even with the best of intentions, people make mistakes. According to the psalmist, nobles cannot be the ultimate objects of our trust because they ***cannot save***.

This issue of trust has always been central for the people of God. What do we need most—government's help, education's help, or God's help? Is our trust in human leaders or in God?

God has both the wisdom and power to accomplish His good purposes. Failing to trust in God leads to disappointment and ruin (Job 15:31). The Bible is filled with examples of misplaced trust. Instead of trusting and waiting on God, the children of Israel made a golden calf and thus fell into idolatry and debauchery (Ex. 32:1-25). By ignoring God's commands, Samson lost his strength and then



his life (Judg. 16:1-20,30). We must avoid making the same mistakes. Trusting in anyone or anything other than God (including trust in ourselves) can have disastrous results. We must always remember that God's way is the best way (Job 42:2; Prov. 3:5-6).

Unlike leaders who reign for a relatively short amount of time, God's kingdom has no end (Rev. 22:5). God isn't here today and gone tomorrow. While we might worry about some lifetime warranties, we will never have to worry about God posting an "out of business" sign (see Jer. 10:10; Dan. 4:2; Rom. 1:2; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2 Pet. 1:11; 1 John 1:2). The psalmist calls us to trust in the One whose plans were made before the foundation of the world (Matt. 13:35) and whose word endures forever (1 Pet. 1:25).

Why are people tempted to put their trust in human leaders instead of in God?

What are the dangers of trusting in another person for one's security and well-being?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom*

The Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

THE WORTHY ONE (PS. 146:5-9)

VERSES 5-9

⁵ Happy is the one whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, ⁶ the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them. He remains faithful forever, ⁷ executing justice for the exploited and giving food to the hungry.

The LORD frees prisoners. ⁸ The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD raises up those who are oppressed. The LORD loves the righteous. ⁹ The LORD protects resident aliens and helps the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

The psalmist made the point that people and their plans die (v. 4), but the story doesn't end there. There is One who is worthy and able, a Helper in whom we can put our hope, and He is ***the God of Jacob***.

It's interesting that the psalmist used Jacob as an example instead of one of the other patriarchs like Abraham or Joseph. Jacob was far from perfect. Twice he took advantage of his older brother, using his brother's hunger against him (Gen. 25:29-34) and stealing his brother's blessing (27:1-35). Then Jacob fell victim to trickery when his uncle deceived him into marrying Leah instead of Rachel. He worked 14 years so he could marry the woman he loved (29:13-29). But it was the same Jacob who, when he realized he was in the presence of God, wrestled an angel all night so God would bless him (32:24-29). It is the same Jacob whose sons and two grandsons would become the foundation for the nation of Israel (49:28-33). Jacob's life was a contradiction of good and bad. Jacob is an apt example for us because he lived as many believers live today—spiritually erratic.

The emphasis here, however, is not on Jacob but on *the God of Jacob*. Although Jacob could not always be trusted, God can always be trusted. He remains faithful regardless of what others, including His children, do.

How faithful is God? The psalmist listed nine areas of God's faithfulness in verses 7-9:

- He executes ***justice for the exploited***.
- He gives ***food to the hungry***.
- He ***frees prisoners***.
- He ***opens the eyes of the blind***.
- He ***raises up those who are oppressed***.
- He ***loves the righteous***.
- He ***protects resident aliens***.
- He ***helps the fatherless and the widow***.
- He ***frustrates the ways of the wicked***.



Whatever our need, God can meet it. Whether facing exploitation, hunger, bondage, or sickness, God can be trusted with our hurts. If we need deliverance from oppression, circumstances, or wickedness, we must seek God above all else. Even if we are the ones who made the mess in the first place, we can still find forgiveness and cleansing through His Son. Nothing is beyond God's power, and no one is beyond His reach. We can trust God to be true to His character in every situation. Although we can't always count on others, we can count on God because only He gives lasting joy, help, and hope. He remains forever faithful to His people.

In what circumstances is God's faithfulness most treasured: in times of prosperity or in times of despair? Explain.

BIBLE SKILL: *Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words or phrases.*

Focus on the phrase "executing justice" in Psalm 146:7. Look up "justice" in an English dictionary to discover its basic meaning. Use a concordance to find other uses of the term in Scripture. Read the context of selected passages that include the word "justice," and make notes of the various ways the word is used. Read the entry for the term in a Bible dictionary, adding to your notes. What insights about justice did you gain? How does that help you better understand God's work in His creation?

THE REALITY (PS. 146:10)

VERSE 10

¹⁰ The LORD reigns forever; Zion, your God reigns for all generations. Hallelujah!

The psalm concludes as it began, with an exhortation to praise the Lord (**Hallelujah!**). The phrase **the LORD reigns** is the crescendo and climax of this hymn. And who is this Lord who reigns?

He is the King who robes himself in majesty and strength (Ps. 93:1). Unlike human rulers who rule based on popular opinion or out of vanity, all that God does is an extension of who He is—His character and authority. He will never act contrary to His divine nature.

He is the King who created all things and judges His creation wisely (Ps. 96:10). As Creator, He lovingly cares for His creation; therefore, all that He does is holy, just, and good. His judgments cannot be bought or influenced through human intervention.

He is the King who causes His enemies to tremble (Ps. 99:1). He protects His own, fiercely guarding them while judging those who oppose Him. All that are His are firmly in His hand.

In contrast with human leaders who rule, then die, the Lord is the King who **reigns** forever and **for all generations**. He will always sit on His throne without the worry of term limits or death, and His righteous reign will always be the same.

Because He is the King who reigns forever, His people can rejoice. Our hearts can rejoice in knowing that the infinite and eternal God who possesses unlimited power and unerring wisdom is also the One who governs and directs our lives. In light of His eternal reign, we are to trust and praise Him all the days of our lives. God is on His throne right now watching over us and preparing a place for us in His forever kingdom. He is and forevermore will be the King (Rev. 17:14; 19:16).

Can you envision the time when no earthly kingdoms exist, when God is the only King? How does that truth motivate you to worship and trust God?

How can believers show that they belong to God's kingdom? What responsibilities come with being part of God's eternal kingdom?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers can praise God for His faithfulness.
- Failing to trust in God will lead to disappointment and ruin.
- God can be trusted to remain faithful forever.
- Believers can live in the light of God's eternal reign, praising Him as God.

Examine your life for areas in which you trust others more than God. What actions do you need to take to demonstrate greater trust in God in the areas you identified?

Discuss with your Bible study groups ways of warning others who place their trust in other people instead of in God. How can you approach them in a loving and honest way? What can your group do to help others place their full trust in Christ?

Reflect on God's eternal faithfulness. How does His eternal faithfulness impact the decisions you make today? What actions can you take today that demonstrate your confidence in His eternal faithfulness?

MEMORY VERSE

The Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them. He remains faithful forever. —Psalm 146:6



Session 10

THE CONFESSION

The realization of sin should move us to confession and repentance.

PSALM 51:1-17

¹ Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion. ² Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me. ⁴ Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge. ⁵ Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me. ⁶ Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within. ⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy



and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt. ¹⁰ God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you. ¹⁴ Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵ Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.

Circle words and phrases in Psalm 51:1-17 that point to feelings of remorse. How did these feelings impact David's confession?

Notice how David described in this psalm the acts that led to his confession. What do these words or phrases reveal about the nature of sin?

FIRST THOUGHTS

A package arrived at a church one day that included an old Bible and a simple note. The note told about a couple who had visited the area some 40 years prior and attended an English class hosted by the church. The man had seen some Bibles sitting in a corner and decided to take one. He packed the Bible when he returned to his home country. In the note, the man apologized for taking the Bible, sharing that he became overwhelmed with guilt every time he saw the Bible. He returned it with the hope that the Bible would find its rightful home again. The toll of 40 years of guilt had grown too heavy to bear, and he had to act.

How does guilt move a person to act? Can guilt be both good and bad? Explain.

