Sermons on Psalms-Robert Morgan

Introduction - **Robert J Morgan** is the teaching pastor at **Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee** and is well known for expository messages that are rich in excellent illustrations of Biblical principles. These sermons are older messages preached on various passages in Psalms.

THE CURE FOR TURMOIL
Psalm 2

Today I'd like to begin a series of message from the largest and longest book of the Bible, the book of Psalms. But I'd like to picture it, not as the large Hebraic hymn book that it is, but as a little medicine shop, filled with 150 bottles of ointments, creams, tonics, and medicines for whatever afflicts the soul.

Today's message is entitled, "The Cure for Turmoil." We don't know the background for the word turmoil, or who coined it. But we know it has been around in the English language for about 500 years, and it describes a state of confusion, agitation, or commotion. That's the kind of world we live in. Whether it's riots in Cincinnati or Quebec City, Mad Cow disease in Europe, political deterioration of sub-Saharan Africa, fighting in the Middle East, the shooting down of a U.S. military plane in China or of a missionary plane in South America, this is a world in turmoil. And sometimes our own lives reflect that turmoil like a miniature mirror.

But God doesn't want us to live in agitation, confusion, or turmoil. And He provides an antidote in the second Psalm. Today I'd like to read for you Psalm 2 and show you the four stanzas with their four verbs and four voices.

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rules gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One. "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters."
The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then He rebukes them in His anger and terrifies them in His wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."

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

Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for His wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him.
This is one of the easiest Psalms to study because it clearly divides into four parts: Verses 1-3; verses 4-6; verses 7-9; and verses 10-12. Four stanzas of three verses each, and every stanza has a different speaker. We hear four different voices in this Psalm.

The World Speaks—Key Word: Plotting

In the first stanza, the world is speaking and the key word is "plotting."

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rules gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One. "Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters."

In other words, the world is in turmoil for one very simple reason—the world is in rebellion against God and against His Anointed One. Now the phrase "Anointed One" in verse 2 is a critical term. In the Hebrew, it is "Messiah," and in the Greek the word is "Christos," or "Christ."

This is a Messianic Psalm and it is one of the most frequently quoted in the New Testament.

For example, in Acts 4, the Jewish Ruling Council calls in the apostles and forbids them from speaking or preaching any more in the name of Christ. Look at verse 23:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in a prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "You made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David (and now they quote Psalm 2): 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against His Anointed One.' Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed…."

In other words, according to Acts 4, the Psalm 2 passage was a prophecy fulfilled when the Jewish and Roman leaders conspired against God's Christ and put Him to death. It is telling us that the world is in turmoil today because it will not submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

I've been reading about the Yalta Conference between Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt. Joseph Stalin is one of the most evil men in history, guilty of mass murder on an unbelievable scale. He is quoted as saying, "One death is a tragedy. One million deaths is a statistic." As a young man, Stalin had actually attended Seminary, but somehow he developed a hatred for God. After his death, his daughter wrote, "And according to some reports, his last conscious act was to raise up his fist in defiance of God before collapsing back onto his bed in death."

And the Bible says this rebellion against God will continue right to the end of time and will climax in a great war against the people of God at Armageddon. I read recently in the San Diego paper a chilling article that said that as gas prices have been soaring, the result is that billions of increased revenues have been flowing into the oil-rich Persian Gulf states who have been buying tons of weapons. Last year, the United Arab Emirates placed one of the biggest defense orders in the world, buying 80 F-16 fighters, and now they're negotiating the purchase of hundreds of missiles for the jets. Oman is increasing its defense spending by 33% and wants to buy an unspecified amount of F-16s. Iran signed a $7 billion arms agreement with Russia last week.

Every time you and I fill our cars with gas, we are unwittingly helping finance the most accelerated and massive military buildup in the world today as the Arab nations of the Middle East build up their arsenals and armories, and, of course, they only really have one enemy—the little nation of Israel, so narrow that an F-16 can fly across it in seconds.

There is a worldwide rebellion against submission to the Lordship of Christ, and that same rebellion cuts through our own hearts. There was a movie a few years ago entitled "The Heart is a Rebel," and all of us, left to ourselves, are in rebellion against God. That's what sin is. We want to go our own way, to do our own thing, to live the way we feel like living. But the Bible says that it brings turmoil into our lives.
So in stanza one, the world is speaking: Let us break their chains and throw off their fetters.

The Father Speaks—Key Word: Laughing

Well, what is the Lord's response? In the second stanza, God the Father speaks, and the key word is laughing.
The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then He rebukes them in His anger and terrifies them in His wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."
This is one of the only times in the Bible in which God is said to laugh, but it isn't a laugh of pleasure, it is a laugh of derision. It's a laugh of rebuke. God's is not intimidated nor is He amused. He has just one thing to say: I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill.

In other words, whether you like it or not, whether you acknowledge it or not, Jesus Christ is the reigning king of the universe. We do not yet see all things subject to Him, but we see Jesus.

I'd like to read you something that the old Puritan writer William Plumer wrote regarding this passage:

> Of thirty Roman emperors, governors of provinces and others in high office who distinguished themselves by their zeal and bitterness in persecuting the early Christians, one became speedily deranged after some atrocious cruelty, one was slain by his own son, one became blind, the eyes of one started out of his head, one was drowned, one was strangled, one died in a miserable captivity, one fell dead in a manner that will not bear recital, one died of so loathsome a disease that several of his physicians were put to death because they could not abide the stench that filled his room, two committed suicide, a third attempted it but had to call for help to finish the work, five were assassinated by their own people or servants, five others died the most miserable and excruciating deaths, several of them having an untold complication of diseases, and eight were killed in battle or after being taken prisoners. Among them was Julian the Apostate. In the days of his prosperity he is said to have pointed his dagger to heaven, defying the Son of God whom he commonly called the Galilean. But when he was wounded in battle, he saw that all was over with him, and he gathered up his clotted blood and threw it into the air, exclaiming, "Thou hast conquered, O thou Galilean."

So in the first stanza, the world is plotting, saying, "Let us throw off God's rule and reign," and in the second stanza God the Father responds by laughing, saying, "I have installed my King on my Holy Hill."

The Son Speaks—Key Word: Ruling

Now we come to the third stanza, and here we have God the Son, the Anointed One, the Christ, speaking. This really should be in red letters in your Bible, for here we have the words of God the Son quoted a thousand years before the writings of Matthew, Mark,

Luke, and John.

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

This is forever being quoted in the New Testament. For example, when the apostle Paul is preaching in Acts 13, he quotes this Psalm in this way: We tell you the good news: What God promised to our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the Second Psalm: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."

And we see the same connection again in Hebrews 1: For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father?"

There are repeated references to this verse in the book of Revelation. It's all summed up in that old hymn of Isaac Watts:

Jesus shall reign where e'er the sun
doth his successive journeys run;
his kingdom stretch from shore to shore,
till moons shall wax and wane no more.
The Spirit Speaks—Key Word: Warning

And that leads to the fourth stanza—the Holy Spirit speaks. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the narrator, the Psalmist, David, says:

Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss (that is, do homage, reverence, honor, respect) the Son, lest He be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for His wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him.

When I was a child, the one thing that would restrain my behavior would be my father's wrath. I loved and respected him very much, and I knew he loved me. But there were times when he became angry with my behavior, and I quickly learned I didn't want to provoke those times.

Now God is a God of love and patience, but the Bible also presents Him as a God of wrath and holiness. And there is a warning: His wrath can flare up in a moment. But I also want you to notice the last line of Psalm 2—the line which really gives us the cure for turmoil: Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Friday, I heard Charlie Davis, the new executive director of TEAM—The Evangelical Alliance Mission, tell of the kidnapping of their missionary in southern Russia, Herb Gregg, who was kidnapped in Dagestan and held for eight months before being released. The thing that impressed me was something he said about Herb's wife, Linda. She had to leave the country very quickly, because one of the first rules in crisis management is that you get the relatives out of the country quickly, or else the kidnappers will use that as leverage.

So Linda was put on an airplane, leaving behind her husband. Perhaps you can imagine her feelings, her turmoil and terror. But Linda said that she had a walkman with her, and somewhere over the Atlantic, she put on a worship CD, punched the button, and all at once, she said, it was as if the heavens opened. She said, "I know now what Ezekiel saw. I know what John the Apostle saw in the Revelation." Heaven was opened and revealed to her. And when the CD ended, she said, it was as if the doors of heaven closed, but God spoke to her heart and said, "Linda, it's going to be all right." And it was.

The answer to turmoil is to take refuge in the Lordship, the rule, the reign, of God and of His Anointed.

So in this remarkable, Messianic Psalm the world speaks—"Let us throw off the bonds of God and His Christ." God the Father Speaks: "I have set my King on my Holy Hill." God the Son speaks, "I will tell you what the Father said to me: 'You are my Son, today I have become Your Father. Ask me, and I will give you the nations for Your inheritance." And God the Spirit speaks, warning us, "Kiss the Son, lest He be angry and you perish in your for His anger can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in Him."

Is He the Savior, Lord, and Master of your life today?

THE CURE FOR TENSION
Psalm 3

As I was reading the newspaper one day this week, I noted how often the journalists and newswriters depend on the words "tense" and "tension." Relations between China and the U.S. are described as "tense." Negotiations over a professional ballplayer's contract were "tense." There is increased "tension" on the West Bank. It's a word that Americans love to use.

The word "tense" comes from the Latin word "tendere," which means "to stretch" or "to strain." Our English word "tendon" comes from the same word. Tense and tension have the idea of being stretched taut. Pulled. Like a rubber band ready to snap.

All of us live with a certain amount of tension, and sometimes it gets to us. We talk about tension headaches; I had one this week. I'm not sure why it came, but I had to take two or three Excedrins and lay down for awhile until the pounding stopped. Sometimes Katrina will rub my neck or shoulders and tell me that my muscles are very tense. Now, I don't think I'm any more tense than anyone else, but it is a modern problem for most of us, and it's a serious one. Doctors tell us that prolonged tension can lead to insomnia, high blood pressure (we sometimes describe this using the word hyper-tension), heart disease, gastrointestinal problems; it can even shorten our lives.

There are many strategies for coping with tension. Doctors and therapists can teach us relaxation techniques. They tell us to get more exercise, especially walking. They tell us to take time for ourselves every day, and to learn to say "No" and to simplify our lives. All of that is very, very important. I concur with it, and I'm trying to put it into practice in my own life.
But to a certain extent, this is also a spiritual problem. You know, almost all our mental and emotional and lifestyle problems have spiritual dimensions, and today I'd like to look at Psalm 3 and find there with you a cure for tension. Psalm 3 is very short—eight verses—and it is the first Psalm to bear a title; it is one of fourteen that are by their titles linked to certain historical events in the life of David.

> O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him."
>
> But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud, and He answers me from His holy hill.
>
> I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.
>
> Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessings be on your people.

Storms Blow In (Psalm 3:1-2)
The first two verses tell us that storms blow into our lives, and the title of the Psalm gives us the background: A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom. That story is told in the book of 2 Samuel, and I'd like for us scan it briefly. We really should begin in 2 Samuel 13 when a conflict erupted between King David's children. In keeping with the customs of his day, the king had multiple wives. It was very foolish and led to all sorts of problems. The story in this chapter involves three of David's children by two of his wives. Amnon was his son by one wife, and the beautiful Tamar and the handsome Absalom, were his children by another wife. Well, Amnon, developed an infatuation for his half-sister Tamar, and he actually molested her. As you might expect, Absalom was furious and for two years he plotted revenge. Then he killed Amnon. He killed his half-brother for raping his full sister. As a result, he fled the country and lived in exile for three years.

In the next chapter, 2 Samuel 14, certain political intrigues were put into play that allowed him to return to Jerusalem, but his heart was still embittered by what had happened to his sister. And he evidently had some bitter feelings toward his own father, David, or at least he had some very powerful political ambitions of his own. And Absalom began plotting the overthrow of his father's government. He was handsome as a Hollywood hunk, smart as a scientist, and if there had been public opinion polls in those days, he would have scored the highest numbers of any figure in the country.

Now look at verse 25: In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. Whenever he cut the hair of his head—he used to cut his hair from time to time when it became too heavy for him—he would weigh it, and its weight was 200 shekels by the royal standard.
Chapter 15 describes the events leading up to the rebellion, and verse 6 says that he stole the hearts of the men of Israel. The crisis hit David out of nowhere. Verse 13 says: A messenger came to told David, "The heart of the men of Israel are with Absalom." Then David said to all his officials who were with him in Jerusalem, "Come! We must flee or none of us will escape from Absalom."
So David and his inner circle quickly abandoned the capital in a desperate effort to escape his own son and large segments of his own army which had joined the rebellion. Now look at 2 Samuel 16:14: The king and all the people with him arrived at their destination exhausted. And there he refreshed himself. In other words, he and his entourage were running for their lives. They escaped the capital and fled into the wilderness, and there they found an overnight spot where they could set up camp. And there David refreshed himself. How did he do that?

He had a good night's sleep, and the next morning during his morning "quiet time" he composed Psalm 3. That is the background of this psalm. Psalm 3 is a page from David's personal journal written on the morning after he had fled from the popular Absalom.

So don't you think we can learn something here about dealing with tension?
Verses 1 and 2 tell us that storms blow into our lives, and sometimes they can blow in from nowhere, and they can seem to put us in hopeless straits. O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, "God will not deliver him." The conventional wisdom among Israelites is, "David's finished. He's done for. We woke up this morning with a new king. The old government has been overthrown."
Now David was facing crises here on multiple levels. First, it was a family crisis. This wasn't just a political enemy who had plotted to overthrow him; it was his own son. In my twenty-four years of pastoral ministry, I've watched people go through many kinds of storms, and I've gone through a few of them myself. The most painful ones are family-related. The deepest and most precious relationships in life are family relationships—the husband and wife, the parents and the children, the siblings, the grandparents. Home truly is where the heart is. And when families are torn apart, when family members are in crisis—that is the deepest pain a human being can endure.
But second, it was a vocation and financial crisis. In essence David was fired from his job, humiliated in the eyes of the entire nation, ignobly evicted from his own home and stripped of all his possessions. His bank accounts and assets were seized by the government.
But third, it was a physical crisis. Large segments of the Israeli army were combing the hills of Judea with instructions to kill him on sight. I'll never forget the sermon that Bill Evans preached here in which he described for us his spiritual struggles after he had been diagnosed with what appeared at the time to be terminal cancer. How do we react when we find ourselves in a crisis in which we are not likely to survive.
Fourth, it was a national crisis. Some here, including me, are old enough to remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which it appeared that the United States and the Soviet Union would soon be in a nuclear confrontation that could effectively destroy the world. There was nothing else talked about as a heavy blanket of apprehension hung over the nation.
Finally, I believe it might have been a spiritual crisis for David, for none of this would have happened but for his own immorality with Bathsheba, which had occurred in 1 Samuel 11. Before 1 Samuel 11, we do not read of any real problems in David's family life. After 1 Samuel 11, he has one problem after another in his home. Now, this was a sin of which he had sincerely repented and for which God forgave him. But he kept having to deal with the consequences.
So storms blow in, and sometimes they can just about sweep us off our feet.

Prayer Looks Up (Psalm 3:3-4)
So if you want to talk about tension, just read verses 1 and 2. But now I want us to notice David's response in verses 3 and 4. Storms blow in, but prayer looks up: But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. To the Lord I cry aloud, and He answers me from His holy hill.
David had a very interesting prayer technique here. If it had been me, I would have brought the Lord about one hundred specific prayer requests, and it is possible, even likely, that David did that audibly and verbally. But in terms of this written prayer, he doesn't actually make a request; just an affirmation. He comes before the Lord in prayer to affirm that Jehovah is his shield: But you are a shield around me, O Lord….
He visualizes God's protective care as a giant enveloping shield. Now, that doesn't communicate very well to us, because most of us have never owned a shield; so let's think in sci-fi terms. Do you remember on the old Star Trek television series that sometimes the Starship Enterprise would come under attack by the Klingons, and Captain Kirk would order, "Activate shields!" Mr. Spock would fiddle at the controls and reply, "Shields Up." Somehow electromagnet deflector shields would surround the Enterprise and ward off the deadly attack.
Well, the word "shield" and "shields" occur exactly 100 times in New International Version of the Bible, beginning with God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 15: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."
The last occurrence is from 1 Peter 1: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

The word "shield" is found twenty-two times in the Psalms.

- Psalm 5:12: For surely, O LORD, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield.
- Psalm 7:10: My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart.
- Psalm 18: The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold…. As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him…You give me your shield of victory

In the middle of a tense situation, I don't know of any more powerful mental and spiritual tool than reminding ourselves that God is the shield and the exceeding great reward for those who are committed to Him in Jesus Christ.

O worship the King, all glorious above,
And gratefully sing His power and His love;
Our Shield and Defender, the Ancient of Days,
Pavilioned in splendor and girded with praise.

Faith Lies Down (Psalm 3:5-6)
And that leads to the third stanza, Psalm 3:5 and Psalm 3:6. Now, before we read these verses I'd like to ask you a question. How would you answer if someone asked you to name some of the great illustrations of mighty faith in the Bible?
Charles Wesley wrote a hymn that says:

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees
And trusts in God alone.
Laughs at life's impossibilities
And cries, "It shall be done."

What are some of the Bible's greatest examples of "faith, mighty faith?" Well, you might mention Noah, when warned of things unseen, built an ark in the middle of the landscape for the saving of his family. You might think of Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as an inheritance, went, even though he did not know where he was going. Perhaps you'd tell me about Moses, standing nose-to-nose with Pharaoh, demanding, "Let my people go!" You might mention Elijah's contest on Mt. Carmel with the prophets of Baal. You might think of Peter walking on the water or the apostle Paul charging the ramparts of the Roman Empire with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But I would like to suggest that one of the greatest acts of faith in the Bible amounted to nothing more nor less than David's lying down to sleep in Psalm 3. Psalm 3:5 says: I lie down and sleep, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.

Sometimes there is no greater act or exercise of faith than going to bed and falling asleep. Now, I'm mentioning this because it cuts into my own life. As recently as last Monday night, I woke up at 2:30 in the morning and a worrisome thought shot through my mind that kept me awake for two hours. And sometimes I struggle with knowing whether, in an urgent situation, I should stay up and pray or go on to bed. I do believe there are times when a situation is so critical that we ought to stay on our knees through the night. The apostles disappointed our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane by going to bed, as it were, when they should have been praying.

But this is where spiritual sensitivity comes in. I think, during any particular time of tension, we should stay up and pray as long as the Lord tells us to, then we should leave it in His hands, go to bed, and trust Him to hand it while we're sleeping. The Bible says, "He gives to His beloved sleep."

I often think of Jesus, sleeping in the midst of the storm. I think of the apostle Peter in Acts 12, in jail, guarded around the clock by an army of solders. On the night before he is to be tried and condemned, what is he doing? He was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sleeping so soundly that then angel had a hard time waking him to set him free.

When Nelson Bell was a missionary physician to China, he was caught with his family in an area that was essentially a war zone. Shells would whiz over their house at night, but they would claim the promise that is found—not in Psalm 3 but in the next chapter, Psalm 4—I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. Dr. Bell later wrote: "It was a question of either resting in God's promises for our safety and our protection, of resting in bed, or being fearful and getting out. And we chose to stay in bed."

I read about one old woman who said this in her bedtime prayer, "Well, Lord, the Bible says that you never sleep and you never slumber, so if you're going to stay awake, I think I'll go on to sleep."

God Goes Forth (Psalm 3:7-8)

How does God respond to that kind of faith? Well, we can label the last two verses of Psalm 3: God Goes Forth. We read, Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God! Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked. From the Lord comes deliverance. May your blessing be on your people. We must trust God to help, save, and deliver.

Now, there is one more interesting aspect to Psalm 3, and that is this—it is followed by Psalm 4. The two go together. Psalm 3 is David's morning devotions, but Psalm 4 represents his evening devotions. He both began and ended the day in prayer, reminding himself of God's great omnipotent power, protection, pardon, and presence. Psalm 4 says:

Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; be merciful to me and hear my prayer. How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and seek false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him.

(Now, David speaks to himself and to us about our thoughts as we retires each night). In your anger do not sin; when you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent. Offer right sacrifices and trust in the Lord. Many are asking, "Who can show us any good?" Let the light of your face shine upon us, O Lord. You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound. I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

If you want to overcome tension in your life, make a conscious decision to both begin and end the day with the Lord. Storms blow in; prayers go up; faith lies down; and God goes forth to help His people.

He is our shield and our exceeding great reward.

THE CURE FOR ANGUISH
Psalm 6

I have a friend in Atlanta who never seems to get discouraged, blue, moody, or down. Every time I see him, he radiates. His face is always ruddy; it beams like he's just a little sunburned, and he has a perpetual, pleasant smile. I know that there are certain times when his life has confronted some real difficulties, and I asked him once how he maintained such a bight personality. He didn't really have an explanation. He said that his daughter once told him, "Dad, I've sometimes seen you angry, and I've occasionally seen you concerned about one thing or another—but I've never seen you sad." He was born in the positive case and seems incapable of those other emotions.

I'm not like that, nor are most of us. The other day I came home fussing and fuming about something, and I told my wife, Katrina, "Just don't pay any attention to me. I'm having a bad flare-up of PMS." She replied, "You can't have PMS." I said, "Yes, I can—Pastoral Mood Swings."

Well, this morning I'd like to show you another case of PMS—the Psalmist's Mood Swing in Psalm 6, which was a Positive Mood Swing—and I'd like to make this simple point in today's message: God designs to help us process our negative moods. We may not always be perpetually upbeat like my friend in Atlanta, but neither does the Lord want us living in perpetual anger, anxiety, or anguish. Taking control of our moods is a spiritual discipline, and I'd like to demonstrate from Psalm 6 how we can move from anguish to anthem, from a sigh to a song in our hearts. We have it modeled for us here in Psalm 6 through the life and prayers of David, King of Israel. Let's read it together.

> O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am faint; O Lord, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?
>
> Turn, O Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.
>
> Away from me, all you who do evil, for the Lord has heard my weeping. The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.

I'd like to give you my outline at the outset, for it seems to me that there are three themes or movements to Psalm 6. Applying it to our own lives, we can say that verses 1-7 deal with our troubled souls. Psalm 6:4 tells of our unfailing Savior. And the last three verses, 8-10, speak of our renewed strength.

Our Troubled Souls (Psalm 6:1-7)

The first part of the Psalm describes our troubled souls. David here is distraught in body, mind, and soul. His troubled condition has elements that are physical, emotional, and spiritual. He begins on a spiritual note by asking God not to rebuke him in anger nor discipline him in wrath, and it seems he felt God was punishing him for something.

This is the first of seven psalms that are scattered throughout the Psalter which are devoted to repentance and restoration. We call them the penitential psalms. There is, as someone noted, one for each day of the week. Here the Psalmist seems to have an

uneasy conscience, and he's asking God to discipline him but not in wrath or anger.

The other day, a lady who was beset with an unexpected series of negative events, said something similar to me. "Do you think God is punishing me?" she asked. Well, I don't know about her case, but the Bible does speak of God's chastening. Hebrews 13 says, "You have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those He loves….' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons."

Paul warned the Corinthians that some of them were sick and a few had even died because they had been careless in their worship patterns, even getting drunk on the communion wine. I feel certain the Lord sometimes uses sickness and suffering and difficulty as a chastening tool to help us grow in holiness and happiness.

But now, notice the six phrases that David used to describe his condition. He's like a patient who goes to the doctor and, pulling a paper from his pocket, says, "Doctor, here is my list of complaints."

First, in Psalm 6:2, he said, "I am faint." The King James Version uses the word, "weak," and it comes from a Hebrew word meaning "to droop." Over the course of my life, I've fainted on three occasions, once while making a pastoral visit at Baptist Hospital. I watched the nurse drawing blood from a patient I was visiting, and I fainted dead away. It was one of my most embarrassing moments.

What happens when we faint? All our strength leaves us. David, that rugged young shepherd boy who single-handedly defeated Goliath, that military genius who had pushed out the boundaries of Israel, that king who had established Zion as Israel's capital forever, that visionary who wanted to build the greatest house of worship the world had ever seen…. He was going through something now that drained away all his strength.

Second, in the same verse he said, "My bones are in agony." The Hebrew word here means to tremble, to palpitate, to be agitated. Agony is a very strong word in the English. It means intense pain of body or mind, torture. It is sometimes used to describe the struggle that sometimes precedes death. In older days the newspapers used to have what were popularly called agony columns which were filled with personal items usually relating to a loved one who was missing.

Third, he said in verse 3, "My soul is in anguish." Anguish is very closely related to agony. It comes from Old English word meaning narrow, and it means to be in straits… to be in distress. While in college, I attended a church that had a little note each Sunday in the program which advised the attenders to be reverent. It said, "We do not know the condition of the people around us, so be prayerful for the Lord to speak to them according to their situations and needs." I often think of that when I look over an audience. Some here may be in anguish this morning, in straits, in distress. They may be sitting near you, though you may not know it.

Fourth, in verse 5, he told the Lord that he felt he was going to die. No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? This is a confusing verse to some Christians, because we know the Bible teaches the wonderful realities of eternal life. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he should die, yet shall he live; and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." David's words here sound as though he had not hope of life after death. What did he mean?

Well, perhaps he was just so discouraged that he lost every last ounce of hope. Or (more likely) he was saying, "Lord, I want to stay on this earth awhile longer and praise you. If I die, my praise on earth will be cut short. I can't finish the book of Psalms. I can't lead the nation of Israel in festivals of praise. When you take me to heaven, I'll cease praising you on earth, and I'm not ready to do that. Help me, Lord, for I feel I'm going to die."

There are times in life when we are so low physically or emotionally that we just feel we're going to die.

Fifth, in Psalm 6:6, he said, I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. How many of us have said, at least to ourselves, "I'm worn out." That's the way David felt, for he was emotionally exhausted. He had cried and cried. He goes on in Psalm 6:7 to say that his eyes are weary: My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes.

Our Unfailing Savior (Psalm 6:4)

But David knew how to encourage himself in the Lord. He had some tricks. He had some techniques. Do you remember what the Bible says about him in 1 Samuel 30? At that time, he was a fugitive, running for his life. One disaster after another had dogged him, and even his most loyal men spoke of stoning him. But 1 Samuel 30:6 says, "But David encouraged himself in the Lord." The NIV says, "David found strength in the Lord his God."

The thing that most impresses me about David was his understanding of the spiritual and psychological truths and techniques necessary to rejuvenate oneself. That is what happens here. Look at verse 4: Turn, O Lord, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. He regained his equilibrium in prayer. I've been thinking recently that if I ever build another house, I'd like to build

a small little prayer closet into it, like John Wesley did in his house on City Road in London. We all need a place where we can gather ourselves into the Lord's presence and pray through our situations in life until the clouds of the soul and blown away by the refreshing winds of the Holy Spirit. But wherever we are is a prayer closet. The Lord bids us pray…

And since He bids me seek His face,
Believe His Word and trust His grace,
I'll cast on Him my every care,
And wait for thee, sweet hour of prayer.

And it was in prayer that David reminded himself of God's unfailing love.

- Joshua 23:14 says that God's promises never fail.
- 1 Kings 8:56 says that not one Word has failed of all that God has said.
- 1 Chronicles 28:20 says that God will neither fail us nor forsake us.
- Lamentations 3:22 says that His compassions never fail.
- 1 Corinthians 13 says, "Love never fails."
- And twenty-seven times in the book of Psalms, the NIV refers to God's unfailing love or to His unfailing kindness.

All of that means that Jesus never fails His praying, trusting, waiting children. When you scan His life in the Gospels, you'll find that He never failed.

When Satan tempted Him and tested Him high in the barren Judean mountains, He didn't fail. When 5000 hungry souls also had hungry stomachs, He took a handful of fish and a few loaves of bread, and He didn't fail. When the terrified disciples woke Him, screaming that there were going to die, He didn't fail, for "no storm can swallow the ship where lies the Master of ocean and earth and skies." When He set His face toward Jerusalem and encountered the anguish of Gethsemane, Gabbatha, and Golgotha, He didn't fail. When the sun rose on Easter morning, He didn't fail.

The Bible says that not one word has failed us of all the promises that are in His book. Our problems may be large, and our resources small, but Jesus never fails; and sometimes we just have to get on our knees, tell God just what we need, and remind ourselves of His unfailing love.

Jesus never fails, Jesus never fails.
You might as well get thee behind me Satan,
You shall not prevail,
Because Jesus never fails.

Our Renewed Strength (Psalm 6:8-10)
The result is seen in the last part of this Psalm, verses 8-10, which tells us of our renewed strength. Notice the vigor and determination in David's voice. His confidence is back. Notice how he speaks to his foes and barks out his commands: Away from me, all you who do evil, for the Lord has heard my cry for mercy. The Lord accepts my prayer. All my enemies will be ashamed and dismayed; they will turn back in sudden disgrace.

Away from me, discouragement! Away from me, anguish! Away from me, you evildoers. Get thee behind me, Satan. I have a God who hears my cries and accepts my prayers.

Here is a man who, through the divinely-given techniques of prayer, has taken control of his moods and taken charge of his emotions. He has strengthened himself in the Lord. His troubled soul had found an unfailing Savior and, in so doing, had received new strength. That's what healthy Christians learn to do.

Do you remember the biblical story of Hannah in 1 Samuel. She was in terrible agony, exhausted, tormented by family strife and by the taunts of her husband's concubine. Hannah was barren, and her burden was so great that she lost her appetite and couldn't eat. Going to the Lord's house at Shiloh, she wept in bitterness of soul and prayed to the Lord. She was in such anguish of spirit that the priest, Eli, thought she was drunk, but she told him that she had not been drinking. "I am a woman who is deeply troubled… I was pouring out my soul to the Lord… I have been praying here in great anguish and grief."

Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of Him."

And then the Bible says this—and notice what a dramatic mood swing it is: "Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast."

What had changed? Nothing. At least, nothing externally. Hannah still had no child. She was still taunted and tormented by her husband's concubine. But her attitude was completely different. Relief had come in prayer. It was a dramatic positive mood swing.

That's what David experienced in Psalm 6, and that is the pattern for you and me.

From every stormy wind that blows,
From every swelling tide of woes,
There is a calm, a sure retreat:
'Tis found beneath the mercy seat.

This week I read the story of a man named David Snitker who, due to an accident with a welding torch, was burned over eighty percent of his body. While in the Intensive Care Unit, he heard of the many people who were praying for him, and he felt himself slowly regaining strength, slowly starting to heal. But then a strange thing happened. He began to feel self-conscious about the number of people praying for him, and he began to feel guilty. He knew that his entire church was in prayer. He heard that the children were gathering to pray for him. He found out that friends and well-known community leaders were endeavoring to raise money for his family's bills.

He said to himself, "Why do I deserve all this love? I've made a lot of mistakes. I've done things I'm ashamed of." And he slipped into a relapse. His temperature climbed and he stopped making progress. Feelings of guilt hindered his own prayer life, and the doctors became concerned about his survival.

Then one night in his haze and fog and pain, a nurse came into his cubicle, and he asked her to read to him from the Bible. She picked up the Bible on the nightstand and turned at random to Psalm 130: Out of the depths have I cried unto Thee, O Lord…. If Thou, O Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand, but there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared. With the Lord there is mercy…

He felt like his soul and his very body was being washed in God's unfailing love. The nurse closed the Bible, put it on the nightstand, and took his temperature. A surprised look came over her. His temperature had returned to normal, and his physical healing resumed.

This morning you can have take a turn for the better. You can have a positive mood swing. You can move from anguish to anthem in your heart, from a sigh to a song because of the privilege of coming to the Lord in prayer and reminding yourself of His unfailing love expressed through Jesus who never, never, never fails!

Running to Bamboo–1
Psalm 11

Today we're beginning a new series of messages entitled "Running to Bamboo: Finding Strength and Stability in a Shifting Culture." There's no doubt our culture has made a major shift in the past half-century—essentially during the lifetime of anyone here my age or older. I recall hearing evangelist Billy Graham being interviewed a few years ago, and the reporter asked him how it felt to be so successful in the ministry. Mr. Graham looked surprised and said something to this effect: "I've not been successful; I've been a failure. America is far worse off now than when I began preaching."

A lot of us can identify with that sentiment as it relates to our own lives and work. When I was growing up—at least in my community—there was basic societal respect for the Bible and for Christian morality. A few years later, as I began my ministry, our nation was entering a post-Christian worldview. Now I'd have to say we're entering a decidedly anti-Christian environment.

This is new territory for us. America is unique among the nations in the way it began, for it's the only nation in history that was established for the specific purpose of establishing religious freedom and with a decidedly Judeo-Christian worldview. I'm not saying that America was established by Christians or to be a Christian nation. That'd be going too far. Many of the Founding Fathers were not overtly Christians; but they did believe in God and they had respect for the ethics of the Bible and they operated within a Judeo-Christian framework.

Take George Washington, for example, whom we respect as the Father of our Nation. I don't know whether George Washington was truly a Christian; only the Lord knows. But I do know that when he took the oath of office as the first President of the United States, he put his hand on the Bible; and after taking the oath he reportedly added the words: "So help me God." Then he bent over and kissed the Bible before him. When shortly after he gave the first Presidential Inaugural Address in American history, it is full of references to God.

In preparing this message I read Washington's first inaugural address and I took some time to analyze it. It runs 1419 words, and I was astounded by how much of the speech was devoted to the Lord. Of the approximately 1400 words of Washington's first

inaugural address, over 500 words (522 to be exact) are devoted to acknowledging and thanking and trusting in God. That's over one-third of the entire speech, and these parts almost sound like a sermon.

At the beginning of his speech, Washington said: It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official Act, my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides in the Councils of Nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that his benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the People of the United States.... No People can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the Affairs of men more than the People of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency. In the middle of his speech, Washington said: We ought to be no less persuaded that the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained... At the end of his speech, Washington concluded by asking for God's divine blessing... on which the success of this Government must depend.

And now, over 200 years later, our society is taking a wrecking ball to every vestige of Christianity or religion in public life, and America has become one of the most godless and secular nations on earth. In the last few years, our nation and the Western world has taken a moral and spiritual nosedive that corresponds perfectly to the death spiral described in the first chapter of the book Romans.

Many Christians are shaking their heads and wringing their hands and thinking all is lost. But the fact is, the Bible predicted these very days. Jesus said the days immediately before His return would be like the days of Noah, and the days of Lot (Luke 17:26-29).
He said that prior to His return, there would be an increase in wickedness. He said His followers would "be hated in all nations because of Me... and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most would grow cold" (Matthew 24:11-12).

The Bible says, "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:1-5, NKJV).

Many people in the Bible found themselves in just such an environment as we're in. Many heroes of the Scripture lived their lives and raised their families in just such a place as we are. And in this sermon series, I don't want to drag us through all the social and political and moral issues we're facing; we know what those are. I want to show you eleven characters in the Bible who faced the same kinds of issues we're facing; and I want to give you eleven propositions to follow.
The first one – our subject for this morning – is: "Remember Who is in Charge."

Today let's look at King David and what he wrote in Psalm 11. We don't know the exact background of this Psalm—whether this was written when David was threatened by King Saul or by Prince Absalom or when he was facing some other crisis. But David found himself in an apparently untenable place. This is what he wrote:

> In the Lord I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"
>
> The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord is on His heavenly throne. He observes everyone on earth; His eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, He hates with a passion. On the wicked He will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot.
>
> For the Lord is righteous, He loves justice; the upright will see His face.

This is a powerful Psalm, and in terms of outlining it for you I want to use three phrases, which, by the end of the sermon, will compose the core sentence stating the proposition I want to lay before you.

1. When the Ground Shifts Beneath You... (Ps 11:1-3)

In the first three verses, it become apparent that David is besieged by a problem or a danger. The tide of events has turned against him. He's in a situation of hostility. But he takes a stand and makes a declaration, saying: In the Lord I take refuge.

The word "refuge" here indicates that David is trusting in the Lord to cover and protect him during the difficult and dangerous days he's facing. But not everyone shares his level of faith. He has a friend who is in a panic. His friend is frantic and telling him all is lost.
I want you to look at this very carefully. We can't interpret this Psalm carefully if we don't notice the quotation marks. David is quoting someone here. He is telling us what someone is saying to him. Someone is in a panic. Someone is telling him that all is lost. Some friend is saying: "Flee! Run for your life! Fly away like a little bird, because there is an enemy stringing his bow and he is about

to shoot you through the heart. The foundations beneath us are imploding. The ground is shifting beneath our feet. There is nothing we can do. All is lost. All is hopeless. The enemy has won, the foundations are being destroyed, and what can we do? All we can do is run away, to fly away, to give up the fight, and to say that all is lost."

David's response is: "I am trusting in the Lord. I have made the Lord my refuge. How can you possibly say something like that to me? How dare you tell me to give up?"

You see, that is the gist of Ps 11:1-3. Let's read them again directly from the text and I think you'll clearly see that.
In the Lord I take refuge. How then can you say to me: "Flee like a bird to your mountain. For look, the wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart. When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Now, we can apply this to our lives in two ways. The first is culturally. The devil whispers to us and he says, "I've won. I've swept away the Judeo-Christian foundation of America. I've turned your nation into a godless, secular land, a graveyard of evangelism. So you just run away, run off now, there's nothing you can do. Fly away like a little bird because I have destroyed the foundations of all you believe in."

Well, David's response to this is: "Not so fast! In the Lord I take refuge. I'm trusting in the Lord. How dare you talk like that to me!"

The other application is personally. Maybe things are going off in your life like an earth tremor. You feel the ground shifting beneath you. You feel the enemy has an arrow aimed at your heart. We're talking about this personal problem you're having right now. In the past week I've learned of two women in our church facing possible cancer; I've learned of a couple on the missions field facing a miscarriage; I've heard of people losing the jobs or getting bad news about a loved one. What do we do when the ground shifts beneath our feet?

Well, verse 4 is one of the great verses on the sovereignty of God I've ever found in the Bible. It simply says that when the ground shifts beneath you, remember who is above you: The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord is on His heavenly throne.

2. Remember Who is Above You... (Ps 11:4-5)

Notice that the supremacy of God is given to us here architecturally in two ways. First, God is still seated in His heavenly temple. Second, He still occupies His heavenly throne room. He is both a Holy God and an Omnipotent Ruler.

It's terribly important that we remember who is in charge. This is a constant refrain in the Bible, and in times of greatest distress the heroes of the Bible would see the throne of God above them.

• In Exodus 24, as the Children of Israel were literally a nation without a country, camped in the desert between Egypt and the Promised Land, we have this fascinating text (Ps 11:9-11): Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky. But God did not raise His hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. There, hovering over Moses amid all his trials, hovering over the priests with all their responsibilities, hovering over the Israelites in all their wanderings, was the temple of God and the throne of God.