God has given every human a sense of right and wrong. The apostle Paul, referring to people who don't know Christ, said of them, "The law is written on their hearts" (Rom. 2:15). All people have some moral sense of right and wrong because all people are made in God's image. God has also given us an infallible guide to right and wrong in His Word, the Bible. God's Word not only tells us what is right and wrong, it also instructs us about what to do with our guilt.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 51

Psalm 51 is one of the penitential psalms whereby David petitioned God's forgiveness and reconciliation, providing detailed insight into David's repentance after Nathan confronted David with the sins of adultery and murder (2 Sam. 12:1-15). Using a story similar in proportion to David versus Goliath (1 Sam. 17), Nathan told David of a large ranch owner who stole and consumed the only lamb of a much smaller rancher. Outraged, David promised swift retribution for the callous rancher. Nathan then revealed the hardhearted man in the story to be David when he stole another man's wife (Bathsheba) and covered his theft by having her husband (Uriah) killed in battle.

Our modern culture glamorizes sinful lifestyles. David's transparency reveals how sin breeds rebellion (v. 1), guilt (v. 2), shame (vv. 3-4), disappointment (v. 6), condemnation (v. 7), and heartache (v. 8). The good news of Psalm 51 is that God's forgiveness can create a right heart (v. 10), restored fellowship (v. 11), renewed joy (v. 12), a rejuvenated yearning for service (vv. 12-13), and a responsive desire for worship (vv. 14-17). Like David, if your life has veered off course, come before the Lord in honesty (vv. 1-4), humility (vv. 7-12), and a hunger for God (vv. 14-17). Whether confronted or convicted, immediately confess and repent of all sin.

Sometimes forgiven believers wrestle with feelings of shame. Guilt (what we have done) must be distinguished from shame (who we are).



Guilt is the normal response of the sinner to his or her sin. However, the forgiven sinner should no longer live in shame, because there is no condemnation in Christ (Rom. 8:1). Jesus became sin so we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

BIBLE SKILL: *Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to Bible verses.*

Focus on Psalm 51:1-2. Read the verses aloud several times. Each time, emphasize different words or phrases as you read. For example, in one reading, emphasize each word for sin. Then read the verse again, emphasizing all the verbs. Take note of your thoughts and feelings. What feelings were evoked by the different words and phrases as you emphasized them?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GUILTY AS CHARGED (PS. 51:1-5)

VERSE 1

¹ Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion.

Once David gave in to the sin of adultery, other sins followed. When he learned Bathsheba was pregnant with his child (2 Sam. 11:1-5), he ordered Uriah home from battle, hoping Uriah would spend the night with his wife. Being a man of integrity, Uriah refused the comforts of home while his men were in battle (vv. 6-13). In desperation, David had Uriah killed (vv. 14-17). After allowing Bathsheba a period of mourning, David brought her into his palace as his own wife under the guise of providing for the widow of a war hero (vv. 26-27).

Sin did not gratify David; instead, it led him on a downward spiral of deceit and death. David likely thought he had sufficiently covered his tracks and gotten away with his sin until God's messenger arrived about nine months later (2 Sam. 12:1-13).

Convicted, David realized his sin was an act of **•rebellion** (see p. 6) against God. He had broken the Sixth and Seventh Commandments by committing adultery and murder (Ex. 20:13-14). As king of Israel, David understood the severity of rebellion. His only recourse was to admit his guilt and seek God's mercy.

Because God is gracious and shows **faithful love** and **abundant compassion**, we too can turn to Him when we fall for sin's temptations. No matter the mess we make of our life, God can rescue us—as long as we take responsibility for our sin by admitting our guilt.

VERSES 2-5

² Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. ³ For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.

⁴ Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge. ⁵ Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

David was riddled with guilt for destroying a marriage, killing an innocent man, and causing the death of his child (2 Sam. 12:14). His sin made him feel dirty on the inside. What dirt does to the body, sin does to the inner person. David needed a cleansing that only God could provide. He was consumed with his wrongdoing. Every sinful word and every sinful act must have replayed over and over in his mind. No matter where he went or what he did, he could not escape his **•sin**. He was ashamed before God and knew God was right to judge him. Do these sound like the words of someone who was enjoying life? No, these are the words of someone who experienced sin's heartache.

Notice also the progression of David's confession. First, the rebellious sinner pleaded for God's grace, love, and compassion (v. 1). Second, David begged for God's cleansing forgiveness (v. 2). Third, the repentant king honestly admitted he had sinned (v. 3). Fourth, David acknowledged that God, the true Judge, held him accountable for his wickedness (v. 4). Fifth, he made no excuses for his unacceptable behavior (v. 5). **Sinful when my mother conceived me** meant there had never been a time when he had not been a sinner. He had been born with sinful inclinations. David didn't hide, justify, or deny his sin. He admitted he was guilty as charged. Like David, we have committed sin and are just as guilty before God.



What are some ways people sugarcoat or rationalize sin to deal with their guilt? Why is it easier to point out the sin in others than to deal with our own sin?

PLEA FOR CLEANSING (PS. 51:6-13)

VERSE 6

⁶ Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within.

What does God want from His children? He wants ***integrity in the inner self***. *Integrity* comes from Hebrew word meaning stability, truth, and trustworthiness. These are the virtues David lost when he dove into sin. His life became unstable when he forsook God's truth, and as a result, he knew God could no longer trust him. David longed for a right relationship with God and with God's Word. He wanted God's ***wisdom*** to fill his heart and guide his life. He found himself in a desolate pit with the deep waters of sin drowning him, and now he wanted out. David teaches us that the way back from sin starts with desire—the desire to be whole again, recognizing the devastating consequences of sin and authentically craving God's forgiveness. Sin leads away from God while spiritual wellness begins when we draw near to God (Jas. 4:8), thirsting for Him above all else (Ps. 40:1-2).

VERSES 7-9

⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹ Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.

As David began his plea for cleansing, he specifically asked God for two things: forgiveness and a changed life. While the word *forgive* doesn't appear in the psalm, the psalmist made it clear that it was exactly what he needed from God. David pleaded with God: ***purify me with •hyssop***. Hyssop was a shrub with hairy stems that could be dipped into liquid. The priests used hyssop for sprinkling blood

on sacrifices or water on people needing ceremonial cleansing (see Lev. 14:4-6; Num. 19:18). Only by the sprinkling with hyssop could the sinner be made holy and acceptable before God.

David also asked God to **wash** him. The cleaning David requested wasn't a physical bathing, but a washing away of his sins. Only God could wash away the filth that had stained his heart, making him whiter than snow (see Isa. 1:18).

David asked God to replace his sorrow with **gladness**. God's conviction had **crushed** his bones, robbing him of joy. In such a sad state, he was unworthy of singing praises to God as he had done before (1 Chron. 13:8).

David begged God, **turn your face away from my sins**. He knew God saw the mess he had made of his life, and there was no hiding from Him (see Ps. 139:7). Then David asked God, **blot out all my guilt**. The Hebrew word for *blot out* is *maha*, meaning "to erase, abolish, destroy, and to utterly wipe away." David pleaded with God for the removal of all his sin. David knew he was a sinner and that he needed what all sinners need—God's merciful forgiveness.

What does a right relationship with God look like? What role does forgiveness play in cultivating our relationship with God?

VERSES 10-13

¹⁰ God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you.

David not only asked for God's forgiveness, but he also begged God to change his life. The word **create** translates a Hebrew term that is used in the Old Testament only to refer to God's creative work. David was asking for a change in his life that only God could create.

David wanted to experience God's **presence** in his life. Sin had robbed him of intimacy with God. Sin had caused David to feel alienated from God's presence and power.



Until the day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God visited people from time to time for special occasions. Knowing he had sinned, David longed for the return of God's Spirit that he received when Samuel anointed him king (1 Sam. 16:13).

David's sinful actions failed to bring him lasting pleasure. Instead, they brought pain and upheaval into his life. Because of his sinful choices, David lost the joy of his salvation. Note that he did not lose his salvation, but the **joy** of his salvation. Sin will rob us of the joy of our relationship with God.

David asked God for the privilege of leading others back to God. He would devote his life to helping other sinners find their way back to the loving arms of God. In the remaining years of his life, David wanted his life to bear fruit that honored God.

Sinful choices come with a price. The longer sin lingers, the harder our hearts will become. We must quickly confess our sin before that sin robs us of our integrity and our joy. Like David, our forgiveness of sin comes only through God's gracious provision. His provision is found in His Son, Jesus Christ. When we confess our sin to Him, we can experience forgiveness and cleansing (1 John 1:9).

How would you describe a forgiven heart? What actions are required for a person to have a pure heart?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation (Repentance)*

Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God.

DELIVERANCE THROUGH BROKENNESS (PS. 51:14-17)

VERSES 14-17

¹⁴ Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.

¹⁵ Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶ You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with

a burnt offering. ¹⁷ **The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.**

Broken over his sin, David stopped doing things his way and started doing things God's way. In exchange for his murderous past (v. 14), David gave three pieces of evidence of a repentant life. First, he offered God his unending **praise**. Because of his sins, David lost the song God had placed in his heart. After admitting his guilt and pleading for God's cleansing, David's love for praising God returned.

Second, David refused to give God vain worship. As king, David was wealthy enough to offer God many sacrifices, but he knew sacrifice alone would not please God. God did not want meaningless sacrifices or empty religious rituals. David was careful not to offend God with offerings for the sake of appearances. He longed for worship that pleased God.

Third, David offered God his brokenness. The repentant king offered God the only acceptable sacrifice—genuine repentance as evidenced by his **broken spirit** and **humbled heart**. The word *broken* in the Hebrew is *shabar*, meaning “to break into pieces.” No longer full of destructive pride, David was broken over the pain his sin caused to him, to those around him, and most of all, to God.

While God no longer requires sacrificial rituals, reconciliation with Him is more than just mouthing the right religious words. The genuineness of our words is evidenced by genuine repentance. God doesn't look at our words; He looks at the condition of our hearts. His deliverance is reserved for those who are broken over their sinfulness and who desire to be right with Him. Approaching God with brokenness and humility over our sin is the first step toward deliverance from our guilt.

How are remorse and repentance related? How are they different? Can you have one without the other? Explain.



IN MY CONTEXT

- Everyone has committed sin and, as a result, is guilty before God.
- Forgiveness of sin comes only through God's provision, His Son.
- Believers should approach God for forgiveness with brokenness and humility over their sin.

Discuss as a group how the fact that everyone is a sinner should impact your group. How can your group help restore those who have been broken by sin? With a spirit of biblical love and humility, consider appropriate ways of confrontation, reconciliation with God and the group, and accountability.

Record how you first became aware of your need for God's forgiveness. With whom can you share what you have written? As you share with that person, also share how you found forgiveness through His Son. Use the information on the inside front cover of this book to assist you.

Spend time alone with God, asking Him to reveal to you sins you need to confess to Him. Use Psalm 51 as a prayer, asking for forgiveness as He reveals sins to you.

MEMORY VERSE

God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me. —Psalm 51:10



Session 11

THE CLEANSING

God's complete forgiveness of those who turn to Him in faith produces gratitude.

PSALM 32:1-11

¹ How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! ² How joyful is a person whom the LORD does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit! ³ When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as in the summer's heat. *Selah* ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not conceal my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah* ⁶ Therefore let everyone who is faithful pray to you immediately. When great floodwaters come, they will



not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance. *Selah* ⁸ I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel. ⁹ Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding, that must be controlled with bit and bridle or else it will not come near you. ¹⁰ Many pains come to the wicked, but the one who trusts in the LORD will have faithful love surrounding him. ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Identify the terms in Psalm 32 that describe the results of God's forgiveness. What do these terms reveal about the depth of God's forgiveness?

Notice the different ways the psalmist expressed gratitude for God's forgiveness. How do these words define how we should respond to God's forgiveness?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Sin leaves us feeling dirty. We may even avoid people who know about our grievous actions. We may become obsessed with the thought that everyone knows. We may try to hide our pain and guilt from others. The one person we can't seem to fool, however, is ourselves—and certainly not God.

To what measures might a person go to regain a sense of being clean? What kinds of things do people turn to in an effort to feel clean again?

Every one of us commits sin. Most of us know that sin is harmful; we can see the effects all around us. We know that God forgives, but we also need to know that He cleanses. David had experienced God's forgiveness; now it was time for David to feel clean again. God delights in restoring His people, making them clean again. David shared some key insights about the cleansing experienced by those who seek God's forgiveness and who then live in light of that forgiveness with a clean heart.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 32

Psalm 32 is one of eight penitential psalms (Pss. 6; 28; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143), all of which were written by David except for two (Pss. 102; 130). A penitential psalm expresses contrition and repentance with a longing for a right relationship with God. Psalm 32 chronologically follows Psalm 51 (see last week's session). After confessing his sins of adultery, murder, and deception (Ps. 51; 2 Sam. 11–12), Psalm 32 fulfills a portion of David's promise in Psalm 51:13 to share what he had learned from his costly experience.

The superscription of Psalm 32 states that it is a maskil. The verb form of this word occurs in verse 8 and is translated "I will instruct." A maskil was likely a composition intended to impart wisdom or understanding. Psalm 32 presents two powerful lessons: stay faithful to the Lord (vv. 1-5) and help others stay faithful (vv. 6-11).

Although David was forgiven, forgiveness does not cancel sin's temporal consequences. As a result of his sin, David lost the baby conceived in adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:14), and he lost the privilege of building a permanent temple (1 Chron. 28:2-3). David paid a high price for his sin, but the cost would have been higher if he had not repented. Because he humbled himself before the Lord, God gave David and Bathsheba another child (2 Sam. 12:24) who would be Israel's next king (1 Kings 2:12) and the builder of God's temple (1 Kings 5:5). Through repentance and righteous living, David found a renewed relationship with God, along with joy in his heart (v. 11).



KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation (Justification)*

Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE CONTRAST (PS. 32:1-4)

VERSES 1-2

¹ How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! ² How joyful is a person whom the LORD does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit!

Overjoyed by God's forgiveness, David could not contain his gratitude to God. Although he didn't list his sins, David stressed their severity by using four different Hebrew words for sin. In verse 1 he called his disobedience **transgression** and **sin** (see p. 6). The word *transgression* means "rebellion or defiance." It is a willful act of rebellion against God and His authority. The word *sin* means "to fall short of a target." The target, of course, is God's righteous standard. The apostle Paul wrote that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In verse 2 the psalmist called his disobedience **iniquity** and **deceit**. The basic meaning of *iniquity* is perversion or distortion of what is right. The word translated *deceit* refers to self-deception. That is what sin does: it deceives.

David could have blamed other people for his sinful actions. He could have put the blame on his generals for not demanding that he go to war with them. He could have blamed Bathsheba for her role in the affair. He could have blamed Uriah for not sleeping with his wife, or Joab for following the murderous plot (2 Sam. 11:1-18). Instead, David rightly took ownership of his own sinful actions.

David used three words to describe what God did with his sin. First, God forgave David's rebellion. To forgive literally means "to lift."

God lifted from David the burden of guilt. Second, God **covered** David's offense. Although David made an attempt to cover his sins, only God could permanently do away with them. Third, God did **not charge** David with sin. This means God no longer counted David's sins against him. David found freedom and deliverance when he sought God's forgiveness, and this filled him with grateful joy.

BIBLE SKILL: *Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.*

On one side of a vertical line, identify words and phrases in Psalm 32 that describe sin. On the other side, note words and phrases in Psalm 32 that describe what God does with our sin when we confess. Meditate on the words and phrases in both lists, confess all sin, and give thanks and praise to God for His forgiveness.

VERSES 3-4

³ When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as in the summer's heat. Selah

Being a loving Father, God disciplined David both physically and spiritually. David groaned day and night from pain in his **bones**. Outwardly, David could have tried to act as if nothing was wrong, but inwardly he ached. God's conviction troubled his heart, making him feel heavy or deeply troubled **all day long**. He lost his energy and thirst for life as if he were out in the hot summer sun. Sin aged David, making him feel much older than he was. A sick body, a disturbed mind, and a troubled heart were God's way of getting David's attention.

Inserted into the psalm at the end of verse 4 is the word **Selah**, a musical term for a short pause. This pause gave time for thought.



Instead of moving on to the next verse, the psalmist wanted people to stop and reflect on the truth just stated.

What are the dangers of refusing to confess or trying to ignore our transgressions? What keeps people from admitting a sin when the impact of doing so can be freeing?

THE DECISION (PS. 32:5)

VERSE 5

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not conceal my iniquity. I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,” and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

Verse 5 is the pivotal verse in this psalm. The turning point in David’s life came when he ***acknowledged*** his sin to God. When confronted by Nathan the prophet, David did not try to ***conceal*** his sins. The word translated *conceal* is the same Hebrew word translated “covered” in verse 1. Only God can permanently cover our sins.