• The prophet Isaiah, in a time of political transition and uncertainty and in a nation that was experiencing slow but steady moral declination, saw the throne of God. He said: In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above Him were seraphim... calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:1-3).

• The young man, Ezekiel, thirty years old and living in a refugee camp in Babylon, saw the throne of God when he thought all was lost. He described the scene in great detail in the first chapter of his book. He said: Over their heads (the cherubim) was what looked like a throne of lapis lazuli, and high above on the throne was a figure like that of a man. I saw that from what appeared to be His waist up He looked like glowing metal, as if full of fire, and that from there down He looked like fire; and brilliant light surrounded Him. Like the appearance of a rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the radiance around Him. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell facedown, and I heard the voice of one speaking (Ezekiel 1:25-26).

• The prophet Daniel, vastly outnumbered by pagans in the courts of Babylon, was bolstered by remembering the throne of God suspended above him. In a time of great cultural and personal stress, he said: As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took His seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of His head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire... In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and people of every language worshipped Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and His kingdom is one that will never be destroyed (Daniel 7:8 14).

• The prophet Habakkuk was overwhelmed one day by the evil of the culture around him and the anguish pressing against him. But in Habakkuk 2:20, we have this powerful verse: The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth be silent before Him.

• When the New Testament hero Stephen was being stoned to death for his faith in the book of Acts, it says: But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55).

• When the apostle John was exiled to the island of Patmos by a hostile Roman government, he wrote: At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne (Revelation 4:2-3).

There's an old Gospel song that says:

> God is still on the throne,
> And He will remember His own;
> Tho' trials may press us
> and burdens distress us,
> He never will leave us alone;
> God is still on the throne.

That's the message of Psalm 11: The Lord is in His holy temple; the Lord is on His heavenly throne.

The passage here in Psalm 11 goes on to tell us that nothing escapes His notice: He observes everyone on earth; His eyes examine them. The Lord examines the righteous, but the wicked, those who love violence, He hates with a passion.

This doesn't mean that God hates people like a character in a soap opera. It means that He is a moral and a holy God who responds to the presence of sin and evil and suffering in this world. And He will make things right. And that leads to our third point and third phrase and to the concluding of our sentence.

3. And Trust Him with the Things Before You (Ps 11:6-7).

When the ground shifts beneath you, remember who is above you and trust Him with the things before you. The Psalm ends by saying: On the wicked He will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot. For the Lord is righteous, He loves justice; the upright will see His face.

Last month I had the opportunity of lecturing in some classes at Liberty University, and a young man from Germany, Johannes Schröder, a Graduate Teaching Assistant, was assigned to help me. I enjoyed being with Johannes and his wife Magdalena very much, and during the course of their time together I asked how Johannes had come to know the Lord in Germany. The story goes back to his grandfather, Helmut Schröder, who was born in 1922. His ancestors had been part of a great wave of German immigration during the days of Catherine the Great, when many Germans came to Russia because there was so much fertile land. Helmut was born in a small town in Siberia, and that's where he grew up and became the leader of a small street gang in his city. But God got hold of his heart and brought him into contact with a group of Baptists who lead him to the Lord. Almost as soon as Helmut was converted, he began sharing his faith and felt God was calling him to be a preacher and an evangelist. But he was surrounded by a hostile society and by a government that wanted nothing to do with his Christian worldview. Being a German in the Communist Russia during World War II was one thing, but being a Christian and a minister of the Gospel put him at even greater risk. Despite the opposition and danger, Helmut Schröder remained open and courageous about his faith. One day while preaching in an underground church, he met a beautiful girl named Martha, whose father had been martyred. He'd been shot for his faith. Helmut fell in love with Martha and proposed to her, but the very next day he was arrested and for a long time Martha didn't know of his whereabouts. Then she received a letter from him. He told her that because of his Christian faith, he had been condemned to hard labor in the gold mines for twenty-five years, that he would undoubtedly die in the mines, and that he was releasing her from their engagement and she should feel free to marry someone else.

But Martha wrote back and said she had meant it when said yes, and that she would wait for him and pray for his release. Miraculously he was released four-and-a-half years later, though broken in health, and the two were married in 1956. The two moved to Kazakhstan where Helmut continued his ministry, riding his donkey from village to village, preaching the Gospel and planting churches. They had four children. One of them, Waldemar, moved back to Germany at age twenty-one and became a pastor.

"That was my father," said Johannes. "I grew up in a Christian home and learned of Christ at an early age. I went to school to work in the airline business and I could have had a great future with Lufthansa. But when Dr. Vernon Whaley came to Germany and we met, he encouraged me to enroll at Liberty University. God is calling me to return to Germany and to labor for Him in Europe. He is calling me just as He called my father and my grandfather before me."

You see, the devil can't win. He can shoot us dead, but we leave a legacy. He can throw us in the gold mines, but we come out refined purer than gold.

Throughout the Bible—as today—people are called on to live and to labor in a hostile environment, and sometimes we're shot through the head or tossed into the gold mines. Sometimes we face discrimination or ridicule. Don't worry about it. Our job isn't to be popular with the world, but to be ambassadors for the King of Kings. The times may change, but God is still on His throne, watching over His own. Our lives are immortal and our work is indestructible.

So when the ground shifts beneath you remember who is above you and trust Him with the things before you. Never forget who is in charge.

AGING GRACEFULLY:POTHOLES IN PATHWAY
Psalm 19

The ordinances of the Lord are sure
and altogether righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.
By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward" (Psalm 19:9-11)

We're in a series of messages entitled Aging Gracefully, the thesis of which is that the Christian's best days are always before him. Our bodies may age, suffering wear and tear, but only to be resurrected one soon-approaching day in glory. Meanwhile our spirits grow ever younger, ever stronger. 2 Corinthians 4:16 says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." And Proverbs 4:18 says, "The road the righteous travel is like the sunrise, getting brighter and brighter..." (TEV).

Psalm 92 says, "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a ceder of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, 'The Lord is upright.'"

And in Isaiah 46, the Lord promises, "Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

We're given examples in the Bible of people who were sparkling and vigorous in their golden years, finding their latter years their most productive for the kingdom. We have the example of men like Caleb in the Old Testament; and in the New, the apostle Paul whose final days found him irrepressible, hard-working, studious, and charitable. But there's one passage about aging in the Bible that seems out of step with the rest of them. I've found one chapter in the Bible that describes the aging process in the most abysmal and melancholy terms. Listen to the way Ecclesiastes 12 describes the aging process:

So remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, "I don't enjoy life." That is when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away. They your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food and your eyes too dim to see clearly. Your ears will be deaf to the noise of the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will be gone. We are going to our final resting place, and then there will be mourning in the streets. The silver chain snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break, and the water jar will be shattered. Our bodies will return to the dust... (TEV).

Now, while it's true that we suffer some temporary physical declines as we age, this particular passage over-elaborates on this decline; and it says nothing about the benefits and joys of aging; and it offers no hope regarding the resurrection. There's nothing here but gloom and doom! Why? Well, I think I know. It was written by an old philosopher whose latter years are described in 1 Kings 11 -- and when you see how he spent his old age you'll understand why he had such an abysmal view of aging.

Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, was the son of David and Bathsheba. At his birth, the Lord told David to name him Jedidiah, which means "Loved by the Lord." But, while I suppose they did give him Jedidiah as a private name, David and Bathsheba

announced him to the kingdom as Solomon, a name that comes from the Hebrew word Shalom -- Peace.

Solomon was a highly observant young man, his mind brilliant. When he assumed the Israel's throne upon the death of his father, the Lord appeared to him at Gibeon, saying, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."

Solomon replied, "O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know who to carry out my duties. Give me a wise and discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong." So the Lord gave Solomon remarkable levels of wisdom and knowledge, and to this day we think of Solomon as the wisest man who ever lived.

1 Kings 4 describes it this way:

> God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite -- wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom.

The days of Solomon comprised the Golden Age of ancient Israel. The temple was built. Great public works projects were initiated. The arts flourished. Education abounded. Wars ceased. The wealth of the world poured into the kingdom. The kings of the earth traveled to Jerusalem. There was never a time like it, never in all earth's history -- all due to the blessings and goodnesses of the Lord. During these days Solomon wrote the book of Proverbs, which follows the book of Psalms in the Bible. He also wrote the Song of Solomon and the book of Ecclesiastes -- books that have endured for 3000 years and are included between the covers of the Holy Bible.

Alexander Whyte, the Scottish clergymen, said that if ever ship set sail on a sunny morning, it was Solomon.

But Alexander Whyte's quotation doesn't stop there. Let me read you what he went on to say: If ever ship set sail on a sunny morning, but all that was left of her was a board or two on the shore that night, that ship was Solomon. A board or two of rare and precious wood, indeed; and some of them richly worked and overlaid with silver and gold -- it was Solomon.
As remarkable as it sounds, Solomon's life ended in spiritual shipwreck, and his old age was dismal, lonely, unhappy, and truthfully described in Ecclesiastes 12.

Why? What happened? He loaded his ship with the wrong cargo. To understand Solomon's story, it's important to study Deuteronomy 17. Moses, in this passage, is anticipating the time when Israel will be entrenched in their homeland and wanting a king. He says:

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, "Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us," be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers. Do not place a foreigner over you, one who is not a brother Israelite. The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the priests, who are Levites. It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere the Lord his god and follow carefully all the words of this law...

The Lord here gives four commands to kings. The king is not to acquire great numbers of horses. He isn't to take many wives, or it says his heart will be led astray. He isn't to accumulate large amounts of silver and gold. But instead, he is to copy for himself a copy of the Word of God and keep it close to him, reading it all the days of his life.

In other words, the king wasn't to become infatuated with horses, holdings, houses, or hormones. He was to be enthralled with holiness. Now, with that in mind, let's go back to Solomon's story in 1 Kings 10:

The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents (about 25 tons!), not including the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and governors of the land...

Then the king made a great throne inlaid with ivory and overlaid with fine gold...

All King Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing

was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's days. The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea... Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons.

King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift -- articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules. Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had 1400 chariots and 12,000 horses...

And look at chapter 11:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharoah's daughter -- Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. They were from nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods...

1 Kings 11 explains Ecclesiastes 12. Solomon's golden years were golden indeed -- golden in the most literal sense, for his treasuries overflowed with gold and silver; but the gold was tarnished and tainted by a lifetime of spiritual carelessness, and in the end Solomon wrecked his magnificent life, and we find him describing his final years as "dismal days and useless, useless."
Someone once said, "The older you get the more you become like the place you're going." Dr. Paul Tournier put it more gently. "Basic individual characteristics will increase and intensify with age," he said.

Our old age is simply the capstone of the tower we've been building all our lives. Solomon's tower was flawed by spiritual carelessness and compromise. He was too busy with his gold and his girls to pay attention to his God. He gained the whole world, and lost his own soul. Andrew Bonar, the great Scottish Christian, frequently recalled his father's words to him: Andrew! Pray that we may wear well to the end!

The secret to wearing well to the end is living well from the beginning. I think the instructions Moses gave in Deuteronomy 17 provides some pretty good guidelines for you and me. We shouldn't become infatuated with horses, houses, holdings, and hormones. The Bible says, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world -- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does -- comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God lives forever."

We must give our hearts fully to Jesus Christ. Give him control over every corner and cubical of your life. Give him top priority -- preeminence -- in all things. Commit to him as Master and Lord, and let there be nothing between you and your Savior. Let no dream, goal, person or habit slip out from under his authority in your life.

Instead, cultivate your relationship with him day by day through daily prayer and Bible study. Inscribe his words in your journal, putting your name in the spaces. Engrave his words on your heart, putting his precepts into practice.

I wonder if there areas of careless and compromise in your life. If so, they'll show up in your old age, bigger and more darker than ever. Are there areas of genuine holiness and spiritual depth in your life? If so, they'll show up brighter and happier than you can imagine.

Our old age will be the capstone of the tower we're building right now. Our mature years will be genuinely mature only if we're maturing in Christ right now, day by day. Our golden years will only be genuinely golden if we're feeding on the Word of God -- the Word that Solomon's father described in Psalm 19 as being...

"...more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the comb.
By them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward."

THE CURE FOR "NERVES"
Psalm 23

The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want. He makes me down to lie,
In pastures green He leadeth me, The quiet waters by.

My soul He doth restore again, And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteous even for His own name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through death's dark vale, Yet will I fear not ill.
For thou art with me and thy rod And staff my comfort still.

Goodness and mercy all my life Shall surely follow me,
And in Thy house forever more, My dwelling place shall be.

Preaching from the 23rd Psalm is one of the greatest joys of the pastor because it is so beloved. But I can also say—preaching from the 23rd Psalm is one of the hardest jobs for the preacher because it is so well-known. What can I tell you about it that you haven't already heard and experienced? It occupies a curious place in the book of Psalms, for it is preceded by Psalm 22 and followed by Psalm 24. Psalm 22 is a vivid prophecy about the crucifixion of Christ and one of the greatest Messianic chapters in the Old Testament. It describes in amazing detail the sufferings of our Lord at Calvary. Psalm 24, describes the coming of our Lord in glory and power, presenting Him as a great King over all the earth: Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in.

In between the two is Psalm 23 with its green pastures and still waters. There's a famous little outline that says:

- Psalm 22 tells of the Savior's Cross.
- Psalm 23 tells of the Shepherd's Crook.
- Psalm 24 tells of the Sovereign's Crown.

Or we can think of it like this: Psalm 22 tells us of the sufferings on Mount Calvary. Psalm 24 tells us the glories of Mount Zion. Between the two we have a lovely valley with green grass, quiet waters, and grazing sheep--a pathway of righteousness that leads us from the cross to the crown under the escort of the Good Shepherd.

The first verse of Psalm 23 establishes the tone and theme for the entire passage: The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want (lack). In his little book on the 23rd Psalm, published in 1899, the evangelist J. Wilber Chapman suggested we should learn to emphasize every word of this phrase.The Lord—literally, Jehovah—the Eternal, Self-Existent God, the King, Eternal, Immortal, Invisible. This Jehovah, this Lord is—present tense, right now, at this moment. The Lord is my—a personal pronoun; He is mine today and He is yours today. It doesn't say, "The Lord is a shepherd," or "the Lord is the shepherd," but "the Lord is my shepherd"—and what a difference that little pronoun makes. The Lord is my shepherd. Jesus called Himself the good shepherd, and Peter called Him the chief shepherd. All that an ancient, oriental shepherd was to his sheep, the Lord is, and more, to you and me. As one rendering puts it.

The King of Love my Shepherd is
Whose wisdom faileth never.
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.
(**Editorial Recommendation**: **Play Michael Card's beautiful vocal version of "The King of Love My Shepherd Is"**)

It seems to me that Psalm 23:1 is the Old Testament's version of a promise that Jesus made in the New Testament, in Matthew 6:33, where we read, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

If the Lord is our shepherd, we have everything we need. If we are seeking His kingdom and righteous, all these things will be added to us. In either case, the secret lies in our own personal daily commitment to the Lordship of Christ. He gives us a fantastic promise—if He is our shepherd, if He is first in our lives, we will have everything we need. We shall not want. We shall not lack. We shall not lack what?

His Peace In Life's Meadows

Well, first of all, we shall not lack for peace. I noticed a little fact this week that I wasn't aware of, a little bit of Bible trivia. The word "peace" occurs 429 times in the King James Version of the Bible—429 times. The Bible is full of peace. Here in Psalm 23, the word "peace" doesn't actually occur, but it is pictured for us in beautiful terms: He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. I don't think there are four words in the Bible that paint such a beautiful picture of peace and tranquility as green pastures and still waters. Whenever we hear those words, we want to go to that place, to visit that meadow. Whenever we picture that scene, we want to be there. We need that tranquilizer. It's the Bible's great cure for "nerves."

It's like that verse in Isaiah 26:3 that says, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because He trustest

in Thee."

It's like those words of Jesus: "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give unto you. Not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

How different from most people in our world today. The historian and writer, H. G. Wells, for example, once said, "Here I am at sixty-five, still seeking for peace."

I read about a man who opened his business in a new location and his best friend sent him a floral arrangement, but when it arrived the message on it said, "Rest in Peace." The man called the florist to complain. The florist said, "It could be worse. Somewhere in this city is an arrangement in a cemetery that reads, 'Congratulations on your new location.'"
God wants us all to be located in green pastures and beside still waters, and there He wants to give us ongoing inner rest and peace.

Now, I think we can do just a little interpreting here. Besides conveying an attitude of peacefulness and tranquility, do these figure of speech have any deeper meaning? In other words, what do the pasture and the pond represent? I think the green pastures might exemplify the Word of God, Bible study. Abiding in the Scriptures is like sheep abiding in verdant meadows; we find nourishment there for our souls. The Bible is sweet pasturage. We feed and ruminate on the Word of God as sheep do on grass. We can furthermore say that the Holy Spirit is beautifully symbolized by the still waters, a fresh pond, an artesian well. (**see picture**) When a sheep has eaten her fill of grass, she drinks water to aid in the digestion and assimilation of that food throughout her system, just as the Holy Spirit takes the Scriptures on which we are meditating and applies it to our lives.

But the net result is peace and strength. We are replenished. Our souls are restored. People who feed on the Scriptures and draw from the waters of the Holy Spirit are continually replenished. They are resilient.

Why do we so frequently need for our souls to be restored? Why do we so quickly lose the strength and vitality and joy of life? I can think of three reasons—weakness, weariness, or waywardness. The Lord has an answer to all three. When we are wayward, He sanctifies us. When we are weak, He strengthens us. When we are weary, He replenishes us. He gives us inward peace and prosperity.

His Plan For Life's Pathways

He also provides guidance, and leads us in paths of righteousness.

> He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

I believe that I can say that all my life I have sensed the Lord's unseen hand leading me, even when I wasn't following Him as closely I should. The other day someone told my daughter, "If only your dad had done this or that he would be here or there…." Frankly I was offended. My answer is, "I don't want to be here or there, and I don't need people second guessing my decisions in life. I just want to do God's will."

We have three sheep who live in our back yard, and the other day I was studying Ethel's eyes. They was dull and cloudy. I can't image how she can even see through them. Sheep don't have very good eyesight, and they can't see very far down the path. They need a shepherd to guide them, and so do we. Jesus said in John 10 that His sheep follow Him because they know His voice.

One of my favorite hymns says,

All the way my Savior leads me
What have I to ask beside?
Can I doubt His tender mercy
Who through life has been my guide?
Heavenly peace, divinest comfort,
Here by faith in Him to dwell;
For I know what'ere befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

I'm of the opinion that the Lord wants to lead us even in the smaller decisions of life. The Bible says,

> "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." (Proverbs 3:5-6)

How can you find God's will for your life? Let me give you the six C's of Divine Guidance.

1. Commit your decision to the Lord in prayer.
2. Open the covers of the Bible and seek Scriptural direction. Even on totally secular decisions, there's something about Bible study that tends to point the way for us.
3. Seek the counsel of those who know more about the matter than you do. The Bible says, "In a multitude of counselors there is safety."
4. Fourth, what are the circumstances indicating?
5. And then, very often, an inner conviction will begin to develop. The Holy Spirit helps us instinctively know what to do.
6. Finally, contemplate the issue. Think it through. God gave each of us a brain, and He expects us to use it to arrive at a wise and sanctified decision.

In the process, His divine guidance extends over our lives, and we can say,

> "He leadeth me in paths of righteousness. He leads me in the right paths."

Because God is our shepherd, we shall not lack peace, paths of righteousness, or, third, protection.

His Presence In Life's Valleys

> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Here we come to a very subtle but very important change of tone in the 23rd Psalm. Until now, God has been addressed in the third person, but now the pronoun changes to the first person. Up till now, it is "The Lord is… He leads… He restores…" But now it is no longer "He" but "You."

> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for You are with me; Your rod and staff comfort me.

Many years ago my father took us on a vacation by train through Mexico, across the rugged Sierra Madre Mountains. I recall our going through a deep canyon, the walls of the cliff rose up at a steep angle, and the tracks ran along a very narrow ravine. Looking out the window I saw an old man, dressed in ragged, rugged clothing. We passed him in an instant, but his image stayed in my mind. He had been caught in the canyon by the unstoppable train, and he had pressed himself as flat as he could into a little cleft while we thundered by. Nestled tightly against his chest was a little lamb hiding its head under his arm.

The Lord isn't an old man in rags, but we are compared in the Bible to lambs who need the shepherd's protection in dangerous canyons. Sometimes He just picks us up and hides us in the safety of His arms. Corrie ten Boom used to say, "When Jesus takes your hand, He keeps you tight. When Jesus keeps you tight, He leads you through your whole life. When Jesus leads you through your life, He brings you safely home."

His Provision on Life's Tableland

Fourth, we shall not lack provision.

> Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies:
> Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Now, some people think sheep are timid animals, and to some extent that's true, but if a sheep thinks you have a bucket of grain, it's amazing how bold she can be. She forgets all about being afraid and she'll charge you to get at that sweet feed. I think every member of our family has been knocked down and even trampled a few times by sheep charging us to get at their supper. They have a driving need for food and provision.

In Bible times, that presented a problem, for the sizzling desert summers robbed sheep of their pastures and ponds. In his book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller suggests that at this point in the Psalm, the shepherd has taken the sheep from the lower meadows where the green grass is turning brown and the still waters are drying up. They have traversed the canyonous valley, and now have ascended up to the high mountain plateaus or tablelands. There the sheep can graze through the summer while the shepherd keeps a close eye for natural predators. A table was prepared in the presence of enemies. God knows that you have needs, and when you put Him first He is going to meet those needs. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added….

> And in the process, He is also going to tend to other needs in your life. He anoints us with oil, for example. Now, why would we read that in Psalm 23? Why would a shepherd anoint his sheep with oil? A few months ago, I was alarmed to find that the horse had taken a serious bite out of Ethel's ear. In fact, Mike Tyson wouldn't have done a better job. There her ear was, mostly gone, badly injured, and bleeding. At first I didn't

> know what to do, but I actually thought of this very verse of Scripture. I grabbed a bottle of olive oil from the kitchen, washed Ethel's ear, and rubbed that olive oil into the wound. It seemed to sooth her, and after several treatments, the wound healed. Later I was talking to a sheep farmer about it, and he said, "Oh, yes, that's a little trick we use at the shows. If we're showing a sheep and she gets a nick or a cut, we rub a little olive oil on it, and it does the trick."

The Lord knows how to heal our hurts and bind up our wounds. He rubs the soothing oil of His grace onto the rough spots of life. It doesn't matter what has happened to you or what you've gone through, He is going to provide for your needs and to bring healing into your life. He promises that goodness and mercy shall follow you all your days.

His Promises for Life's Journey

And that leads to my final point. If the Lord is your shepherd, you will never lack for peaceful lives, righteous paths, divine protection, abundant provision, and all along the way His promises for life's journey—

> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

Jesus must have been thinking of this when He said, "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you." (John 14:2KJV)

Recently I read a wonderful story in a publication from Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. It was written by one of their professors, Dr. Burt Braunius, entitled "A Father's Profession of Faith" (RTS Quarterly, Spring, 1999, p. 8-9). Dr. Braunius said that when his son Peter was nine weeks old, doctors in Pensacola, Florida diagnosed him with cystic fibrosis.

"We were young parents, twenty-nine years old," Dr. Braunius wrote. At that time, CF children lived an average of twelve to fourteen years, suffering with chronic lung infections and digestive disorders. But Peter lived to be almost twenty-three years, and caring for his son for all those years changed Dr. Braunius.

"One of our experiences with Peter concerned Psalm 23. During one of the quiet times in Peter's hospital room a few days before he died, he told Marlene and me in a soft voice, 'I was hoping to make it to Psalm 23.' Marlene came close to him, hugged him, and said, 'What do you mean, 'hoping to make it to Psalm 23?'"

Well, Dr. Braunius had established a family tradition of reading the Psalm corresponding numerically with that person's birthday. Peter was feeling the sadness of knowing that he would not live that long to make it to age 23. He actually died eight days before his 23rd birthday. But in commemorating Peter's life, Dr. Braunius took Psalm 23 and re-wrote it this way with Peter in mind:

> The Lord gives me help and support. He takes care of me. He enables me to accept the challenges of my failing health and at times even to find humor in the midst of pain and uncertainty. He gives me strength to live as a Christian while in a hospital climate in which most everyone's hopes are based on medical science, the latest technology, and the greatest physicians. Even though I am close to death, You, Lord, are with me. You comfort me by your Word, by your Spirit, and by family and friends from church and community. You are preparing a place for me where I will be able to breathe freely without even thinking about it; where I will walk and run without getting tired. Even though my life has been surrounded by the lung disease of cystic fibrosis and attacked by chronic lung rejection, and viral and fungal infections, You are with me. When my pain is so severe that I can't sleep and I don't know where to turn, You give relief. When I am discouraged by the constant blood draws and endless tests and procedures, You give courage. When I am so weak that I can only walk a few steps, You give me inner strength. Even though my pain is so severe that I do not know how much longer I can take it, how much longer I can live, I still believe that your goodness and love will follow me and that I will dwell in your house forever.

You, too, can personalize this Psalm. It's for you. One writer said that the reason Psalm 23 is so universal is because it is so individual. I'd like to end my message today by sharing it with you from the King James Version of the Bible, which is the most well-known and beloved version of all:

> 1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. 4Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

PSALM 23:1

We live among people who are very needy. Case in point: The actress Jessica Simpson has been in the news recently because her friends are worried that she has gone into an emotional tailspin. She had a little dog named Daisy that had been given to her by her ex-husband. Whenever anything went wrong for Jessica, she turned to her dog. They were inseparable. One friend said, "Whenever things went wrong for Jessica, she reached for Daisy. Daisy was her security blanket."

Daisy was one of the most pampered pets in Hollywood. She never ate dog food; it was always steak. When Daisy was under the weather, Jessica Simpson would cancel her plans to tend to her. When Jessica was traveling, she'd call home and have someone hold the phone to the dog's ear so they could say good-night to each other. She threw birthday parties for Daisy, and sometimes Jessica would cry herself to sleep at night using Daisy as a pillow. The air-conditioning was always set just to Daisy's liking, and this little mutt lived like royalty.

And then not long ago, disaster struck. Before Jessica's very eyes in Los Angeles, a coyote snatched Daisy up and ran off with her. Jessica screamed and searched and offered rewards, but there's no sign of Daisy. This trauma has reportedly sent the actress into a tailspin. One of her friends said, "Jessica is very needy. She is very clingy. She is so sweet, but sometimes because of that she's hard to be around…." (Friends Worry About Jessica Simpson's Tailspin" athttp://www.cnn.com/2009/SHOWBIZ/Music/09/21/jessica.simpson.daisy/index.html, accessed September 22, 2009.)

From the press reports, it almost sounds as if this little dog had become more than a pet or a friend; the little dog had become a sort of "god" to her—the source of her comfort and peace and strength in life. Somehow she got the letters "g" and "d" reversed in her life, and instead of "God," she had "dog." And when the animal was so terribly snatched from her life, it wasn't just a lost dog or a lost friend; it was her whole world.

It illustrates the fact that people are very needy; we have emotional needs, relational needs, family needs, and financial needs. And we need someone to help us with them who isn't going to be snatched away by a coyote. We don't need a dog; we need a God.

We need an over-watching Shepherd—and that's just what we have in the Twenty-Third Psalm. The Twenty-Third Psalm has been a source of strength and comfort to people for three thousand years. It is the most beloved poem in human history. It's the most memorized passage in the Bible. It's the most vivid allegory ever written.

Let's read this Psalm together and then I want everyone in this room to make a commitment to memorize it over the next six weeks if you don't already know it by heart; and, if you have children, to teach it to your youngsters. We're going to go real slow through Psalm 23. There are six verses, and we'll look at one verse per week for the next month-and-a-half; and if you've never memorized it before, make an effort to do so now. Here it is from the New King James Version.

> The Lord is my shepherd;
> I shall not want.
> He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
> He leads me bedside the still waters.
> He restores my soul;
> He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil;
> For You are with me;
> Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
> You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
> And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

This is arguably the most comforting Scripture in the whole Bible. Some years ago when I went through a very difficult period and I could not sleep for anxiety and fear, I would lie on the couch and fall asleep by repeating this Psalm over and over in my mind. It had a calming power that is found nowhere else. And many other people have said the same.

In his book, God's Psychiatry, the great Methodist preacher, Charles L. Allen, told of a man who had come to see him. This man

had started with his company at the bottom of the ladder and had worked his way up to the very top. But along the way, he had lost his peace of mind. He was a worried, tense, sick man. He'd been to doctors and taken bottles of pills, but nothing helped him.

Dr. Allen talked with him about his life, and then he took out a sheet of paper and wrote out a prescription of his own. He prescribed the Twenty-Third Psalm, five times a day for seven days. He insisted the man carry out the prescription to the letter. Upon awakening each morning, the man was to read through the Psalm carefully, meditatively, and prayerfully. Immediately after breakfast he was to do the same. Then he was to do it again immediately after lunch, then after dinner, and finally the last thing before going to bed.

Dr. Allen gave out the prescription with the confidence that it would work, because he had given out that same advice many times and it had never failed. "That prescription sounds simple," he wrote in his book, "but really it isn't. The Twenty-Third Psalm is one of the most powerful pieces of writing in existence, and it can do marvelous things for any person. I have suggested this to many people and in every instance which I know of it being tried it has always produced results. It can change your life in seven days." (Charles L. Allen, God's Psychiatry (Fleming Revell Co., 1952), 13-14.)

Well, our study is about the Great Shepherd living for His sheep in Psalm 23, and let's
begin today with this opening sentence: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. As you can see very clearly there are three parts to this verse.

1. The Lord…

It begins with the words "The Lord…." That's the starting point. We don't begin with our own needs or our own fears or our own wants. We begin with the Lord.

Literally in the Hebrew as David wrote Psalm 23, it says, "Yahweh is my Shepherd." The word was made up of these letters: YHWH. The German theologians gave it a "J" sound at the beginning, which is why some translations say "Jehovah." But as far as we can determine, the best pronunciation is Yahweh.

This is the proper and the personal name of the God of Israel. As far as we can determine, it comes from the Hebrew word "to be" or "I am." And the key text in the Bible on this subject is Exodus 3. In that chapter, God told Moses to go down to Egyptand liberate the Hebrew slaves. Moses said, "What if they ask me who You are, God. What is Your name."

The answer came back from the burning bush, "I AM WHO I AM." The Hebrew consonants for this phrase, "I am" or "to be," serve as the basis for the name Yahweh. In other words, "I JUST AM. I AM SELF-EXIST. NO ONE MADE ME. I HAD NO BEGINNING, WILL HAVE NO ENDING. I AM THE ETERNAL, UNCHANGING, SELF-SUSTAINING, SELF-EXISTANT ONE." It could even mean: "I AM WHAT I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN."

All other life in the universe is derived. Whether it's a tiny microscopic organism, a tree or plant, a bird or animal, a person or an angel—we have derived our lives from Him, but He derived His life from nowhere and from no one. He is eternal, self-existent, and self-sustaining. "I am who I am."

Now what happened is that the ancient Hebrews didn't feel comfortable writing or speaking this name, because it was so personal and so proper. They didn't want to take it in vain. They didn't want to disrespect God in any way, so when they wrote or spoke this name, they substituted the title Adonai, which means "Lord."

Think of it this way. We have a woman in our church whose son works in Washington, D.C., and is frequently at the White House on various assignments. Several years ago during the Christmas season, he was in a particular room in the White House and there was a problem with the Christmas tree lights. He got down on his hands and knees and looked for the plug and tried to get the thing working. Suddenly he felt another presence in the room, and he turned around and there was Ronald Reagan towering over him. He was startled and he said, "Oh, Mr. President. I was just trying to fix these lights." Mr. Reagan smiled and said, "Well, Merry Christmas to you."

"Merry Christmas to you, too, Mr. President."

Reagan said, "And Merry Christmas to your whole family."

"And to yours, Mr. President," said the man.

At no time did the man call the President of the United States Ronald or Ron or Ronnie. I've read that when a man is elected President of the United States, even his close friends no longer call him by his given name except on the most informal of occasions. The dignity and the power of the office are too great. It's "Mr. President."

That's the way the ancient Hebrews thought about this name "Yahweh." The Lord said to them, "Just call me Yahweh." But the rabbis and scribes of biblical times just couldn't bring themselves to do that. So they said "Adonai"—Lord. (In fact, to prevent readers from speaking this name, scribes took steps to create textual markers to remind readers not to use this name in reading aloud. They used the vowels from the word "Adonai" and placed them with the consonants YHWH to remind readers to say "Adonai" instead of YHWH. In this way, the scribes maintained both reverence and scriptural accuracy when the divine name was used. The German theologians gave it as a "J" sound at the beginning, a "V" sound in the middle, and they transliterated the text markers (the vowel sounds from Adonai), and that's why some translations say Jehovah. But as far as we can determine, the best pronunciation is something like "Yahweh.") And the custom has carried over into most of our English translations of the Bible. And that's why when you look at Psalm 23:1, you see the word Lord, an all capital letters. The first letter, "L," is a regular sized capital letter, and the "ord" are in small capital letters. Whenever you see that in the Old Testament, it means that the actual Hebrew term is the personal, proper name for God – YAHWEH – the Eternal, Self-Existent, All-Powerful yet All-Personal God.

This is the One who is my Shepherd.

Jehovah-Jesus is my shepherd. Yahweh-Yeshua is the shepherd of my soul.

2. The Lord is My…

That makes the pronoun so remarkable. This Eternally Self-Existent One is not just a shepherd or the shepherd. He is my shepherd. What that really means is "I am His sheep." He owns me and I am under His management and under His care. I have a personal relationship with the God of the universe.

Martin Luther once said that the heart of Christianity is seen in its personal pronouns. William Evans, a writer who lived a hundred years ago, observed that The Twenty-Third Psalm was so universal because it was so individual. (William Evans, The Shepherd Psalm (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1921), 9.)

Jesus said in John 11: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me."

My shepherd… My sheep.

3. The Lord is My Shepherd

And that brings us to the next word. The Lord is my Shepherd. There are ways in which our relationship to the Lord can be aptly compared to a shepherd's relationship to his sheep.

It's interesting and wonderful to me that when the Lord created the world, He decided to make living creatures that we call animals. He filled the world with these things. They come in every shape and size, from tiny bacteria to enormous whales. Some of them are frightening and we run from them, and others are so comical and funny that we laugh at them. Some of them swim in the water, some of them crawl in the dirt, some of them walk on two or four or one hundred legs, and some of the fly through the air. This world is a virtual zoo of animals that God created and placed in their various ecosystems and environments.

Why did He create so many animals?

One reason was educational. God created some animals specifically to teach us behavioral skills and moral values. By looking at those animals we can see ourselves. We can learn lessons about our own lives.

For example, the Lord told us in Proverbs 6:6 that we should study ants, which work hard and are busy all the time. You see a column of ants marching back and forth on the sidewalk or an ant hill in your yard; that's a lesson in industry and hard work.

Jesus said that we should study the birds, because they can teach us someone about living without anxiety. They know their Heavenly Father will feed them.

We're compared to eagles in Psalm 105 and Isaiah 40. We're warned against being stubborn like a mule in Psalm 32, which has to

be governed with bit and bridle.

We could preach a whole series of sermons on the subject of what God intends for us to learn from various animals. He designed and made the animals, placed them in the world, and then, here and there in the pages of Scripture, He listed the specific lessons He wants us to learn from them.

Well, Exhibit A in the Bible is sheep. And there seems to be two major ways in which we are compared to sheep in the Bible.

First, we are utterly dependent on someone to take care of us. A sheep is one of the only animals that just cannot make it on their own. Dogs can go wild and live in packs in the woods and track down their own food and take care of themselves. Many wild animals don't need human help at all. Cats adapt to the wild, and so do most of the other animals that we sometimes domesticate and keep as pets. You hear about herds of buffalo and wild horses on the prairie. But you never hear about sheep migrating on their own in great flocks. They have no defensive equipment except they can butt you a little bit with their heads. They can't fight with their hoofs or their teeth. They can't track down their own food. They can't run away very easily, or dig holes or climb trees. They can't kick very effectively or bite.

They are utterly dependent on a shepherd to care for them. We may think we can make it on our own. The human race might think it can get along just fine without a good and gracious God; but in the end we can never do it. We need a Shepherd.

Allen Emery was a very successful businessman who, for many years, was a supporter and an advisor to evangelist Billy Graham. Several years ago, he wrote an account of his life, and he told about an experience he had as a young man. Allen was originally in the in the wool business, and he once spent an evening with a shepherd on the Texas prairie. The shepherd had dogs to help him herd and protect the sheep, but he was the only person in charge.

It was in the springtime of the year, and the snows had only recently melted. The grass was turning green. There were about 2000 sheep in a large flock, and the shepherd had built a large bonfire. And there they were—one shepherd, three sheep dogs, a large bonfire, and 2000 sheep. As the night wore on the sheep settled down, when suddenly the air was pierced by the long, loud wail of coyotes. The shepherd's dogs growled and peered into the darkness. The sheep, which had been sleeping, lumbered to their feet, alarmed, bleating pitifully. The shepherd tossed more logs onto the fire, and the flames shot up.

In the glow, Allen looked out and saw thousands of little lights. He realized those were reflections of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. Those sheep had instinctively looked toward the shepherd. "In the midst of danger," Allen observed, "the sheep were not looking out into the darkness but were keeping their eyes set in the direction of their safety, looking toward the shepherd. I couldn't help but think of Hebrews 12: 'looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...'" (Allen C. Emery, A Turtle on a Fencepost (Waco: Word Books, 1979), 53.)

You and I are utterly dependent on a Shepherd, and that's why we have to keep our eyes on Christ. Jesus said, in John 10: "I am the good shepherd."

Second, we're like sheep, not only because we are utterly dependent on our Shepherd, but because we are made for companionship with Him. When I first began pastoring a church in 1977, I did a personal Bible study on the subject of biblical shepherding, and I was amazed to discover that in the Hebrew language, the word for "friend" is derived from the Hebrew word for "shepherd." Sheep become attached to their shepherd and the shepherd to them. Continuing with John 10, Jesus pointed this out when He said, "The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

That's true. I attended a lecture a few weeks ago conducted by a professor of the culture of the Holy Land. He pointed out that sometimes several shepherds and several flocks of sheep would inhabit one area of land, and at night all the sheep would be mingled together in giant corals or folds. The next morning, one by one, each shepherd goes to the gate and sings a particular song. His sheep and his sheep alone respond to his voice and head in his direction, and he leads them out. Then the next shepherd comes and sings his song, and his sheep follow him. And in this way the various flocks all start their day heading to their various pastures.

When Katrina, the girls and I moved to Pennington Bend, we had a field in our back yard and we bought a little flock of three or four sheep. Our girls bottle-fed them and then spent years taking care of them. Each sheep became very attached to whoever was

taking care of it.

Years ago, the Friday or Saturday newspapers used to carry the sermon topics for the next day in all the leading pulpits in town. In Norfolk, Virginia, Rev. R. I. Williams of Fairmont Park Methodist Church picked up the phone and called the newspaper to give them this sermon topic. "The Lord is my Shepherd," he said. The person on the other end said, "Is that all," and Rev. Williams said, "That's enough." The next day the church page carried his sermon topic as: "The Lord is my Shepherd—that's enough!"

It's a beautiful, biblical picture of our relationship with the Lord Jesus. Jehovah-Jesus is my Shepherd. And that leads us to the final phrase of the verse: I will not lack.

4. The Lord is My Shepherd; I Will Not Lack

The Living Bible says: Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need. If the Lord is our shepherd, He will meet all our needs in life. And when you read the other five verses of Psalm 23, they are simply an extension and explanation of verse 1. Look at this with me and see how beautifully it flows.

The Lord is my Shepherd….

- I shall not lack peace and provision in life, for He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me by still waters.
- I shall not lack hope and encouragement, for He restores my soul.
- I shall not lack guidance, for He leads me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.
- I shall not lack deliverance during tough times, for even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.
- I shall not lack companionship, for You are with me.
- I shall not lack protection, for Your rod and staff comfort me, and You prepare a table for me in the presence of my enemies.
- I shall not lack help and healing in all the events of life, for you anoint my head with oil.
- I shall not lack endless blessings, for my cup overflows.
- I shall not lack anything, for goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.
- I shall not lack an eternal, heavenly home, for I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

All that, if we can truly say, "The Lord is MY Shepherd."

It's like my wedding ring on my fourth finger, which reminds me of the personal and exclusive relationship I have with the one I love. It's my way of saying, "I am hers, and she is mine." (This old story appears in many places, including The Secret of a Happy Day by J. Wilber Chapman (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, reprint of 1899 edition), 24-25, and in The Lord is…by H. Edwin Young (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981), 17-19.)

Can you say this about the Lord?

> The King of Love my Shepherd is
> Whose goodness faileth never.
> I nothing lack if I am His
> And He is mine forever!
> (**Editorial Recommendation**: **Play Michael Card's beautiful vocal version of "The King of Love My Shepherd Is"**)

PSALM 23:2

> He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
> He leads me beside the still waters.

Today we're continuing our study of Psalm 23, the best-loved chapter of the Bible. To the best of my memory, I memorized this passage when I was in the second grade at East Side Elementary School. That was our memory project for the year. I was about eight years old at the time, and so that was about a half-century ago. I've had a fifty-year relationship with Psalm 23, and it's as refreshing to me now as it has ever been. It was undoubtedly the best thing I learned in the second grade, and one of the most treasured acquisitions of my life.

I suppose that nearly everyone loves the Twenty-Third Psalm, because of its tranquil pastoral images of green pastures and still waters. I'm not alone in having memorized it in childhood. I hope every child and every family in our church has Psalm 23 committed to memory, or is working on it now. This chapter has been among the first memory projects for children of all ages and in all ages, from antiquity to modern times. From generation to generation, it's been quoted in countless pulpits, read in millions of waiting rooms, recited in thousands of hospital rooms, scribbled on jailhouse walls, whispered by the bedsides of children, spoken word-for-word by the dying, and leaned on moment-by-moment by the living. It sums up all our needs in life and all God's provisions —and all in six verses and about a hundred words.

It begins with "The Lord," and it ends with "forever." And what could be better than that?

"The world could afford to spare many a magnificent library better than it could dispense with this little Psalm of six verses," observed a writer from yesteryear. (William Evans, The Shepherd Psalm (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1921), 7.)

Psalm 23 is a microcosm of God's grace in our lives. Dr. F. B. Meyer said we can see the grace and the gospel of God reflected in Psalm 23 just as the whole sun is reflected in a single dew drop.

So let's read the entire Psalm again, then we'll focus on the second verse.

The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me bedside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Introduction

This is a painting. We're not talking about real sheep and a real shepherd; we're talking about a beautiful oil painting to hang in the gallery of our minds. We're obviously not real sheep. We don't have four legs with hoofs at the end of them. We're not covered with wool from top to tail. When we open our mouths we can make words and communicate with sentences. We don't just say "Baaaa." What the writer, David, was saying is not that we are sheep, but that we are like sheep. He's painting a picture to show us the comparisons between the way we are and the way sheep are; and there are parallels between the way God is and the way a Shepherd is. This is a series of metaphors. It's an analogy; we have to interpret it all along the way.

So while these four words in verse 2—green pastures, still waters—conjure up a beautiful scene in our minds, what exactly is the meaning of it? What lessons can we draw from it? It's not very hard to interpret. I think we can say there are three levels of meaning.

This is a Picture of Provision: Our Needs are Met

First, the green pastures and still waters mean that our needs are met. We have a God who knows and meets our needs as thoroughly as a shepherd cares for his flock. Psalm 23:2 follows Psalm 23:1 in a logical way. Because the Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need. I have green pastures. I have cool, still ponds of water. My needs are met. There are provisions and supplies for my hunger and thirst, and my Shepherd has seen to it that everything I need has been provided.

Look at verse 2 again: He makes me lie down in green pastures. This doesn't mean that a sheep has plenty to eat and is about to graze. It means that he has grazed until he is full, and now he's going to lie down and chew his cud. Sheep eat standing up. The only time we ever had a sheep to eat lying down was when it was sick. If I saw a sheep laying down and trying to graze on some grass right at its nose, I worried. If I had a sheep that couldn't get up or was weak or ill, I'd go out and sit down beside it with some sweet feed and feed it out of my hand. Sheep typically eat on all fours, and then they find some shady spot in the green pastures to

lie down and chew their cud.

Once while I was working in the back yard, one of my daughters was swinging on a tire swing hanging from an old tree, and she was laughing. I asked her what was so funny, and she pointed to one of our sheep, who was lying down under a nearby tree, her legs tucked neatly beneath her. I watched her, and she was chewing away like a baseball player going to town on bubble gum. Chomp, chomp, chomp. Then she swallowed whatever she was chewing, and a moment later she burped. And she started chewing again. This was repeated over and over, and my daughter thought it was hilarious, which it was.

I explained that sheep have more than one department in their stomachs. When they stand and graze the wet, dew-drenched grass in the morning, they don't take time to chew it. They just bite off the green shoots of grass, swirl them around in their mouths, and swallow the mouthful whole. They do this until their stomachs are just full of whole, undigested grass. Then they find a quiet place and lie down, and—I'll try to make this as inoffensive as possible—they start burping up the contents in that division of their stomach, one mouthful at a time, and they chew it up. This time when they swallow it, it goes into another division of their stomachs. And so they enjoy their breakfast twice, so to speak.

My point is that when the Psalmist says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures," it means that the sheep has had plenty to eat, she's full, she's satisfied, and her needs have all been met.

The same is true with the water. He makes me lie down in green pastures and beside still waters. Sheep are easily frightened by water, and they don't like rushing streams. After all, they can't swim. They're dressed in heavy wool coats that can become waterlogged and result in their drowning. Last summer when you were at the swimming pool or beach, did you jump into the water wearing your heavy wool winter coat? You couldn't swim in something like that. It'd become waterlogged and pull you under. And sheep instinctively know that.

We didn't have a pond or stream in our back field, so I had a barrel I'd fill with water. We had to do it often, because water turns brackish pretty fast and it gets filled with insects and sometimes a bird that drowns while trying to bathe. But the sheep would never come near the water while I was filling it with the water hose. The sound and sight of the water splashing into the barrel bothered them, and they would back away or run off. But after the barrel was filled and the water was stilled, they would come and drink all they wanted.

If they had food and water, they were happy. Their needs were met.

This is a tremendous and frequently repeated theme in the Bible. If we make the Lord our Shepherd, He will see to it that one way or another all our needs are met. He will take personal ownership and responsibility for us.

Jesus made this same point in a similar way in Matthew 6. He was literally standing in green pastures as He preached, but apparently there were no sheep around. There were birds and flowers, but no sheep. So Jesus simply issued the same promise using birds and flowers as the analogy. He said, in effect, "Look at the birds… they don't worry. Your Heavenly Father feeds them. Look at the flowers… they don't fret. Your heavenly father clothes them. Your Heavenly Father knows you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

I've never gone through the Bible to try to determine how often this promise is repeated, but it is a constant refrain in Scripture. I'll give you just a few examples.

1. Psalm 37:25 says, I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.
2. Jacob said in Genesis 33:11: God has been gracious to me and I have all I need.
3. Paul said in Philippians 4: I am amply supplied…. And my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
4. Psalm 34:9-10 says: Fear the Lord, you His saints, for those who fear Him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good things.
5. Psalm 84:11 says, No good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless.
6. Romans 8:32 says: He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, freely give us all things.
7. 2 Corinthians 9:8 says: God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

I think we underestimate the dimensions and duration of this promise. It means that if the Lord is our Shepherd, if we are under His ownership, management, and care, if we are seeking first His Kingdom and His power, He will see to it that every crucial need in our lives is met in one way or another. All our material needs. All our emotional needs. All our relational needs. All our spiritual needs. All our eternal needs. Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need. He makes me lie down in green pastures and He leads me beside the still waters. My needs are met.

This is a Picture of Peace: Our Minds are Content

Second, this means that not only are our needs met, but our minds are content. Green pastures and still waters are a sign of contentment. Sheep lying under shady trees with their legs tucked under them, chewing the cud beside still waters – that is a lovely picture of tranquility and peace. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly. I am the good Shepherd" (John 10:10-11).

Sheep do not lie down if they are troubled, insecure, or frightened. With our old sheep, they could be lying in the pasture as content as could be, and if I or one of the girls came down and spoke to them or petted them, that was fine. But if I had someone with me they didn't know or if the grandchildren ran down into the pasture hollering and screaming, the sheep would instantly get up. If a little dog ran into the field barking and yelping, the sheep would jump to their feet. Sheep only lie down if they feel secure, content, and at peace.

One of the reasons we have a hard time relaxing is because we're not content with what we have. We always want something more. We're always striving for something or worried about something.

But Hebrews 13 says: Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper (my Shepherd); I will not be afraid."

How content are you?

The Bible says: Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing (if our basic needs are met), we will be content….

This is a Picture of Personal Nourishment: Our Souls Are Fed

Third, this is a picture of personal nourishment, for the Lord meets three different kinds of needs in our lives.

- He meets our External Needs, our physical needs—food, clothing, the necessities of life.
- He meets our Eternal Needs—salvation, heaven, and everlasting life. John 10 says: "My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand."
- But He also meets our Internal Needs—He feeds us with His faithfulness and on the rich truths and promises of His Word.

Green pastures have long been a picture of personal Bible study. Perhaps you know that our English word pastor comes from the word pasture, and it has to do with someone, a preacher, a pastor, who leads his flock—a congregation—into the green pastures of Scripture Sunday after Sunday.

In Jeremiah 23, the Lord excoriated the false teaches of Israel because they were not providing a nourishing pasture for the Israelites. They were feeding them with careless doctrine and flawed truth. Jeremiah 23:10 says: "The pastures in the desert are withered. The prophets follow an evil course." He went on to warn, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you… they speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord… But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear His Word? …But if they had stood in My council, they would have proclaimed My words to My people…."

Jesus said in John 10 that if He is our Shepherd, He will lead us in and out, and we fill find pasture.

Psalm 37:3 says, "Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness" (NKJV). The NIV says, "Enjoy safe pasture."

Our job is to take the time to graze in the sweet pasturage of the Word. A great old writer of yesteryear, William Evans, observed:

> "It is generally recognized as being a very difficult thing to get God's people to thus lie down. They will do

> almost anything and everything else but that. They will run, walk, fight, sing, teach, preach, work, in a word do almost anything and everything except seek seasons of quiet and periods of retirement from secret communion with God and quiet soul nurture…. We do not like pauses… (but) from the rush into the hush Jesus calls us." (William Evans, The Shepherd Psalm (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1921), 27.)

Now, if the green pastures represent feeding our soul on Bible study, perhaps the still waters represent the Holy Spirit. He is often likened to water in the Bible. In John 7:37-39, Jesus said, "If anyone is thirsty, let Him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within Him." By this He meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive.

Let me add one detail to this picture. Sometimes I'd fill up our watering barrel in the back meadow, but the sheep wouldn't drink from it. I noticed that it stayed full, except what evaporated into the air. I could go for days without replenishing their water supply. That would happen when the weather changed and we had heavy dews. Sometimes if the climate is right, sheep can go for a long time without actually drinking water. They can go for days when, in the early mornings, the grass is drenched with dew. It's sopping wet, and the sheep take in their needed moisture with their needed nutrition.

I think it's a wonderful picture of the Spirit-drenched Scriptures. In the early morning we graze in the sweet pasturage of the Word of God covered with the watery dew of the Holy Spirit. I think this is a beautiful picture of the Christian's daily quiet time.

To quote William Evans again:

> "There can be no spiritual strength sufficient to walk in the paths of righteousness unless time is taken to lie down in the green pastures of the divine Word by the still waters of prayer. (William Evans, The Shepherd Psalm(Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1921), 27-28.)

Conclusion

The last thing I want to point out about verse 2 are the pronouns. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters.

He makes me… He leads me: He / Me. Martin Luther once said that the heart of Christianity is seen in its personal pronouns. Everything depends on knowing Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Shepherd. Everything depends on our receiving Him and His free gift of eternal life, by grace and through faith.

Years ago when I was in college, I came across a little story that I clipped and copied into my notes. I don't know where it came from, but I've never forgotten it. A social gathering was held somewhere in the UK, and among the attendees were a famous British actor and an aged Christian minister. During the course of the evening, the actor was asked to give a recitation, and he decided to use the Twenty-Third Psalm. He quoted it with a beautiful voice, with pauses and inflections and remarkable timber of voice. When he was finished, a mummer of admiration ran through the crowd. Then the aged minister was invited to recite the same passage of Scripture. But when he finished, all eyes were filled with tears because of the great tenderness and understanding with which he had spoken. Later the actor came up to him and said, "You know the difference between our recitations? I know the psalm, but you know the Shepherd."

You're learning about the psalm, but make sure you know the Shepherd.

PSALM 23:3

> He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.

If you've taken a trip by airliner in recent months, you know that it's not as much fun as it used to be. I don't know which is tighter—the security or the seats. And it seems like the airline companies are trying to nickel and dime us to death. There are little charges for everything. If you check your baggage, there's a charge. If you want to watch a movie there's a charge. If you want to board early, there's a charge. If you order a coke, there's a charge. If you want your little thimble of peanuts, there's a charge. If you want an aisle seat or a window seat, there may be a charge for that, too. In the unlikely event of an emergency water landing, they charge you for the seat-cushion flotation devices, and if you experience a sudden change in air pressure, you have to insert a dollar bill to use the emergency oxygen masks. Well, those last two items may not be true, but I did read that one airline is planning to put a coin box on the doors of the lavatories. I'm not sure that's a good idea, but it's bound to happen sooner or later. I suppose the

longer the flight the more they would charge!

But in the airline's defense, they do have incredible expenses; and from I've read most of the major airlines are spending millions and millions of dollars to upgrade to the very newest navigation technology. Southwest Airlines is spending $175 million dollars to install new navigation equipment on its airliners. Other airlines are doing the same, and it's an improvement that is being mandated and overseen by the FAA (the Federal Aviation Administration) in order to take advantage of GPS systems that will keep airplanes on more direct routes and give them more efficient airport approaches.

The old navigation technology was based on radio and radar, but the newest technology is based on Global Positioning Systems using orbiting satellites. According to news reports, this new navigation technology will allow airplanes to fly more directly to their destination and make more accurate approaches to the runways. And I'm certainly in favor of that. I still don't like paying all kinds of fees and surcharges at the airport, but I certainly want my pilot to know where he's going.

My point is that we all need the best navigation we can find. Down here on earth we'd be lost without our GPS systems, or our maps, or our scribbled-out directions. Just suppose you had to find your way by car to, say, Bearcreek, Montana, and you didn't have a GPS or a map or any directions, and there was no one to ask. What if you just had to wander around the highways and byways of the United States hoping to somehow end up there? What if everything was trial and error, hit or miss, guesswork andguesstimation?

Well, if we can't even guide ourselves by our own instincts to another town, how can we expect to find our way through life itself? The simple fact is that we cannot guide ourselves. We need a navigator, a guidance system. What we need is a shepherd who leads us in the right paths. And that's what we have in Psalm 23:3.

We're in a series of studies into the famous 23rd Psalm, and today we're coming to verse 3; but let's take a moment to read the entire chapter as an aid toward memorizing it.

> The Lord is my shepherd;
> I shall not want.
> He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
> He leads me bedside the still waters.
> He restores my soul;
> He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
> Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
> I will fear no evil;
> For You are with me;
> Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.
> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
> You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over.
> Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.
> And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Introduction

It's remarkable how many of the heroes of the Bible were shepherds. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the patriarchs were all shepherds. King David started life as a shepherd, and the lessons he learned as a shepherd prepared him for the kingship. The first announcement of the birth of Christ was made to shepherds keeping watch over the flocks by night.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah is described as our Shepherd; and in the New Testament, Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd." And Peter later called Jesus the "Great Shepherd." So if we want to understand the Bible and about biblical principles, we have to know something about biblical shepherding. This morning's message is devoted to the phrase: He leads me in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.

If I could take us all to the Holy Land today, we'd fly into David Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, load up on buses, and start driving up the Mediterranean Coast toward Caesarea or inland toward Jerusalem. It wouldn't be very long before we'd look out our windows and see a shepherd, keeping watch over his flock; and it would look just about the way it did 4000 years ago. Very likely that shepherd would be a child, or maybe an adolescent. David was the youngest son of his father Jesse, but he was old enough to watch a flock of sheep.

One of the most important things about shepherding is leading the flock to the right place by means of the right route. As the

weather changes and it become hotter in the summer, the pasture lands change. In some cases, the sheep overgraze an area and have to move to another. So one of the main jobs of the shepherd is leading their flocks from one area to the other, looking for good pasturage and fresh water. The shepherd can't afford to lead his flocks into dead-end canyons or into an area with no water or is off limits. The shepherd could face tragedy. He can't lead them into barren wastelands or into a fenced area where they'll be trapped. He can't backtrack with them, or get lost, or go around in circles. He has to know where he is going, and he has to know the route. He has to go before the flock, check out the pathway, and lead them in the right routes with confidence and in safety. Without good navigation, the whole flock can perish in just a day or two.

Exposition of Verse

To the biblical writers, this was analogous to God's guidance over our lives. "The Lord is my shepherd… He leads me in the right paths…"

One of the most famous books on the 23rd Psalm was written by a shepherd named Philip Keller, and he said that from his own experience in tending sheep: "No other single aspect of the ranch operation commanded more of my careful attention than the moving of sheep. It literally dominated all my decisions. Not a day went by but what I would walk over the pasture in which the sheep were feeding to observe the balance between its growth and the grazing pressure upon it. As soon as the point was reached where I felt the maximum benefit for both sheep and land was not being met, the sheep were moved to a fresh field. On the average this meant they were put onto new ground almost every week."[i]

In the same way, we need a navigator, a guide, a Shepherd.

When I was a student in Bible College—a junior or a senior, I don't remember—we had a special end-of-year banquet and invited Dr. Charles Stanley from the First Baptist Church of Atlanta to come over to Columbia and be our special speaker. At that time, many of us were unsure of the future. We talked about the big M's ahead of us—marriage, ministry, and further matriculation. We were making decisions that would determine the course of our lives. Dr. Stanley came and spoke to us about the certainty of God's plan for our lives and on the subject of divine guidance. And I came to understand more clearly from the Scriptures that God has a plan for His children and that He guides us. I don't recall the specifics of Dr. Stanley's message, but I still remember how reassured and strengthened I was to learn that God had a plan for our lives and had promised to guide us in the right paths.

You might not have any decisions to make that start with the letter "M" — but maybe you have other areas of your life in which you need God's direction. Maybe it begins with "J" as in job. Maybe it begins with "F" as in finances. Maybe it begins with "C" as in children. Maybe it begins with "R" as in relocation. But the Bible teaches that the Lord leads us in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.

Great Guidance Verses and Hymns

Let me give you some of my favorite Bible verses that reassure us that God has an individual plan for each of His children, and He has promised to guide us accordingly:

- Proverbs 3:5-6: Trust in the Lord with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.
- Psalm 37:23: The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord.
- Psalm 139:16: All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.
- Isaiah 48:17: I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go.
- Psalm 32:8: I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye.
- Psalm 48:14: For this is our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to the end.
- Isaiah 58:11: The Lord will guide you always; He will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.
- Psalm 73:24: You will guide me with Your counsel and afterward receive me into glory.
- And our text today, Psalm 23:3: You lead me in paths of righteousness for Your name's sake.

These verses have also inspired some of our great hymns. There is a category of hymn that means a lot to me. I call these hymns of guidance.

Savior, like a Shepherd lead me,
Much I need Thy tender care.

If Thou but suffer God to guide thee,

And trust in Him through all thy days,
He's give the strength what e'er betide thee,
And bear thee through the evil days.

He leadeth me, He leadeth me,
By His own hand He leadeth me.
His faithful follower I would be
For by His hand He leadeth me.

Guide me, O Thou Great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.

In shady green pastures, so rich and so sweet,
God leads His dear children along.

Precious Lord, take my hand,
Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn…

These verses and hymns of guidance have been of immeasurable strength and encouragement to me, and all of them are summarized in this little phrase, "He leads me in paths of righteousness of His Name's sake."

The phrase "Paths of righteousness" means two things to me. First, they are the right paths; they are right for me and represent the right decisions and directions for me. And second, they are righteous paths; they represent a daily walk that is pleasing to God. Right paths and righteous paths. They are both good for us and glorifying to Him.

And He does it for His sake. Not just for ours; but so that He will be glorified when others see how He is guiding and guarding us.

So, then, here's the question: If God has a plan for your life and if He has promised to guide you as clearly as a Shepherd leading his sheep, how do we discover and follow His plan for us?

Six C's of Guidance

Try using six C's of Divine Guidance.

1.Commit your decision to the Lord in prayer.

Ask the Lord to lead you. Ask Him to have His way in your decision and in the direction of your life. Let me give you a sample prayer. Let's say you're trying to decide where to go to college. Try finding a special place and time to consciously and definitely give it to the Lord in prayer. Find a hillside, (as I did on one occasion), or walk along the seashore (as I did on another occasion), or kneel down by your bedside or wherever you are; and take as long as you can to talk to the Lord about your decision. Say, "Dear God, I believe that you have a plan for my life. I want to remind you of some verses that You have put in your Bible. I want to remind You of Psalm 23:3, and I want to claim that verse in this decision. You have promised to lead me in paths of righteousness. I want to remind you of Proverbs 3:5 and 6, and of Jeremiah 29:11. I believe that I want to go on to college, but I'm not sure where to go. Should I go to this school or that one? Here are my five best options, Lord, and I want to lay them before You. I'm going to lay these academic catalogues here on the bed or here on the ground. I'm going to spread them out before You. You know how much each school costs. You know every professor under whom I will sit. You know every friend whom I would make at each school. You know every influence that I would face. Lord, will You lead me and guide me? Will You show me what to do and grant me the decision to make the choice that most pleases You and that represents Your perfect will for my life? I am willing to go where You send and do what You say."

You may spend five minutes in this prayer or you may spend an hour or you may spend all night, as some people have done. Jesus spent all night in prayer before choosing and calling His disciples. But I recommend having a definite time of prayer, committing your big decisions to the Lord (and the little ones, too!). And then, periodically, pray for this decision on an on-going way. Pray as the Lord or as circumstances bring it mind. Jot the item down on your prayer list and pray over it daily.

2. Second, open the Covers of the Bible and seek Scriptural direction.

This doesn't mean we'll always have a specific verse telling us what to do; but in the process of fellowshipping in God's Word, He'll use Bible texts to give wisdom, and certain Scriptures will become helpful in the decision-making process. It's a little hard to explain, but it's wonderful to experience. As we meet with the Lord each day for regular Bible reading or as we spend special times in prayer and Bible study, very often there's some verse or Scripture that God gives us. It helps us know what to do. It reassures us of the way we should go.

I'll give you an example. One of my favorite writers is Dr. J. Oswald Sanders. As far as I'm concerned, you can read every book he ever wrote and find profit in every page. He was a lawyer in New Zealand who ended up becoming a great missionary statesman and a powerful worldwide Bible teacher. Several years ago, when he was a very old man, he wrote an article for Discipleship Journal about lessons he had learned along the way, and he spoke of the time when he was invited to become leader of a great missionary organization. At the time, he had spent twenty years at a Bible college in Auckland and he enjoyed his work very much. He had a number of other ministries for which he was responsible and all of it was fulfilling to him. And then came an invitation to become the general director for China Inland Mission.

It was the last thing in the world he wanted to do, for it was a time of crisis. Hundreds of missionaries had been withdrawn from China, and he knew that the work would be tremendously stressful. A mighty stream of workers was coming out of China and had to be relocated all over Free Asia, and he did not want the job. The board asked him unanimously to become the director, but he didn't want to do it.

Dr. Sanders talked to a friend of his, a confidant, a medical doctor. The man said, "I've got a passage of Scripture for you that I believe is from the Lord." The passage was 1 Peter 5:1-7. Dr. Sanders went to his room and picked up the Bible. That's when the Phillips translation had just come out, so he thought to himself, "I'll read it in Phillips." He turned to 1 Peter 5 and began reading in verse 1. It dealt with Christian leadership and verse 2 contained these words: "Accept the responsibility of looking after (the flock) willingly, and not because you feel you can't get out of it…." What could he say to that? He knew instantly that this was God's word to Him, that he was to accept this responsibility and care for the families of this missionary flock, and to do so willingly.[ii]

So very often as we prayerfully think through a decision, we'll find verses of Scripture that seem to speak to us. They aren't magical, and we can't distort or wrest them out of context. I don't know how to explain it except that God speaks to us in His Word; and very often in His Word we hear a word behind us saying, "This is the way; go ye in it."

3. Third, Seek the Counsel of those who know more about the matter than you do, for "in a multitude of counselors there is safety."

Ask people whom you respect and trust for their advice.

4. Fourth, see how the Circumstances are leading.

God often guides us through His providential leading. He opens and closes doors. He brings the right opportunities at the right times. He brings the right people into our lives or across our paths.

5. Fifth, very often, an inner Conviction will begin to develop.

The Holy Spirit helps us instinctively know what to do.

6. And finally, Contemplate the issue.

Think it through. God gave each of us a brain, and He expects us to use it to arrive at a wise and sanctified decision. John Wesley once said, "God generally guides me by present reasons to my mind for acting in a certain way." In other words, our guidance often comes in an objective rather than a subjective way. We make a list of pros and cons, we think through the issue, and we prayerfully reach a logical decision inside these marvelous brains that God has given to us.

Conclusion

In the process, we discover that the Lord is our shepherd and that He guides us in the right paths; He guides us in paths of righteousness for His Name's sake.

As I've mentioned in our previous messages from Psalm 23, I learned a few things about sheep from the four or five head that we had for 15 years or so in our back field. One day while I was working outside, I took some time to study Ethel's eyes. They were dull and cloudy, and I couldn't imagine how she could even see through them. I realized that sheep don't have good eyesight; they can't

see very far down the path. They need a shepherd to guide them.

Later when we only had one old ewe left, Lucy, she became so old and feeble that she was virtually blind. Sometimes she be walking along and she'd run right into the gate or fence, because she couldn't see anything. I think she could see shades of darkness or light, but for all practical purposes she was blind.

But there wasn't anything wrong with her hearing, and when I'd walk down the hill toward the pasture to give her some oats or sweet feed, I always knew the moment she heard me coming. Usually it was when I opened the gate. The chain would rattle against the gate as it opened, and Lucy's head would shoot up in my direction.

She wouldn't move until she heard my voice. But when I called her she would always come in my direction. But I'd have to keep talking to her, because she'd get off track. She'd go in a wayward direction, so I'd keep calling her. "This way, Lucy! Right here! Come on! I've got something good for you." And she followed the sound of my voice and that kept her on the right track; that kept her, in the words of Psalm 23, in paths of righteousness.

We can't always see very well. The Bible says that right now we see through a glass darkly, though someday we'll see face to face. We have to follow the Shepherd's voice. And Jesus said in John 10 that His sheep follow Him because they know His voice

All the way my Savior leads me,
What have I to ask beside?
Can I doubt His tender mercy,
Who through life has been my guide?
Heavenly peace, divinest comfort,
Here by faith in Him to dwell.
For I know whate're befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

PSALM 23:4

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

Introduction

It isn't safe being a sheep; and being a shepherd can be downright deadly. There was a story the other day in a British newspaper, the Telegraph, with this surprising headline: "Flock of Sheep Bursts into Flames." It happened in Jordan, and here is what the newspaper reported:

The explosion of an underground methane gas leak in a remote area of northern Jordan sparked rumors of an impending volcanic eruption, causing panic across the desert kingdom. A shepherd said he saw his flock "burn and completely disappear" after he let them wander into a rocky depression in search of grass…. Government experts dispatched to the burned region… on the outskirts of the city of Salt revealed that a nearby waste treatment plant had saturated the soil with methane gas and organic materials. "The underground fire erupted when some local residents set fire to dried grass in the vicinity and the sparks spread," said (an official). ("Flock of Sheep Bursts into Flames After Gas Lead in Jordan" in The Telegraph, October 12, 2009, at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/6308252/Flock-of-sheep-bursts-into-flames-after-gas-leak-in-Jordan.html, accessed October 20, 2009.)

Now, I could go in all kinds of directions with that illustration. A flock of sheep is incinerated and destroyed because it was grazing in toxic pastures. There are so many possible applications to that story. There are a lot of Christians grazing in toxic pastures today; and there are a lot of so-called shepherds who aren't leading their flocks into safe and sweet pasturage. But for today, my only point is that it's not safe being a sheep or a shepherd. There are dangers on every side, whether in toxic pastures, from carnivorous predators, or in deep valleys and sunless canyons.

As we've studied through The 23rd psalm, we've already learned about the leadership of a good shepherd. It's crucial that he know where he's going, for he must lead his flock into green pastures, beside adequate sources of calm waters, and in the right pathways.

But sometimes, in traveling from pasture to pasture, Middle Eastern shepherds have to lead the flocks into dangerous areas, through difficult terrain, and into rocky canyons or dark and narrow valleys. And that's where we find ourselves today as, in our verse-by-verse study, we're coming to verse 4, which says: Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

Yea…

The first thing we notice is that this verse begins with a sort of exclamation, an interjection. Yea! That's not Yea! like we'd shout at a ballgame. It means "Yes," as in "Yes, even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." This word "Yes" connects verse 3 to verse 4. I'd never really thought about that before, and the other night just before falling asleep a thought flashed into my mind. Why is "yes" in that verse? What is the purpose of the interjection "yea"? The answer is pretty clear. It connects the two verses like a coupling between two cars of a train.

The Lord leads me in paths of righteousness. They are the right paths even when they appear to be the wrong ones. They are the right paths even when they are dark and difficult. He knows where He is going. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake; and, yes, that is true even when the route runs through a canyon or valley. Even then He leads me and He is with me.

Though I Walk through the Valley

Now, all this is metaphorical, of course. We aren't really sheep; this is symbolic language, and so we have to interpret it. What is the Psalmist telling us here? Well, it helps to have a little background of biblical times.

In olden times, flocks would often have to travel through canyons. What happened is that the flock spends the springtime on the lower pastures and in the lower fields. But as the summer comes, the heat and lack of rain create problems. It becomes necessary to move the flock to the highlands, and sometimes in moving from the lower pastures to the hill country, it's necessary to go through deep gorges and dark valleys. The sheep spend the summer in the alpine ranges, but at the beginning of fall, they have to withdraw back to the lower elevations.

We see this with the story of Joseph in Genesis 37:12-17:

Now (Joseph's) brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, and Israel said to Joseph, "As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them."

"Very well," he replied.

So he said to him, "Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me." Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron.

When Joseph arrived at Shechem, a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, "What are you looking for?"

He replied, "I am looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?"

"They have moved on from here," the man answered. "I heard them say, 'Let's go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan.

Jacob and his sons lived down in the Judean region of Israel, and Shechem is way up north in the higher elevations, in the hill country of Samaria; and Dothan is even further to the north. So you see the migratory, nomadic life of shepherds and their flocks as they move to the higher elevations in the early summer and return in the early fall.

So valleys were transition places. We'd always rather be in green pastures or beside still waters. We'd always rather be on the highlands where a tableland has been prepared for us. But sometimes we're in the valleys of life. The valley represents the frustrating, fearful, threatening times of life. Valleys can be long and dark and severe; and some of you are threading your way through a valley in life right now.

Notice that this verse comes in the middle of The 23rd Psalm. It marks the halfway point. Psalm 23 begins with an idyllic, pastoral, serene setting—A good shepherd, a flock of happy sheep, green pastures, still waters, right pathways. And Psalm 23 ends with our cups overflowing and with goodness and mercy and living in our Father's House forever. But here in the middle of the Psalm, there is the valley. What do we do when we're in the valley?

Of the Shadow of Death

Furthermore, this isn't just a placid scenic valley like the Shenandoah Valley or the San Fernando Valley. This was a terrifying canyon of shadows and danger. Let's keep reading. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

It represents not only the difficult times in life, but the most difficult moments. Right at the heart of this psalm, right in the middle, is a fearful, difficult, stressful valley. But there is something very interesting about this title. It is not the Valley of Death. It's not Death Valley. There's a Death Valley in California. In fact, it's a national park. But there's no Death Valley in Psalm 23 Country. It's the valley of the shadow of death.

Let me give you a vivid example of the difference. Let's say that late in the afternoon, you're standing at a railroad crossing waiting for the commuter train. Now, two things can happen to you. Either you can stand on the tracks and be hit and killed by the train. Or you can stand to one side of the tracks, maybe on the platform, and be hit by the shadow of the train as it whizzes by. There is a significant difference in those two options. To the best of my knowledge, no one was ever hurt by the shadow of a train. I've been hit by the shadow of a train any number of times, and I suffered no ill effects. Last year when Joshua Rowe and I went to Italy, we traveled everywhere by train. We were on the platform many times. Sometimes as the train approached the station it would be our train, and it would slow down. I'd be hit by a train shadow traveling at 5 or 10 miles an hour, but I was never hurt. Sometimes we'd see a train coming, and it wouldn't stop at our station. It was an express train, and it whizzed by much faster. I'd be hit by a shadow going 100 miles an hour, but I didn't suffer any injuries. Once while traveling in Japan I was hit by the shadow of a bullet train traveling 300 miles an hour. Now, you'd think that you'd be hurt, and I'll have to say it was a little frightening. The roar and the power and the wind and the sound of it all. It left me trembling a little bit; but somehow I was not hurt. No broken bones. No cuts or bruises. It's remarkable to think about. A human being—even a child—can be hit head-on by a shadow going hundreds of miles an hour, and not suffer the slightest bruise.

Jesus was hit by the freight train of God's wrath for sin as He hung on the cross. He endured the collision; we're only hit by the shadow. That is a very powerful phrase in the Bible—the shadow of death. There is no such thing as death for the Christian. There is only the shadow of death. We don't experience death; we experience death's shadow. He endured the real thing at Calvary; and He said, "Because I live, you will live also." He said, "I am the resurrection and the life.

Charles Allen tells about a woman who collapsed when news came that her son had been killed. She went into her room, closed the door, and refused to see anyone or to accept any comfort. Her minister came and sat down by the bed, but she wouldn't speak to him. Finally he began quietly quoting The 23rd Psalm: The Lord is my shepherd…." When he came to verse 4 and its great phrases of comfort, she began mouthing the words and quoting them with him: "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for Thou art with me…." A small, serene smile came to the edges of her lips, and she said, "I see it differently now." (Charles L. Allen, God's Psychiatry (Fleming Revell Co., 1952), 25-26.)

I Will Fear No Evil; for You Are With Me

As we begin to see things through the prism of Psalm 23, we can say,

> "Yes, even though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil."

It removes fear from the life of the Christian. Now, the main thing to notice at this point in Psalm 23 is the dramatic change of pronoun that occurs here in verse 4. The Psalmist starts out in the third person: The Lord is my Shepherd… He makes me lie down… He leads me… He restores me… But now, he changes to the second person: You are with me.

The whole Psalm becomes much more personal, and the Psalmist is thrilled with the very close and personal and constant contact he has with his Shepherd. It reminds us of what the prophet Isaiah said in Isaiah 40, referring to the Lord:

> He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young.

It also reminds us of what Jesus said in John 10:

> I am the good shepherd; I know My sheep, and My sheep know me.

Recently I drew a connection between three different verses in the Bible, and I'd like to show them to you.

In Deuteronomy 31:7, Moses transferred the leadership of Israel to his general, Joshua, and it says:

> Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the presence of Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you must go with this people into the land that the Lord swore to their forefathers to give them, and you must divide

> it among them as their inheritance. The Lord Himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."

What a fabulous, all-inclusive commitment to Joshua! He was immunized from fear and discouragement even in the most demanding challenges of life and leadership, for the Lord would never leave him or forsake him.

Well, having transferred the reins of power to Joshua, Moses passed away. And when the book of Joshua opens, God Himself directly gives this same assurance to the new leader of Israel.

Look at Joshua 1:1:

> After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aid: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people get ready to cross the Jordan River…

And look at verse 5:

> As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

So Joshua received this same promise twice, word-for-word. Once was from the lips of Moses, and the second time was by direct revelation from God. And so, Joshua entered into office with a specific iron-clad promise from the God of Israel: I will never leave you for one moment; I will never forsake you under any circumstances. I will be with you at every step.

Now that promise was made specifically to Joshua. But now look at the book of Hebrews at the opposite end of the Bible. In Hebrews 13, the writer is talking about everyday holiness in the lives of his readers, and he says:

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

This is a very significant quotation from the Old Testament, because it tells us that we have biblical authority to take the exact same promise that God made twice to Joshua as he assumed control of Israel, and we can claim and apply that promise to our own lives just as confidently and completely as did Joshua. This promise was not just for Joshua. On the authority of the book of Hebrews, we can lay claim to this promise. We have God's own assurance of His presence with us, even in the battle, even in the challenges, even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. We fear no evil, for He is with us.

We have His presence in life's valleys, even in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Your Rod and Your Staff Comfort Me

But there's one more little phrase in this passage: Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. In other words, I'm reassured and my fears are relieved by the shepherd's equipment. He has a rod to drive off predators and enemies. He knows how to club the devil and defend me. And He also has this staff with the crook or curve on the top of it, so He can snag and snare and snatch me if I get too close to the precipice. He knows how to restrain my footsteps. He knows how to protect me from myself. The rod and the staff refer to the protective and restraining ministries of our Shepherd; and that's why we don't have to live in fear—ever.