The words ***I will*** reflect a decision on David’s part. He would ***confess*** his ***transgressions to the LORD***. Many people today refuse to acknowledge that they are sinners. The Bible, however, teaches that every one of us falls short of God’s holy standard. The consequences of our sin are real and can be eternal. Agreeing with God about our sin is the first step to experiencing His forgiveness and cleansing.

When David acknowledged and confessed his sin and transgressions, God removed his guilt. God extends to us forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Tim. 1:15). The cross proves without a doubt that God is willing to forgive. However, He will not override our free will. He waits for us to come to Him as the prodigal son made the decision to come home to his waiting, loving Father (Luke 15:11-24). God’s forgiveness changed the direction of David’s life, and it changes our lives as well.

What benefits await those who confess their sins to God? Which benefit provides the greatest motivation for confessing?

THE COUNSEL (PS. 32:6-9)

VERSES 6-7

⁶ Therefore let everyone who is faithful pray to you immediately. When great floodwaters come, they will not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance. *Selah*

David had experienced God's forgiveness. His words remind us that God will forgive our sins when we confess them to Him. ***Therefore***, in light of this truth, David urged his hearers to pray ***immediately***. The imagery of the ***great floodwaters*** represents the chaos and trouble that come into our lives as a result of our sin. Some see this as a reference to God's judgment, just as in the days of Noah when the floodwaters came (Gen. 7:11-16). If the reference is to the flood in the days of Noah, then the lesson here is that the time to repent and seek God is when He convicts. Once the door of the ark was closed, those outside the ark were without hope. Although the Lord is full of mercy and compassion, there is a limit to His patience (see Rom. 2:4; 1 Pet. 3:19-20; 2 Pet. 3:9).

Instead of hiding from his sin, David found God to be his ***hiding place***. Those who abide in Him find protection, joy, and deliverance. These are the very things David had lost because of his sin. Security, happiness, and a second chance are three things people desperately seek. Outside of God's sheltering wings, they are temporarily found and lost because only God can permanently provide them. Take advantage of the psalmist's ***selah*** (pause) to reflect on whether your hiding place is in the Lord. Come to Him for forgiveness, and then stay with Him for life's blessings.

VERSES 8-9

⁸ I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel. ⁹ Do not be like a horse or mule, without



understanding, that must be controlled with bit and bridle or else it will not come near you.

Making good on his repentant prayer in Psalm 51:13, David provided instruction and counsel, using his own experience as an invaluable lesson about moral failure. His experience of God's forgiveness mandated that he share with others what he had learned, so they would not repeat his mistakes. David's actions pointed to the genuine nature of his repentance.

David had acted like a wild animal, ***without understanding***. Like a ***horse***, he rushed ahead impetuously into the act of adultery. Like a ***mule***, he tried covering his sins with his own foolish plans. Horses and mules need to be ***controlled with bit and bridle***. Rather than driving us with discipline, God desires that we follow Him with willing trust and obedience. However, when His people remain stubborn and unresponsive to Him, He will not hesitate to get their attention by bridling or disciplining them.

David chose to encourage others in their spiritual journeys, teaching them from his personal experience. Offering a word of caution is much easier than trying to repair a broken life. When we share with others what God has done in our lives, we may save them from a lifetime of heartache and pain.

What principles should we follow when sharing our life experiences with others? How can sharing lessons learned help both the one hearing and the one telling?

THE CONCLUSION (PS. 32:10-11)

VERSES 10-11

¹⁰ Many pains come to the wicked, but the one who trusts in the LORD will have faithful love surrounding him. ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

David contrasted the *pains* that **come to the wicked** with the **faithful love** that surrounds **the one who trusts in the LORD**. The disobedient inherit the judgment of God while the obedient bypass His judgment in exchange for His loving kindness, as evidenced in David's life. In dramatic fashion, David went from a rebellious sinner whose bones were made brittle by God (v. 3) to a man with overflowing joy when he sought God's cleansing (vv. 1-2,11). The wicked suffer **many pains**, leaving the sinner feeling dirty, guilty, and estranged from God, but the pain doesn't stop there. Bathsheba felt the pain of losing her child and husband. Joab felt pain because he doomed a fellow soldier at the command of a sinful king. The kingdom of Israel felt the painful results of having a wayward king. Sinful living produces unintended consequences—heartbreaking pain.

In stark contrast, those whose trust is in God have His faithful love surrounding them. The word for *faithful love* is *hesed*, meaning “love filled with kindness.” His saturating love faithfully enriches and blesses the obedient (1 John 2:5). This doesn't imply that we will not experience pain as obedient followers of God, but it means that as we journey through life, we will always possess His peace and grace in spite of what happens. A life lived within God's will is a life of confident hope and unending joy (2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Trusting that his audience would heed his warning, David closed his psalm with a word of encouragement: **be glad in the LORD and rejoice**. For the righteous ones who are upright in heart, the pathway of God leads to joy (Ps. 16:11). Righteousness can only come from God, by His gracious forgiveness and reconciliation (Rom. 5:8-11), but it is retained by continual union with Him when we walk daily in His truth (1 Thess. 4:1). Those who make this choice find the opposite of pain; they find a life well lived (Pss. 64:10; 68:3).

What keeps believers from being grateful for what God has done in their lives? How can believers cultivate a lifestyle of rejoicing?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers must confess their sins to the Father or face the possibility of becoming spiritually despondent.
- People can find rest and mercy when they confess their sins to the Father.
- Believers can encourage others in their spiritual life, teaching others from experience.
- Believers should respond to God’s forgiveness with gratitude and joy.

List ways you can stay sensitive to the Holy Spirit so that you do not become spiritually despondent. What practices do you need to add to your daily routine to put yourself in a position to hear from God?

Reflect on times when God gave you a clean heart. What lessons did you learn from those experiences? Take time to share with others in your Bible study group, encouraging each other.

How can you maintain a grateful and joyful Christian attitude? What changes do you need to make in your attitude and actions to demonstrate gratitude and Christian joy?

MEMORY VERSE

Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart. —Psalm 32:11



Session 12

THE PROTECTOR

Believers should seek refuge in God because He is the only One who can give them strength to face temptation and evil.

PSALM 141:1-10

¹ LORD, I call on you; hurry to help me. Listen to my voice when I call on you. ² May my prayer be set before you as incense, the raising of my hands as the evening offering. ³ LORD, set up a guard for my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips. ⁴ Do not let my heart turn to any evil thing or perform wicked acts with men who commit sin. Do not let me feast on their delicacies. ⁵ Let the righteous one strike me—it is an act of faithful love; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let me not refuse it. Even now my prayer is against the evil acts of the wicked. ⁶ When their rulers will be thrown off the sides of a cliff, the people will listen to my words, for they are pleasing. ⁷ As when one



plows and breaks up the soil, turning up rocks, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of Sheol. ⁸ But my eyes look to you, LORD, my Lord. I seek refuge in you; do not let me die. ⁹ Protect me from the trap they have set for me, and from the snares of evildoers. ¹⁰ Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.

Look for goals that the psalmist expresses in some way. What role does God play in the psalmist's being able to accomplish these goals?

Observe how the psalmist described God's correction. What are the benefits of receiving godly instruction?

FIRST THOUGHTS

One of the most common things runners and cyclists are encouraged to do when training is to get involved in a running or cycling club. The idea is that the group will hold one another accountable for running or riding on the days when someone really doesn't want to go. The group can also serve as a means for improving, especially if you run or ride with a group that is just a little faster than you.

What are the advantages of doing something with a group? How do our relationships impact our behavior?

King David had his share of bad relationships. He knew all too well the importance of being in the company of others who are seeking to honor God. Instead of partnering with the wicked, he prayed for them because he knew God would judge them. With the

time he had left on earth, David prayed that God would help him live a life that honored Him. Psalm 141 gives us a glimpse into the lessons David learned about prayer, dependence on God, and his need for discipline and accountability.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 141

Classified as a lament psalm, where prayers or cries are made to God in distressful situations, Psalm 141 provides evidence David had grown spiritually since experiencing God's chastisement (see 2 Sam. 12:1-23). Instead of giving in to temptation, he sought God in his duress (Ps. 141:1-2), recognized his own spiritual weaknesses (vv. 3-4), pleaded for strength against tempters (vv. 6-10), aligned himself with other believers (v. 5), and admitted God was his only source of strength (v. 8). Compared with his previous psalms (see the two previous sessions), David had come a long way spiritually.