Conclusion

Many people believe that when David wrote Psalm 23, he based the imagery of this verse on the Wadi Kelt. In fact, one commentary I consulted speculated that perhaps David traveled out to the Wadi Kelt, which was near Jerusalem, and sat on the edge of one of the cliffs looking down at the valley as he composed this part of Psalm 23. We don't know if that's actually true, but I do think he knew this valley very well and had it in mind as he wrote verse 4. It's near Bethlehem, and David might well have led his sheep through the Wadi Kelt many times, taking them down to the pasture lands of the Jordan Valley during the winter and early spring months, which would have been pleasant and verdant. The city of Jericho is a desert oasis, and the area around it is well watered in the winter and spring.

The word "wadi" is a Middle Eastern term meaning deep valley or ravine. In the olden days when you drove from Jerusalem to Jericho, you went through a deep, twisting, dramatic canyon or ravine called the Wadi Kelt. For many years when we went to Israel we would ask for bus drivers willing to drive us through the Wadi Kelt, because not all of them would do so. There's a new modern highway now between Jerusalem and Jericho, and the bus drivers want to use that highway. The old route through the Wadi Kelt is narrow and steep and twisting. On our last trip to the Holy Land, I was very disappointed to learn that this old road has now been blocked by the Israeli Government because suicide bombers were using the Wadi Kelt to slip into Jerusalem from Jericho; so we

were only able to drive a portion of the route. But this is the route Jesus would have taken in biblical times as He left Galilee. He used this very location as the setting for His story about the Good Samaritan.

In Matthew 18, Jesus Christ finished His ministry in the northern regions of Galilee and He left to head toward Jerusalem and the cross. Matthew 19:1 says, "When Jesus had finished saying these things, He left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan."

Look at where He is in Matthew 20:17: "Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, 'We are going up to Jerusalem and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn Him to death and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life.'"

Now look at verse 29: "As Jesus and His disciples were leaving Jericho, a large crowd followed Him…"

And then chapter 21 says, "As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives…"

In other words, Jesus Himself took this very route from Jericho to Jerusalem as He entered the City on Palm Sunday. He traveled to the cross through the actual, literal Valley of the Shadow of Death that David referred to in Psalm 23:4. And because our Shepherd has conquered this valley, we don't need to worry when we approach it, when we're in between pastures and changing locations. He knows the route very well, and He fills the valley with the light and safety of His presence. He is with us, and His rod and staff comfort us. He will get us safely home!

Corrie Ten Boom, the great Christian holocaust survivor, wrote a book entitled In My Father's House, which told the story of her life before the Nazi death camps. She ended the book—the very last page and the very last sentence—by quoting something that her father often said and which she never forgot: "When Jesus takes your hand, He keeps you tight. When Jesus keeps you tight, He leads you through your whole life. When Jesus leads you through your life, He brings you safely home." (Corrie ten Boom with C.C. Carlson, In My Father's House (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976), 192.)

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.

PSALM 23:5

> You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
> You anoint my head with oil;
> My cup runs over.

Today I want to preach on the word "tend." You've probably never heard a sermon on the word "tend" before; but it's a wonderful biblical word. It's a shepherding word, and it occurs quite often in the Bible.

- In Genesis 30, we're told that the patriarch Jacob was tending the flock of Laban (Ge 30:31, 36).
- In Genesis 37, we see Joseph, a young man of seventeen, tending the flocks (Ge 37:2).
- Years later, after this young man had become a statesman and a ruler in Egypt, he described his family's business to his governmental colleagues, saying that they tended livestock (Genesis 46:32-33).
- In Exodus 3, we're told that Moses was tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro when God called him to deliver the Israelites (Ex 3:1).
- Centuries later, when the prophet Samuel asked Jesse where his youngest son was, Jesse told him that young David wastending the sheep.
- In Luke 17, Jesus told a parable about a servant who was tending the sheep.
- And in John 21, the risen Christ met with the apostle Peter by the shores of Galilee and said to him, "Tend My sheep."

Tend! It's just a tiny little four-letter word found here and there in the Bible, but it sums up so very much of what shepherds do for their sheep and of what the Lord does for us.

Isaiah 40:11 says about God:

> He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young.

In Ezekiel 34:11-15, the Lord said about His people:

> For this is what the Sovereign Lord says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after My sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend My sheep….

God tends to His flock. But what does that mean? Well, to put it simply, sheep require a lot of work. I watched my girls tend to their little flock of three or four sheep. The animals' hoofs had to be trimmed and cleaned out from time to time, or else they became diseased and impacted. The sheep had to be wormed. They had to have a mineral block lugged down the pasture and put near the water barrel. They had to be smeared with ointments to keep away the flies.

I suppose the biggest job was shearing the sheep once a year. During the fall and winter, sheep grew heavy wool coats that kept them warm during the cold months and during the snows. It's remarkable how insulating those wool coats were. Our old sheep would lie down right in the snow on a bitter day without seeming to be the least bit chilly. But those wool coats were too hot for the summer, and so every spring we'd have to shear them. At first, we tried to do this job ourselves because it's hard to get someone to come and shear a small number of sheep. Shearers get paid by the head, and they prefer to go to large farms that have fifty or a hundred head of sheep, or more. There's real money in that. But to drive all the way to Donelson to shear three or four old ewes—well, that was harder to arrange.

One year we had an early summer and it got hot in the Springtime. Our handful of regular shearers couldn't get to us until they had serviced their large farms, and we were afraid our sheep would die from heat exhaustion. I went to the dime store and bought several pairs of scissors, and we literally cut the wool off with scissors. It was a pretty botched job, and when the shearer finally did come to finish the work, he laughed at us. But it got the job done.

On another occasion, a farmer gave me a pair of electric shears. They looked very much like the electric clippers used at barber shops, only they're bigger and sturdier. I tried to shear the sheep by myself, but I found that it was awfully easy to nick the sheep. Plus this pair of clippers kept giving me periodic electrical shocks. I was afraid it had a short-circuit or something, and that I'd end up electrocuting both myself and my sheep. And so I gave up and never really learned to shear a sheep very well.

It's too bad we don't have any video from those times. It was a funny sight. I'd try to shear the sheep and I'd nick her (it was especially prone to happen on her soft belly) and she'd jump and bleat. Then a moment later, I'd get a little shock from the clippers, and I'd drop the clippers with a shout. The neighbors must have thought we were having a Pentecostal service.

Well, we always noticed that after a sheep is sheared, she's very shy for awhile. It's like she realizes she's naked. Furthermore, when the sheep looked at each other following a shearing, they didn't seem to recognize one another. They thought they were in a totally new flock, and so they had to reestablish their "pecking order," so to speak. It takes sheep a day or two to recover from it all; but, of course, as the days get hotter they're glad to be in their summer wardrobe.

And then sheep need comforting. I think the most pitiful moment with our little flock was when we were down to two sheep, two old ewes—Lucy and Ethel. One day we looked out the window and Ethel was dead. She had just laid down in the pasture and died of old age. Lucy was standing beside her bleating mournfully and looking as lost and as grief-stricken as any person would look. It broke our hearts. We buried Ethel; and since we wanted to get out of the sheep-raising business, we didn't replace her. So Lucy had several years of living alone in the pasture. Sheep are flock animals, companion animals. They don't like to be alone. So we tried to go down and spend extra time with Lucy each day and in time she seemed to adjust to her new realities.

My point being that sheep are very much like human beings, and vice versa; and they need a shepherd to tend to them. And that brings us to verse 5 of Psalm 23. The writer, David, didn't list all the various duties he performed as a shepherd; but he lists three great responsibilities that the Lord bears toward us.

1. You Prepare a Tableland in the Presence of My Enemies

First, he prepares a tableland for us in the presence of our enemies. As I studied this text, I found Phillip Keller's insights very

helpful. In his book, **A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23** (**Ed: A modern classic. Read it**!), Keller suggests that at this point in the Psalm, the shepherd has taken the sheep from the lower meadows where the green grass is turning brown and the still waters are drying up. They have traversed thecanyonous valley, and now have ascended up to the high mountain plateaus or tablelands. There the sheep can graze through the summer while the shepherd keeps a close eye for natural predators. A table was prepared in the presence of enemies. (Phillip Keller, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), from chapter .)

Furthermore, the shepherd often has to do a lot of hard work if the tableland belongs to him and if he brings his flock here year after year. Rocks have to be uprooted and piled up, water has to be channeled. Briars and bushes have to be uprooted and hauled away. The pasture has to be prepared for the flock. And as the flock grazes on the tableland, they have to be protected from predators. In 1 Samuel 17, David told King Saul that on one occasion, a lion attacked his flock; and on another occasion it was a bear. David went after the predator, struck it, and rescued the sheep. When it turned on him, he killed it.

The key idea behind this verse is of God's protection of His flock. We have three kinds of enemies in this world. We have personal enemies—people who just don't like us, for whatever reason. Perhaps someone at school or work just doesn't like you at all. Perhaps the two of you have quarreled. Perhaps you've rubbed someone the wrong way. Perhaps they are offended by your Christian testimony. Perhaps they feel threatened by you. Perhaps they don't even know you; but you have a personal enemy. Second, we have national enemies in this world. There are nations and groups that hate the United States of America and all it stands for. They'd like to destroy us. Third, we have demonic enemies. The Bible consistently warns us that we have an unseen enemy who would like to ruin each one of us.

But our enemies have already lost the battle, because we have an unconquerable Shepherd. On our own, we're helpless and defenseless; but Jesus keeps us safe. Many times He prevents bad things from happening to us. We have no idea how many times we've been protected and delivered by His providential hand of protection. Other times He allows bad things to happen, but He delivers us from them and through them.

In John 10, Jesus said, "My sheep listen to My voice; I know them and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10:25-29).

The Lord is able to provide for us and to protect us throughout life and eternity; and His protective watch-care is part of His tending ministry.

2. You Anoint My Head with Oil

Second, He anoints our heads with oil. One day when I was checking on our sheep, I was alarmed to find that the horse had taken a serious bite out of Ethel's ear. I didn't see it happen, but there was no doubt that a good portion of Ethel's ear had been torn away by the horse's teeth. At first I didn't know what to do, but I thought of this verse of Scripture. Grabbing a bottle of olive oil from the kitchen, I washed Ethel's ear and rubbed that olive oil into the wound. It seemed to sooth her, and after several treatments, the wound healed. Later as I was talking to a sheep farmer about it, he said, "Oh, yes, that's a little trick we use at livestock shows. If we're showing a sheep and she gets a nick or a cut, we rub a little olive oil on it, and it does the trick."

The Good Shepherd is alert to various hurts and cuts and problems we have. He anoints them with oil. The Lord knows how to heal our hurts and bind our wounds. He rubs the soothing oil of His grace and of the Holy Spirit onto the rough spots of life. Oil is a constant symbol in the Bible of the Holy Spirit.

3. My Cup Runs Over

Another aspect of God's tending ministry to us is making sure that if we aren't beside still ponds or small lakes of water, we still have plenty to drink.

Look at the story of Jacob in Genesis 29: Then Jacob continued on his journey and came to the land of the eastern peoples. There he saw a well in the field, with three flocks of sheep lying near it because the flocks were watered from that well. The stone over the mouth of the well was large. When all the flocks were gathered there, the shepherds would roll the stone away from the well's mouth and water the sheep. Then they would return the stone to its place over the mouth of the well.

Providing water for the sheep was a lot of work. You had to dig a well, and in those days it was done by hand with some kind of crude shovel. The well had to be maintained, and a stone fitted for the covering. When it was time to water the sheep, the stone was rolled away, buckets were dropped, the water hauled up and poured into the troughs. Now the sheep didn't really appreciate all the work that went into it; they were just glad when their water troughs overflowed.

In Psalm 23, David was saying, “God’s blessings have been poured out into my life so greatly that they overflow. I can’t contain all of them. I can’t absorb all the mercy and goodness that He has given me. My cup overflows; surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life.”

I was reading an interesting book the other day that talked about the remarkable ability of the human mind and life to adjust to things. Psychologists call this the principle of adaptation. Human beings have a remarkable ability to adapt to their ongoing circumstances.

So here are we are, going along and minding our own business, when suddenly our situation changes. It throws us for a loop. Our life is disrupted. But over time we accept the changes and began to adapt and eventually our normal level of emotion, of happiness, returns. When each of my parents passed away, which was something I had always dreaded, I grieved and felt an enormous sense of loss. But over time, I accepted it and adapted to it and, even though there are times when I think about it and miss them greatly, I look forward to our reunion in the New Jerusalem. In time, we adjust as well as we can to things.

Well, the principle of adaptation works in the other direction, too. Let’s say you win the $100 million lottery. That would disrupt your life for awhile. You’d pay off all your bills, buy a new car, and maybe buy a beautiful new home. Let’s say you bought a $10 million house with a pool and a large fenced-in acreage, and everything else.

In a surprisingly short period of time, you’d adapt to that, adjust to it, get used to it, and your emotions would return to where they were before winning the lottery. If you were unhappy before, you’ll be unhappy again. You’ll walk through your big house and find that it was as lonely as your old one, and maybe more so. If you were having problems in your marriage, they’d return, and maybe be worse. You’d adapt to your new surroundings and the newness would wear off and the novelty would be gone, and you’d be no more happy or unhappy than you were before winning the lottery.

Over time, winning the lottery would have no lasting effect on your emotional well-being; if anything, say the experts, it will have an undesirable effect. Psychologists have done a great deal of research on why this is true. They call it the “poverty of affluence.” It’s a question of some debate today: In the midst of our seeming affluence, people don’t seem to be getting any happier. Why, in studies done by universities, does a person’s happiness level seem unrelated to his affluence?

Psychologists say that it’s because of the principle of adaptation. We adapt and adjust to our new circumstances, and then our emotions go right back to their pre-set levels. Just because our circumstances are altered, it doesn’t mean our temperaments are changed.

But the best quote that I’ve ever seen on this subject comes from an anonymous source. I was reading a book by Jan Karon the other day, and she quoted this sentence and admitted that no one knows who said it. But it puts it very well.

> It is not happiness that makes us grateful;
> It is gratitude that makes us happy.
> (Anonymous, quoted by Jan Karon in A Continual Feast
> (NY: Viking Press, 2005), unnumbered page.)

In other words, when we learn to look around and say, “God is blessing me. My cup is running over. Goodness and mercy are following me all the days of my life. I’m thankful for that, and I’m grateful for every blessing. Even in this difficulty, even in this tragedy, even in the middle of this stress, here are some praise items, here are some blessings to count”—when we learn the reality of that, we are happy.

Jesus fills our watering troughs every day.

> John 1:16 says: From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another.
>
> Ephesians 1:3 says: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.
>
> Psalm 103 says: Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.
>
> Psalm 16:5 says, Lord, you have assigned my portion and my cup. You have made my lot secure. The lines

have fallen to me in pleasant places.

Recently I've spoken at two different churches in which a soloist has sung a particular song that I'd never heard before. The words say:

I thank God for His blessings,
And the mercies He's bestowed.
I'm drinking from my saucer,
'Cause my cup has overflowed.
(Words by John Paul Moore.)

The Psalmist said, "My cup runs over."

Conclusion
Now, I want to conclude by showing you some cross-references in the Gospel of Matthew that explain everything.

In Matthew 20, the disciples were bickering among themselves about which ones would be the leaders of the group, and Jesus said, "You don't know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

A few chapters later, we see Him in the Upper Room, instituting what we call the "Lord's Supper." It says in Matthew 26:27, "Then He took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'"

And later that evening, in the Garden of Gethsemane, according to Matthew 26:39, He fell with His face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from Me. Yet not as I will, but as You will."

Jesus described His suffering and His death on the cross as a cup that He had to drain and drink. The Psalmist said, "My cup overflows." Because Jesus drained His cup, our cups overflow. All our blessings for this life and the life to come—all of them were purchased for us by the Good Shepherd when He laid down His life for His sheep.

That's why it's so important to come to Christ and receive Him as Lord and Savior and to enter His fold and join His flock. He is a tending Shepherd. He prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies, He anoints our heads with oil, and He so blesses our lives that we can say with the old songwriter:

I'm drinking from the saucer, for my cup has overflowed.

PSALM 23:6

On this is Thanksgiving weekend, what better verse could we claim as our own:

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

Years ago, there was a mighty Persian monarch who had risen to the heights of wealth and political power. He had a vast palace, but there was one room in the palace different from all the others. He went there every morning for prayer and meditation. Inside were the implements and equipment of his youthful days, his early and first occupation. He'd been a shepherd boy from a shepherding family, and in that little room were his old shepherd's crook, his rod and his staff, his coarse dress, his water container, his sling, his cruise of oil. By going there each morning for prayer and meditation, he kept his perspective and found it an effective antidote against the dizzying life in which he now found himself.

Today we're coming to the end of our series of messages from The 23rd Psalm. The genius of this Psalm is its simplicity. Everyone is longing for the simple life. We want to escape the dizzying life of complexity and confusion, which seems to be the norm today. We all want to simplify and purify and rectify the out-of-control spinning of our world. And nothing's simpler than Psalm 23. We need to step into this room – this little chapter of the Bible – to regain our perspective, for it's an effective antidote against the dizziness of life. Let me give you the condensed version of this chapter:

- Beside Me: My Shepherd

- Beneath Me: Green Pastures
- Near Me: Still Waters
- In Front of Me: Righteous Paths
- Within Me: Restored Spirits
- Against Me: My Enemies
- For Me: His Rod and Staff
- Around Me: A Tableland
- Upon Me: Anointing Oil
- Above Me: Overflowing Blessings
- Behind Me: Goodness and Mercy
- Before Me: The House of the Lord

Well, we've been studying this Psalm and its implications phrase-by-phrase, and today we're coming to the final verse in the chapter, verse 6: Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

1. Behind Me: Goodness and Mercy

Today's message has two simple points. If the Lord is our Shepherd, we have goodness and mercy behind us, and our Father's House before us. That's the essence of verse 6. I like the way it's put in a song about Psalm 23 that was adapted from the Living Bible:

> With blessings overflowing,
> His goodness and unfailing kindness
> Shall be with me all of my life; and afterwards
> I will live with Him, forever, forever, in His home.

Surely. Let's approach this in the simplest way and look at this verse word-for-word, and the first word is surely: "Surely goodness and mercy." When I was a child, I thought that phrase represented a string of three items. Surely, goodness, and mercy… those three things were going to follow me; but I wasn't sure what **surely** was. In the Hebrew, this is a very small word that could mean either "surely" or "only." Some translations say, "Only goodness and mercy." But the best rendering seems to be "surely." It has the basic meaning of "no doubt, it's absolutely true." It can be translated, "I am certain of this, I am sure of it."

Those of us who grew up reading the King James Version of the Bible remember the "verily" statements of Christ: "Verily, verily, I say unto you…." It's the same idea. I'm going to tell you something that is very, very true, very certain, very established, very factual. The Bible is full of words like this that convey the confidence we should have in life. The apostle Paul said, for example, "I am persuaded that nothing can separate me from the love of Christ. The patriarch Job said, "I know whom I have believed." The book of Philippians says, "Being confident of this…" The apostle John said, "These things are written that you might know…."

Goodness. The next word, "goodness," means benefits, good things, welfare, prosperity, happiness, blessings. It's an all-inclusive word that implies we have a good God who does good things and who gives good gifts to those who know Him.

Mercy. The word "mercy" means kindness. This is the great Old Testament word for the loyal, royal love of God. It's in His nature to be merciful, and forgiving, and benevolent. He surrounds our lives with acts of kindness that we don't deserve, all because of His loyal and steadfast love for us.

Follow. The word "follow" is a gentle translation of a very interesting Hebrew term. The actual word is more aggressive than most translations imply. It can mean "pursue." In a negative sense, it can mean being pursued by an enemy or by an animal. Here it's used in a benevolent sense. Peterson uses the word "chase" in his paraphrase of Psalm 23. Goodness and mercy chase after us every day of our life.

It's almost as if David were saying that these two qualities – goodness and mercy – are like God's Sheepdogs. Very often in sheepherding lands, you'll see the shepherd going in front of the flock leading the way, followed by all the sheep, and bringing up the rear and running along the sides are the sheepdogs who help with the herding. Goodness and mercy are God's sheepdogs.

It's fascinating to read about herding dogs—animals that help herd the flock. They're found all over world in every kind of agricultural society. They are working dogs that are trained to act on the sound of a whistle or a word to keep the flock or the herd in a group and help them stay on the trail or to move them one way or the other in traveling. They typically stay behind the flock, and they use their barks to help move the flock in the right way. There are several breeds that seem designed just for this purpose, such as Border Collies. Well, goodness and mercy are God's border collies, chasing us, following us, guiding us, surrounding us on every side.

All the Days of My Life. And notice the all-encompassing nature of the promise. It is true for every single day of our lives,

noexclusions, no exceptions, no exceptions.

That doesn't mean that we'll not face adversity or have any dark days, because the Psalmist has already warned us that our pathway may sometimes wind through dark and difficult valleys. But it does promise that every day for the Christian will be filled with God's mercy and loving kindness.

The prophet Jeremiah said, "His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness."

The apostle Paul said, "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose."

Job said about his assorted difficulties and disasters, "Just wait, this is going to work out for the best" (Job 13:16).

Psalm 25:10 (NKJV) says, "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth, to such as keep His covenant and His testimony."

Psalm 103:17 (NKJV) says, "The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children."

Now this should translate into an abiding attitude of cheerfulness and reassurance. The other day I read something that reminded me of this. It was a letter or a testimony that was printed in Dr. Robert A. Emmons' book, Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier. Dr. Emmons was conducting a study on the effect that gratitude has on patients who are recovering from series illnesses such as heart attacks. This was what a man wrote in a study conducted by Dr. Emmons:

It is hard to put into words how many times I have felt grateful with such a great family and kids. Now grandkids. My daughter was in high school and knew the signs of a heart attack and to call the ambulance when I had my first heart attack. My wife was always at my side when I needed her. When I had a cardiac arrest in New York she was there. Also the young man fromCalifornia that did CPR to save me. When I came home from the hospital all my family of twelve was there to meet me. When I was waiting for my transplant my wife was there to take me to the hospital. Every time I went into heart failure, and three years ago I had a hematoma on the brain, my wife and family were there for me. Life just does not get better than that. (Robert A. Emmons, Thanks! How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 64.)

What an attitude! We have dark valleys, mountain passes, deep needs, and scary predators; but we have a Shepherd going before us, His rod and staff to protect us, and His twin sheepdogs of goodness and mercy to pursue us all the days of our lives.

2. Before Me: The House of the Lord Forever

And afterward? And afterward, we will live with Him forever in His home. And here Psalm 23 comes full circle. The shepherd has led his flock into the green pastures and still waters of the spring meadows. As the summer progresses and the pastures recede, he has led his sheep through mountain passes and deep valleys, to higher ground. Up into the hills, up to the alpine meadows and tablelands. And now, as winter approaches, he leads them back down the hillsides, back toward home, back to the folds prepared for them.

He calls it the house of the Lord: I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

I looked up this phrase in the Bible and found it occurring over and over in the Old Testament. For example, "the House of the Lord," is a very common phrase in the book of Psalms.

- Psalm 27:4 says, "One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple."
- Psalm 92 says: "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright…."
- Psalm 122 (KJV) says: "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'"

In the Old Testament, the house of the Lord was the Tabernacle, and, later, the Temple. It was the place where God dwelled among His people. And that's the basic meaning. The house of the Lord is the place where God's presence is centered. It is the place of His throne, the place where He lives in the immediate essence of His presence.

The final word of the Psalm is forever, so that lets us know that we're talking about heaven—about the New Heavens, the New Earth, and the New Jerusalem of Revelation 21 and 22.

Jesus used the same symbolic language when he said, "In My Father's House are many mansions." He was talking about heaven.

Randy Alcorn is a Bible scholar and writer who has collected more than 150 books about heaven, many of them very old and out of

print. He's read nearly all of them, and he said that he was amazed at how many of them say things like,

> "We can't possibly know what heaven is like, but it'll be more wonderful than anything you can imagine." But, as Alcorn points out, that's not really what the Bible says. The Scriptures give us many descriptions of our eternal home, and some of them are very literal and vivid and clear. The Bible teaches that in many ways, our heavenly home will be like our current home—like this planet, only without all the sin and death and suffering and corruption. (Randy Alcorn, Heaven (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004), 17.)

So very often when I visit a breath-taking place with magnificent vistas and picture postcard scenery, or when I look out the window and it's a fabulous day with a clear blue sky, I think of the old Gospel song that says, "How Beautiful Heaven Must Be."

Some time ago, I was in Portsmouth, Ohio, and when getting in my car to leave, a couple came up to me. They were elderly, but they very much wanted to tell me something before I left. Their names were Don and Mae Cregger, and they attend the Sciotodale Free Will Baptist Church.

The Creggers have a daughter who is a nurse; and some time ago, when Mrs. Cregger began suffering what appeared to be severe heartburn, this daughter suggested they visit the hospital. At the hospital, the doctor examined the woman and became concerned. He detected that the problem was really with her heart itself, and she was sent by ambulance to a larger hospital. There they found five serious blockages in her heart and she was taken into the operating room for open-heart surgery. The surgery took place the following evening (after she was admitted to the larger hospital). After the surgery, Mr. Cregger and the daughter were with her in the recovery room, when suddenly everything went wrong. The heart monitor flat-lined, the daughter screamed, and medical personnel leaped into action, trying to save the woman's life. Both the daughter and the husband had a strong sense the woman died, of her soul leaving body. As they were ushered out of the room, the medical experts managed to get the woman's heart beating again and to stabilize her, but it was such a strange experience and sensation that the father and daughter agreed to say nothing about it. "Let's not tell anyone about this," advised Mr. Cregger.

Mrs. Creggar says this about the incident: "My daughter and husband were in the surgical waiting cubical with other members of the family. They received the call that I had become unstable and for my immediate family to come back to the I.C.U. My daughter said when I 'flat-lined' she saw a fog leaving my body, and when the monitor showed a heartbeat again she said it re-entered my body." Later, after Mrs. Cregger had recovered enough to be released, everyone was home preparing for supper. As they talked, Mrs. Creggar said in an almost causal way that she "must have died" in the hospital. She said, "My husband said he almost fell out of his chair and asked my daughter if she had mentioned anything to me. She said that she had not." Father and daughter looked at each other, and asked her why she would say that. "Well," she said, "I remember feeling my spirit leave my body. I was propelled toward a wondrous light at the end of a pathway. It was a propulsion pushing me onward, but not at all unpleasant. I was traveling down a lovely pathway, unfamiliar but pleasant, with flowers blooming on both sides, everywhere. They were beautiful, but I didn't recognize the varieties. I also heard music, and it was beautiful, but I didn't recognize the songs. At the end of the pathway in front of me, a man in white was beckoning for me to come. But then suddenly he stopped and held up his hands and motioned for me to go back. And that's when I guess I revived in the recovery room." "Before coming to the pathway I went through a very dark tunnel." I asked her if the experience had made her feel differently about death, and she said, matter-of-factly, "Well, I guess; but I've never been afraid of death to begin with. I'm looking forward to being with the Lord. I have spent the last eleven years praising God and thanking Him for the experience and have shared it wherever He leads. I know He spared me for a very special reason. There were three witnesses to this miraculous event. I know what I saw. My daughter knows what she saw, and my husband knows what he saw. Praise God!"

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude this series of sermons from Psalm 23 by relating the story of a friend of our family. In my hometown ofElizabethton, Tennessee, lived an aged schoolteacher named Beula Thomas who was raised on the Colorado prairie. Before her death, she recorded her childhood recollections, including the vivid incident that brought her to faith in Jesus Christ.

An early blizzard hit the Rockies during the winter of 1912, and a local shepherd, Mr. Woods, was caught with his flock in the mountains near the Thomas homestead. He desperately tried to herd his sheep into a hollow space close together so they could keep warm. Woods knew the thick snow would provide a protective covering for his sheep, saving them from the bitter wind; and the warm breath from the sheep would melt the snow near their faces, allowing them to breathe.

But instead of listening to their shepherd, the sheep bolted after the lead sheep and ran into a thick snowdrift where they perished. The despondent, half-frozen shepherd showed up at the Thomas house, seeking refuge from the storm. Mrs. Thomas heated water for the poor man's hands and feet while her husband rubbed them vigorously to ward off frostbite. Over a supper of salmon patties the man told his said story.

"I'll come back after the blizzard and skin the sheep," said Mr. Woods. "The birds and coyotes will take care of the meat."

The three Thomas children were gripped by this unexpected visitor. Shortly afterward, while they discussed it all with their mother, she quoted Psalm 23, explaining that Jesus is the Good Shepherd who cares for us, though all we like sheep have gone astray. "Some people are stubborn and refuse to follow Christ and are lost forever. But Jesus came to lead his sheep to eternal safety."

As she used that story to explain the Gospel, her words spoke to the children, and that day both Beula and sister Pearl chose to follow the Master's voice. I hope you know the Master, too, and that you've chosen to follow the Shepherd. Jesus applied Psalm 23 to Himself in John chapter 10, but He didn't do it the way we do. When we read Psalm 23, we think of ourselves as the sheep. When Jesus read this, He thought of Himself as the Shepherd. He said, "I am the good Shepherd, and I lay down for My sheep."

Every verse of Psalm 23, every phrase, every promise, every image, every word was purchased and paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ. And the Bible tells us we must confess Him as Lord and know in our hearts that He died and rose again for us. Have you given yourself to the Good Shepherd? Have you turned your life over to Him?

The King of Love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never.
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever.

Perverse and foolish oft I've strayed,
And yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulders gently laid,
And home rejoice brought me.

And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise,
Within Thy house forever.

(**Editorial Recommendation**: **Play Michael Card's beautiful vocal version of "The King of Love My Shepherd Is"**)

THE CURE FOR SHAME
Psalm 25

Several years ago a fourth grade boy named Joseph Lahey stood in a line at school in mortal agony. He was in a white hospital gown, lined up in the infirmary awaiting his turn for a routine physical examination. He was exceeding uncomfortable and self-conscious, because he knew that of all the boys there, he was the only one who was different physically.

For the most part, he was able to conceal this difficulty with his clothes on, but when it undressed it was all to clear, and, he said, "I lived with a feeling of shame. I wished more than anything else I would be like those other boys with their fine, straight bodies. Soon the doctor would be saying, 'Now, Joe, take off that robe and let's have a look at you,' and I dreaded it. I never, never, never undressed in front of anyone…."

An accident coupled with tuberculosis of the spine had left him with a hump in the middle of his back and he was very ashamed of it. Few people knew about it, but in a few moments, he knew, he would have to walk into the examination room and removed his gown.

At last it was his turn. The doctor was a kindly, gray haired man who took his weight and measured his height, then he said, "Now, take that robe off." Joseph was dying inside as he fumbled with the string, his hands shaking, but he finally got the knot untied and slipped the robe from his shoulders. Suddenly the doctor put down the chart, came forward, and gently put his hands on either side of the boy's face, looking into his eyes.

"Do you believe in God?" asked the doctor.

"Yes, sir. I do," replied the boy in surprise.

"That's good," said the doctor, "because there's nothing we can do in this world alone. The more faith we have in Him, the greater faith we have in ourselves." Then the doctor picked up the Joseph's chart, wrote scribbled something onto it, sat it down nearby, and said suddenly, "Excuse me for a moment—I'll be right back."

Joseph, of course, was exceedingly curious to know what the doctor had scribbled onto the chart, so he picked it up nervously, expecting to read something about his humped back. Instead, beside the words Physical Characteristics was this sentence: "Has an unusually well-shaped head."

It was so unexpected that he read them again, then again. In a few moments, the doctor was back in the room, smiling at him. "All right, Joseph," he said, "get your robe on and tell the next boy to come in now."

"Thank you, sir, thank you," said Joseph as he put his robe on and let himself out of the room. It was only years later that Joseph realized that his head is no better shaped than anyone else's. But he got the old doctor's message: Focus on the best, not on the worst. Trust God, and don't let shame ruin your life.

Well, in church I think we're more prone to talk about guilt than about shame. Our society, on the other hand, downplays the concept of guilt, but centers a lot of attention on shame. Which does the Bible talk about the most? Well, in the NIV, the word guilt occurs 105 times. The word shame occurs 130 times.

What is the difference between the two? Guilt is the reality that exists between us and God; shame is the feeling we have because of that guilt. Or, as in Joseph's case, it is a feeling of humiliation or disgrace we may feel, even when there's no guilt.

The patriarch Job, in the tenth chapter of his book, told his friends, "Even if I am innocent, I can not lift my head. I am full of shame."

Some of the most intense feelings of shame come because of what others have done to us. There was a woman in the Old Testament named Tamar who was raped by her half-brother, and her reaction was one of deep shame, even though she was the victim.

One of the worst things about sexual abuse is the feeling of shame that it transfers to the victim. One of the worst things about having an alcoholic parent is the shame that the child often feels.

You say, "I think we should just banish shame." Yes, but on the other hand, there are times when shame is a completely appropriate and necessary feeling. The prophet Jeremiah complained that the people of his day had lost the ability to feel shame over sin. "They do not even know how to blush," he said in Jeremiah 6:14. We're living in a similar age in which people are proud of the things about which they should be ashamed.

But my question today is—what is the biblical response to shame? Some here today may be carrying around a heavy load of shame because of a failure of some sort in some period of your life, perhaps recently. It might be a moral failure. It might be a financial failure or a vocational failure or an academic failure. Perhaps your marriage has failed, or your children have done something to disgrace you. Others struggle with shame for other reasons. But whatever the reason—whether it is valid or invalid shame—what do we do with it?

Well, I'd like to give you a dose of Psalm 25, God's Cure for Shame. Let's read it together.

> To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God.
> Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse
> Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O Lord, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O Lord.
> Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.
> Who, then, is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him. He wills spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. My eyes are ever on the Lord, for only he will release my feet from the snare.
> Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and distress and take away all my sins. See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!
> Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you.
> Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles.

Two Observations

What can we say about this psalm overall? Two observations. First, you'll notice that it has 22 verses, and that's often a giveaway with the Psalms. The Hebrew alphabet has 22 letters, so when we find a Psalm with 22 verses it is probably an acrostic psalm, which is the case here. In other words, in the original Hebrew, verse 1 begins with the Hebrew equivalent of our letter "A". Verse two, with the Hebrew equivalent of our letter "B". And so forth. Why is that important? It was a mnemonic, a device to aid in memorization. This Psalm was intended for memorization. It's message was so important that the writer wanted to make it easy to memorize.

The second thing we can say about Psalm 25 is that it has a three-fold arrangement. There is an opening prayer, then a little sermon, then a closing prayer. You see how it begins in verse 1: To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul…. He continues praying through verse 7, then he begins a little sermonette in verse 8: Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right…. In verse 16, he closes his Psalm with another prayer: Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted…. And he goes on until he concludes with his final request for God to redeem Israel from all their troubles.

Two Prayers

Now it seems to me that throughout Psalm 25, David keeps coming back to two great ideas as it relates to shame. He offers two great prayers. The first is this. He wants God to bleach away every vestige of guilt and shame in his life. He asks God three times to remove his guilt, and he seems to have in mind some sins that he had committed years before, perhaps during his adolescent years.

- Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways…-- verse 7
- Forgive my iniquity, though it is great—verse 11
- Take away all my sins… -- verse 18

But he also asks three times for God to remove his shame:

- Do not let me be put to shame…-- verse 2
- No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame…-- verse 3
- Let me not be put to shame… -- verse 20

Three times he asks to be released from guilt, and three times he asks to be released from shame. He wants to be bleached in the blood of Christ. My mother was a great believer in bleach. She called it "Fleecy White," because I think that was the brand name of a kind of bleach years ago, but she used it to wash our white clothes and everything else that was white. I remember many times getting ready to get in the porcelain tub, and my mom would say, "Rinse it out real good; I washed it in fleecy white." I forgot to do it once and lost three month's worth of tan.

But even today when I get my white shirts back from the cleaners, Katrina will say, "Their stained under the arms. We need to bleach them."

Bleach is actually chlorine combined with sodium hydroxide and water, but there is something about it that breaks down soil molecules and acts as a cleaning agent.

I think the Psalmist was saying here, "Lord, Bleach Me! Make me whiter than snow. Wash away every spot, every stain." Well, I want to tell you that the blood of Jesus Christ is God's bleach, His "Fleecy White."

> There is a fountain filled with blood
> drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
> And sinners plunged beneath that flood
> lose all their guilty stains.
> The dying thief rejoiced to see
> that fountain in his day;
> And there may I, though vile as he,
> wash all my sins away.

It doesn't matter how much trouble you've gotten into, or how sinful your past has been. Jesus died on the cross for you, and His shed blood can bleach you as white as pure linen. Isaiah said, "Though your sins are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

And when He bleaches away the sin, the shame follows it down the drain. You may have to remind yourself of that. You may have to claim that by faith. But "He breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free. His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me."

So the Psalmist's first plea is, "Lord, bleach me." But second, it is "Lord, teach me. Teach me to overcome sin and shame in my own mind, in my thinking, in my attitude and outlook. And teach me your will, show me your ways."

Ps 25:4, 5 contain one of the most profound prayers in the entire book of Psalms:

> Show me Your ways, O Lord. Teach me Your paths. Guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long."

This is a very deep prayer request, and I think that it was based on something that Moses said many years before. A few weeks ago when Jeff Nichols spoke from Psalm 119, he reminded us that the only Bible that David knew was composed of the first five books—the Pentateuch, the books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Well, in Exodus 33, we have recorded for us perhaps the most intense conversation Moses ever had with the Lord. Look at Exodus 33:12ff: Moses said to the Lord, "You have been telling me, 'Lead these people,' but You have not let me know whom You will send with me. "You have said, 'I know you by name and you have found favor with me.' If you are pleased with me, teach me your says so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. Remember that this nation is Your people."

The Lord replied, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."

Then Moses said to Him, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that You are pleased with me and with Your people unless You go with us? What else will distinguish me and Your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?"

And the Lord said to Moses, "I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name."

Then Moses said, "Show me Your glory."
Notice that first request of Moses, the man of God: Teach me Your ways."
And there's an interesting cross reference in Psalm 103. Verse 7 says: "He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel."
Many people observe the Lord deeds, but not everyone is privy to His ways. Isaiah 55 says:

> "For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
> neither are your ways my ways,"
> declares the LORD.
> 9 "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
> so are my ways higher than your ways
> and my thoughts than your thoughts.