Under the law, approaching God was normally done in the sanctuary with the assistance of a priest, but David's journey of faith helped him understand he could approach God directly with his burdens. With the coming of Jesus Christ, we are no longer required to go to the sanctuary; we can bring our petitions personally to God because Christ is our High Priest (Heb. 4:14-15).

Recognizing our proclivity to sin in areas where we are weak is an important step in reaching spiritual maturity (v. 3). Another step is our willingness to allow godly people to hold us accountable (v. 5). With the help of the Holy Spirit and the company of mature believers, God empowers us to live godly lives that honor Him.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PLEA (PS. 141:1-2)

VERSE 1

¹ LORD, I call on you; hurry to help me. Listen to my voice when I call on you.

The first word of David's prayer is **LORD**, God's revealed name (Yahweh). David began his prayer by speaking God's name that



denotes a covenantal relationship with His people. This is a reminder that prayer is talking to God. God is a Person, so we address Him as a Person, not as an impersonal force.

David's prayer in Psalm 141 is a prayer of desperation. He needed God's help urgently as he pleaded for God to ***hurry*** and ***listen to*** his voice. Desperation is one of the keys to an effective prayer life (see Pss. 42:1; 84:2; 119:131; Luke 18:1-18). Flippant prayers, words ushered up with no heartfelt passion, do not impress God (see Matt. 12:36). Instead of developing ulcers or worrying about how we can fix our problems, we can call out to the One whose very name, *LORD*, indicates that He is more than capable of handling any need, adversary, or temptation.

VERSE 2

2 May my prayer be set before you as incense, the raising of my hands as the evening offering.

Every evening the Jewish priests serving in the tabernacle burned incense and offered a burnt offering (see Ex. 30:8; Num. 28:4). In this prayer, David was just as solemn and sincere as those serving in the tabernacle. Although he was neither a priest nor in the tabernacle, he humbly pleaded for God to hear his prayers, probably due to his imminent duress (vv. 3-10). Like the tabernacle ***incense***, he sent his prayers upward. Like the tabernacle ***offering***, he lifted his hands as a pleasing sacrifice—a sign of reverential obedience and unconditional surrender.

Troubled by personal and public adversaries, David wasn't waiting for the perfect place or timing to pray. He knew God was always listening. We too can approach God with confidence anytime, knowing that our cries do not fall on deaf ears (Ps. 56:8). By withholding our prayers, we give the enemy an unfair advantage over us. Instead, we must seize the moment by sending our prayers upward like David.

Why do people often treat prayer as a last option? What makes some people question whether God hears their prayers?

THE REQUESTS (PS. 141:3-7)

VERSES 3-4

³ LORD, set up a guard for my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips. ⁴ Do not let my heart turn to any evil thing or perform wicked acts with men who commit sin. Do not let me feast on their delicacies.

David wanted God to help him avoid sin. His petition included two requests. First, he asked for God's help with his speech. Whether his enemies were slandering or tempting David, he wanted his mouth under God's control. We cannot control our own speech. James wrote that "no one can tame the tongue" (Jas. 3:8). But God can. Perhaps David had tried to control his tongue and failed. He turned to God for help.

Second, David asked for God's protection from the wicked. God had given him a clean heart (Ps. 51:10); David asked for God's help in keeping it clean. Pollution of the heart comes in two forms: inward desires (***do not let my heart turn to any evil thing***) and outward influences (***with men who commit sin***). Satan, the master of deception, makes sin look pleasurable, but whatever delicacies the devil and those who willfully indulge in sin offer, the result is anything but pleasure. We must not allow temptation to get the best of us. Instead of fighting alone, we can call on God for help and protection (see 1 Cor. 10:13).

How are David's two requests connected? How do our words reveal our associations and relationships?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation (Sanctification)*

Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him.



VERSE 5

⁵ Let the righteous one strike me—it is an act of faithful love; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let me not refuse it. Even now my prayer is against the evil acts of the wicked.

Having the right kind of strategy determines whether the battle will be won or lost. In his spiritual battles, David chose wisely by seeking the wisdom of godly advisors. God not only provides His power and presence for helping us overcome temptation, He also provides godly people.

Even if the words of his godly counselors were striking or difficult to hear, David knew their counsel was not out of malice; it was ***an act of faithful love***. Their ***rebuke***, as hard as it would be to hear, would benefit him spiritually like the fragrant ***oil*** used on honored guests at mealtime. To reject such an anointing would dishonor the guest and the homeowner. Therefore, David prayed that he would not refuse it so he would not disgrace himself or his God who had graciously forgiven him.

The strategy of the king was twofold. He not only would accept godly correction, he also would prayerfully reject the evil acts of the wicked. Staying morally pure requires a right course of action that includes practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, and Bible study, but it must also include intentional rejection of wickedness. Spiritual maturity doesn't happen accidentally; it takes a lifetime of work that starts by making the decision to turn to Him.

VERSES 6-7

⁶ When their rulers will be thrown off the sides of a cliff, the people will listen to my words, for they are pleasing. ⁷ As when one plows and breaks up the soil, turning up rocks, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of Sheol.

David anticipated the judgment of the wicked as being ***thrown off the sides of a cliff***. Although a terrible form of execution, throwing people off a cliff was practiced in Bible times as a sign of utter rejection and contempt (see 2 Chron. 25:12; Luke 4:29). The word ***•Sheol*** means the grave or realm of the dead and appears more than 60 times in the Bible (Deut. 32:22; Job 24:19; Prov. 5:5; Eccl. 9:10). The rejection of these wicked leaders would be so complete that their end would resemble the soil after a thorough plowing.

On the other hand, David believed he would be vindicated. His wise strategy of accepting godly discipline and making himself accountable to wise counselors would cause his subjects to **listen to** his words and gladly follow him. His rulings would be **pleasing** because they would be based on God's instruction rather than on sinful desires.

Everyone influences someone else, whether at home, on the job, at school, among friends, or in the community. While some have a wider influence than others, each influencer will reap what he or she sows. How people speak of us at the end of our lives will be determined by how well we lived and influenced others. Those who grow in faith by embracing discipline, accountability, and righteousness will be remembered well. David became Israel's most beloved king, demonstrating the importance of living a life that honors God.

What are the risks involved in refusing to be held accountable by other believers? Is holding one another accountable necessary for spiritual growth and living a righteous life? Explain.

THE PROMISE (PS. 141:8-10)

VERSE 8

⁸ But my eyes look to you, LORD, my Lord. I seek refuge in you; do not let me die.

David's **eyes** were focused on God. He knew his help came from the Lord. Unwilling to compromise with ungodliness, David would find his **refuge** in God alone, fleeing to Him for protection. By trusting in God, he would not only live but also find his faith by soaring above the schemes of mortal men. Outside of God, foolish plans and their schemers die; inside God's refuge, the committed find security and life. There are two ways of living in this world—by one's own design or by steadfast trust in God. While those who conform to culture may think they are living well, only God gives significance and purpose that truly satisfy the deepest longings of the soul.

In his prayer, David promised God his undying trust. His promise was more than just words; it was backed up by authentic living.



Intentional acts of faith give evidence to a changed heart (Hab. 2:4; Jas. 2:17). The direction of our lives follows where our eyes lead (Matt. 5:29). Keeping our eyes on Jesus will keep us from going astray (Heb. 12:2).

VERSE 9

⁹ Protect me from the trap they have set for me, and from the snares of evildoers.

The unrighteous love it when believers fall in disgrace, especially those in high places like a king. David's enemies not only watched for him to make a mistake, they also set him up for failure with traps and **snares**. Drawing on his childhood experience as a shepherd, David would have been familiar with how powerful these instruments were in protecting his sheep from wild animals. Now, **evildoers** hunted David as their prey, using these same instruments of death. Recognizing that his physical and spiritual health was in danger from attack and that tempters never rest until they succeed, David cried out for God's protection.

The word **protect** translates a Hebrew word (*shamar*) that means "to place within a thorny hedge." Like his sheep, David needed deliverance. Instead of being paralyzed with fear, like a helpless animal, David reacted in prayer, calling out to God for divine protection. Everyone faces temptation. Temptation is not a sin. It is how we react to temptation that makes the difference. With God, we can face whatever the devil throws at us.

God answered David's prayer for protection. But that does not mean He gave David a life without trials. God allowed David to rise above life's trials and to live in such a way that honored Him, which still inspires believers to faithfulness to this day.

How does keeping our focus on Jesus help us avoid the traps and dangers found in this world? What makes recognizing Satan's traps so difficult?

VERSE 10

10 Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.

David clearly expected God to judge *the wicked* because God is just. Since his enemies were determined to set traps for him, David prayed for them to be caught by their own nets—just as Goliath was killed with his own sword (1 Sam. 17:51) and years later Haman was killed with his own gallows (Esth. 7:10). Wickedness deceives evildoers into thinking their plans are foolproof, but the wicked are often ensnared by their own plots because sin destroys whatever it touches (Pss. 7:15-16; 9:15; 57:6; Prov. 28:10).

The last part of verse 10 reveals much about the character of David. First, David was a man of grace. While David's prayer included a number of pleas, it is ultimately a request for God's divine grace. David knew he could not pass safely through the perils of life without God's compassionate help (Ps. 40:1-2). Second, David was a man of integrity. By passing *safely*, he would not dishonor himself or God with vain living. Sin had derailed his life earlier (Ps. 51), and repeating those mistakes was no longer an option. By keeping his focus on God, David was able to live a godly life that honored the Father, himself, and those around him. God was truly his Protector.

BIBLE SKILL: *Identify the imagery in a verse or passage, and discover what it communicates.*

Highlight the different images used in Psalm 141. Note which images are used to describe righteousness and which are used to describe unrighteousness or the results of unrighteousness. Reflect on the images used and how they are similar and different. What does each image teach us about our experiences of temptation and opposition? What do they teach us about the value of righteous living?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers can approach God with confidence, knowing that He hears their prayers.
- Believers can hold each other accountable for living godly lives.
- God can be trusted to lead us to live godly lives by helping us keep our focus on Him.

Review with your Bible study group prayer requests made over the past few weeks. Identify the requests God has answered and how He answered them. Discuss how seeing God's answer to prayers gives you the confidence to approach Him with your needs. Record insights gained from this discussion.

Define the strategy you are following for growing spiritually. What elements from Psalm 141 need to be added to or strengthened within your strategy?

Spend time reflecting on the things that sometimes get in your way or cause you to lose focus on Jesus. What actions do you need to take to minimize and eliminate these distractions?

MEMORY VERSE

But my eyes look to you, LORD, my Lord. I seek refuge in you; do not let me die. —Psalm 141:8



Session 13

THE LONGING

The hope of God's presence serves as encouragement during discouraging times.

PSALM 42:1-11

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God.

² I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, "Where is your God?" ⁴ I remember this as I pour out my heart: how I walked with many, leading the festive procession to the house of God, with joyful and thankful shouts. ⁵ Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God. ⁶ I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon,



from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your billows have swept over me. ⁸ The LORD will send his faithful love by day; his song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life. ⁹ I will say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about in sorrow because of the enemy’s oppression?” ¹⁰ My adversaries taunt me, as if crushing my bones, while all day long they say to me, “Where is your God?” ¹¹ Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God.

Notice the repetition of words and phrases in Psalm 42:1-11 that reveal the emotional state of the psalmist. What does the repetition of these words and phrases reveal about the pain the psalmist was enduring?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Life has a way of reminding us that we are not always in charge of what happens. We may get a flu shot, take vitamins, and carry hand sanitizer, yet we end up with the flu. We may exercise and watch what we eat, yet we end up with heart disease. We may even be the one who works extra hours to complete a critical project and then gets passed over for that promotion or let go. Life can just be unkind at times.

What kinds of situations might cause a person to think life is unkind or unfair? In what ways do people respond to the unfair or unkind things they encounter in life? What factors contribute to how a person responds?

The psalmist found life to be unkind at times. Although he longed for God, he could not find God in his pain. There had been a time when he enjoyed God’s presence, but it seemed like such a long time ago. Filled with despair, life’s circumstances were

almost unbearable. He felt as if his ship was adrift as his adversaries crushed his spirit. The psalmist was not alone in his experience. Moses spoke to God about his misery and asked God to kill him (Num. 11:15). When Elijah was afraid and alone, he too asked God to take his life (1 Kings 19:2-4). Jeremiah became so despondent that he wished he had never been born (Jer. 20:14-18). In light of such emotional experiences in the lives of faithful men of God, believers today should not be surprised that people who know and love God battle feelings of despair.

Just as our bodies are imperfect, our emotions are imperfect too, and we sometimes reach our breaking points. We live in a fallen world, no longer perfect as it was originally created. No one is immune from spiritual anguish. Refusing to wallow in self-pity, the psalmist put his hope in God, remembered God's faithfulness, and continued praising the Lord. He discovered that the way out starts by looking up to God.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALMS 42–43

Many Bible scholars believe Psalms 42 and 43 were composed as a single psalm. Psalm 42 consists of two stanzas with identical refrains in verses 5 and 11. Psalm 43 has the same refrain in its final verse, so it appears to be a third stanza of Psalm 42.

Although the writer of this psalm is not specifically identified, the superscription indicates it was written by "the sons of Korah." The sons of Korah were Levites who were descendants of Kohath, the father of Korah (see 1 Chron. 6:22-48; 9:17-32; 2 Chron. 20:19). They produced and performed music while the tabernacle was in the wilderness and after the construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Eleven psalms are attributed to the sons of Korah (42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88).

The writer of Psalm 42 found himself in exile, separated from God's people (vv. 2-4), though the exact cause and place of his exile is unknown. With the privilege of serving as a Levite taken away from him, the writer fell into the deep crevice of despair (vv. 5-6).

In spite of his suffering, the psalmist still praised the Lord, knowing God was his only hope (vv. 5,8,11). He put his hope in God and continued praising the Lord.



In Psalm 42, we can see glimpses and hear echoes of Jesus, the Suffering Servant. Just as the psalmist shed tears (v. 3), Jesus shed tears at Lazarus's tomb (John 11:35) and wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41). Compare the forsakenness experienced by the psalmist (v. 9; 43:2) with the cry of dereliction or forsakenness voiced by Jesus on the cross in Mark 15:34. The presence of thirst (vv. 1-2) sounds familiar to the thirst Jesus felt for God the Father when on the cross (John 19:28). Jesus can be trusted since He knows the pains of this life as well.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THIRSTY (PS. 42:1-4)

VERSES 1-4

**¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God.
² I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God? ³ My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, "Where is your God?" ⁴ I remember this as I pour out my heart: how I walked with many, leading the festive procession to the house of God, with joyful and thankful shouts.**

Drought is defined as a prolonged period of abnormally low rainfall. A four-year drought caused the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, leaving 2.5 million Americans homeless from destructive dust clouds. Spiritual drought, like a drought of rain, can be just as hazardous, creating a lifeless existence even for God's people—a life void of joy and hope.

Remembering the days when he had worshiped joyfully with others at God's house, the psalmist agonized over his spiritual dryness. He knew that God alone could satisfy his spiritual **thirst** for His presence in the same way only cool water from **flowing streams** can quench a deer's physical thirst.

Taunting him, his critics constantly asked, "**Where is your God?**" With their cruel question, they implied God had deserted the psalmist, which only added to his grief. He cried endless tears. Knowing an animal cannot live very long without water, he knew his spiritual survival depended on rediscovering **God, the living God.**

While reasons for spiritual dryness are numerous, the results are the same: feelings of isolation from God, unasked prayers, apathy towards Bible study, a lack of desire for worship, and lost contact with fellow believers. A spiritual wasteland isn't a location but a condition of the heart. Each Sunday countless believers arrive at church, immersed in a spiritual dust storm while surrounded by followers of Christ. Even church leaders can faithfully fulfill their duties with a cold and barren heart. No one is immune from the disease of spiritual drought, no matter how long he or she has been a Christian.

As this psalmist struggled with the feeling of spiritual drought, he remembered a better day. He recalled a time when he led a ***festive procession*** to the temple that included many others who followed him. There in ***the house of God*** they worshiped with joy and thanksgiving.