But God reveals, not just His deeds, but His ways to certain people. What kind of people? That's what the little sermonette is about in the middle of Psalm 25. Look at it again with new light:

> Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way. All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant…Who, then, is the man that fears the Lord? He will instruct him…. The Lord confides in those who fear him…

Think of it—the Lord confides in those who fear Him. God had His confidants. He confides in those who fear Him, who take Him seriously, who reverence Him and who study His word.

There was a schoolteacher in England who died in 1923. His name was Benjamin M. Ramsey. He is best known as the author of an old hymn, and even though it is seldom sung today—in fact, I don't remember ever having sung it except in my personal devotions, I expresses my point perfectly. I often pray it for myself, and just as often I change the pronouns and pray it for one or more of my children. It says:

> Teach me Thy way, O Lord, teach me Thy way!
> Thy guiding grace afford, teach me Thy way!
> Help me to walk aright, more by faith, less by sight;
> Lead me with heav'nly light, teach me Thy way!
> When I am sad at heart, teach me Thy way!
> When earthly joys depart, teach me Thy way!
> In hours of loneliness, in times of dire distress,
> In failure or success, teach me Thy way!
> When doubts and fears arise, teach me Thy way!
> When storms o'erspread the skies, teach me Thy way!
> Shine through the cloud and rain, through sorrow, toil and pain;
> Make Thou my pathway plain, teach me Thy way!
> Long as my life shall last, teach me Thy way!
> Where'er my lot be cast, teach me Thy way!
> Until the race is run, until the journey's done,
> Until the crown is won, teach me Thy way!

And as God teaches us His ways, we will never be put to shame. In fact, He bore the cross, despising its shame, that we might be free.

Perhaps you need to pray, "Lord, bleach me! Make me whiter than snow. Free me from the sense of shame that has troubled me for years and years. Bleach it away today, once and for all, in the blood of Christ." Perhaps you need to pray, "Lord, teach me! Show me Your ways; guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Savior."

Come to Him like that, and you'll discover the wonderful grace of Jesus. It's…

> Broader than the scope of my transgression,
> Greater far than all my sin and shame,
> O magnify the precious name of Jesus,
> Praise His name.

THE CURE FOR INSECURITY
Psalm 27

- The girl tried to stay busy, to work around the house, to distract herself. But a large chunk of her attention was drawn toward the telephone which sat frustratingly silent on the table. Will it ring? Is he really interested in me? Will he call me? Has he met someone else? Did he find me attractive? What's wrong with me? Why doesn't he call?
- A man drove home from work, but his mind wasn't on the traffic. His boss had barely spoken to him for a week now. A distance had grown between them, and the man feared he was about to be laid off. He had a nagging fear about his job security—or lack of it.
- A woman turned off the light in the empty house, but she had a hard time sleeping. Every creek of the wood, every scrape of the shrubbery against the window, sent a shiver through her spine. She was afraid of being alone.
- A teenager, walking through the hallway of his new school, felt everyone looking at him; and when he saw a group of students across the room laughing, he was sure they were laughing at him. He ducked into the library and found a few moments of blessed privacy between the stacks of books.

I think that most of us, by nature, are insecure people, or least we all have areas of insecurities in our lives. Today I'd like to share with you the Bible's great cure for insecurity—it is Psalm 27, one of the greatest compositions of King David, the warrior-poet. As we read it together, begin to make this your own special psalm:

> The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear?
> The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?
> When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh,
> When my enemies and my foes attack me,
> They will stumble and fall.
> Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear;
> Though war break out against me,
> Even then I will be confident.
> One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek:
> That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life,
> To gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple.
> For in the day of trouble He will keep me safe in His dwelling;
> He will hide me in the shelter of His tabernacle and set me high upon a rock.
> Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me;
> At His tabernacle will I sacrifice with shouts of joy;
> I will sing and make music to the Lord.
> Hear my voice when I call, O Lord;
> Be merciful to me and answer me.
> My heart says of You, "Seek His face!"
> Your face, Lord, I will seek.
> Do not hide Your face from me,
> Do not turn your servant away in anger; You have been my helper.
> Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior.
> Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.
> Teach me Your way, O Lord; Lead me in a straight path because of my oppressors.
> Do not turn me over to the desire of my foes,
> For false witnesses rise up against me, breathing out violence.
> I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.
> Wait for the Lord; Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.

Everyone who carefully studies Psalm 27 comments on the change of tone that occurs between verses 6 and 7. In the first half of Psalm 27, David seems supremely confident. He asks a series of almost defiant questions: The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? And that sets the tone for the whole first stanza—courage, confidence, intrepidity, boldness.

But beginning with verse 7 the tone softens and we get the idea that there are, in fact, some areas of insecurity in this writer: Hear my prayer when I call, O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me… Do not hide your face toward me… Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me… Do not turn me over to the desires of my foes, for false witnesses rise up against me.

The change is so abrupt that some have questioned whether or not we have two authors here, or perhaps two separate psalms that were somehow thrown together during the course of the transmission of the Bible.

Other commentators point out that this is a very realistic psalm, an accurate reflection of our own souls which are full of courage one moment, then a little fearful the next.
I would suggest that in the first part of the Psalm we have a confident attitude toward the outside world, but it is based on the humble internal reliance on God that we find in the last half of the Psalm. Hidden humility before God leads to calm confidence toward other people. His public boldness toward others is based on his private dependence on God.
For our purposes today, I'd like to divide this Psalm into four parts and suggest to you four statements that can help us overcome life's insecurities.

One Thing I Know (Psalm 27:1-3)
The first statement is: One Thing I know. The Psalmist was aware of problems in his life. Enemies were surrounding him, and he had plenty of reasons to feel insecure. But his insecurities were offset by one giant factor. He knew one thing. He knew that the Lord was his light and his salvation, that the Lord was the defense of his life.
You know, there are times when I like a certain amount of darkness. Candles are very popular now, and sometimes when we're having supper alone, Katrina and I will eat by candlelight, which means we are dining in a certain amount of darkness for the sake of mood. There are times when I like to have my devotions only by a small desklight. There are times when I like walking through the back yard by moonglow, and sometimes when I love the beauty of a foggy, misty day.
But for the most part, I'm a sunshine lover. When I walk outside and the sun is bright and the sky cloudless, I just automatically feel better.
Every fall I when I teach in Holsby Brunn, Sweden, I notice the little lamps that hang in the windows of all the houses. Every window has a little lamp hanging in it, and they are beautiful. I asked my host how such a custom began, and he told me that in the winters the sun doesn't come up until late in the day, and it sets early in the afternoon. There are only a few hours of sunlight. So the lights in the window are little miniature substitutes for the sunshine that no longer streams into their houses.
People in our world have created a lot of substitutes for divine light, but nothing compares with having a close daily relationship with the Lord Jesus, the Light of the World, and being able to look difficulty in the face and say, "The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life—of whom shall I be afraid.
Now the word "light" has always been a hard word for me to interpret in the Bible. It occurs 232 times in Scripture, and many times it is used symbolically. What does the Psalmist mean here when he says, "The Lord is my light"?
Well, sometimes when the Bible uses the word "light" it refers to the being and existence of God Himself. We're told that God is light that and in Him there is no darkness. We are told that He dwells in inexpressible light, that He is robed in light. And Jesus once said in John's Gospel, "I am the Light of the world."
Sometimes when the Bible uses the word "light" it refers to God's truth, to His Word. The Psalmist said, "The entrance of Thy Word giveth light." And again, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." I think this is what Isaiah had in mind when he told us to walk in the light of the Lord.
Sometimes when the Bible uses the word "light" it refers to God's holiness. John said, "If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin."
And sometimes when the Bible uses the word "light" it refers to cheerfulness and joy. Psalm 97 says, "Light is shed upon the righteous and joy on the upright in heart."
Maybe David had all those things in mind! He was saying, "I may have inadequacies. I may have enemies. I may have problems. I may have unresolved circumstances. But one thing I know: The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear. The Lord is the defense of my life—of whom shall I be afraid. When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me; even then I will be confident."
Because one thing I know: the Lord is my light and my salvation.

One Thing I Ask (Psalm 27:-6)
In the next several verses, we can say: "One Thing I Ask." Look at verse 4: One thing I ask of the Lord, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in His temple.
It's very interesting to study the "one thing" passages of the Bible. Do you remember when the rich young ruler came to Jesus, asking for eternal life? Jesus told him to keep the commandments, and the young man said he had done that. But Jesus said in Mark 10:21: "One thing you lack: Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."
A little later, in Luke 10:41, Jesus said to his friend Martha, the sister of Mary and Lazarus: "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her." He was referring to communion with Him at His feet.
In John 9:25, the blind man, having been healed by Jesus, told the temple authorities, "Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"
In Philippians 3:13-14, the Apostle Paul said, "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do:

Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."

And so the Psalmist was launching a biblical pattern when he wrote: "One thing I ask of the Lord and this will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life."

David wasn't necessarily saying that he wanted to move from his palace in Jerusalem to live near in the tabernacle in Shiloh or up on Mount Zion. He was saying that nothing else mattered to him more than dwelling continually in the Lord's presence, having unbroken fellowship with Him, having intimacy with the almighty. In New Testament language, I think he was talking about abiding in Christ.

That's where we find genuine security. Before his death last week from Lou Gehrig's disease, I interviewed Jonathan Thigpen for a book I was editing. He asked me if I knew the old college definition of flying. I didn't. He said, "Flying is hours of boredom interspersed with moment of sheer terror." And then he said, "Living with a life-threatening illness is that way. I would not be honest if I didn't say there are times when I've experienced fear and discomfort, but I can tell you that those times are very small compared to those other times when, as a child of God, I have been overwhelmed by a sense of His peace."

So many of us are so superficial in our Christian experience. We're like Martha, distracted by all the errands that need to be done, or like the rich young ruler, distracted by the material things of life.

But one thing we lack. One thing is needful. One thing, if not in its proper place, gives rise to all our insecurities. One thing we should ask of the Lord—we should ask Him for an overwhelming desire to know Him, to love Him, to be hidden with Christ in God, to dwell in His presence from day to day and even from moment to moment, to abide in Christ. One thing I ask of the Lord, and this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to seek Him in His temple. For in the day of trouble He will keep me safe in the shelter of His tabernacle.

O for a heart to praise my God,
a heart from sin set free,
a heart that always feels Thy blood
so freely shed for me.

One Thing I Need (Psalm 27:7-12)

So the Psalmist is teaching us to say: One thing I know… One thing I seek… and, thirdly,One thing I need. Look at verse 7: Hear my voice when I call, O Lord…. This is the place in the Psalm where the tone changes, where the writer's voice becomes more humble, where he is expressing his fears quietly to his God. At this point in the Psalm, he begins to pray. He needed to back up his public bravado with prevailing prayer.

You know, we've gotten away from that old adjective that our Christian forefathers used in connection with prayer—the word "prevailing." When I read books and articles on prayer written by Christians a hundred years ago, I almost always come across the phrase, "prevailing prayer." D. L. Moody used those words as a title for his book on prayer, and Charles Finney gave a famous series of lectures on that subject.

I suppose it comes from Genesis 32, when Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord through the night, and at daybreak the angel said, "Your name is no longer Jacob but Israel, for you have wrestled with God and man and have prevailed."

But we need to rediscover prevailing prayers. I don't know of any better answer to those things that make us insecure in life than good, old-fashioned, Spirit-blessed prevailing prayer. We can take all our burdens, all our problems, all our fears to the Lord. And when we exercise prevailing prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, two things happen. God goes to work on our circumstances, but He also goes to work on our hearts, giving us peace, confidence, and security.

This week I read a testimony of a lady named Shirley Waite who learned what a very practical thing prayer is. Her husband had just finished graduate school and was just starting a job. They had no money. But they did have a little baby, and one morning as she gathered up the baby's laundry, she discovered that she had run out of detergent. There wasn't a penny to spare, yet she knew that she had to have clean diapers for her baby.

So she got down and prayed earnestly. "O Lord, You now I need soap. I pray that my folks send me money—soon." Her parents had periodically sent a small check. They were the only source of income she could think of.

Just then, Shirley heard a small noise at the door. Could it be the mail carrier? She glanced out the window, but there was no mailman, so she went on with her housework, crying out to the Lord, "What will I do about these diapers? O Lord, what will I do?"

But by and by, she felt prompted to go to the front door. Opening it, she found no mail. But hanging from the doorknob was a plastic sack containing a sample box of new detergent. She later said that she learned that God not only answers prayer, but that He has His own ways of dealing with us in the process.

The most powerful tool we have for overcoming our insecurities is prayer. I've been reading a famous little primer on prayer written a number of years ago by an unknown believer. It's called A Kneeling Christian, and, after reading a few chapters, I can see why it has been a classic on prayer for many years. The anonymous author makes this remarkable statement: "Prayer is omnipotent. It can do anything God can do. When we pray, God works."

I would never have thought to put it that way, but the Psalmist seemed to have that kind of high regard for prayer, and he needed

God to work.

One Thing I'll Do

One thing I know, one thing I seek, one thing I need, and at the very end of the book, it's as though he says, "Oh yes, here's one more thing—one thing I'm going to do. I'm going to be strong and wait on the Lord: I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."

I looked up the definition of the word "wait" in the dictionary, and it has two different shades of meaning. Sometimes it means to pause in order to give others time to catch up with you. When I was a boy I'd often go hiking in the mountains with my dad, and he always went faster than my legs could go. I'd call out, "Wait, Dad."

But the other definition means: "To remain in a place or state of expectation." Sometimes when we're excited about something, we say, "I can hardly wait!" It means that we are in a state of expectation. Well, here in Psalm 27, the Hebrew word that is translated here as "wait" is sometimes translated "hope."

Here is the idea. Sometimes things are not as we want them to be. Sometimes certain situations in our lives are unresolved. We may, in the flesh, even feel insecure and anxious about those areas. But when we earnestly commit them to the Lord in prevailing prayer, we can adopt an optimistic attitude toward them and say, "I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. I will wait on the Lord and be strong and take heart. I'll wait for the Lord."

And Isaiah said, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings like eagles. They shall run and not grow weary; they shall walk and not be faint."

So if you troubled by areas of insecurity in your life right now, I just want to suggest four simple sentences based on Psalm 27:

One thing I know! The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life—of whom shall I be afraid.

One thing I ask! That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze upon His beauty and seek Him in His temple.

One thing I need! Hear my voice when I call, O Lord; be merciful to me and answer me.

One thing I'll do! I will stay confident of this—that I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

So wait on the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait on the Lord.

ONE THING I ASK
Psalm 27

At the beginning of this New Year, I'd like to tell you how to feel better. The other day I went to the pharmacist for a prescription, and while he was filling it I looked over his shoulder at all the different pills and bottles and medications on his shelves. Thousands of them. Then I noticed all the over-the-counter products. And on another aisle were all the vitamins, herbs, and minerals available. All of them are designed for just one purpose—to make us feel better. Well, we thank God for the drugs and pharmaceuticals available to us in this modern age.

But it isn't just drugs, tonics, and vitamins we need. In order to feel better as we go through life, we need insight and information, not just for our minds but for our hearts. We need a word of encouragement, a word from our Creator. And that brings us today to Psalm 27. I don't care how good or how bad you feel, it is impossible to work your way through Psalm 27 without feeling better when you're finished.

There is something about this Psalm that is like a tranquilizer—that is, it calms our nerves. It's like a pain-reliever—that is, it lessons our pain in life. It is like a mood-enhancer. It is medicine for our souls. This morning, I'd like to read Psalm 27 with you, then show you its four great divisions.

1 The Lord is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the strength of my life;
Of whom shall I be afraid?
2 When the wicked came against me
To eat up my flesh,
My enemies and foes,
They stumbled and fell.
3 Though an army may encamp against me,
My heart shall not fear;

Though war may rise against me,
In this I will be confident.
4 One thing I have desired of the LORD,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the LORD,
And to inquire in His temple.
5 For in the time of trouble
He shall hide me in His pavilion;
In the secret place of His tabernacle
He shall hide me;
He shall set me high upon a rock.
6 And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me;
Therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle;
I will sing, yes, I will sing praises to the LORD.
7 Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice!
Have mercy also upon me, and answer me.
8 When You said, "Seek My face,"
My heart said to You, "Your face, Lord, I will seek."
9 Do not hide Your face from me;
Do not turn Your servant away in anger;
You have been my help;
Do not leave me nor forsake me,
O God of my salvation.
10 When my father and my mother forsake me,
Then the Lord will take care of me.
11 Teach me Your way, O Lord ,
And lead me in a smooth path, because of my enemies.
12 Do not deliver me to the will of my adversaries;
For false witnesses have risen against me,
And such as breathe out violence.
13 I would have lost heart, unless I had believed
That I would see the goodness of the Lord
In the land of the living.
14 Wait on the Lord;
Be of good courage,
And He shall strengthen your heart;
Wait, I say, on the Lord!

As I said earlier, this Psalm divides into four segments. It really divides into two major parts. There is an obvious and observable change of tone between Psalm 27:6 and Psalm 27:7. It is so noticeable that some Bible scholars wonder if this were not originally two psalms. But I think not, for the two fit together in a very human and tangible way. We can further divide these two sections into two smaller sections, and thus we have the four divisions I'd like to show you this morning.

My Confidence in the Lord (Psalm 27:1-3)

In the first division of this Psalm (Psalm 27:1-3), David speaks of his confidence in the Lord. He speaks here as a man who faces life every day with confidence, enthusiasm, and optimism. He begins with: The Lord…. In the Hebrew, this is the one-word personal name for God—Jehovah. He begins: Jehovah is….

There we have the basis of his confidence. He believes that God is, that God exists. He believes—he knows—there is a God, and since there is a God there must therefore be answers to life. This is a great debate in our day as scientists and scholars argue among themselves whether there is a God and whether or not the universe has meaning.

Steven Weinberg, who won the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1979, is one of the most famous scientists on earth. But he is perhaps most famous for having written one sentence that's been widely quoted, one he based on an earlier observation by Albert Einstein. Einstein had said, "The only incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible." Steven Weinberg said, "The

more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless."

I read of a debate that took place between two great scientists a few weeks ago at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster,Pennsylvania. One of the scientists presented evidence that the universe appears to be created by an intelligent designer and that there is purpose and meaning in the universe. The other argued that there is no supernatural element to the universe, and no purpose to it. Therefore there is no real purpose to life itself. Everything is ultimately pointless, he said.

But the Psalmist said, "The Lord is… Jehovah is…. God exists." And if there is God there must be, somehow and somewhere, meaning and purpose to the universe. And if there is meaning and purpose to the universe, there must be, somehow and somewhere, meaning and purpose to life. And if there is meaning and purpose to life, there must be, somehow and somewhere, meaning and purpose to my life, and to yours.

And then, the psalmist David used a very interesting personal adjective: The Lord is my….

My is an adjective that means relating to me. The use of the adjective-pronoun "my" means that David not only believed in the existence of God, but he believed that he had a personal connection with this God. This is Bible terminology that we see a number of times in the Bible.

> Moses said in Exodus 15: The Lord is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise Him.
>
> Psalm 23 says: The Lord is my Shepherd.
>
> Jeremiah said: The Lord is my portion.
>
> The writer of Hebrews said: The Lord is my helper.

Here, Psalm 27 says: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" And he goes on to make a very bold assertion. There is not one thing—not one thing—we should fear in life. Verse 2 says: When the wicked came upon me to eat up my flesh, my enemies and my foes, they stumbled and fell. Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident.

And he speaks of God as his hiding place. Look at Psalm 27:5: For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock.

There was a popular movie recently entitled "Panic Room" about a special, secure room that is built into some houses. This is one of the newest fads in home design. Some homeowners are building a high-tech bunker into their homes. These bunkers are capable of withstanding an onslaught, and there you can feel safe until help arrives.

All of us need a hiding place. I had a wonderful hiding place when I was a boy. I loved to climb trees, and one day while I was exploring a very tall maple tree on our acreage, I found a natural little perch where the tree limbs formed a seat, as it were. Whenever I needed to be alone or to hide from my parents or to hide from a neighborhood bully, I'd climb to the top of that maple tree and nobody ever found me there. In fact, I don't think anyone has ever known of my little secret until just now as I have disclosed it. I felt safe there from all alarms.

Well, I'm older now, but I still need a hiding place. I need somewhere I can go, and there I can have utter and absolute security. I need a place secure from all alarms. I need a place where I can rest, knowing that everything is going to be all right because my Lord is in control. Colossians 3:2-3 says: Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

> Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,
> Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;
> Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,
> Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.
>
> Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest,
> Finding as He promised perfect peace and rest.

My Closeness to the Lord (Psalm 27:4-6)

And that brings us to the next division of Psalm 27—my closeness to the Lord. Our confidence in the Lord is based on our closeness to the Lord. And here we come to the first of our "one things."

One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple. For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in His pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me high upon a rock.

You may remember from last year's series of sermons on the Tabernacle how significant this ancient tent was in the life of the Old Testament peoples. This was written before the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, so the primary place of worship was at the site of the ancient Tabernacle that was in Gibeon until David had it moved to Jerusalem. The Tabernacle represented the presence of God Himself among His people, and here David refers to the Tabernacle as: (1) The house of the Lord; (2) the temple; (3) His pavilion; (4) His Tabernacle.

I think this is what he is saying: "If I could only do one thing in life, I'd just move to Gibeon and live there near the Tabernacle and fellowship with God all day and all night." In other words, he is saying, "Lord, I want to dwell with You, to live in Your presence, to be hidden in Your care day and night."

Missionary Amy Carmichael once spoke about her early days as a single missionary in Bangalore, India. She would find herself very lonely. The other missionaries were friendly, but they were busy and had their own lives, their own ministries, and their own families. One day the loneliness became almost intolerable, but the mail arrived. Sorting out her mail, she went immediately to her bedroom, knelt by her bed, opened every letter, and read it aloud to her heavenly Father. There was something about that simple procedure that expelled the sense of loneliness that had been haunting her, and from that day she had the victory.

Another story from India illustrates the same thing. There was a native Indian of high-caste, the daughter of an Indian clergyman. Her name was Ellen Goreh. Her mother died when she was young, and she eventually came under the care of British missionaries who took her to England and raised her. In time, she returned to India as a soul-winner herself. She's best-known today for her hymns, and one of them fits this theme perfectly.

> In the secret of His presence how my soul delights to hide!
> Oh, how precious are the lessons which I learn at Jesus' side!
> Earthly cares can never vex me, neither trials lay me low;
> For when Satan comes to tempt me, to the secret place I go.

My Cry Before The Lord (Psalm 27:7-12)

But now we come to the third section of this Psalm, and, as I said, the tone changes. I call verses 7-12, "My cry before the Lord." Up to this point, David has been talking about the Lord; now he addresses the Lord personally in prayer:

Hear, O Lord, when I cry with my voice! Have mercy also upon me and answer me. When You said, "Seek My face," My heart said to you, "Your face will I seek." Do not hide Your face from me; do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation.

Why the change of tone. In the first part of this Psalm, David declares with unbridled confidence: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" Now he is pleading with God not to leave him or forsake him. Well, just look at the progression of his thought. First he talks about his confidence in the Lord, then about his closeness to the Lord. But as he thinks about his closeness to the Lord, he begins to feel unworthy and sinful. He begins to feel dirty on the inside. He begins to think of certain sins that put distance between him and his Holy God. And so he comes now to confess his sins and to reassure himself that God is a God of mercy and forgiveness. And then he asks the Lord to teach him to be a healthier, holier, more righteous person. Verse 11 continues: Teach me Your way, O Lord, and lead me in a smooth path because of my enemies…

My Counsel From the Lord (Psalm 27:13-14)

And that brings us to the last paragraph of Psalm 27—my counsel from the Lord. He ends his psalm with a little sermon in which he gives us the benefit of his counsel. He says: I would have lost heart, unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.

That reminds me of George Muller's quote: Many times when I could have gone insane from worry, I was at peace because my soul believed the truth of God's promises.

As we go through life, we sometimes face staggering problems. The Christian has two options at every point along the way:

- We can despair or we can depend.
- We can worry or we can worship.
- We can give up or we can look up.
- We can bear it ourselves or we can cast our cares on the Lord.

David said, “I would have lost heart unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.” And then he says: “Wait on the Lord…” If you have problems that aren’t being resolved, if you have prayers that aren’t being answered, if you have needs that aren’t being met—give God time. Wait on the Lord; be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart. Wait, I say, on the Lord.

Now, what does all this mean to us?

First, my confidence in the Lord—what does that mean? That means I’m going to make up my mind to cast out depression and discouragement and launch into every day with a positive attitude. New Year’s Resolution #1 is start every day this year with enthusiasm and confidence.

Second, my closeness to the Lord—what does that mean? That means I’m going to make it a priority every day to spend time in personal Bible study and prayer. One thing I have desired of the Lord and that will I seek—to be with the Lord, to be close to Him. New Year’s Resolution #2, then, is to have meaningful daily devotions every morning or every evening, or both.

Third, my cry before the Lord—what does that mean? That means I’m going to be more sensitive to sin in my life. I’m going to change some things. Anything that tears me down spiritually, anything that makes me feel guilty—with God’s help, I’m going to change those things. So New Year’s Resolution #3 is to confess my sins daily and to ask God to help me to grow in holiness this year.

Fourth, my counsel from the Lord—what does that mean? That means I’m going to wait on the Lord to solve those problems that haven’t been solved and to answer those prayers that haven’t been answered. So New Year’s Resolution #4 is to cast my cares on the Lord, waiting on Him and trusting Him to do what only He can do in His own timing and in His own way.

> For the Lord is my light and my salvation;
> Of whom shall I fear?
> The Lord is the strength of my life;
> Of whom shall be afraid?

What To Do With Problems You Cannot Solve And Fears You Cannot Shake
Psalm 31; Luke 24:44-46

In our Sunday mornings together this fall we’ve been looking at the subject of stress—how to bear up to it, how to handle it. I read this week in the New York Times that Harvard University has begun new programs for helping graduate students suffering from stress. The programs were started because 27-year-old Jason Altom, a fifth-year graduate student in chemistry, became the third Harvard graduate student to commit suicide in recent months due to stress.

Meanwhile in Norway, the Prime Minister of the country, Kjell Magne Bondevik, has just returned from 3 1/2 weeks of sick leave. He bluntly told his nation that his sickness was a depression triggered by the stress of running the country and by his inability to find any private space in his life.

Most people today are living under undue pressure. Where do you turn when you are so stressed you can imagine yourself becoming either suicidal or sick? Well, we turn to the Lord Jesus Christ, to our Savior. We follow his example. What did he do when he was stressed? Where did he turn during his greatest moments of anguish and affliction. Look at what Luke says about it:

/It was now about the sixth hour, and darkness came over the whole land until the ninth hour, for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last. The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man" (Luke 24:44-46).

In the last, stress-filled, anguished, painful moments of his life, the Lord Jesus quoted Scripture that he had previously memorized. When he said, "Into your hands I commit my spirit," he was taking an Old Testament prayer of the Psalmist David and making it his

own. The passage that came to our Lord's mind at that profound moment was Psalm 31:

In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge;
let me never be put to shame;
deliver me in your righteousness.
Turn your ear to me,
come quickly to my rescue;
be my rock of refuge,
a strong fortress to save me.
Since you are my rock and my fortress,
for the sake of your name lead and guide me.
Free me from the trap that is set for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hands I commit my spirit;
redeem me, O Lord, the God of truth.

For our purposes today, we can say that the whole of Psalm 31, all 24 verses, are summarized and summed up in Psalm 31:4 and Psalm 31:5; for here in Psalm 31:4 and Psalm 31:5, the Psalmist deals with the three themes that pervade the whole Psalm. The first is the idea of a trap.

The Trap

"Free me from the trap that is set for me," he prays in verse 4. He is feeling trapped. We use this same kind of terminology today. People talk to me about feeling trapped in a bad marriage, or trapped by circumstances. Some people feel like they're trapped in a job they don't like, or caught in the trap of financial stress. Ecclesiastes 9:12 says, "As birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times and fall unexpectedly upon them." The devil is setting traps for us all over the place. 2 Timothy 2:26 warns us to beware falling into "the trap of the devil."

The Psalmist here, the Israeli King David, had fallen into a trap of some sort, and he was in a terrible state of mind. Look at the words he uses to describe his condition.

Psalm 31:7 - Affliction
Psalm 31:7 - Anguish
Psalm 31:9 - Distress
Psalm 31:9 - Sorrow
Psalm 31:9 - Grief
Psalm 31:10 - Groaning
Psalm 31:10 - Weakness
Psalm 31:12 - Broken like pottery

I wonder if anyone here feels trapped by life, broken like pottery, afflicted and anguished and distressed. Well, the next word I'd like to use is Truth.

The Truth

The passage continues, Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge (vs. 4). This is the main theme of the whole Psalm. You see how it begins in verse 1? In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge.... And verse 2: ...be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me. And verse 3: ...you are my rock and my fortress.... Verse 4 says, for you are my refuge.
The writer puts it even more beautifully in verse 19: How great is your goodness which you have stored up for those who fear you. God is very, very good; but what does he do with all his goodness? He stores it up for those who fear him, ...on those who take refuge in you. In the shelter of your presence you hide them... in your dwelling you keep them safe.
At our house, we have a cat named Spider and a dog named Duke. Sometimes, Duke will take a notion to chase Spider. He will leap to his feet, a conniving smile on his face, and dart after her in a flash. But he's never been able to catch her, because she heads to the nearest tree and darts up it as quick as a wink. From her secure perch on a limb, she looks down and laughs at Duke. She feels utterly safe and secure, knowing that despite his barks he can't touch her, he can't get near her.
Just as a pursued kitten runs to a tree, just as a frightened child runs to his father, so we can come to the Lord in our stresses and distresses and find in him a hiding place, a place of security.

I read the other day about a football player named Eric Moore, a senior who plays for the University of Oklahoma Sooners. He came to the Sooners as a freshman starting quarterback, but was rejected by the fans. He received thunderous booing whenever he walked onto the field. Now he is a senior, finishing his college football career, and he recently gave an interview with the Dallas

Morning News, talking about those days. He received hate mail and death threats; and from sports radio hosts he was pounded with insults, sarcasm, and criticism. "I was 18, 19 years old. I thought about quitting... I thought people were my friends, but they weren't. I just didn't know who I could go to."

But he found that his once source of comfort and strength was the Lord. "I knew about God and I really felt like I had a relationship with God. But going through this showed me I was not really as close to God as I should have been." His pastor advised him to burrow himself into his Bible, to pray, and to submit himself to the authority of his coaches, and that's what he decided to do. He said, "If it weren't for (the Lord Jesus), I couldn't have made it through this." He found his refuge in God.

This week we had a member of our church, Lofty Castle, pass away. His sister told me that after he had contracted terminal cancer it affected his thinking. But he could still pray, and one evening she overheard him praying in his bedroom. He was saying, "Lord, I don't understand why, but you know why." He was finding his refuge in God.

The Trust

And that leads us to the third theme in this passage—Trust. Free me from the trap that is set for me, for you are my refuge. Into your hands I commit my spirit.... The word "commit" means to entrust; specifically, to entrust into another's safekeeping, to turn over something to someone for their watchful care.

The wonderful thing about this verse is its versatility. You can end it with a blank, and fill in that blank however you need to. For example, we who are parents can say, "Into your hands I commit my children." I first realized this when I started sending my kids off to college and feeling very insecure and uneasy about it. But while worrying one day I happened upon Psalm 31, and I realized I could say, "Lord, into your hands I commit (I entrust) my children." He can be where I cannot be. He can love them as I cannot. He can do for them and within them things that I cannot do.

This is exactly what Paul did with his children—that is, with the churches that he established here and there. For example, after spending a great deal of time launching the church at Ephesus, he eventually had to leave it and he felt very insecure about doing so. Yet he had no choice, so he knelt in the sand and prayed for them, saying to them, "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32).

We can also say, "Into thy hands I commit my talents. Perhaps God has given you some special gifts or talents or opportunities. Give them back to him, in full surrender. Proverbs 16:3 says, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do, and your plans will succeed."

We can also say, "Into thy hands I commit this problem—this problem I cannot solve, this fear I cannot overcome. This has been one of the hardest lessons for me to learn, but sometimes I've faced bad situations which, despite my best efforts, only got worse. But what a joy and peace comes to our hearts when we learn to give those situations to the Lord, to commit them to him, to entrust them to the one who can do the impossible.

We can also say, "Into thy hands I commit this disappointment. A friend told me the other day of going by to see lady who had just received bad news. She was disappointed and vexed. But when my friend visited her the next day, the lady was as cheerful as ever. "What about your problem?" asked my friend. "Oh," she said, "I've already given that to the Lord."

Isn't that a wonderful phrase and a wonderful practice? When we're faced with a disappointment we can't do anything about, we can give it to the Lord.

When missionary Robert Moffat prepared to leave for South Africa, he badly wanted to take a young lady named Mary Smith along as his bride. But when her parents objected, the young couple abandoned their plans, and Robert prepared to go to the mission field alone. He was bitterly disappointed, but he gave it to the Lord and found strength in a verse of Scripture from 1 Samuel 3: "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him." In other words, he was committing the disappointment to the Lord, saying, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." As it happened, it all turned out for the best; and within three years the two young people were together, and they walked hand-in-hand through South Africa in remarkable ministry for the next fifty years.

We can also say, "Into thy hands I commit hurt, anger, and desire for vengeance." Psalm 37:5 say, "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun."

This week there was a story on the internet about a couple named Dwane and Bonnie Wheat. Dwane is a Baptist pastor in Big Spring, Texas. One day several years ago, they talked to their 19-year-old daughter, Charla, about 11 p.m. then went to bed. About 5 am, there was a knock on the door. It was a police officer, coming to tell them that during the night Charla had been sexually assaulted and murdered. The perpetrator of this horrendous crime was soon arrested, tried, and convicted.

The couple was full of anger, bitterness, and a desire for revenge. They wanted somehow to get even with this cruel man. But they later said that as they prayed and worked their way through the crisis, they developed in their own hearts a new definition of forgiveness. What is forgiveness? To them it came to be this: "Forgiveness is giving up to God my desire to be angry and to get even."

Bonnie said, "Several places in the Bible we are told that 'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,' but I always thought that meant God was going to get even for me. What it came to mean was that God was going to carry the problem that I couldn't handle. I had to let God carry the load of anger and bitterness and vengeance because it was too big for me."

Perhaps someone has hurt you in some way, and there's nothing you can to rectify the situation. You've carried around a lot of anger

over the years. How wonderful to bring it to the Lord and say, "Into thy hands I commit this situation... into thy hands I commit this anger."

Finally, we can commit our souls into his keeping, as this verse implies: Into thy hands I commit my spirit. We can trust him as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death; we can trust him as we pass through the tunnel of light to the gloryland of heaven. 2 Timothy 1:12 says, "For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day."
This was a favorite verse of the famous English scientist Michael Faraday, who pioneered research in electrolysis and the magnetic field. He was a dedicated Christian who lost no opportunity of testifying of the one in whom he believed. People were so impressed with his knowledge, so engrossed in his theories, that even on his deathbed, he was asked, "What are your speculations?"
"Speculations?" he replied. "Speculation! I have none! I am resting on certainties. I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day!"

Several years before the sinking of the Titanic, passengers on another oceanliner faced terror in the night. It was the Empire State, and a Methodist worker named Phoebe Palmer was aboard. The evening was very quiet, the waters placid. Suddenly a blast shuddered through the ship as a boiler burst, jolting the passengers from their beds in alarm. They might have panicked but for Phoebe Palmer, who began singing hymns on deck. Others joined, and soon calm was restored. After the danger passed and all the passengers were safe, someone asked Phoebe, "Weren't you afraid?"
She replied, "No, thank God," explaining that from the very moment of the explosion, 2 Timothy 1:12 had come to her with such force that she could only sing of the one who was able to keep what was committed to him.
The devotional writer Samuel D. Gordon knew a woman who had memorized much of the Bible, but age took from her memory all the verses but this one: ...I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day. In time, she could only remember: ...what I have committed to Him. When she came to her deathbed, her loved ones noticed her lips moving. Bending low, they heard her repeating one solitary word over and over: Him, Him, Him.
Dr. Gordon noted that she had lost the whole Bible but one word. But in that one word, she had the whole Bible.
There are trials and traps all around us, but the truth is this: Jesus is our Refuge. And so we trust in Him, saying,

- Into thy hands I commit my children.
- Into thy hands I commit my talents and opportunities.
- Into thy hands I commit my problems and heartaches.
- Into thy hands I commit my disappointment.
- Into thy hands I commit my hurts and injuries in life.
- Into thy hands I commit my spirit, for...

I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love,
Redeemed me for His own.
But I know whom I have believed
And am persuaded that He is able
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against That Day.

Do Not Fret
Psalm 37

Do not fret because of evildoers,
Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity.
For they shall soon be cut down like the grass,
And wither as the green herb.
Trust in the Lord, and do good;
Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord,

> Trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass...
> Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him;
> Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way...
> Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;
> Do not fret—it only causes harm.
> —Psalm 37:1-8 (NKJV)

The good thing about growing old is that it isn't all bad. Though our outward self may be flagging, says the Bible, our inner self is being renewed day by day. The older we grow the more of life we see, the more of God we know, and the greater becomes our wisdom. When Pearl Buck was eighty years old, she said, "I have reached an honorable position in life because I am old and no longer young. I am a far more useful person than I was fifty years ago, or forty years ago, or thirty, twenty, or even ten. I have learned so much since I was seventy."

The same was true for David, the king of Israel. He wrote music all his life; he sang to his sheep while employed as a shepherd boy; he played his harp for King Saul while just a young man. But some of his richest Psalms were penned in old age. For example, Psalm 37. How do we know this is a song of a senior citizen? He tells us in verse 25: I have been young, and now am old.

And he has learned some things through the years, some lessons—secrets that could only have been garnered from the accumulation of maturity—three syllables, ten directives, and five assurances.

Three Syllables
The three syllables comprise the first three words of the Psalm: Do Not Fret. The word "fret" is very interesting in English. It comes from the Old English word "fretan" which means "to devour, to eat, to gnaw into something." Fretting is allowing worry to devour you, to gnaw like a rat into your soul and spirit.

The Hebrew word that David actually used as he wrote this in his original language 3000 years ago also had a picturesque meaning. The Hebrew term for "fret" is "charah" (ka-ra') which had at its root the idea of growing warm and blazing up.

So put these two pictures together. Think of worry as a rat inside your soul, gnawing away. Think of Satan as an arsonist, setting little blazes of distress inside your heart.

King David is saying in Psalm 37:

> "I have been young, and now I'm old. I've seen many things, suffered many burdens, and learned many lessons. And based on a lifetime of experience I have three words to give you: Do not fret. Kill off the rats and put out the fires. Do not fret, it only causes harm."

Ten Directives
But if you're like me, you are saying to yourself, "That's all well and good, but I can't help worrying. You might as well tell a river to run backward as to tell me not to fret."
Well, as we read through Psalm 37, David suggests that we overcome worry by displacing it with ten things. He gives us ten directives in Ps 37:1-9.

The **first** is trust. Ps 37:3 says: Trust in the Lord.... At its very essence, worry is the failure to trust God with the problems of life. It is a form of disbelief, and that is a very serious sin. That is the sin that kept the children of Israel out of the promised land for forty years. Fear and Faith are mutually exclusive, and that's why David said, "Do not fret... Trust in the Lord." Likewise, the Lord Jesus Christ told his disciples, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me."

Ps 37:3 then goes on to say: "Do good." In other words, when you are tempted to fret and worry, divert yourself. Don't sit around with the curtains drawn, wringing your hands. Throw open the windows, find something that needs to be done, and get busy. During the height of World War II, someone asked Winston Churchill if he worried about his tremendous responsibilities. He said, "I'm too busy. I have no time for worry."

The **third** directive David gives us is also in verse 3: Dwell in the land. What does that mean? It means "Don't panic; don't cave in; don't run away." In other words, God had given the children of Israel the land he had promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They were possessing Canaan-land, the land of Israel. Enemies wanted them to flee. Native Palestinians wanted to take over that territory, and they were always trying to nibble at its sides, or set fires to burn the Israelites out. But David was saying, "When you have enemies trying to drive you out of the land, relax. Remember that God gave you this land and if you trust him and are obedient to him, he will protect and preserve you. Don't panic. Dwell in the land."

We have an enemy that wants to rob us of our peace of mind. He wants to eat away at our faith and torch our joy. But the Lord expects us to dig in our heels and dwell in the land. Don't let the devil chase you out of the place of God-given peace and joy.

Instead...

Feed on God's faithfulness. Isn't that a wonderful phrase? But how do we do it? I think we do it by grazing in the Scriptures, by reading and memorizing and claiming God's good promises. I was reading the other day about a man named Ralph C. Norton, who represented the Belgian Gospel Mission early in this century. In September of 1917, his work required that he and his wife, Edith, cross the Atlantic, but it was a very dangerous undertaking because the Germans were sinking American boats, and 59 ships had already been lost. Early Sunday morning aboard ship Norton awoke frightened, but as he studied his Bible the Lord gave him a verse of Scripture from Psalm 107: So He guides them to their desired haven. He underlined the verse in his Bible and kept it close in his thoughts all day long. Another day as he poured over his Bible, he found Isaiah 54:17: No weapon formed against you shall prosper. He underlined that verse in his heart and felt that God was giving him those words as an assurance. On another occasion, he turned to Job 5 and read these words: He shall deliver you in six troubles, Yes in seven no evil shall touch you. Just as he was pondering this verse, his wife Edith burst breathlessly into the cabin. She was frantic. "Quick, Ralph," she cried, "a torpedo has just missed us; we may be attacked at any moment. Oh, be quick. Don't wait!" He looked up, smiled, and showed her the verse the Lord had just given him. As she read those words with him, her fear, too, suddenly lessened and the Lord's peace took hold. "And so we faced the perils of the deep," Edith later wrote, "not once, but during seven crossings of the sea during wartime, and his faithful Word was our guide and our stay, the cloud in daytime, and a pillar of fire by night."

What were they doing? Feeding on God's faithfulness. What an antidote to worry!

Fifth, we're told to delight ourselves in the Lord. Find your daily joy and fulfillment in him.

Commit your way to the Lord, says Ps 37:5. This is the very thing we talked about last week from Psalm 31. Lord, into thy hands I commit my children, my opportunities, my problems, my disappointments, and so forth. Peter expressed a similar thought when he told us we can cast all our cares on him, for he cares for us. We can entrust ourselves into God's keeping and into his care.

Seventh, he tells us again to trust the Lord. Ps 37:5b says, "Trust also in Him..."

The **eighth** command is in Ps 37:7: Rest in the Lord. This is a wonderful word that is frequently repeated through the Bible, and it refers to the calm, composed, and confident spirit possessed by those who know how to entrust the affairs of life into the Lord's hands. Jeremiah 6:16 says, "Ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it. Then you will find rest for your souls." In other words, by aligning your life according to the way of life prescribed in the Bible, you will develop a calm, composed, and confident spirit. Jesus said in Matthew 11: "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." In other words, "I will give you calm, composed, and confident souls." Hebrews 4 tells us it is God's will that we should enter his rest, that we should cultivate calm, composed, and confident souls. There's an old hymn that says Jesus, I am resting, resting / In the joy of what you are. / I am finding out the greatness / Of your loving heart.

Number 9: Wait patiently for him (verse 7). Much of our anxious striving involves timing. God doesn't always move as quickly as we want him to, and we grow impatient and began fretting. But do you remember the old poem that says, God's wisdom is sublime His heart supremely kind / God never is before his time / And never is behind. /

And the **final** directive that David gives in this section is in verse 8: Cease from anger and forsake wrath. In other words, calm down, hold your horses, cool your jets. Don't get overwrought. Don't set worked up so quickly. Just take a deep breath, say an earnest prayer, trust God, and give him time to work things out.

Five Assurances

Perhaps you're saying to yourself, "That's hard to do. Sometimes I can hardly help getting worked up and overwrought. I feel like going into a panic. It's hard to trust the Lord and do good and dwell in the land with calm, composed, confident spirits. There is too much to worry about." Well, for those of us who feel that way, the Psalmist devotes the rest of Psalm 37 to reassurances. Because of time, we'll only look at five of them.

The **first** is in Ps 37:11: But the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. If we will do what he says in this Psalm, the Lord promises us Abundant Peace. As I read those words in verse 11, certain other verses came to mind:

- Isaiah 55:7 says that our God will abundantly pardon
- John 10:10 says that Jesus came to give us life more abundant
- Ephesians 3:20 says that God is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we can ask or imagine.

The word "abundant" means—more than enough. In other words, the person who has a relationship with God through Jesus Christ will experience more than enough pardon for all sins, more than enough life, more than enough answers to prayer, more than enough grace, and, according to Psalm 37:11, more than enough inner peace for any situation that arises.

The **second** assurance is in verse 23: The steps of a good man (or woman) are ordered by the Lord, And He delights in his way. When we obey God's commands in this Psalm we have not only abundant peace, we have ordered steps. In other words, we have the assurance of God's guidance.

No horoscopes for us. We have no need for tarot cards or palmistry. We haven't time for crystal balls, ouija boards, or psychic hot-lines. Our God has a plan for our lives.

All the way my Savior leads me; What have I to ask beside?
Can I doubt His tender mercy, Who through life has been my guide?
Heav'nly peace, divinest comfort, Here by faith in Him to dwell!
For I know, whate'er befall me, Jesus doeth all things well.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths. He shall order your steps.

The **third** assurance is in Ps 37:25: the promise of daily bread. I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread. A couple of weeks ago we devoted an entire sermon to our Lord's teaching on this very subject from Matthew 6. The Lord told us to consider the lilies and the birds of the air, how God provides for them. Then Jesus said, Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Do you know who Martin Luther's favorite preacher was? He once wrote, "I have one preacher I lover better than any other; it is my little tame robin, who preaches to me daily. I put his crumbs upon my window sill, especially at night. He hops onto the sill when he wants his supply, and takes as much as he desires to satisfy his need. From thence he always hops to a little tree close by, and lifts up his voice to God, and sings his carol of praise and gratitude, tucks his little head under his wings, and goes fast to sleep, to leave tomorrow to look after itself."

The **fourth** assurance is in Ps 37:39: But the salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; He is their strength in time of trouble. It is the promise of timely strength. The Lord doesn't promise to keep us from trouble, but to give us strength in the midst of it. I read the other day that no professional football team that plays its home games in a domed stadium with artificial turf has ever won the Super Bowl. A climate-controlled stadium protects the players and the fans from sleet and snow and mud and heat and cold and wind. Everyone is comfortable. But athletes who brave the elements are disciplined to handle hardship, and apparently such rigors have something to do with the ability to win the Super Bowl.

James Cash Penney came from a long line of Baptist preachers, and he grew up with deep convictions. He was unwaveringly honest. He never smoked or drank, and he was a hard worker. But in 1929, the Great Depression hit, and he was suddenly in crisis. He had made some unwise commitments, and they turned sour. Penney began to worry about them, and soon he was unable to sleep at night. He developed a painful case of shingles and was hospitalized. His anxiety only increased in the hospital, and it seemed resistant to tranquilizers and drugs. His mental state deteriorated until, as he later said, "I was broken nervously and physically, filled with despair, unable to see even a ray of hope. I had nothing to live for. I felt I hadn't a friend left in the world, that even my family turned against me."

One night he was so oppressed that he didn't think his heart would hold out, and expecting to die before morning he sat down and wrote farewell letters to his wife and sons.

But he did live through the night, and the next morning he heard singing coming from the little hospital chapel. The words of the song said, "Be not dismayed whate'er betide / God will take care of you." Entering the chapel, he listened to the song, to the Scripture reading, and to the prayer.

"Suddenly—something happened. I can't explain it. I can only call it a miracle. I felt as if I had been instantly lifted out of the darkness of a dungeon into warm, brilliant sunlight."

All worry left him as he realized more fully than he had ever imagined just how much the Lord Jesus Christ cared for him. From that day J. C. Penney was never plagued with worry, and he later called those moments in the chapel "the most dramatic and glorious twenty minutes of my life." When he died at age 95, he left behind 1,660 department stores in his name. God gives us timely strength.

Finally, he gives us eternal salvation. Ps 37:39-40 say: But the salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the Lord shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked and save them, because they trust in Him.

Without Jesus Christ, we have reason to be worried. Without Jesus Christ, we should be fretting. Without Him, we have no hope, no future, no forgiveness, no eternal life. But when we come to the cross of Calvary where Jesus died for our sins, when we ask for forgiveness on the basis of his blood shed there, when we pray to him, asking him to become our Savior and Lord, He saves us and sets us free. He gives us peace.

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Have you received him as your Savior? Are you living in His peace? Today is the best day you've ever had to give your life to Him and to cast on Him your every care.

What's Wrong With Religion
Psalm 50

The Bible is a very positive book, and as I rule I try to preach positive, uplifting, upbuilding sermons. But the Bible is also a negative book. That is, it is full of warnings and cautions. It contains some "Thou shalt nots." It speaks of the wrath of God and the judgment of heaven. And when you read the Old Testament prophets and some of the sermons of the Lord Jesus Christ, they are plain-spoken and even, as we would say today, politically incorrect.

Yet they reflect the wisdom of God.

What I've been finding is that the wisdom of God and the currents of our popular culture are headed in two different directions. And if we are not well-grounded in the Scripture, we'll be swept away in the evil our age.
So today I'd like to begin a nasty, negative little series of sermons, entitled, "What's Wrong With…." Over the course of the next several weeks, we'll look at these topics:

- What's Wrong with Worshipping at the Lake?
- What's Wrong with Entertainment?
- What's Wrong with Gambling?
- What's Wrong with Living Together?
- What's Wrong with Tolerance?
- What's Wrong with Success?

And today is our initial message: What's Wrong with Religion? There are two things wrong with religion, according to God. Let's look together at what He says about it in Psalm 50.
In the first stanza of this Psalm, the writer (a man named Asaph) pictures the Lord entering the courtroom of the universe and summoning the whole earth to appear before Him.

The Mighty One, God, the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets. From Zion, perfect in beauty, God shines forth.

Now, Asaph paints us a picture of the majesty of the Judge as He prepares to hold court:
Our God comes and will not be silent; a fire devours before Him, and around Him a tempest rages. He summons the heavens above, and the earth, that He may judge His people: "Gather to me my consecrated ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice." And the heavens proclaim His righteousness, and God Himself is the Judge.

What is He going to judge? He is about to judge our religion, our praise, our thanksgiving, our church-going, and our worship patterns. And He finds two things wrong. The first is formalism and ritualism.

Problem #1: Dead Formalism

Look at verse 7:

> "Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you: I am God, your God. I do not rebuke you for your sacrifices or your burnt offerings, which are ever before me. I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills."

In other words, God is saying something like this: Every morning and every evening you offer sacrifices on the altars of Israel. You have your liturgy, your ritual, your formalism. I will not condemn you for that. In fact, I prescribed it. But you must remember that the ritualistic offering of a sacrifice is meaningless when it regresses into mere external routine.

God goes on to tell the Israelites: Do you think I need your bull or your sheep or your goats? Do you think I'm hungry and need you to kill animals for me to eat? That's not the purpose of the sacrifice. There is a deeper meaning, a heart meaning, but you've forgotten about it. You're going through the motions of offering all these animals on the altars as though I needed a bunch of dead animals for some reason. I don't."

Read on:

> I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?

God didn't prescribe the worship patterns of the Old Testament in order to provide Himself with a local butcher who would keep meat on the tables of heaven. He isn't so very interested in the externals of religion--yet it's amazing how easily our worship patterns can deteriorate into little more than external forms.

Think of worship as a flashlight. A flashlight needs the external case, because that everything together, providing a structure which allows the light to shine. But the batteries can die down very quickly, and nothing is more foolish or useless than trying to find your way through the darkness with a flashlight in which the batteries have gone dead. It's the voltage on the inside that really counts.
God is saying in this passage to the ancient Israelites, "I'm not rebuking you for carrying around your flashlight, but you're batteries are dead. I need people with spiritual voltage within them. I need people who know how to worship with power, in spirit and in truth."
How do we do that? Well, in Psalm 50, the Lord approves of three internal criteria exhibited by healthy worshippers. To put it differently, He isolates three nine volt batteries that He wants us to install into the flashlight of worship. There is a practice to cultivate, a vow to keep, and a promise to claim.

Counting our Blessings
The practice to cultivate is: Thanksgiving. Look at verse 14:
/Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call upon me in the day of trouble and I will deliver you, and you will honor me."

What is a "thank offering"? Well, the Old Testament prescribed various types of offerings required of the children of Israel. There were sin offerings and guilt offerings, which were to be made as a way of symbolically confessing sin and gaining forgiveness. There were burnt offerings, which represented the person's personal consecration to God. But one of the most frequently mentioned offerings in the Old Testament was what was called the "thank offering," which represented an act of thanksgiving for blessings already bestowed.

For you and me today, the "thank offering" is that act and attitude by which we count our blessings and express to God our gratitude for the way He "daily loadeth us with benefits," to quote Psalm 68.

Back on May 12th of this year, Katrina and I both woke up in a dismal mood. We were worried about some financial matters we were having to deal with, we were concerned about health concerns, and we were worried about a couple of other matters. We were also pretty tired, having not slept well.

But in my morning Bible reading I came across this verse--Psalm 50:14--and I realized that God expected me to change my attitude, to offer Him the sacrifice of thanksgiving--and sometimes it is a sacrifice, for it's easier to stay in a funk than to work your way out of it. In my little notebook, I listed eight things for which I could be thankful on that morning. There were many others, of course, for the Bible says that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. But I began to consider just those eight blessings and it made all the difference.

Now, I want to jump down to the end of this Psalm, to Asaph's summation, and show you a remarkable sentence. Verse 23 says: He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.
In other words, the attitude of thanksgiving in worship opens the door to many more of God's blessings in our lives. The word "salvation" here isn't used just in the restricted, limited way of being justified at the moment of conversion. It is used in a much broader way indicating all the blessings that accompany our salvation. We can paraphrase this verse in this way:

> He who worships me with a thankful heart honors me and opens the door so that I may flood him with even more blessings.

Keeping Our Vows
That's the attitude true worshippers are evermore cultivating in verse 14, but the verse goes on to say this. We become true worshippers not only by counting our blessing, but by keeping our vows. Look at verse 14 again:

> Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High….

Did you once give your life to Jesus Christ? Did you offer yourself a living sacrifice? Did you commit yourself to Him with the same solemnity as a bride exchanging her vows with the groom at the altar? Have your remained true to Him, or has there been backsliding in your life? Have your left your first love?

In order to stave off external formalism in worship, we must offer genuine thanksgiving to God and persevere in our vows to Him. Third, we must call on Him and trust Him to help us through the distresses of life. Look at verses 14 and 15 again:

Trusting Our Lord

> Sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill your vows to the Most High, and call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor Me.

True worshippers please God by relying on Him to sustain them and deliver them through the distresses of life.

In 1812, America's first family of missions, Adoniram and Ann Judson, sailed from Massachusetts as America's first missionaries. They ended up in Burma where they suffered many heartaches and privations. On one occasion when Adoniram was imprisoned and sent far away, Ann followed with their children. She found her husband imprisoned in an old building without a roof, chained to other prisoners, and almost dead. She herself had nowhere to stay, but the jailer allowed her and the children to share the tiny hut where he lived with his family. For six months, Ann lived in these primitive and almost hopeless conditions. Then she caught smallpox. Just as she was recovering from that, she contracted one of the tropical diseases that were almost always fatal to foreigners. She became so weak she could hardly walk, but with her last ounce of strength she set out for a nearby village to obtain medicine. She returned in a state of extreme weakness and exhaustion. Shortly thereafter she contracted spotted fever and could not move. During this time her husband was placed in another obscure prison where she couldn't find him, and even the food she sent him was returned. She later wrote:
If I ever felt the value and efficacy of prayer, I did at this time. I could not rise from my couch. I could make no efforts to secure my husband. I could only plead with that great and powerful being who has said, "Call unto me in the day of trouble and I will hear, and thou shalt glorify me." God made me at this time feel so powerfully this promise that I became quite composed, feeling assured that my prayers would be answered.

Psalm 50:15 has that kind of effect on us. I remember reading several years ago Jamie Buckingham's book, Into the Glory, about the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service, known as JAARS, the "flying arm of Wycliffe Bible Translators." He opened the book with a gripping story about a missionary aviator named Ralph Borthwick who was transporting a team of Gospel workers into the mountainous jungles of Peru. When he left the Wycliffe base, the weather was fine and the weather reports favorable. But suddenly, almost without warning, he was swallowed up by the worst storm he had ever seen. Curtains of water cascaded over the plane, leaking in around the canopy and side panels of the fuselage. Turbulence shook the plane so hard it seemed that the rivets would pop out. There was nothing but static on the headset, and then the rain got worse, like someone turning on a firehose to the windshield. He thought he wasn't in a plane, but in a submarine, with the water leaking in very badly, from every seam and crack, drenching both him and the instrument panel. Then came the hail, beating against the windshield like bullets. At the worst moment, the engines failed.
As he struggled to retain control of the aircraft, he suddenly remembered the verse he and his wife had read just the day before at their breakfast table--Psalm 50:15: Call on me in the day of trouble: I will deliver you and you shall glorify Me."
During all the time of his emergency, Ralph realized he had not yet called upon God. Now, with death seemingly only seconds away, he began to pray: "Father, if You still have work for me and my passengers, please bring on the engine."
All at once, he thought of something. He had not yet pulled the little handle that would shut off outside air to the engine, the carburetor heat. He tried to dismiss the thought, for that wasn't something one would normally do in an emergency. But the thought came to him with force, and he reached down and jerked the carburetor heat handle and at the same time pulled back on the stick.
Suddenly there was a mighty roar, and the engines screamed to life as if they had never quit. He shouted "Praise the Lord!" and at literally the last second, he pulled his plane out of the treetops and eventually back to safety. And Ralph Borthwick lived to fly again.
Now, do you think such an experience would help you worship God?

Genuine worship occurs when we offer thanksgiving to God, follow through with our commitments to Him, and call on Him in the midst of trouble. That's the cure for dead formalism and lifeless ritualism in worship.

Problem #2: Rampant Hypocrisy
But in the last half of the Psalm, there is another problem with religion, and that is hypocrisy. Look at the way verse 16 begins:
/But to the wicked, God says: "What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips? You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you. When you see a thief you join with him; you throw in your lot with adulterers. You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. You speak continually against your brother and slander your own mother's son. These things you have done and I kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you. But I will rebuke you and accuse you to your face.

In other words, the Lord is saying something like this: You come to church and quote My scripture and give every appearance of external godliness. But then you cast My words behind you. You're dishonest. You let immorality invade your life. You say bad words with your mouth and argue with your brothers. And worst of all, you don't take Me seriously. You think I am just like you.
As Isaiah put it in another place: These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.
What's the remedy? We need to repent and return to our God.

Look at the way Asaph ends this Psalm in his summarizing last two sentences:

> Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with none to rescue. He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.

What's wrong with religion? Dead formalism and rampant hypocrisy. It can so easily become insincere and sanctimonious, but not if Christ reigns in our hearts.

The other day as Katrina and I took the shuttle to our hotel in Anaheim, we found ourselves with an Australian businessman. He was very friendly, and in the course of the conversation, he asked me what I did. I told him I was a minister. I asked him if he went to church, and he replied that he was a non-practicing Catholic.
"What's the use in that?" I replied. "If Christianity or Catholicism is true, it's true; and if it's false, it's false; but why would you believe it is true, but live like it's false?"
He just looked at me… and smiled… and tried to think of something to say. When I saw he didn't have a response, I just said, "Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship. Religion is humanity seeking some kind of god, but in Jesus Christ, God was seeking you and me in order to have an eternal relationship of love with us."
He changed the subject. But I'd like to ask you right now: Don't change the subject. Consider this carefully. Jesus Christ is seeking some of you. He loves you and He wants to fill your heart with Himself. He wants a relationship with you--not one marked by dead formalism or empty hypocrisy; but one in which you and I can daily sacrifice thank offerings to God, fulfill our vows to the Most High, and call upon Him in the day of trouble.

And He will deliver us. And we will glorify Him.

Six Ways To Know God's Will
Psalm 48:14; Psalm 73:24; Psalm 23:3

This is the last Sunday of August; we're almost in September and almost in the fall of the year. The children are back in school, the days are getting shorter, and the heat is beginning to subside a little. Soon we'll be able to look into the sky and see the ducks and the geese flying south. These larger birds migrate by day, but I recently read an article saying that many of the smaller songbirds, migrating to the south, travel mainly in at night. The article said that during the autumn months as we sleep peacefully in our beds, millions of songbirds quietly travel over our heads under cover of darkness, heading south for warmer climates.
Take Baltimore Orioles, for example (the birds, not the baseball players). Every fall, they pack their bags, close up their nests, leaving the key under the mat, and like head south like senior citizens. How do they know when to begin their trip? Apparently the weather patterns tell the birds when to move. One expert wrote: "As cold fronts pass over eastern North America, clear skies and north winds usually follow, sending waves of Orioles, warblers and other songbirds on their way to wintering grounds in Mexico and Latin America. These conditions are ideal for migration, allowing the birds to travel with little risk of storms, with the wind at their backs, and with a clear view of the stars to help them find their way."
These little birds fly over houses and highways, over shopping malls and parking lots, over city and country, passing state after state. If a particular Oriole opts for a direct flight home, it will fly over the Gulf of Mexico in a single night, crossing 600 miles of open water.
The entire trip from Baltimore or Washington or New York to Mexico, Panama, or Costa Rica takes about two weeks. But the Oriel knows exactly where it is going. God planted within its little brain a perfect guidance system that tells it exactly where to go, and when, and how, and it returns to exactly the right spot. Not even our most advanced technologies, not even our military, has guidance systems so well developed as those in the tiny brains of the smallest migratory birds.

The Bible says that we are even more valuable to the Lord than the birds of the air. We are worth more than many sparrows. If the Lord is pleased to guide the birds in their migrations, it's a safe bet that He also wants to guide our lives. One of the most comforting truths I've ever discovered is that…

> He leadeth me, O blessed thought!
> O words with heavenly comfort fraught!

Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

This morning I'd like to show you three of my favorite verses on the subject of divine guidance, all of them occurring in the Psalms, and then share with you six ways we can discover God's will for our lives. The verses are from Psalms 48, 73, and 23:

- For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end. Psalm 48:14
- You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory Psalm 73:24
- He leadeth me… Psalm 23:3

But how does He lead us? What are the means by which He guides us? Some of you may be trying to make a decision about whether to remain in Nashville or relocate. Some of you might be trying to decide whether to purchase a new car or not. Some of you might have decisions to make relating to work or school. How do we find God's will in these matters?

My favorite illustration about guidance comes from the writings of the Bible teacher F. B. Meyer, a British preacher who was one of evangelist D. L. Moody's closest associates and who died in 1924. One night in his travels, Meyer was standing on the deck of a ship approaching land. He wondered how the crew knew when and how to safely steer to the dock, for it was a stormy night, and visibility was low. Meyer, standing on the bridge and peering through the window, asked "Captain, how do you know when to turn this ship into that narrow harbor?"

"That's an art," replied the captain. "Do you see those three red lights on the shore? When they're all in a straight line I go right in!" Later Meyer said: When we want to know God's will, there are three things which always occur: the inward impulse, the Word of God, and the trend of circumstances…. Never act until these three things agree.

Well, I'd like to suggest that in determining God's will for your life, there are six lights that should align, they should all line up and fall into place, and those six lights give us powerful indications of God's will for our lives.

Willingness

The first is willing in our hearts to do the will of God. I believe that God's will is something he reveals to his children, to those who come to him through Jesus Christ, and who are submissive. Psalm 25:9 says: The meek will he guide in judgment; and the meek he will teach his way. The word "meek" means humble, willing, submissive to God. We cannot come to God and say, "Lord, tell me what you want me to do with my life and if I like it I'll do it." We come instead saying, "Lord, I'm willing to follow your plans for my life, whatever they are. Please lead me into them."

Jeremiah 29:11 says, For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.

Arthur T. Pierson, Charles Spurgeon's successor in London, once said: To go as I am led, to go when I am led, to go where I am led… it is that which has been for twenty years the one prayer of my life--A. T. Pierson
Proverbs 3:5-6 put it like this: Trust in the Lord with all you heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.

Word of God & Prayer

Second, we come to know the will of God for our lives as we study the Word of God and pray. Now the word of God shows us the will of God for our lives in two ways. First, its very teachings constitute the will of God for our lives. We know God's will in moral and spiritual matters because his word reveals it to us clearly. Suppose a young man comes to me who is dating a non-Christian woman, and he is trying to decide whether or not it is God's will for him to propose. Well, the Bible says, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." The Bible says, "Come out from among them and be ye separate, says the Lord." His Word reveals his will in that matter.
But there is a second way in which the Word of God aids us in discovering God's will. As we study it and as we memorize it, the Holy Spirit is able to bring specific verses to mind at just the time we need them.

Recently I came across two separate stories that can illustrate how this works. When Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the Prince of Preachers who ministered in the south of London a hundred years ago, was a young man, eighteen years old, he was seeking God's will for his life. He felt that the need for theological training. He needed to be in Bible College, and his friends and his father told him that, by all means, he needed biblical training. So he so made application to Regent's Park College, and an interview was set between the head of the college and young Spurgeon. The meeting was to be in Cambridge at the home of Mr. Macmillan, the publisher. Spurgeon rose early that morning and had special prayer, seeking God's guidance in the matter. And at just the appointed time, he showed at Mr. Macmillan's house. He rang the bell, and a servant showed him into the parlor. There he sat for two hours

until at last his patience could stand it no longer. He called for the servant and was horrified to discover that she had forgotten to announce his arrival, had not let anyone know he was there, had forgotten all about him.
Meanwhile the head of the college had sat waiting in an adjoining room until his patience, too, had been exhausted, and he had left Cambridge for London by train without the interview ever having taken place.
Spurgeon was deeply disappointed and disturbed, and his first impulse was to run after the man, to chase him to London, to explain what had happened. But he took a long walk out in the country to calm down, and as he walked along a verse of Scripture came to his mind so forcibly that he almost seemed to hear it audibly. He later said that it could not have been any clearer if Christ Himself had appeared to speak it aloud, so strong did this verse suddenly hit his mind. It was Jeremiah 45:5: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!"
The Lord seemed to be telling him not to worry about the misunderstanding and not to make extraordinary efforts to clear it up. As a result, Spurgeon never did make it to college, but it didn't matter. He became the most powerful and successful and fruitful minister in the history of Victorian England, and he later said that he "a thousand times thanked the Lord very heartily for the strange providence which forced his steps into another and far better path."

The other story involves one of my favorite authors, J. Oswald Sanders, the missionary statesman who for many years was the director of Overseas Missionary Fellowship. Sanders once wrote about a time when he wanted a particular position in the Christian world very much. Having friends in positions of influence, he was about the see if some strings could be pulled to turn the job in his direction. He was toying with the idea of doing a little lobbying.
But while walking down the main street in Auckland, New Zealand one day, turning the matter over in his mind, as he walked past His Majesty's Theatre, a verse of Scripture came to his mind with tremendous authority and powerful conviction: "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!" (Jeremiah 45:5).
"The words came just as though it was God speaking. There were crowds all around me, and no one else heard the voice, but I heard it all right!" Sanders later said. "I believe that was a real turning point in my service to the Lord." As a result, he did not seek the position, but it later opened to him on its own in God's good timing.
Many times as we diligently study the Bible, the Lord uses specific verses to help us glimpse what his will is for us in specific matters.

Inward Impulse

The third means of guidance is what I'd like to call the inward impulse or inward impression or inward conviction that the Holy Spirit often gives us as we seek his will. I remember clearly how the Lord guided me to Columbia International University. I was a freshman at King College in Bristol, Tennessee, but really not very happy attending there. One night I was sitting up in bed reading the CIU academic catalogue that someone had given me. I suddenly had a very strong and unmistakable impression that I should attend Columbia International University in Columbia, South Carolina. God has never spoken to me audibly, but he came close to it that night; and I have never doubted that decision.

A few years later I was pastoring a lovely little church in the rural area near Greeneville, Tennessee, but growing restless, for I was young and ambitious and I wanted to be where I could make a greater difference. A church in Chicago called, asking me to pastor. I was very excited, ready to go; but for some reason I stalled for time, asking for a week to think it over. We went to the beach, and I spent a great deal of time walking along the ocean, praying, and asking the Lord to show me what to do. Somehow I never had an inward peace about accepting that opportunity, so from vacation I called and turned down the offer. I couldn't explain why, because it seemed like the ideal spot for us. But I turned it down, and within forty-eight hours this church got in touch with me.
The Bible says, "Thine ear will hear a word behind thee saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it,' when ye turn to the right hand or to the left." And I think that when we seek to remain close to the Lord, his Holy Spirit often gives us a sense of peace about matters involving his will.

Counsel of Others

The fourth means of guidance is seeking counsel from others. Go to Christian people, mature friends, family members, people you trust, and ask them their opinion about your decision. Proverbs 11:14, "With a multitude of counselors there is victory." Proverbs 15:22 says: "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."

Trend of Circumstances

Fifth, the trend of circumstances. God often reveals his will by providentially arranging the circumstances of life. When you study the book of Acts, we discover that God sometimes led Paul the apostle by means of open and closed doors. In Acts 16, for example, Paul wanted to go into Asia and evangelize the Orient, but the doors wouldn't open for him. He couldn't get through the borders. But the doors into Europe opened virtually by themselves, and Paul concluded that God wanted him to take the Gospel westward.

Using our Minds

Finally, I believe the Lord guides us by our own sanctified thought processes. We take all the factors mentioned above, and we mull them over, thinking things through. The Bible says, "The mind of man plans his way, and the Lord directs his steps."

John Wesley said, "God generally guides me by presenting reasons to my mind for acting in a certain way." J. Oswald Sanders said, "God generally guides us by the exercise of our own sanctified judgment."

We consider all the factors mentioned above, then prayerfully make the best decision we can. And that decision almost always represents the will of God for our lives. And if somehow we do manage to make the wrong decision, if we are humble and prayerful and patient, the Lord has his own ways of getting us back on track.

In 18th century Wales, a young man named William Williams graduated from the university as a physician, but quickly changed professions to become a physician of the soul--a clergyman. Being warned against the "fanatical dissenters" such as Wesley and Whitefield, Williams decided to become one himself, becoming a Calvinistic Methodist.
During his 43 years of itinerant ministry, Williams traveled over 95,000 miles, and his impassioned preaching drew crowds of 10,000 or more. Once he spoke to an estimated crowd of 80,000, noting in his journal, "God strengthened me to speak so loud that most could hear."
William Williams is best remembered, however, for his hymns, becoming in Wales what Isaac Watts was in England. In all, he composed over 800 hymns, his best known being an autobiographical prayer. Williams had lived as a pilgrim, pressing on through the snow of winter, the rains of springtime, and the heat of summer. He was beaten by mobs (once within an inch of his life) and cheered by crowds, but in all his travels he sought only to do the will of God, saying:

> Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah
> Pilgrim through this barren land;
> I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
> Hold me with Thy powerful hand.
> /Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah
> Pilgrim through this barren land;
> I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
> Hold me with Thy powerful hand.

That's our prayer today. God doesn't leave his children to flounder along in this world, like travelers lost in the wilderness. We travel an appointed way. He knows the way we take; he will guide us by his counsel, and afterward receive us into glory.

Psalm 51 E = Evangelism

Today we're coming to the end of our SIMPLE 2 series of messages in which we've looked at the basics—the A, B, C, D, and E of successful Christian living: Assurance of Salvation, Baptism, Church Involvement, Daily Devotions, and, today, the subject of Evangelism.

Evangelism has been damaged in the United States in recent years by moral failures among high-profile ministers, going all the way back to the Jim and Tammy Baker scandal, and more recently the pastor in Colorado Springs who fell into sin. And whenever these things happen, it demoralizes all of us. It's discouraging when the headlines in the newspaper are devoted to moral failure among Christian leaders.

But I find some solace in turning to the Bible and realizing that the same thing happened in biblical times. Perhaps the most prominent Old Testament example is King David. In 2 Samuel 11, we read about how one evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of his palace, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing. She was evidently in a private area, perhaps a courtyard, of her home; and in the darkness she had no idea anyone was watching her from above.

Interestingly and incidentally, we have a pretty good idea where this took place. In just the last year or two, an Israeli archaeologist has announced that she has identified the location and foundation of the ancient palace of King David, dating from the 10th century B.C. It's located on a hillside on the southeast slopes of Jerusalem where it would have looked out over the surrounding houses, just as 2 Samuel indicates.

Well, up to this point, King David had been one of the most revered and respected men in the Bible—a young man who kept sheep and killed giants and trusted God and composed Scripture and wrote worship songs and provided godly leadership for his nation. Now, he was drawn away by his own desires, and his desires became lust, and his lust became sin, and sin became death

—and by the time it was all over, he was engulfed in a conspiracy that involved adultery, murder, deception, and cover-up.

But David still had a tender heart, and when his pastor—the prophet Nathan—came to rebuke him for his sin, David collapsed into tears, full of genuine and earnest repentance. Out of that experience he wrote Psalm 51, and in this psalm he said something very important on the subject of evangelism. So our Scripture reading today is the 51st Psalm, and I'd like to read through it verse by verse with comments, and then share a great secret from this passage about winning others to Christ.

Notice the superscription over the psalm. It says: Psalm 51: For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Verse 1 says: Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgression. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

There are three verbs here—to blot out, to wash away, and to cleanse. And these three verbs give us a three-fold picture of what God does with our sins. Blot out is the picture of something being erased. When I was in elementary school, in some of my classes all the students would have a little job to do every day. Sometimes my job was to erase the blackboard and to clean it. For some reason, I always like that job. I began with a simple eraser that wiped out all the words and numbers on the board. And then the teacher had a rag with some kind of damp substance that cleaned it even better, until it looked as good as new.

That's what David needed, and it's what you and I need ever so constantly. Lord, erase all the record of my sins and mistakes and regrets.

The second verb is wash away, and the Hebrew word here was the word used for washing clothes. Your shirt is dirty and smelly, so you put it in the washing machine with detergent and maybe bleach, and by the end of the day it's fresh and clean again. That's what happens to us when God forgives our sin.

The third verb is cleanse: Cleanse me from all sin. This was the ceremonial word used in the book of Leviticus, when priests and worshippers were ceremonially cleansed and purified to stand before God in temple worship.

The only answer in all the universe for our mistakes and regrets is our Lord's three-fold forgiveness. He erases it. He washes it away. He cleanses us from it. That's why we don't have to keep flogging ourselves because of it. When He forgives us, our sin and guilt is gone for good.

In the next verse, verse 3, David openly confesses his sin, saying: For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge.

The interesting thing about this is the timing of it. It took David a year to repent of his sins. It was a year after his sin that Nathan approached him and rebuked him and brought about the sentiments expressed in this psalm. David had been living with his guilt for a solid year, and his sin had been ever before him.

Now he was acknowledging that it was against God that he had sinned. Now, in one sense, of course, he had sinned against himself, and against his wife, against Bathsheba and her husband whose death he had arranged, and against his entire nation. But in another sense, it was against God alone that he had sinned.

Why is that? Because it was the Lord who issued commands against sexual immorality, murder, lying, and deception. It was God's rules that David had broken—rules that issued forth from the very character of God's holy nature. Whenever we sin against someone else, we are primarily sinning against God because we are breaking His laws and violating His holiness.

I shared something about this with Jeff Nichols this week, and he encouraged me to share it with you. We can think of God's laws as a great triangle. First, everything issues forth from the nature of God's transcendent holiness. He is utterly and eternally and intrinsically good, pure, perfect, holy, ethical, honest, faithful, and righteous.

In order to show us how His character should be reflected in our lives, He has given us in the Law and throughout the Bible hundreds of commandments and instructions.

These hundreds of commandments and instructions are all boiled down into ten areas and summarized in the Ten Commandments.

If we study the Ten Commandments very closely, we find that they are grouped into two categories—commandments having to do with our relationship with God (Commandments 1, 2, 3, and 4), and commandments having to do with our relationship with other people on this planet (Commandments 5-10).

Jesus, picking up on that, summarized the Ten into Two—Love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.

And the writers of the epistles noted that we could take all the laws and regulations of the Bible and boil them down to one word—Love, but love as God knows it to be and defines it in His word.

So you see the triangle:

The Transcendent Character of An Infinitely and Perfectly Holy God

Hundreds of Commands and Instructions in Scripture

Ten Great Summarizing Commandments

Two Great Commands

Love

And whenever we sin against someone else, we are violating something somewhere in this triangle, and it is always and ultimately a violation of God's character. So it is against God that we sin and do this evil in His sight.

Verse 5 goes on to explain why we act this way. He said that he had sinned because he was a sinner; that is, he was born with a sinful nature: Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts….

This is one of the passages in the Bible that explains how we have inherited a sinful nature from our parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, going all the way back to Adam and Eve. We are born with a sinful nature, and it's a problem we can never fix on our own. It's like an inherited blood disease for which there is no cure. Our only hope is a blood transfusion, as it were. We need the blood of Christ. But left to ourselves, we are inherently sinful.

No one questioned that very much until the so-called Enlightenment, because it seems so obvious and intuitive. But when the Enlightenment spread through Europe in the 1700s, it created a fundamental shift in the way people viewed themselves, and in the way they viewed both God and sin.