These verses provide two clues about overcoming spiritual dryness. First, the psalmist recognized his spiritual need. Verse 1 is an honest confession of the psalmist's current relationship with God. He no longer felt close to God. Through untold events, he found himself separated from God's presence. An honest evaluation is the first step toward wellness.

Second, the psalmist thirsted for God. A panting deer pants for a reason. Perhaps it has been chased by a predator, or water is unavailable. In any case, without water, death comes quickly. Drinking water is essential, not optional. Whenever we feel separated from the Lord, we must make seeking Him our highest priority because our spiritual health is at stake. Believers must pay attention to their spiritual lives, or else, like a garden, weeds choke out both beauty and vitality.

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit cultivates Christian character, comforts believers, and seals the believer unto the day of final redemption. His presence in the Christian is the guarantee that God will bring the believer into the fullness of the stature of Christ.



What does a thirst for God look like? How can believers create a thirst for God?

DROWNING (PS. 42:5-8)

VERSES 5-8

⁵ Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God. ⁶ I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. ⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your billows have swept over me. ⁸ The LORD will send his faithful love by day; his song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life.

In his despair, the psalmist's mood took a radical turn from drought to a raging storm inside of him. His inner turmoil was more than he could stand. The waves of deep despair rolled over him as if he had fallen off a capsized boat in the middle of the ocean.

Oftentimes we confuse the kind of despair described by the psalmist with clinical depression. This session is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment for those who suffer from clinical depression. For people struggling with clinical depression, gaining hope in God doesn't mean foregoing medical treatment. In fact, such treatment may well be the help someone needs if he or she is struggling with the emotionally crippling symptoms of clinical depression.

Feeling abandoned by God, the futility of the psalmist's situation consumed him. He had to take action. First, he put his **hope in God**. Many have hope, but the object of their hope is misplaced. Only by placing our hope in God can we find the help needed to weather the storms of life. Job overcame his afflictions with godly hope (Job 13:15). Jeremiah reminded the exiles that a godly hope would help them return home (Jer. 29:11). Paul taught that a godly hope will never disappoint (Rom. 5:4-5). Believers have a living hope, for our hope is in a living Savior (1 Pet. 1:3).

Second, the psalmist praised God. At first, with a broken spirit, such praise can seem awkward or forced, but God is worthy of praise even when we don't feel like worshipping. While worship may not remove the dark clouds from your life, it opens the doors of your heart and spirit, giving God an avenue for His healing touch. Notice the psalmist called God his **Savior**. Even though the psalmist couldn't return to the temple, he declared God was his Savior nevertheless.

BIBLE SKILL: Memorize a verse and apply it to a real-life situation.

Memorize Psalm 42:5 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Write a few sentences here or in a journal stating how the verse can help you live faithfully and joyfully through a difficult time.

Third, the psalmist remembered God. He promised to remember Him from **the land of Jordan and the peaks of •Hermon** and **from Mount •Mizar**. The exact location of Mount Mizar is not known, though the name means “little mountain.” Mount Hermon, at some 9,100 feet, is the highest mountain in the region, and it has three peaks. The psalmist might have been living in exile there. The region is approximately 125 miles from Jerusalem, but it might as well have been a million miles given his desire to worship at the temple and his inability to do so.

Pain has many unintended side effects, one of which is forgetfulness. In the storms of life, believers often forget what God has done for them. Instead of being grateful, they narrowly focus their gaze on their current situation. By remembering who God is and what He has done for us, we can see the light at the end of the tunnel—maybe faintly at first, but a light nonetheless.



Lastly, the psalmist prayed to God. When we are in misery, we often turn inward. We circle the wagons, protecting ourselves from further harm. When we do, we often stop doing the very thing that will help us cope with our situation—prayer. Much like praise, praying may seem useless at first because of the condition of our hearts. When we start, our prayers may seem more like an inquisition as we question God. When we finish praying, we must spend time listening to God and His words. Like the psalmist, we must ask for God’s sustaining faithful love for both our days and nights. In verse 8, the psalmist used the name **LORD** (Yahweh), meaning the self-existent and eternal God. The psalmist was reminding us that when we pray, our prayers reach the throne of the God of heaven. Even when we can’t see God’s face, we can trust His heart, knowing that He cares (1 Pet. 5:7).

How can unresolved despair produce more despair? What role should a person’s faith play when it comes to facing a situation that could cause despair in life?

CRUSHED (PS. 42:9-11)

VERSES 9-11

⁹ I will say to God, my rock, “Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about in sorrow because of the enemy’s oppression?”

¹⁰ My adversaries taunt me, as if crushing my bones, while all day long they say to me, “Where is your God?” ¹¹ Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God.

This psalmist raised questions about why God had *forgotten* him, why he must *go about in sorrow because of the enemy’s oppression*. Often people in dire circumstances feel abandoned by God. The psalmist relayed those feelings in verse 9. Yet, no matter how deeply we believers feel abandoned by God, the depths of our feelings do not reflect the true reality. God has promised never to desert His people (see Isa. 49:15; Heb. 13:5).

The psalmist has gone from being thirsty in a spiritual drought (vv. 1-4), to being drowned in a spiritual storm (vv. 5-8), to being

crushed by words of accusation (vv. 9-11). Notice what the psalmist called his oppressors: enemies and **adversaries**. They taunted him and his God. They delighted in repeatedly causing him pain. They were adversarial, confrontational, and mean-spirited.

Let's be honest: words hurt. They cut deep, leaving emotional, relational, and spiritual scars, driving the recipient of those words deeper into despair. How did the adversaries' words make this psalmist feel? He was full of **sorrow** (Hebrew, *qadar*), meaning to mourn in a blackened sackcloth. This word expressed a deep emotion that moved beyond mourning. Without any sign of relief, he felt as if his bones were crushing under the weight of their condemnation. He felt helpless as people attacked his faith with questions about the power of his God. As a result, the psalmist fell deeper into despair and turmoil.

While weaker men might have succumbed to the intense persecution, the psalmist cried out to God. He pleaded for God's help and reassurance that He was with him (Ps. 23:4). He looked for God's help to shield his soul from the piercing words of his aggressors. He once again reaffirmed that his **hope** and **praise** were in his **Savior** and his **God**. He declared his allegiance to God even in times when opposition taunted and questioned the power of God.

While our attacks may not be as severe as what the psalmist experienced, they are real nevertheless. Menacing opposition, nasty comments, and character assassination are tools of Satan. Unfortunately, the devil sometimes delivers hurtful words through family, friends, and even other believers. When we feel crushed by the devil's blows, we must first seek God as our fortress and tell Him our hurts. God's presence serves as encouragement during discouraging times. Then we must trust Him for deliverance, remembering that one day our deliverance will be complete when the Lamb leads us to springs of living water (Rev. 7:17).

How does the promise of God's presence serve as encouragement during hurtful times? How does His faithful presence function as proof of His future promises?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers should pay attention to their spiritual lives, longing to spend time with God.
- God is always present, even in the most difficult circumstances.
- Believers can praise God even when they face difficulties and uncertainties.

Review your regular habits, especially your habit of spending time with God. What time of day is best for you? How can you schedule a daily time with God that will not get pushed aside by other obligations? What can you do to make sure you protect your daily time with God?

Ask others in your group to share about times when they were aware of God's presence when facing a difficult situation. Record insights gained from the stories of others. Discuss ways the group can represent God to others who are facing a difficulty.

Create a list of reasons you have for praising God. Include the challenges that lie before you. Take time to thank God for what He has done and what He will do as He walks with you through these challenges.

MEMORY VERSE

The LORD will send his faithful love by day; his song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life. —Psalm 42:8

those who were once enemies of the heavenly gift, became enemies of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ tasted God's wrath, ⁶ and were brought into bondage of the coming age, ⁷ away, because, ⁸ to their shame, ⁹ crucifying the Son of God to contempt. ⁷ For ground that has often fallen on vegetation useful to those who receive a blessing from God, and thorns and thistles, it is worthless, ⁸ even though it is cursed, and will be burned up. ⁹ Even though we are your friends, in your case we are like other things connected with the earth; He is not unjust; He will not forget the love^c you showed for the angels—¹⁰ and you served the saints—and you did not love them. ¹¹ Now we want you to demonstrate the same diligence for the Lord's sake, ¹² so that you will be worthy of your hope, ¹³ so that you will be without imitators of those who, through faith and perseverance,

Inheriting the Promise

¹³ For when God made



Connections



Connect with a community of Explore the Bible users on Facebook. Post responses to questions, share ideas, and link to great blog content. Connect with us at **Facebook.com/ExploreTheBible**.