The thinkers of the Enlightenment rejected the idea of a personal God who was transcendent and holy, and they rejected the idea that humanity is ultimately evil. They taught that humanity was essentially good, and that political and social movements could advance humanity to new zeniths. And that's what spawned all the –isms: Nationalism, Marxism, Leninism, Stalinism, Communism, Fascism, Nazism, and so forth. I recently heard one historian opine that the age of the Enlightenment began with the French Revolution and ended with the Fall of the Berlin Wall, when the last of the great –isms—Communism—collapsed in Western society, ending the bloodiest century the world has ever known.

What are we left with now? We're left with extreme atheism and hardcore secularism, still clinging to the notion that human beings are just fine without the Lord Jesus Christ.

But David said, "I need the Lord!" Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts…. You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

Then in verse 7, David says: Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean. What does this mean? There are several references to hyssop in the ceremonial law of Israel, but perhaps the most familiar reference is that incredible story of the Passover Lamb in Exodus 12. Moses and Pharaoh were face to face in their historic dual, fighting for the liberation of the Israelites from bondage. The Lord sent a series of plagues on Egypt, the last of which was the death of the firstborn in every home. On that terrible night, Moses told every Israelite family to kill a lamb, emblematic of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to dip into its blood a branch of a hyssop tree and to paint the doorposts of the house with the blood. "And when I see the blood, I will pass over you," said the

Lord.

David was saying, “Lord, do that to me! Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”

Verse 8 continues: Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

And now, David’s requests turn in a positive direction. It’s not just, “Lord, forgive me for the past,” but “Lord, help me now and in the future.” Verse 10 says: Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

In my prayer notebook I have several petitions from the Bible that I request of the Lord every morning, and this is one of them: Create in me a clean heart, O God. I can’t build a clean heart within myself. I need for the Lord to construct a clean heart and a clean mind within me. It’s His work in our lives. The Bible says that He perfects that which concerns us, that He who has begun a good work in us will carry it on to completion. This is a biblical prayer that represents God’s perfect will for our lives, and we can pray each day, “Lord, create in me a clean heart.”
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In verse 11, I think David is begging God not to let him end up like his predecessor, King Saul. He said: Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. This was the Old Testament dispensation, when the Holy Spirit didn’t indwell every believer in the sense that He has since the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament came upon certain people at certain times in certain ways for certain tasks. And when we read the story of King Saul in 1 Samuel, we see how the Holy Spirit came upon him to equip him for his kingship, but because of his repeated sin and failure, he was cast away from God’s presence and the Holy Spirit was taken from him. David was anguished at the possibility of the same thing happening to him. So he prayed: Do not cast me from Your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

And then we come to the point of today’s message and our primary text on the subject of evangelism. Look at verse 13: Then will I teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. David is saying, “Lord, if you will forgive me, cleanse me, renew me, restore me, and give me once again a clean heart, no one will be better equipped to help other sinners than me. I will go to other people whose lives are messed up and mired down, and I’ll tell them what you’ve done for me. I will teach transgressors your ways and sinners will be converted to you. Look at what David says in verse 15: Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare Your praise.

Now here’s the principle I want to highlight in today’s message:

Great sinners can become great soul-winners—and we’re all great sinners.

If you think you can’t win someone else to the Lord Jesus Christ because you’re too great a sinner, or too immature a Christian, or too unworthy to do anything for the Lord, think again. God uses forgiven sinners to reach those whom Christ died to forgive and to save.

This reminds me of what Paul said to Timothy: Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe in Him and receive eternal life.

In other words, at the very beginning of Christian history, the Lord saved and called His most sinful, vile, violent opponent so that throughout the entire subsequent history of evangelism, everyone would know that God saves great sinners, and that great sinners become great soul-winners.

Recently I came across the story of Andrew Wyzenbeek. I had never heard of him before, but as I did some research, I realized he was a great Christian worker and soul-winner in American 20th-century life. Andrew emigrated from Holland to the United States and became a successful engineer, manufacturer, and inventor. After his conversion, which I’m going to tell you about, he worked with evangelists like Billy Sunday, Mel Trotter, Paul Rader, Torrey Johnson, and Billy Graham. He served on the board of the Slavic Gospel Association, worked in the Gideons, and was active in Chicago church life as long as he was able.

Here’s how he was saved. Andrew Wyzenbeek arrived in America as a militant atheist, one of those who had been educated in the philosophies of the Enlightenment. There is no God, and people are basically good. All that’s needed is the right political

environment for humanity to flourish.

Well, Andrew was hired as superintendent in a factory, and that was the environment he saw every day. Working for him were the six filthiest men he had ever seen. They were so unkempt and dirty that most people avoided them. Their clothes were always filthy, as though they never did any laundry. Their bodies were filthy, as though they never bathed. They lived like dirty animals.

But one Monday, these men arrived at work on time, sober, clean, and neatly dressed. They were clean and groomed. Andrew, watching them, was confused. He thought they were dressed for a funeral and would ask for time off. The next day was the same story. Finally, his curiosity got the best of him, and Andrew approached the six.

“Ollie,” he said, “what happened to you fellows? You’re different.”

The man replied, “We are different. We are new men. We are born again. We accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior, and He has put a new spirit and a new heart in us. All six of us.”

That night, Andrew couldn’t sleep, and the next day he interviewed the men again. He couldn’t get over the change he saw in these men. They kept telling him how Jesus had changed their hearts and literally cleaned up their lives.

Finally Andrews went with them to an evangelistic service and was eventually converted because of the change in their lives, and he went on to devote his life to winning others to the Lord. It was the change, the repentance of filthy sinners that led him to consider the claims of Christ.

The Lord wants to clean up our lives so that we can be His witnesses to others—and the world is always changed by those who have been forgiven.

I want to end today by telling you a story that Norman Richards shared with me recently. Norman is our Director of Pastoral Ministries at TDF and he also oversees our Senior Adult ministries and our program of teaching English as a second language.

Well, Norman told me that when he was a senior in high school, he had a good friend who lived nearby named Bill Smith. Norman had never shared his faith with anyone, but he knew the Lord and he began to have a real burden to tell Bill about the Lord Jesus. Norman said, “It’s the first time I had ever tried to witness to anyone and to lead them to the Lord, and so I sat down with Bill and gave him some Scriptures and asked him about giving his heart to the Lord Jesus. He deferred, and when I left him, he had not received Christ. But I felt a great weight lift from my heart because I felt I had done what God wanted me to do.”

“Well, I graduated and got married and went off to college and then to the mission field. And fifty years passed in the blink of an eye. Bill and I hadn’t seen each other in fifty years. But I went back home for our 50th high school reunion, and there was Bill. He came up to me and said, “Norman, I’m so glad to see you. For some reason, we lost touch with each other and I never told you this, but I want you to know that shortly after you talked with me, I took your words to heart and accepted Christ as my personal Savior. And I married, and my wife and I have been church workers all these years. I’m glad I’ve been able to tell you this after all these years.”

The Bible says, “He who goes forth with weeping, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him…. For as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth. It will not return void.”

The Lord wants to use us in ever increasing ways to win others to him—children, teens, and adults. He turns great sinners into great soul-winners, and we are all great-sinners so we all qualify. Let’s all pray:

Lord, create in me a clean heart and renew a right spirit within me… then will I teach transgressors Thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto Thee.

THE CURE FOR GUILT
Psalm 51

Recently several people have told me how they still struggle in various ways with the recollection of bad choices they had made earlier in life. One man said, "I sowed my wild oats, and now I have a harvest of bitter memories." Another said, "I've always been faithful to my wife, but my mind can't get rid of all the images of things I did before I met her. How can I get those pictures out of my mind?"

Guilt is a very persistent force in our souls. There was an article in the newspaper the other day about a letter that arrived at the finance department at Bradford City Hall in West Yorkshire, England, with a check for ten pounds. In the letter, the man confessed that during World War II he had jumped on a train without paying his fare, and now, fifty years later, he wanted to make peace with his conscience.

Well, in our series of messages through the Psalms, we are coming to one of the most personal of all the Davidic Psalms—Psalm 51, David's plea for forgiveness following his immorality with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband Uriah. It is one of the most powerful and precious Psalms, for in it we find God's cure for guilt. Let's read it together:

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity.

Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.

Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

This background for this Psalm is given in 2 Samuel 11 and 12. There we read that on a particular occasion when David should have been out with his troops working on the defense of his empire, he stayed at home, alone in his palace, letting his general Joab accompany the troops One evening, unable to sleep, the king got up from his bed and walked along the parapets on the roof of his palace in Jerusalem, and down below he watched a woman bathing in the moonlight. What followed was the most infamous political sex scandal in human history, involving both adultery, cover-up, and murder. David was so caught up in the crime and in its cover-up that he didn't even think of himself as being guilty until confronted by his spiritual advisor, Nathan the prophet. Then suddenly David's eyes were opened and he saw the enormity of what he had done.

It's amazing how blinded we can sometimes be to the sinfulness of our own behavior. One of the reasons few people felt any sympathy for Timothy McVeigh is because he seemed to have no remorse for his killing of 168 innocent people in the terrorist bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. The last thing he did was to quote the defiant poem, "Invictus," which says "My head is bloody but unbowed." We ask, "How can a person kill 168 people and not feel guilty?"

But on another level, just look at you and me. When we compare ourselves with everyone else in our society, we're tempted to say, "I'm not so bad. Everyone's doing this or that." And we rationalize.

But when we compare ourselves with the brilliant, burning holiness of Eternal God, who dwells in unapproachable light and is described as being "holy, holy, holy," that is when we really recognize the awfulness of our sinfulness and can only exclaim, like Isaiah, "Woe is me, for I am undone."

In David's case, it was when Nathan confronted him that he suddenly saw himself for who he was and his sinfulness for what it was; and Psalm 51 is his response. Notice in the first two verses, he uses three different words for sin. In verse one, he says, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions." The root word for "transgression" in the Hebrew means "to break way," and was sometimes used to describe breaking away from a certain pathway, veering off course. Other times it was used to describe a revolt, a breaking away from authority. The Bible talks about the path of life, the path of righteousness, the path of God's commands, the pathway of holiness. But the Bible also says, "All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone unto our own ways…." We have revolted against Him and gone off in our own direction.

In verse two, David says, "Wash away all my iniquity," and the word "iniquity" refers to depravity of nature, to evil. And he goes on to use a third word when he says: "Cleanse me from my sin." The Hebrew word for "sin" means "to miss the mark." God has given each one of us but one life to live, and it is like an arrow. We all have one arrow to shoot, one chance to aim at the target—and all of us have squandered our shot. We've all missed the mark. The Bible says, "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God."

David goes on to say in verse 3 that he can't get away from the memory of what he did. "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." One of the worst things about guilt is the damage it inflicts on our self-image. I had a man send me a letter recently confessing something terrible he had done. It was of a sexual nature, and I could tell from his letter that he hated himself for

it, he was ashamed of himself, and his self-opinion was in the gutter. The devil wants us to have low self-esteem, so he leads us into sin, then he uses the guilt as a cat-of-nine-tails to flog us, all the while laughing at us like a sadistic monster.

And then, look at verse 4: "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." Now, in one sense that doesn't seem true, because David had coveted this woman, taken her, and killed her husband. But in another sense, it is absolutely true. Whose law did David break? Whose character did He violate? Whose commands did He disregard? Not Bathsheba's or Uriah's, but God's. All sin is a violation of the character and commandment of Creator God, and it is to Him we must come in contrite confession.

In verse 5, he recognizes that his sinful behavior was not simply a matter of a few isolated actions, but a way of life, a part of his very nature, that he had been that way since birth and conception. "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." The Bible teaches that our human nature from its first beginnings has been infected with sin.

So this was the condition in which David found himself, in which he had placed himself. He hated himself, and he felt as dirty as a filthy shirt that isn't fit to be worn. What could he do? There are three things you can do with guilt. You can shove it down within yourself, swallow it (psychologically speaking), push it below the surface and pretend it isn't there. Or you can attach it to someone else and blame them for your situation. Or you can take your guilt and nail it to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Here in Psalm 51, David does the latter. And in this prayer that we call Psalm 51, he asks God for three things. In the first part of the Psalm, he begs God to remove this sin, to forgive his iniquity, to cleanse him.

Remove This Sin (Ps 51:1-9)

Look at verse 1: Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. The words "blot out" in the Hebrew mean literally to rub out, to erase. It is as though there was a list on the blackboard of David's heart, or on the blackboard of the heavenly accountant, listing David's faults and failures. "Dear Lord," he begged, "erase it, erase it all."

In verse 2, he says, "Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." The words "wash away" were common words the Hebrews used for doing their laundry. David was saying, "I feel like a dirty garment that needs to be thoroughly laundered."

Verse 7 is a wonderful verse. "Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean." What is hyssop? It was a plant in biblical times—we aren't sure as to which plant it is, but some sort of shrub, and it is uniquely connected in Scripture with the blood of a lamb.

In Exodus 12, on the night of the Passover, when the death angel was passing through Egypt, Moses told the Israelites to take bunches of hyssop, dip them in the blood of the slain Passover lambs, and apply it to the tops and sides of the doorframes. Hyssop, in other words, was the paintbrush with which they applied the blood of the lamb.

David was saying, "Lord, take your divine paintbrush and paint me with the crimson blood of the Lamb. He was looking forward to the cross of Jesus Christ, for at Calvary, Jesus died for the sins of the world. He died in our place. Peter said that He Himself "bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness— by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

Then David said in verse 7: "Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." And that reminds me of Chesterton's great quote which goes something like this, "God uses many colors, but He never paints as beautifully as when He paints in white."

How would you like to be utterly and absolutely forgiven? That guilty secret gone forever? That self-hatred turned into praise and joy? That's what Jesus does on Calvary.

Would you be free from the burden of sin?
There's power in the blood, power in the blood.
Would you o'er evil a victory win?
There's wonderful power in the blood.

Restore This Soul (Ps 51:10-17)

In the second part of this Psalm, verses 10-17, David goes a step further. He not only says, "Lord, forgive this sin," but "Lord, restore this soul." Look at Ps 51:10: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

"Create" is a word indicating a miracle. This is something that God alone can do. "Lord, give me a new heart, create a clean heart in me, O God. Restore, renew, reinvigorate, revive me."

Recently I read the biography of a missionary to Africa named Mary Saunders who was called "Mama John." She told of working in a seminary in Tanzania. One of the students approached her one day and said, "Teach me to pray, Mama John."

Mama John began, "In the Bible we are given an example from the Psalms. Like David of many years ago, you and I can ask God to create a clean heart in us, and renew a right spirit within us in order that our hearts might be ready for prayer."

They spoke a few more minutes, then the two women bowed their heads in prayer. The African woman began: "God, get a broom and sweep out my heart. Sweep it good so that you get every corner. Then I can be clean. Amen."

He goes on to say, "Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me." David here was doubtlessly thinking of his predecessor. In Old Testament days the Holy Spirit did not indwell and fill all believers as He did after the day of Pentecost in the New Testament. Instead He came upon certain men and women at certain times to equip them for certain tasks. When King Saul was anointed king, the Holy Spirit came upon him, but when he turned against God, the Holy Spirit left him. When David was anointed King, the Holy Spirit came upon him, and now as he confessed his sin, he was pleading with God that he not end up in

Saul's condition.
And Ps 51:13 goes on, in the old King James: "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee."
David wants to be able to resume his ministry. Ps 51:15 says: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." But at the same time, he's aware that his confession and repentance must be sincere and lasting. In Ps 51:17, he acknowledges: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."
We must be heart-broken over our sins, for they break the heart of God. But as we confess them we ask God to remove our sins, restore our souls, and finally, notice how, in verses 18-19, he asks God to redeem his situation.
Redeem This Situation
"In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on Your altar."
These two verses are so different from the previous stanzas that many scholars think they were added later, but we must remember that all Israel suffered because of David's sin. We never sin in isolation. It always affects those around us, and in this case terrible suffering had come to the entire nation because of what David had done. Now, he was praying, "Lord, redeem this situation. Turn, now, and rebuild my people. Build up the walls of Jerusalem. Bring good out of this."
And how often God does just that. When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, they committed a terrible sin, but God used it to deliver a nation. When the Jewish and Roman officials put Christ to death, it was a terrible sin, but God used it to redeem humanity.
When Romans 8:28 says that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord, the "all things" mean "all things." God can even take sin, when it is humbly, sincerely confessed and placed under the blood of Jesus Christ and bring forth from it good.
That's why, having confessed our sins, we can leave them at the cross and go on with life. Corrie ten Boom once told of a little girl who broke one of her mother's treasured demitasse cups. The little girl came to her mother sobbing, "Oh, mama, I'm so sorry I broke your beautiful cup."
The mother replied, "I know you're sorry and I forgive you. Now don't cry any more." The mother then swept up the pieces of the broken cup and placed them in the trash can. But the little girl enjoyed the guilty feeling. She went to the trash can, picked out the pieces of the cup, and brought them to her mother and sobbed, "Mother, I'm so sorry I broke your pretty cup."
This time her mother spoke firmly to her. "Take those pieces and put them back in the trash can and don't be silly enough to take them out again. I told you I forgave you so don't cry any more and don't pick up the broken pieces any more."
Do you have a guilty secret that hangs over you like a dark cloud full of acid rain? Why don't you confess your sin or your sins—sincerely, thoroughly, contritely—and then release those guilty feelings knowing that that the blood of Christ is all-effective, all-covering? "Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter then snow."

Lord Jesus, I long to be perfectly whole,
I want Thee forever to live in my soul.
Break down every idol, cast out every foe,
Now wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.

Wesley said,
He breaks the power of cancelled sin,
And sets the prisoner free.
His blood can make the foulest clean,
His blood availed for me.
Or, as another old hymn puts it…
Years I spent in vanity and pride,
Caring not my Lord was crucified,
Knowing not it was for me He died,
On Calvary.

Mercy there was great and grace was free,
Pardon there was multiplied to me,
There my burdened soul found liberty.
At Calvary

PSALM 55:22 & 1 PETER 5:7

In the years just before the American Revolution, there was a New England preacher named Rev. Jonathan Edwards, who, one

morning, preached a sermon entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” As he delivered his message, which he reportedly read in a calm voice, something strange started happening to his listeners. They began writhing under conviction and weeping in repentance. That worship service in Connecticut that day sparked one of the greatest revivals in American history—the Great Awakening. Edward’s message is summed up in these few words: Those without Christ are hanging by a slender thread, he said, over the fire of divine wrath.

Well, today all the world is hanging by a slender thread. At any moment, something may snap. The Israeli journalist, Eitan Haber, wrote an article in the online publication ynetnews.com just this past week. It blared: “WORLD WAR III HAS STARTED.” Haber was writing about the success of North Korea’s nuclear program, and he said that the test missile fired recently by the North Koreans landed squarely in the Prime Minister’s office in Jerusalem. (“World War III Has Started” by Eitan Haber, inhttp://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3722339,00.html, accessed May 27, 2009.)

In other words, he said, the world is quickly reaching a point of no return, especially when it comes to the Middle East. Experts believe the Iran-North Korean nuclear axis is now unavoidable, with North Korea ready to supply nuclear weapons to Al Qaeda, and a nuclearized Iran threatening to destroy Israel.

There are about 25,000 known nukes are scattered around the world, including hundreds of so-called “suitcase bombs,” about 100 of which Russia has reportedly “lost.”

National Defense Magazine recently ran a chilling article entitled, “7 Deadly Myths about Weapons of Terror,” warning that smuggled nukes cannot be easily detected at U.S. ports. Our ability to spot nuclear components is “over-hyped,” said the report. (7 Deadly Myths about Weapons of Terror” by Sandra I. Irwin and Stew Magunson, athttp://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2009/June/Pages/7Deadly.aspx, accessed May 25, 2009.)

All it takes is one explosion, and history will never recover. And that’s only one of our problems. For many Americans, the more immediate crisis is still with our economy. There’s a liberal-leaning online magazine called the Huffington Post, and last week one of their columnists, Eric C. Anderson, a national security consultant, wrote something very disturbing: “My periodic reading of the financial tea leaves is causing a significant loss of sleep…. We face a debt problem that is literally unfathomable to the average American. Yes, yes. I’m sure you are aware of the $1.8 trillion deficit Washington is expected to put on the books this year. And I’m pretty sure the average American knows our national debt has reached approximately $11.2 trillion… What I don’t think most Americans understand is the size of our unfunded liabilities – the $99.2 trillion the U.S. government currently owes to Social Security and Medicare. Do the math with me… $11.3 trillion plus $99.2 trillion equals $110.5 trillion. That’s right. $110.5 trillion. We’re in big trouble.” (“Washington’s Grim Economic Prospects” by Eric C. Anderson, in The Huffington Post, May 29, 2009, at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-c-anderson/washingtons-grim-economic_b_208171.html, (accessed May 29, 2009).)

All this is having a terrible effect on our society. A Charlotte newspaper just reported that paramedics recently responded to eighty-one suicide attempts in eighteen days. It’s no accident, said mental health authorities, that the upturn in attempted suicides coincided with the downturn of the economy, which included spikes in the city’s unemployment and home foreclosure rates. (“Washington’s Grim Economic Prospects” by Eric C. Anderson, in The Huffington Post, May 29, 2009, athttp://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-c-anderson/washingtons-grim-economic_b_208171.html, [accessed May 29, 2009].)

In our own area, the newspapers this week have been reporting on the runaway suicide rate among soldiers at Fort Campbell. We are living in perilous times, and I believe the stage is being set for the Last Days and for the return of Christ and the rapture of the church. It’s enough to make us all nervous wrecks, and that’s without even considering all the personal trials and tribulations that come our way. Sometimes when the world is hanging by a thread, we found ourselves at the end of our ropes.

How do we react to it all? What do we do with our cares, our burdens, and our anxieties? Today I’d like to speak on two of our memory verses that are remarkably similar—one is in the Old Testament and one in the New.

1. Cast Your Cares on the Lord – Psalm 55:22

The Old Testament verse is Psalm 55:22: Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall.

I remember memorizing this verse in college, and I believe the occasion was during my sophomore year. I went through a period of despondency, and my roommate, seeing my low spirits, showed me this verse and it immediately struck a chord in my heart. I memorized it and have loved it ever since.

The writer of Psalm 55, according to the superscription, is King David; and David was facing a very painful problem. He had a handful of people who didn't like him and who were causing him problems. We don't know if this is strictly personal (since David was, after all, a human being with all kinds of emotions) or if it involved national security (since David also happened to be the Head of State for Israel). At any rate, he had an active handful of enemies, and now another shoe had dropped on him. One of his close friends had gone over to the other side. David had been betrayed or abandoned by his friend, and it had just crushed him. That's the background for this Psalm.

Let me show you some selected verses from Psalm 55:

Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my pleas; hear me and answer me. My thoughts trouble me and I am distraught at the voice of the enemy, at the stares of the wicked; for they bring down suffering upon me and revile me in their anger. My heart is in anguish within me…

I said, "Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest—I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and storm."

If an enemy were insulting me, I could endure it; if a foe were raising himself against me, I could hide from him. But it is you, a man like myself, my companion, my close friend, with whom I once enjoyed sweet fellowship as we walked with the throng at the house of God.

My companion attacks his friends; he violates his covenant. His speech is smooth as butter, yet war is in his heart; his words are more soothing than oil, yet they are drawn swords.

What do we do when we've been hurt, when we're worried, when other people are wounding us in all kinds of ways? What do we do when we've been betrayed or someone has turned on us?

Verse 22: Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall.

Whether it was personal or political or both, David knew that this level of hurt and burden was something that had to be given immediately and irretrievably to the Lord. Cast your burden on the Lord, and He will sustain you.

I read one commentary on this verse which spoke of an ancient Jewish rabbi. This man, who was carrying a heavy load on his back, was walking one day with an Arabian tradesman. The tradesman looked at the rabbi and said, "Take your burden and throw it on my camel." The rabbi later used that incident to aptly illustrate this verse. Casting our care on the Lord is taking off our load and throwing our problems and worries and concerns onto the Lord.

2. Cast All Your Cares on Him - 1 Peter 5:7

Now, the New Testament counterpart to this verse is in the book of 1 Peter. I've been reading and re-reading 1 Peter recently, and one of the themes of this book is responding to problems and periods of suffering in life. Here's the message of 1 Peter: We have been born again by the precious blood of Christ; so we have a forgiven past. We are awaiting His glorious coming; so we have a forever future. But in-between, we are pilgrims and sojourners on the earth, and we're going to have problems.

Look at 1 Peter 1:3ff: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

You see, we have been given new birth and we have a glorious hope. But look at the next verse:

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

Look at chapter 2. Here Peter is talking to some of the slaves or servants in the Roman Empire. Some of them were being picked on and even abused and beaten simply because they were Christians. Verse 20 says: How is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.

Look at chapter 3, verse 17: It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Look at chapter 4, verse 1: Therefore, since Christ suffered in His body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.

And down in verse 12: Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.

And look at chapter 5, verse 10: And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast.

So there you have the theme of Peter. He closes the book the way he opens it. We have been called and forgiven and saved by Christ, and one day we're going to be fully delivered. We have an excellent past and a glorious future. But right now we're in a no-man's land, we're on a battlefield, we're in hostile territory, and on any given day we might have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

So what do we do? How do we cope? What technique do we discover? That's the broad context for our verse, 1 Peter 5:7: Cast all your anxiety on Him because He cares for you.

Every word in this verse is terrific.

Cast: The word cast means to throw, to remove something from one place to another. Where is your concern right now? Where is your worry? It's swirling around in your mind, in your heart, in your emotions. When you cast your care on the Lord, you are removing it from your own heart and placing it on His. The Greek word that Peter uses here only occurs one other time in the New Testament. It's in the story of the Triumphal Entry, when some of our Lord disciples took their cloaks and threw them on the donkey as a saddle mat for the Lord Jesus. They had on a heavy coat, and they took it off, and they threw it on—cast it on—the donkey. Reminds us of the rabbi I mentioned earlier. Just as the rabbi took off his burden and placed it on the camel, just as the disciples took off their cloaks and placed them on the donkey, so we take off our anxieties and place them on the Lord.

ALL: I'll never forget the night I noticed this word. I was deeply worried about something, and I was reading 1 Peter and saw this word "ALL," and it struck me like an anvil. All means every single one, without exception. There are no limitations.

YOUR: This is personal, for you. It means the unique set of circumstances that is troubling you at this moment.

CARES: The Greek word here means worries and anxieties. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't have healthy concern about things. It doesn't mean we shouldn't give prayerful thought to things. This is talking about that unhealthy, crippling, dysfunctional anxiety that can tear us down like a building being demolished. One lexicon called it the kind of care or anxiety that brings disruption to the personality and to the mind. It's talking about personality-disrupting worries.

ON: That's a preposition that fits our analogy with the camel and with the donkey—on top of Him.

HIM: "Him" is God. Look at the immediate context in verses 5-6: All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on Him, for He cares for you.

"Him," then, is God; and when we're humbling ourselves before Him, we're saying, "Lord, I have a problem that I can't handle, but You can. I'm going to humble myself, get out of the way, and give this problem to You."

FOR HE CARES FOR YOU: This is the declaration on which the command is given. The command is that we cast our cares on Him. The basis of it is this—God really does care for us. The Bible repeatedly assures us of this. There's an old song based on this verse that says, "Does Jesus care when my heart is pained too deeply for mirth or song? As the burdens press and the cares distress and the way grows weary and long?" The answer: "Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares; His heart is touch with my grief. When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares."

Conclusion

Now let's compare Psalm 55 and 1 Peter. David has been deeply hurt personally, and probably politically and professionally. He's been betrayed by a close friend. But he said: Cast your care on the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous be moved.

Peter knows that his readers have been born again and that Christ is coming again. But between these two events, we may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. But here's what to do: Cast all your care on Him, because He cares for you.

You may be asking—but how do I cast my cares on Him? Let me close by giving you four steps in this process, and we can use the word CAST as an acronym.

1. C = Claim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as your own. In Psalm 55, David was writing as someone who had an ongoing relationship with God. Likewise Peter is writing to people who had been born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. These passages are written against the backdrop of an existing, saving, life-transforming trust in the Lord. These are saved people taking advantage of some of the benefits of their salvation. In other words, our salvation comes fully loaded. It comes complete with all the promises in the Bible. The death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ provide an all-inclusive spiritual and eternal experience.

When we receive Him as our Savior, He also becomes our All-in-All. In other words, He is All-Sufficient for All-Needs and in All-Circumstances. His death and resurrection prove to us that He cares for us. It proves that He can handle our problems. It proves that He has provided a solution to all our anxieties. All our burdens were nailed to the cross, and all our cares disappeared into the mouth of the empty tomb.

I want you to look down the page from 1 Peter 5:7. You come to verses 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13, and then you come to 2 Peter 1:1, 2, and 3. Look at verse 3: His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His glory and goodness.

So in order to access 1 Peter 5:7, you need the password of Jesus Christ. You have to claim His death and resurrection as your own, and receive Him as your Savior, and take Him as your Lord.

2. A = Ask. Second, seriously ask God to talk over the issue that is distressing you. Learn to pray earnestly about it. That's what David was doing in Psalm 55. That Psalm begins with the words: Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me…. He was praying, and in His prayer he was describing his problem and asking for God's help.

3. S = Surrender. As you pray, surrender that problem or anxiety to God. Give it to Him with permission for Him to resolve it however He wants, however seems best to Him, according to His good and perfect will. There are two verses here in 1 Peter that talk about this.

- 1 Peter 2:23 talks about the Lord Jesus when He was abused by the soldiers: When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. That's a synonym for casting your care on Him. It means you entrust that matter to the Lord who will handle it justly—just as it should be handled.

- 1 Peter 4:19 talks about our response to unjust suffering: So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. We entrust ourselves to Him. We commit ourselves to Him. We entrust and commit our burdens to Him. We let Him have His way.

The old German hymnist, Paul Gerhardt, put it:

Commit whatever grieves thee
Into the gracious hands
Of Him Who never leaves thee,
Who Heav'n and earth commands.
Who points the clouds their courses,
Whom winds and waves obey,
He will direct thy footsteps
And find for thee a way.

4. T = Trust. And the final "T" of course, stands for trust. That means we begin to act as if everything is going to turn out all right. Recently I heard a man talking about this. He's a big fan of a particular football team. He said, "Sometimes if I can't watch a game live on television because of meetings or a church service or a schedule conflict, I record the game and watch it as soon as I get home. I don't like to know the outcome. But sometimes somebody inadvertently spoils it for me. I'll be walking out the door and

they'll say, 'It's a shame about those Titans.' Well, in that case I don't bother to watch the tape. But sometimes someone will say, 'How 'bout those Titans! What a great win.' In that case, I'll go home and watch the game. It might be in the fourth quarter and the team is behind by 10 points and the quarterback is sacked or injured on the play. It may look bleak and hopeless. But I don't worry about it, because I know the final score."

That's what it means to trust the Lord. When we find ourselves hanging by a thread, or at the end of our rope, or when it appears the world is collapsing around us, we act as if God were really in control—for He is. We act as if He had already taken care of our problem because we know in advance that He will. We act as if all things were going to work together for good—because they will. We can adopt an attitude of hope. We can rest in the assurance that He reigns. Our hearts and minds are guarded by the peace of God that passes all understanding.

That's the meaning of Psalm 55:22 and 1 Peter 5:7:

Cast your cares on the Lord and He will sustain you. He will never let the righteous be moved… Cast all your cares on Him, for He cares for you.

PSALM 56:3

We are in a series of sermons on the great faith verses of the Bible. This is part of our yearlong project of memorizing 100 essential Bible verse, and some of those Bible verses have to do with faith. And one of the most useful and usable verses on this subject is a little verse that's tucked away in the book of Psalms. It's found in Psalm 56, and it's verse 3. In the old King James Version, it's put very quaintly: What time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee. The newer translations say: Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You.

Background and Introduction

Notice that it doesn't say, "If I am afraid…," but "When I am afraid…," for fear is a universal emotion. Through the years, one of my hobbies has been collecting and reading biographies and autobiographies of interesting men and women—and I've found that virtually everyone is interesting (with the possible exception of current celebrities, and some of them are interesting in their own sort of way). I've tried to read the biographies of many of our American presidents, and a lot of other interesting characters in history. I think my all-time favorite biography is William Manchester's two-volume biography of Winston Churchill, and it's a shame that Manchester didn't live long enough to write his third and final volume of the series. Most of all, I'm intrigued with the stories of great Christians, and I think we should all be reading Christian biography because it tells us and shows us how God has been working in this world through His men and women for 2000 years. One of my favorite Christian biographies is the story of missionary J. O. Fraser, which was written by Geraldine (Mrs. Howard) Taylor. The reading of biographies is the best way to study history, whether world history, American history, church history, or missionary history.

I find it fascinating that I can sit down in front of a fire on a chilly, rainy night, open a book, and read the whole story of a person's life, from birth to death, in just a few minutes or a few hours, depending on the length of the book—all of the decisions they made, all the mistakes they committed, all the good they did, all the twists and turns of their lives… it's almost as though we were looking into a crystal ball and with just one glance taking in an entire story, which it took them a lifetime to live out.

Well, here's my point. Somewhere in almost every biography or autobiography, there is a point when things seemed to fall apart in a person's life. Everything seemed to go wrong at once. At some point in almost everyone's life, there is a time of great adversity and discouragement. Most of us know what it's like to experience a critical phase in our lives when it just seems that everything is against us, "when sorrows like sea billows roll." One comes after another, one problem right after another, a series of disappointments coming in seemingly endless succession. Whenever you read the completed story of a person's life, you very often see a period like this. We can call it the convergence of negatives.

I'll give you an example. In recent weeks, I've been reading the biography of Benjamin Franklin, the great American colonial leader. In 1775, everything turned against him. It must have been the worst year of his life. He had devoted all his energies to representing the colonies in London, but he failed. Not only did he fail, but he was publically humiliated in the process, hauled before a public forum and treated like a dog. He was harried out of England; and it was at that very moment that he learned by letter that his wife, Deborah, had died; and she had died pining to see him again, but he had not been there. At that very same moment, his son, whom he loved with all his heart, began turning against him, and their relationship was in the process of being destroyed forever because of personal and political differences. His health also took a nosedive and he began suffering terribly, especially from gout. And his little group of colonies was in a political crisis for which there was no resolution, as well. He set sail

for the Colonies, knowing that the only thing in his future was personal strain, political danger, and a seemingly hopeless war.

We have an example of this convergence of negatives in the biblical story of David, a shepherd boy who had become a popular hero and then a hunted villain in ancient Judah. Much of David's story is told in the book of 1 Samuel; and in 1 Samuel 21, we see David is running for his life from the armies of King Saul, and Saul is closing in on him. I don't how to help us relate to this, except to appeal to our dreams and nightmares. The other night I dreamed all night long that I was being chased by people who wanted to kidnap me. Or perhaps you've seen a movie about a woman trying to evade a stalker or a soldier trying to escape capture by a deadly enemy.

Well, David fled to the town of Nob, and the local priests helped him out, but the priests were later killed for their efforts, and David felt responsible for their deaths. He fled across the border in the region of Gath, but he found he had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. He was surrounded by the armies of his archenemies, the Philistines, and by King Achish of Gath. These were the compatriots of the fallen Goliath, whom David had killed. In trying to get away from King Saul, David had run right into the arms of his archenemies, the Philistines. And 1 Samuel 21 says that he was greatly afraid.

Psalm 56

And that's when he wrote our text today, Psalm 56. That gives us the background. This Psalm was written by a young man who was running for his life; and, in trying to get away from one enemy, he had run right into the arms of another. This was a time when everything that could go wrong in his life had done so. He was living in Murphy's Law Land. So with that as background, let's look at this chapter, beginning with the words found right before the first verse. Notice the superscription at the head of the Psalm: For the director of music. To the tune of "A Dove on Distant Oaks." Of David. A miktam. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.

This superscription gives us the background and indicates that he later gave this psalm to his musicians and told them to sing it to a tune entitled "A Dove on Distant Oaks." We have no idea today what that tune sounded like. He called his song a "Miktam," but we aren't sure what that means either. But this superscription does give us the background, referring to the story in 1 Samuel 21, when the Philistines had seized him in Gath. And so we know the background for Psalm 56. It's a short psalm, so let's read it together:

> Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me;
> All day long they press their attack.
> My slanderers pursue me all day long;
> Many are attacking me in their pride.
>
> When I am afraid, I will trust in You.
> In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid.
> What can mortal man do to me?
>
> All day long they twist my words;
> They are always plotting to harm me.
> They conspire, they lurk,
> They watch my steps, eager to take my life.
>
> On no account let them escape;
> In Your anger, O God, bring down the nations;
> Record my lament;
> List my tears on Your scroll—
> Are they not in Your record?
>
> Then my enemies will turn back
> When I call for help.
> By this I know that God is for me.
> In God, whose word I praise,
> In the Lord, whose word I praise—
> In God I trust; I will not be afraid.
> What can men do to me?
>
> I am under vows to You, O God;
> I will present my thank offerings to You.

For You have delivered me over from death
And my feet from stumbling,
That I may walk before God
In the light of life.

Now, as I studied Psalm 56 in preparation for this message, I took a legal pad and made a simple list of how David described his enemies. He made ten statements about how dangerous they were.

1. They hotly pursue me.
2. They press their attack.
3. They slander me.
4. They attack me in their pride.
5. They twist my words.
6. They plot harm against me.
7. They conspire against me.
8. They lurk.
9. They watch my steps.
10. They are eager to take my life.

Every once in awhile in life, we have someone who some way resembles something on this list. We do have enemies along the way. We have people who, for whatever reason, get upset with us. They don't like us. They slander us. They plot against us. But sometimes our enemies in life are not people, but circumstances. We're buffeted and bullied by circumstances in life. And we also have a very real enemy called the devil, or Satan. The Bible says, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." Between our human enemies and our satanic enemies and our adverse circumstances in life, we're sometimes just caught in a period of time in which nothing is going in our direction. We feel like the old patriarch Jacob who said, "All these things are against me."

Our Six-Point Strategy

In such times, we need a strategy to deal with the convergence of negatives in our lives. What would you think of a military commander who had no strategy? We're not supposed to just react to circumstances, or to panic or curl into a fetal position and give up. We aren't to put our heads in the sand like an ostrich. We aren't to throw our hands in the air and run around like a crazy person. We're not to wither up and die. We are to strategize. And in his extreme distress and intense fear, David implemented a six-point strategy. We can take the words right out of the Psalm and express them all with the proactive words I WILL….:

1. I Will Call (Ps 56:9)

First of all, he said, "I will call on You!" His first course of action was to pray. Notice four words in verse 9: "I call for help." What's the first thing a police officer does if he gets into trouble? What's the first thing a soldier does when he finds himself surrounded? They call for backup. That's what David did in Psalm 56. He said in verse 9, "Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help." Notice how the Psalm begins: "Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me." Verse 7: "On no account, Lord, let them escape." He prayed, He called on the Lord, He called for help, he called for backup.