Get quotes, instant updates about new articles, giveaways, and more on Twitter. Follow us **@ExploreTheBible**.

Many of the Psalms were intended to be sung! Go to the Leader Helps at **LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible** to hear some of these Psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

SHEPHERDS: A BIBLICAL IMAGE OF GOD AND HIS CHOSEN LEADERS

By *Thomas H. Goodman*



» How did one of the lowliest jobs of men become one of the dearest images of God and His chosen leaders?

Many consider shepherding to be the lowest rung of migrant labor in America,¹ and it was no different 2,000 years ago. An angel announced Christ's birth to shepherds (Luke 2:8-18), men in a despised occupation. Shepherds could not be witnesses in court.

Buying "wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property."²

Yet the image of the shepherd was a favorite biblical metaphor to describe God and those He chose as leaders of His people.

The image first appeared in the earliest days of Israel's history, when the economy was based on a nomadic life and

on moving flocks of sheep and goats in order to find sufficient pasture in the rainless summers. The patriarchs lived as herders, as did Moses, David, and Amos. The work was both difficult and dangerous, as Jacob and David testified (Gen. 31:38-42; 1 Sam. 17:34-36). Against the backdrop of these early experiences, people began to compare divine and human leadership to the work of shepherding.

The Old Testament contains several references to God as “shepherd” (Gen. 48:15; 49:24; Pss. 23:1; 80:1; Eccl. 12:11), plus many other references that compare His work to that of a shepherd. When the biblical writers said God “protects his flock like a shepherd” (Isa. 40:11), they had the idea of God’s protecting, feeding, leading, and restoring His people. While most references are to God’s care of the flock as a whole, in Psalm 23 David applies this imagery to his personal experience with God: “The LORD is *my* shepherd” (Ps. 23:1, emphasis added).

The Bible often refers to God calling on leaders to shepherd His people. He reminded Nathan that all who ruled His people in the past were those “whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel” (2 Sam. 7:7).

These rulers included Moses and Aaron (Ps. 77:20) and David, whom God chose “from tending ewes to be shepherd over his people” (78:71). Second Samuel makes clear that shepherding God’s people and serving as their ruler meant the same thing: “You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will be ruler over Israel” (5:2).

To be without an earthly ruler was to be “like sheep without a shepherd,” a condition Moses did not want for his people (Num. 27:17). God even called the pagan leader, Cyrus, “my shepherd” who “will fulfill all my pleasure” in the return of the exiles to Jerusalem (Isa. 44:28).

Because of his position, a leader’s failure left the people vulnerable. Speaking through prophets, God complained against shepherd-leaders who imperiled His flock. Through Jeremiah, God said that His people had become “lost sheep” because “their shepherds led them astray” and “have not attended to them” (50:6; 23:2). God also commanded Ezekiel to “prophesy against the shepherds of Israel”:

Shouldn’t the shepherds feed their flock? [...] You have not strengthened the weak, healed the sick, bandaged



the injured, brought back the strays, or sought the lost. Instead, you have ruled them with violence and cruelty. [...] I am against the shepherds. I will demand my flock from them and prevent them from shepherding the flock. (34:2,4,10)

Through the prophets, God castigated the shepherds for letting wild animals get to the sheep, for leading the flock in the wrong direction, and for leaving them altogether (Zech. 11:17). He also declared, “My anger burns against the shepherds, so I will punish the leaders” (10:3). The Lord echoed this thought when He promised that incompetent leaders would be punished and removed. “I myself will search for my flock and look for them,” He said, adding, “I will establish over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will shepherd them. He will tend them himself and will be their shepherd” (Ezek. 34:11,23; see also vv. 12-22; Jer. 23:3-5).

A messianic figure like David is what God promised through Micah. This messianic figure, who would come from Bethlehem, would shepherd God’s people:

One will come from you to be ruler over Israel for me. His origin is from antiquity, from ancient times. [...]

He will stand and shepherd them in the strength of the LORD, in the majestic name of the LORD his God. They will live securely, for then his greatness will extend to the ends of the earth. He will be their peace. (5:2,4-5)

Matthew said this prophecy was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus (2:6). Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10) who came to do what other caretakers were unwilling to do. He had compassion on the crowds, whom He saw as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matt. 9:36). His mission was to reach “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24). They were lost due to the carelessness of their earthly leaders, but Jesus said He knew His sheep by name and would lead them (see John 10:3).

Of course, Jesus prophesied that the Good Shepherd would lay down his life for the sheep (vv. 11,15,17-18). “Strike the shepherd,” Zechariah had prophesied, “and the sheep will be scattered” (Zech. 13:7). This prophecy was fulfilled upon Christ’s arrest (Matt. 26:31).

The Shepherd laid down His life, sacrificing Himself like a



Lamb (John 1:29; Rev. 7:10-17). Yet He was raised to life by the Father “who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus—the great Shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20). In heaven, “the Lamb who is at the center of the throne will shepherd them” (Rev. 7:17).

As did the Father in the Old Testament, the Son also commissioned under-shepherds through whom He guides His flock. Before His departure, Jesus commanded Simon Peter to “shepherd my sheep” (John 21:16; see also vv. 15,17). Later in life, Peter himself wrote that elders who serve well as shepherds of God’s flock will be rewarded “when the chief Shepherd appears” (1 Pet. 5:1-4). This was consistent with Paul’s command to the Ephesian elders to “be on guard for yourselves and for all

the flock” because the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). Church leaders are called “pastors” in Ephesians 4:11, using the word *poimen*, the Greek word most often translated “shepherd.”

Even before the New Testament period was over, though, Peter had to caution church leaders against “lording it over” others or seeking financial gain in their position of authority (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Just as the prophets warned of derelict shepherds in the Old Testament, Jude warned the church of “shepherds who only look after themselves” (v. 12).

Through earthly shepherds, and even in spite of incompetent ones, Christ still leads His people as “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25).

1. Dan Frosch, “In Loneliness, Immigrants Tend the Flock,” *The New York Times* [online] 22 February 2009 [accessed 25 February 2009]. Available from the Internet: www.nytimes.com.

2. Joachim Jeremias, “ποιμήν, ἀρχιποίμην, ποιμαίνω, ποιμνη, ποιμνοιν” (*poimen*, shepherd) in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 489.

This article is adapted from an article that originally appeared in the Winter 2009–10 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Thomas H. Goodman is pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church, Austin, Texas.



COMING NEXT QUARTER

EXODUS; LEVITICUS

- Session 1** **Reluctance** > *Exodus 3:4-14; 4:13-16*
- Session 2** **Confrontation** > *Exodus 7:1-13*
- Session 3** **Liberation** > *Exodus 12:1-13*
- Session 4** **Victory** > *Exodus 14:13-28*
- Session 5** **Sufficient** > *Exodus 16:1-5,11-20*
- Session 6** **Commanded** > *Exodus 20:1-17*
- Session 7** **Equipped** > *Exodus 25:1-9; 31:1-6*
- Session 8** **Rebellion** > *Exodus 32:1-6,11-14*
- Session 9** **His Presence** > *Exodus 39:42-43; 40:4,34-38*
- Session 10** **Set Before** > *Leviticus 1:3-9; 2:1-3; 3:1-5*
- Session 11** **Set Apart** > *Leviticus 9:15-24; 10:1-3*
- Session 12** **Set Free** > *Leviticus 16:3-10,29-30*
- Session 13** **Set Futures** > *Leviticus 26:3-16,40-45*

Egypt and the Holy Land





Be honest—have you ever shown up
to a Bible study unprepared?
This is for you.

It is actually quite common for people to forget to study before their group meets. That's one of the reasons Explore the Bible is introducing the *Daily Discipleship Guide* this fall as an alternative to the *Personal Study Guide*. Same content. Different model. Instead of trying to learn something before the group meets, you learn at the meeting, and you use five daily directed Bible studies to reinforce the learning all week long. And that's just the beginning.

Learn more at lifeway.com/exploredaily