Now, when you are faced with a problem or with a real set of problems, it's important to do this. It's all wonderful to say a quick prayer when you get up or when you go to bed or as you're driving to work. But when we're facing an important decision or a set of critical issues, that calls for a definite time of prayer. This is exactly what they did in the Bible. This is why we seeJehoshaphat in prayer when he learned that his nation was being invaded. This is why we see Nehemiah engaged in prayer after he heard the terrible news about broken walls of Jerusalem. This is why Daniel set aside three weeks for prayer when he had the disturbing vision. This is why Jesus set aside one hour for prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. It could be prayer with someone else. It could be prayer alone, like Jacob wrestling with the angel. It could take five minutes or an hour. It could be a one-time prayer, or one that's frequently repeated. But when things go wrong in our lives, that's the time to set aside a time and place so we can take the issue to the Lord and make it a matter of prayer.

Now, let me tell you something important about prayer. Prayer is not just transmission, it is transference. We aren't just transmitting information to God when we pray. We are actually transferring the situation over to His control. And that leads to the second point in our strategy.

2. I Will Trust (Ps 56:3, 4, 11)

Three times in Psalm 56, David makes the affirmation: "I will trust."

- Ps 56:3: When I am afraid, I will trust in You.
- Ps 56:4: In God I trust; I will not be afraid.
- Ps 56:11: In God I trust: I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

Faith is being confident that God's positives are greater than our negatives, and that His providence is overshadowing our lives. Faith in God is really the only lasting antidote for fear. That's why this little verse for today – Psalm 56:3 – is such a powerful verse to memorize. As Christians, we don't exactly believe in mantras. The Eastern religion practices mantras. They'll say something meaningless over and over and over again until their minds are sort of in neutral. Well, I don't believe in mantras, but I do believe in mottos, in the power of a statement that you can repeat to yourself as often as you need it, a slogan or verse that has the authority of heaven behind it. And this is such a verse. It can be tremendously comforting to repeat it to yourself as needed.

It does not say:

> When I am afraid, I will panic.
> When I am afraid, I will get depressed.
> When I am afraid, I will fall to pieces.
> When I am afraid, I will give up.
> When I am afraid, I will run and hide.

It says:

> When I am afraid, I will trust in You—in Your providence, in Your promises, in Your protection, in Your power, in Your peace.

3. I Will Know (Ps 56:9)
That leads to the third step. Faith leads to knowledge, and as we trust in God we discover that He is faithful, that His Word is true, and that we can know beyond any doubting that He is on our side; He is for us. Look at verse 9: Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me.

I think it'd be a good idea to underline those four words in the Bible: God is for me. Sometimes we feel so guilty or inadequate that we believe God is against us. But here is a great affirmation in the Bible that tells us the opposite: God is for you. He is on your side.

And Romans 8 says: If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, freely give us all things?

I will call, I will trust, I will know, and, fourth, I will praise.

4. I Will Praise (Ps 56:4, 10)
And that leads to the fourth step in the process: I will praise.

Look at Ps 56:4: In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. And Ps 56:10: In God, whose word I praise; in the Lord, whose word I praise….

This is very interesting phraseology. The Psalmist isn't exactly praising God here; he is praising God's Word. But God's Word is the expression of God. It's the expression of God's power, of His promises. David had a word from the Lord, and it filled him with praise.

David wasn't out of His dilemma, but He had gotten a word from the Lord in the midst of his dilemma, and he had already started praising God for the deliverance he knew was coming.

It's great to praise God after He answers, but how much better to praise Him all along the way. It's hard to panic and praise at the same time.

5. I Will Thank (Ps 56:12)
Verse 12 takes it another step and says: I am under vows to You, O God; I will present my thank offerings (my thanksgiving) to You.

We praise God because of who He is, and we thank Him for what He has done, or is doing, or is going to do. As we learned in a previous verse, "In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

You know, it's a very powerful thing – it is strong praying – to say: Dear Lord, this looks terrible, everything seems to be against me, by human standards I should be discouraged and depressed, but I have called on You, and I am going to trust and praise and thank You. I thank You for what You are going to do in Your own time and in Your own way.

6. I Will Walk (Ps 56:12-13)
And finally the Psalmist said: "I will walk…" Look at Ps 56:12-13: I am under vows to You, O God; I will present my thank offerings to You. For You have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life.

The reason God helps us is that we might keep our vows to Him, honor our commitment to Christ, and walk before Him in the light of life. This is the Christian's answer to fear. It is the ancient winning strategy of a young man in a bind, and it still works perfectly for us today: I will call on Him, when afraid I will trust Him, I know that God is for me, I will praise Him, I will thank Him, and I will walk before Him in the light of His presence. I call, I trust, I know, I praise, I thank, I walk. That's the combination that unlocks Psalm 56 and that frees us from the frets and fears of life.

Last Wednesday in our Bible Study, one of our newer members, Dana Thompson, told me how this verse, Psalm 56:3, had come to her at a critical time of danger and fear. It was in 1996, and she hadn't been feeling well at all. On the Saturday night before Christmas, she had trouble walking, and her family urged her to visit the Emergency Room at the local hospital. They checked her out and kept her over the weekend, and on Monday she was scheduled for a cardiac catheterization in another hospital. She was frustrated about this because she didn't believe there was anything wrong with her heart. She thought she was suffering from a touch of pneumonia, and she wanted to be home for Christmas. But something went wrong during the catheterization, and when Dana woke up, she was surrounded by frantic activity and by the loud, windy chopping of helicopter wings. She was being airlifted to a medical center in Birmingham.

She was terrified, not only because something serious was obviously very wrong with her, but also because she had never been on a helicopter before. The thing took off, and she told me, "I was just shaking with fear and it came to me that in this fearful state I wasn't being a very good testimony to the medical workers. I wasn't displaying the peace of Jesus Christ. I was falling apart and shaking very badly. I wracked my brain for a Bible verse to calm me down, but I could only think of one verse—what time I am afraid, I will trust in Thee.

"I quoted that verse over and over in my mind as I looked down through the helicopter window and saw the houses and streets below me. The weather was rough and the ride was bumpy and choppy. But I started praying Psalm 56:3 to Him. I don't know whether it was audible or not, but He heard and instantly my shaking stopped and I felt like I had been wrapped in a soft as cotton, warm blanket. I reassured the doctor and nurse on the chopper that it was going to be alright and settled down to enjoy a God's eye view of the countryside despite the bouncing around, knowing whatever happened, God had it covered."

When the chopper arrived at the medical center in Birmingham, a renowned cardiologist performed open-heart surgery. I wasn't able to thank him at the time because he left for a holiday trip to Brazil immediately after the operation. But, later, I sent him flowers and a thank you note telling him how God had responded to my prayer and quoting to him Psalm 56:3." (Dana Thompson in personal interviews with Rob Morgan and Sherry Anderson, September 21/22, 2009, used with permission).

If, during a time of crisis or fear, this is the only verse you can remember, it's the only verse you need—What time I am afraid, I will trust in You."

It's summed up by the old Scottish preacher, Horatius Bonar, who said:

> Fill Thou my life, O Lord my God,
> In every part with praise,
> That my whole being may proclaim
> Thy wisdom and Thy ways.
>
> Fill every part of me with praise;
> Let all my being speak
> Of Thee and of Thy love, O Lord,
> Poor though I be, and weak…
>
> So shall each fear, each fret, each care
> Be turned into a song,

And every winding of the way
The echo shall prolong.

So shall no part of day or night
From sacredness be free;
But all my life, in every step,
Be fellowship with Thee.

What Time I Am Afraid
1 Samuel 21; Psalm 56; Psalm 34

This week in my personal Bible study I was struck by seven words in Psalm 37:8: Do Not Fret—It Only Causes Harm. I'd like to take up that theme with you this morning by looking at three interrelated passages of Scripture.

1 Samuel 21
That day David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath (in Philistine territory). But the servants of Achish said to him, "Isn't this David, the king of the land? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?" David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of Achish king of Gath. So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard. Achish said to his servants, "Look at this man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?" David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam (1 Samuel 21:10-22:1)

Robert Orben, the comedy writer, recently said, "Sometimes I get the feeling the whole world is against me, but deep down I know that's not true. Some of the smaller countries are neutral."

Well, for David none of the smaller countries were neutral. The whole world was against him. In the passage today, we see him as a young man whose world had fallen apart. Through no fault of his own, he suddenly found himself unwanted by his own countrymen and being pursued by the Israeli Army. (How would you like the Israeli Army and the Mossad after you?) Running out of places to hide, David flew across the border into enemy territory, into Gath of the Philistines. In so doing he jumped from the frying pan into the fire. He had apparently hoped he wouldn't be recognized by the Philistines—he had, after all, killed their national hero, Goliath—but he was recognized, and his life hung by a thread. It would be as if you were being chased by the Israeli Army, and you fled across the border and were captured by Iraqi soldiers who dragged before Saddam Hussein to see what he would do with you. That is exactly the condition David found himself in.

It says in this passage that David took matters to heart and was very much afraid. In other words, he was engulfed in fear, worry, and anxiety.

One of the observations frequently made about President Bill Clinton is his ability to compartmentalize his thinking during a crisis. Just when you think he would be incapacitated by worry and engulfed in crisis, he gives a brilliant State of the Union speech, or he goes to church with a relaxed wave and a smile to the crowds, or he stands head to head with another head-of-state to focus international issues, or he discusses Social Security with an incredible grasp of statistics and facts. He seems to keep the crisis contained in one compartment of his mind without allowing it to bleed over into the other areas of his life.

But most of us can't do that. Someone defined worry as a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. That's the way it is with me. When I become anxious about something, it affects every other part of my life.

Well, the Bible's great antidote for worry is prayer. Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." This has always been the secret of victorious Christians. I was reading the other day the remarks of Mike Singletary as he was inducted into the Football Hall of Fame. Singletary grew up in the ghetto of Houston. There were ten kids in the family, and times were hard, especially after Mike's father abandoned them. Six months later, the oldest child, Grady, was hit and killed by a drunk driver. Everyone wondered how Mike's mother could sustain such a large family with virtually no income, how she could keep her home together and raise her children. Mike said, "She responded the only way true champions respond: On the knees."

Psalm 56
Christians respond to the worries and crises of life on our knees. And in David's case in 1 Samuel 21, he went to his knees twice.

There are two different prayers recorded in the Psalms and attributed to this moment in his life. The first is Psalm 56, the superscription of which tells us that this is a prayer of David "when the Philistines had seized him in Gath."
/Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack. My slanders pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride. When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?" (Ps 56:1-4).

Notice here that he prayed in faith. He was in deep trouble, but he prayed in faith. James 5 talks about "the prayer of faith," or "the prayer offered in faith." In praying, David didn't collapse into a frantic fit of hand-wringing and hopelessness, but he seemed to know he was speaking to his God and that his God could deliver him. "When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid..."

And the Lord did deliver him in a most unique way. There's nothing like this in the Bible, but the Lord put it into David's mind to feign insanity. So he put on the performance of his life, pretending to be insane, scribbling on the gateposts and letting his saliva trickle down his beard. The king of Gath was disgusted and said, "I have enough insane people around me already; get him out of here." David escaped with his life. It was a crazy scheme, but it worked. The Lord delivered him.

Psalm 34
And that's when David went to his knees again to compose another prayer, the one I want to focus on today, Psalm 34:1-7. Notice again the superscription: Of David, When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left. 1 Samuel calls the king Achish, but that was his personal name. Abimelech was his dynastic name, so this is speaking of the same incident, the one recorded in 1 Samuel 21.

The first three verses are an expression of exuberant praise: I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name together.
And verses 4-7 tell us why. Here the Psalmist sums up God's mercies toward him, telling us that when he sought the Lord and cried out to Him, that God did four things. He answered in four ways.

He Delivers Us From All Our Fears
First, the Lord delivers us from all our fears. Ps 34:4: I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. The essence of worry is fear—we are afraid of what may happen to us or to those we love. The Bible never promises to keep us from fearful situations, but it does promise to deliver us from fear in those situations.

Psalm 23 says, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." The three Hebrew children in Daniel's book were thrown into the fiery furnace, but the Fourth Man came down to be with them. The Lord sent the disciples into a storm tossed sea, but the Master of Sky and Sea walked across the water to be with them.

Isaiah 41 says, "Fear thou not, for I am with thee." And David said in the Psalm we're already looked at, "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee."

Allan Emery is a Christian businessman who started out his career by inheriting his father's wool and textile empire. In the early days, he used to go on wool buying trips, and one evening he spent the night with a shepherd on the Texas prairie. It was a very quiet and peaceful night until suddenly the coyotes' long and mournful cry pierced the air. Emery started, and he looked out over the fields. The shepherd's dogs growled and peered into the darkness. The sheep, which had been sleeping, lumbered to their feet, alarmed, bleating pitifully. The shepherd got up and tossed more logs onto the fire, and the flames shot up. In the glow, Allen looked out and saw thousands of little lights. He realized that it was the reflection of the fire in the eyes of the sheep. It dawned on him that in the midst of danger, the sheep were not looking out into the darkness but were keeping their eyes set in the direction of their shepherd.

"I sought the Lord," says Psalm 34:4, "and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears."

He Makes Our Faces Radiant
Second, as we cry out to the Lord and take our burdens and worries to him, praying with faith, he takes the anxious lines and the downcast expressions of our faces and replaces them with radiance. The next verse, verse five, says: Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

You know, the Bible says that we should dress modestly; and I think one of the reasons is this: The Lord wants people's attention drawn to our faces, for he intends for the expressions on our countenances to be a witness for him.

Exodus 34 says that when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, "behold, the skin of his face shone." Job said that before he was brought low by the weight of his multiplied problems, people sought him out because of the expression on his face. "The light of my face was precious to them," he recalled in Job 29:24. Ecclesiastes 8:1 says, "Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its

hard appearance." Psalm 42:11 says that God is "the help of my countenance and my God" (NKJV). Proverbs 15:13 says, "A happy heart makes the face cheerful." It says about Stephen, "And all that sat in the council looking steadfastly on him saw his face as it had been the face of an angel."

I know a man who goes to this church, and he has been through many difficult problems. But whenever I stand up to preach, I see his face. He has a gentle and affirming smile, and all the time I'm preaching he is smiling and listening and nodding in affirmation. And it has been an encouragement to me for over 18 years of pulpit ministry here.

There's nothing wrong with a touch of make-up here and there—even an old barn benefits from a fresh coat of paint. But the most expensive cosmetics in the world provide little help for a face that never shines with the gentle joy of Jesus. 2 Peter 3 says, Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful.

Sometimes I know the expression on my face communicates anger or anxiety. I know that sometimes my countenance is worried and tense and downcast. But I hope that when I take my burdens to the Lord and lay them before his throne, I can leave my prayer closet with an expression of confidence, peace, and joy.

There's a famous story about Martin Luther, that he became so weighed down and burdened about his many cares and pressures, that his countenance became weary and haggard. He went about the house brooding and melancholic. One day he came down for breakfast to find his wife Katharina dressed in black, in a widow's weed, a garment of mourning. When he greeted her, she said not a word. "What is wrong, Katie?" he asked.

"Someone has died," she said. "Who?" asked her alarmed husband. She replied, "God has died."

Martin Luther roared at her, "Woman, that is a terrible heresy. God is not dead nor doth he sleep. Never say that the Eternal has died. When heaven and earth shall pass away, God will remain."

"Then why do you awaken each morning with such a doleful expression on your face," she asked him. "You go through the day sighing like the north wind. In your university classes you claim to interpret the mind of God. You have appeared to know him well; and I became certain, from the expression on your face, that God must surely have expired."

She said all that without a change in her expression. Suddenly Martin broke out laughing. "You have convinced me, Katie, dear," he said. "So if you ever see me again with a melancholy countenance, remind me that God is living, that he will live forever."
Psalm 34 says, "Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."

He Saves Us From Our Troubles
Third, not only does the Lord deliver us from our fears and make our faces radiant, he saves us out of our troubles. Verse 6 says, "This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles."
He doesn't promise to prevent troubles, but to work them out for good in our lives. "In this world you will have tribulation," said Jesus. "But be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

> Every joy or trial falleth from above,
> Traced upon our dial by the Sun of Love.
> We may trust Him fully all for us to do;
> They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.
> Stayed upon Jehovah, hearts are fully blest
> Finding as he promised perfect peace and rest.

He Stations His Angels Around Us
Finally, the Lord stations his angels around us. Ps 34:7 says: The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. I was reading this week the account of a Free Will Baptist preacher here in Nashville around the turn of the century. He recorded his life's story in a little booklet, and Chuck Sherrill found it in the Tennessee State Library and sent me a photocopy. The preacher's name was C. H. Pickle, and he helped start many of our denominational churches here in Middle Tennessee. Rev. Pickle had many interesting experiences. For example, he wrote that one night he was very burdened to know for certain that he was in the Lord's will and he earnestly prayed for confirmation from heaven. That night after going to bed, "an unusually happy feeling came over me. I looked with an eye of faith to the Lord and I could see the all-seeing eye of God looking down into my soul. I felt like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration, that it was good to be here, for I was in the immediate presence of Jehovah. It seemed that the power of the Lord would kill me, it was so great. And just then, to add to my rapture, I heard a rustling of wings and I said, 'Surely, this is an angel the Lord has sent to comfort me.' I had read in the thirty-fourth Psalm and seventh verse that the Angel of the Lord encampth around them that fear him and delivereth them. The angel stayed with me all night till about an hour

before day... and from that night to present time I have never doubted my call to preach."

I've never actually heard the rustle of angels' wings in my room, but the Bible does say that sometimes we entertain angels unawares, that they are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14).

This entire passage has been a great comfort to me this week as I've had a hard time taking my middle child off to college. But I keep going back to Psalm 31-37, and this portion of Scripture has given me comfort, this Psalm 34 in particular. And I've asked the Lord to station his angels around my daughter, to guide her, to go before her, to keep her from danger and from evil. And I've asked the Lord to turn my worry into worship, and my burdens into blessings.

So this is my message for you today. We sometimes find ourselves beset with worry and anxiety like David in 1 Samuel 21, with things going from bad to worse. But we can call to the Lord as he did in Psalm 56. And when we come through the blood of Jesus Christ to the Throne of Grace, crying out to the Lord, when we cast our cares on Him, he does what he promises in Psalm 34. He delivers us from our fears, he makes our faces radiant, he saves us out of all our troubles, and he sends his angels to set up camp around us. And we can then say with the Psalmist:
What time I am afraid, I will trust in you.

STAYING THANKFUL IN A COMPLAINING WORLD
Psalm 61

Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer. From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

For You have been a shelter to me, a strong tower from my enemy. I will abide in Your tabernacle forever; I will trust in the shelter of Your wings.

For You, O God, have heard my vows; You have given me the heritage of those who fear Your name. You will prolong the king's life, his years as many generations. He shall abide before God forever. Oh, prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him! So will I sing praise to Your name forever, that I may daily perform my vows. – Psalm 61

Today we're coming to the end of a series of messages that have been largely topical in nature and have dealt with living a godly life in an ungodly culture. I want to list these messages for you by way of review:

- Staying Moral in an Immoral World
- Staying Revived in a Dying World
- Staying Sound in a Skeptical World
- Staying Straight in a Perverse World
- Staying Happy in a Hollow World
- Staying Positive in a Negative World
- Staying Sober in an Addictive World

Today our final message in this series—timed for the onset of our holiday season—is: "Staying Thankful in a Complaining World." I've been in the pastorate for over a quarter century, and I know something about grumbling and complaining. It's not that I have a lot of people grumbling and complaining to me. No, the problem is that my own heart tends to grumble and to complain.

I can get into a foul mood, and suddenly I'm not happy with anything or anyone. Don't we all have this problem sometimes? The other day I found a little poem written by a woman named Ella Wheeler Wilcox back in 1892. It said it perfectly:

> There was a boy named Grumble Tone who ran away to sea,
> "I'm sick of things on land," he said, "as sick as I can be;
> A life upon the bounding wave will suit a lad like me!"
>
> The seething ocean billows failed to stimulate his mirth,
> For he did not like the vessel, nor the dizzy, rolling berth,
> And he thought the sea was almost as unpleasant as the earth.
>
> He wandered into foreign lands, he saw each wondrous sight,

But nothing that he heard or saw seemed just exactly right;
And so he journeyed on and on, still seeking for delight.

He talked with kings and ladies fair; he dined in courts, they say,
But always found the people dull, and longed to get away
To search for that mysterious land where he would like to stay.

He wandered over all the world, his hair grew white as snow;
He reached that final bourne at last where all of us must go,
But never found the land he sought. The reason you would know?

The reason was that north or south, where'er his steps were bent,
On land or sea, in court or hall, he found but discontent;
For he took his disposition with him everywhere he went.

Well, the problem is that we are imperfect people dealing with other imperfect people in a terribly imperfect world. How do we maintain a healthy disposition under such circumstances? By cultivating a healthy, vital, daily relationship with a perfect Heavenly Father through our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a spiritual issue, and a good place to see it illustrated is here in Psalm 61. The first verses tell us that the writer, David, had a lot to complain about. He was being opposed.

Being Opposed

He began: "Hear my cry, O God; attend to my prayer." He was facing something rough. He had some powerful opposition. I don't know what it was, but he was feeling overwhelmed. What was the problem? We don't know, but we might get some clues by noticing his next words: "From the end of the earth I will cry to You."

This indicates that he wasn't in Jerusalem, so it might have been when he was running from King Saul, being chased by the armies of Israel, living on the lam, in fear of his life, facing the brutal elements of the desert, encompassed by a thousand foes. Or it might have been written when he was out on a battlefield somewhere, and the war wasn't going well. Or it might have been written when he was running from his son Absalom, who had usurped the kingdom and intended to track him down and kill him.

Whatever it was, David was on the run and overwhelmed by opposition. He went on to say: "When my heart is overwhelmed…" Does someone here today feel overwhelmed? Is someone here facing the holidays with pressures and problems?

What do we do? Well, we do what David did. We remember that when we're opposed, we can be enclosed.

Being Enclosed

David visualized himself enclosed within the protective, providential grace of God—and in his mind that took on four pictures. He uses four different pictures to describe what God means to him during times of distress and opposition. I'd like to look at these four pictures with a suggestion that you adopt one or more of them as your own.

First, he compares God to his Rock. Ps 61:2 says: "When I am overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I." The picture here seems to have been a rock out in the ocean. Here is a man who has been overwhelmed. The waters are going over his head. He's sinking. His feet can't touch the ground. He needed to be lifted upon a rock that is large and sturdy and strong and high enough to shelter and protect him. And he is saying that there is such a rock, and that rock is God. Is that a picture you can identify with?

Well, he goes on immediately to use another image. He says in verse 3: For you have been a shelter to me, a strong tower from the enemy. A shelter, one that is high, one that is ensconced in a tower. In Bible times, a sturdy tower built into the city walls was just about the safest place you could be, and the Bible repeatedly describes God as our tower. The book of Proverbs says, "The name of the Lord is a strong tower. The righteous run into it and are safe." What about that picture? Can you visualize and relate to it?

Well, here's a third. Ps 61:4 says: "I will abide in Your tabernacle forever." The Tabernacle, as we have seen in previous sermons, represents the very dwelling place of God Himself, and in a special way it represents the person of Jesus Christ.

And there's a fourth picture in Ps 61:4b: "I will trust in the shelter of Your wings." This is the most unusual image of all, because it is rather strange to go from rocks and towers and tabernacles to feathers. But this is one of the Bible's favorite pictures, and I'd like for

us to think about it. This was one of the Bible promises that comforted and encouraged the CIM missionaries who were trapped behind the Bamboo Curtain following the Communist takeover of Mainland China under Mao Tse-tung.

But they found this verse and others like it. Psalm 91:4, for example, says, "He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge." The biblical patriarch, Boaz, referred to Ruth as a woman who had come under the Lord's wings for refuge (Ruth 2:12). Later Ruth's great-grandson, King David, perhaps recalling that story, asked the Lord in Psalm 17:8: "Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings." And in Psalm 57, he cried, "Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me! For my soul trusts in You; and in the shadow of Your wings I will make my refuge, until these calamities have passed by."

A thousand years later, David's great descendent, Jesus of Nazareth, said to the people of Jerusalem, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings…"

So while everyone else was talking about the Bamboo Curtain of Communism, they began talking about the "Feather Curtain of God." We are opposed by the fiery darts of the devil, but we are enclosed within the feather curtain of God. I had a man call me this week from Canada who had read one of my books. He was deeply disturbed about business reverses and financial difficulties. His small business was failing, and he feared bankruptcy. But he testified that through it all, He had an inner peace and strength that God was his refuge, that the Lord would take care of him and lead him through the crisis, and that the Lord would cause all these things to work together for good. He was hiding under the feather curtain of God.

Recently I read about a man named William Cushing, who was born in 1823. He labored for over 20 years as a Christian pastor in New York with the Disciples of Christ; but in 1870, William's wife died and his own health broke. Though only 47, he suffered a paralysis that affected his voice and made it nearly impossible for him to preach. He fell into depression, but finally offered this prayer of resignation: "Lord, give me something to do for Thee."

Shortly thereafter he began writing hymns, and his hymns have reached more people than his natural voice could ever have touched. One of his most famous hymns is on this theme. It says:

> Under His wings I am safely abiding,
> Though the night deepens and tempests are wild,
> Still I can trust Him; I know He will keep me,
> He has redeemed me, and I am His child.
>
> Under His wings, under His wings,
> Who from His love can sever?
> Under His wings my soul shall abide,
> Safely abide forever.

And so the man who wrote Psalm 61 was opposed, but he was enclosed. And as a result we can say a third thing about him—he was composed.

Being Composed

Look at the way he ends this Psalm: For You, O God, have heard my vows; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name. You will prolong the king's life, and his years as many generations. He shall abide before God forever. Oh, prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him! So I will sing praise to Your name forever, that I may daily perform my vows.

What a difference from the beginning of this Psalm. There he was complaining, and now he is praising. And this is a valuable Psalm because it tells us something of the sequence that should characterize our pattern of thinking. The Bible doesn't indicate that we're going to have great, victorious, triumphant, sanctified, glorified, heavenly thoughts and emotions automatically in every strait or crisis. When we talk about the peace that passes all understanding, we don't mean that it's going to be fired down to earth like a missile at the simultaneous moment we receive bad news. No, inner composure and strength comes to us as we work our way through the difficulty. We first find ourselves opposed by the hard situations of life; then we deliberately remind ourselves that whatever happens we are enclosed within the will of an omnipotent God. We go to His Word. We visualize His protective shelter. We remember that He is a rock that is higher than we are. We remember that He is a tower that lifts us to a higher plane. We remember that we can abide with Him in His tabernacle and under His wings. And that knowledge, received and mixed with faith, is what composes our spirits and gives us strength.

And people who master this process… well, somehow they seem to have the ability to stay thankful in a complaining world. For how can you complain when you're safely sheltered under the Feather Curtain of God?

Praying on the Wrong Frequency
Psalm 66

Recently I read the autobiography of John MacVane, correspondent for NBC during World War II. He was to NBC what Edward R. Murrow was to CBS during the war, and his broadcasts from the battlefronts kept Americans riveted by their radios. John MacVane accompanied Allied forces when they pressed into North Africa, and he was in Algiers on November 18, 1942, when he received word he was to prepare the Army Hour broadcast for the following Sunday.

It was a tremendous undertaking. MacVane had to find the right people, interview them, write the scripts, and have the scripts approved by the war censors. Messages from the chief commanders had to be obtained. Then there was the music. MacVane finally found some American GIs who could play jazz, and he organized them into a little orchestra and started them practicing the national anthems of the Allied nations. Everything had to planned out to the very second.

Finally the night came for the broadcast, and a cast of fifty assembled in a makeshift studio in great excitement to beam an hour-long war-time broadcast to the people of Europe and America. Precisely at 8:30, p.m., the orchestra began playing the French National Althem. MacVane leaned into the microphone and said in his most sober voice, "This is Algiers—the heart of North Africa." He was there, he said, with the troops, with men from California, Kansas and Maine, with Allied soldiers on the move to sweep the Germans out of North Africa.

MacVane had worked hard on his script, and he painted a vivid picture for the people back home. His words were poetic and powerful. "This is Africa—and in the streets, you can see the flowing robes of desert Arabs, red fezzes, Bedouins, Berbers, aged Jews in beards and robes rubbing shoulders with officers in kilts, women who might have come from the rue de la Paix—and farm boys from Iowa… Algiers is the nerve center for this army of French North Africa. Shuttling in and out of its port come great gray transports and warships bristling with guns. Overhead go the squadrons of bombers, off to rip the Germans in Tunisia…. Through Algiers streets rumble tanks made in Detroit and Birmingham—and above the rubble, you will hear this words of half a dozen languages and fifty dialects.

MacVane interviewed soldiers, and a French Reserve officer gave a rousing report on the status of the French Africans to fight for the Germans. American generals gave reports to America, and pilots for the RAF and the US Air Force told their stories. Finally the show ended with the band playing the American National Anthem.

It was a great program, and afterward all the participants were ecstatic. They had just given a riveting account, heard live by 40 million people back home.

It was several days later when MacVane received a telegram asking what had happened to the expected broadcast. Nobody had heard it. Apparently it had gone out on the wrong frequency and was never picked up by the engineers in New York and London. Nobody in America heard so much as a single word. It was finally learned that only one person—an RAF pilot patrolling the skies, had heard the program by chance while he was scanning frequencies. He greatly enjoyed it, and said it was one of the best programs he had ever listened to. But as far as its intended purpose, it had all been an exercise in futility.

Can the same thing happen to prayer?

Pray is the most powerful kind of broadcast the world has ever known. Prayer wings its way from our lips and hearts through the heavens to the very Throne Room of God Himself. Prayer is a commanded activity. God tells us to pray, and He promises to hear and to heed; He promises to move heaven and earth to answer our prayers. But is it possible to send prayer out on the wrong frequency? Is it possible that we can be praying with great energy and effort, but for some reason our prayers are not being picked up on the heavenly receivers?

The Principle Stated Negatively

Today I'd like to deal with this subject both negatively and positively, and show you several verses that you seldom hear in sermons about prayer. Let's start with Psalm 66. This is a triumph psalm, which begins with the words: "Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all the earth! Sing out the honor of His name; make His praise glorious. Say to God, 'How awesome are Your works!'... All the earth shall worship You and sing praises to You."

As we continue reading Psalm 66, we learn that the psalmist here is exuberant because he has emerged from a dark valley, from a time of testing, and God has preserved him. Look at verses 10ff: For you, O God, have tested us; You have refined us as silver is refined. You brought us into the net; You laid affliction on our backs. You have caused men to ride over our heads; We went through fire and through water, but You brought us out to rich fulfillment.

No one goes through life without encountering hard seasons, prolonged periods of difficulty. But God is able to get us through the

valley and back to the meadows of green pastures. He is able to get us through the fire and through the water, and to bring us out to rich fulfillment.

So now this man has a testimony. Look at verse 16: “Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will declare what He has done for my soul….”

In other words, “I want to tell you what God has done for me, how He has helped me, how He has answered prayer. I want to tell you what I have learned. And among the things that I learned was this—there is power in prayer.

Verse 17: “I cried to Him with my mouth, and He was extolled with my tongue.” I learned the power of calling on God with my voice, of praying. But I also learned something else about prayer. Look at verse 18: “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.”

> The New Living Translation says: “If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened (NLT).
> The New Revised Standard Version says: “If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.”
> Today’s English Version says: “If I had ignored my sins, the Lord would not have listened to me.”

What does it mean when it says, “The Lord will not hear me”? There’s been a lot of discussion in the newspapers during the last year concerning the statements of some Christian leaders that God does not hear the prayers of Jews or of Muslims or of Hindus. Of course, God does hear every prayer in a literal sense. He is omniscience and He is omnipresent. Now a sparrow falls to the ground without His notice. He hears every sound in the entire universe. He is ignorant of nothing.

But the Psalmist is using this verb “hear” in the sense of “answering.” He is setting down a biblical principle that we see throughout the Scripture. God will not respond to prayers by those who hearts are not clean in Jesus.

To be practical about it, suppose that a young man had a box of pornography under his bed. He knew he should take that box out and burn it or throw it in the dumpster, but he didn’t want to do it. He filled his mind with the images. Now suppose that he had a habit every night of kneeling beside that same bed to say his prayers. The Psalmist is saying quite bluntly that the two activities cancel each other out. If we regard iniquity in our hearts, the Lord will not hear us.

Jesus said that when we come to God’s altar, but we remember that we have a bad and unforgiving attitude toward another person, we should get up, leave the altar, find the person, and resolve the problem before we proceed with our worship and prayer.

It’s the idea of purity. That which is pure is always more powerful than that which is diluted. The other day I decided to scrub the kitchen floor with a thick washing cloth, a pail of hot water, and a bottle of ammonia. I poured a whole bottle of ammonia in about a quart of hot water, and I had to stop almost before I’d gotten started. The fumes from that ammonia went up my nose and in my eyes, and it was like tear gas. I had to dilute it much, much more before I could use it.

The more something is diluted, the weaker it becomes; but something that is pure, 100-percent proof is very powerful.

When there is unconfessed sin in our lives, it dilutes our prayers. But prayers from pure heart are very powerful.

Let me show you how it’s put in the book of Isaiah, chapter Isaiah 59: “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.”

God can do great things. He can perform miracles in our lives. He longs to hear and to answer prayer. His hand is strong enough to accomplish what is needed, and His ear is sharp enough to hear the faintest cry. But something is blocking our prayers, and it is unconfessed sin in our lives.

We have this principle stated several times in the book of Proverbs. Chapter 1 contains a warning that those who reject God and refuse His wisdom will call on the Lord, but He will not answer them (Proverbs 1:28).

Proverbs 21:13 says: Whoever shuts his ears to the cry of the poor will also cry himself and not be heard.

Proverbs 28:9 says, “One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination.” You can not neglect good, old-fashion daily Bible study without it weakening the strength of your prayers.

Proverbs 15:8 says, “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, but the prayer of the upright is His delight.”

Turning to the New Testament, we have an interesting statement in the story of the healing of the blind man in John 9. Verse 31 says: “Now we know that God does not hear sinners; but if anyone is a worshipper of God and does His will, He hears him.”

The book of James near the end of the Bible has two interesting words on this subject. James warned that our prayers can be hindered by unbelief and by selfishness. Look at James 1:5ff: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”

And look at James 4:2: “You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

In the very next book, Peter said that marital strife can hinder our prayers. Look at 1 Peter 3:7: “Husbands, likewise, dwell with (your wives) with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.” In other words, if a husband thinks that he can enjoy the blessings of answered prayer when he isn’t honoring and loving and cherishing his wife, he’s got another thing coming. Having the wrong attitude in a marriage hinders our prayers.

So the principle is this: There are certain needs in our lives that can only be met through prayer. There are certain things in this world that can only be done through prayer. But when there is a sinful habit or attitude in our lives, it can bump prayer onto the wrong frequency and render it useless.

One of the most wonderful missionary autobiographies I’ve ever read is the story of Bertha Smith, Southern Baptist missionary to China. She was in China during the Japanese invasion. When it appeared the Japanese forces were headed toward the city of West Shantung, all the government schools closed as teachers fled the area. So Bertha opened her missionary boarding school to non-Christians, something she had never done before. Soon it was packed with children, and she had the opportunity of teaching many non-Christian children the story of the Bible. She also hired a wonderful Chinese woman who was a gifted Bible teacher, Miss Kiang Pao Shan. She had grown up in a Christian family, and was a third-generation Christian. She had been studied the Bible all her life, and seemed to have a special anointing as a Bible teacher. She was also a powerful prayer warrior. Not only did Miss Kiang spend hours preparing her materials, but before going to class she got down on her knees and prayed for her students by name, one by one.

On January 11, 1937, Tsining fell to the Japanese, but Bertha Smith decided to remain and keep the school open. On night, after the city gates were closed and locked, the Chinese head teacher of the mission school came to Bertha’s little house and asked her to call Miss Kiang from her room in the girls dormitory. He wanted the two women to come and pray for his sick baby. The only doctor was outside the city walls, and the baby was critically ill and might not live through the night.

Bertha Smith and Miss Kiang took their Bibles and went to the little home. Bertha turned to 1 John 3:22 and read, “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.”

Suddenly, to Bertha’s amazement, Miss Kiang said to her, “I cannot pray for this sick baby!” She explained, “There is a woman in our church whom I do not love. She offended me publicly more than a year ago, and from that day until this, I have had nothing to say to her. I only say good morning and pass on.”

So instead of praying for that sick baby, they prayed for Miss Kiang; and finally she was able to ask God’s forgiveness for her own unforgiving attitude and to forgive the other woman from her heart.

That settled, Bertha Smith read 1 John 3:22 again: “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.”

Suddenly Miss Kiang interrupted again and said, “I cannot pray for this sick baby.” She went on to explain that she has recently had a distinct impression that God wanted her to leave the school and to go into an unevangelized area of China as a missionary. She admitted that she was unwilling to leave her work at the school and her Christian community of family and friends to go and live among strangers and to tell them of Christ.

The two women searched the Scriptures and prayed together for a long time that night until Miss Kiang was able to surrender this matter to the Lord and to tell Him she was willing to go.

Finally, Bertha said, we were on praying ground. In her memoirs, she said, “We united our hearts before the Lord and humbly asked Him for His own glory to touch the body of that baby and heal it. We then went home and went to bed. The next morning, the baby was all right, and so was Miss Kiang.”

The Principle Stated Positively

Now, let’s look at this same truth from the other perspective. It is stated positively in many different places in the Bible. Look for example these verses:

· Psalm 34:15: The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry.
· Psalm 34:17: The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears and delivers them from all their troubles.
· James 5:16: The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

· Proverbs 15:29: The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous.
· 1 John 3:21: Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence toward God. And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight.
· John 15:7: If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

Now, I need to make two points.

The first is that none of are intrinsically, perfectly righteous. The Bible says that “none are righteous, no, not one.” That’s why we pray in Jesus’ Name. He is the only pure and perfect person in the world, and we must come before God with the righteousness of Christ, which is gained by grace through faith.

But, second, in practical terms the Bible does call us to a righteous life, and as Christians we should be growing and becoming increasingly like Jesus Christ. And the point of my message today is this: There is an indisputable, invisible correlation between the purity of your life and the power and effectiveness of your prayers.
I’ve found this to be a powerful motivation for purity. I have a need in my life that can only be met through answered prayer. I have something in my life which only God can accomplish. And there have been times when I have resisted some temptation or another on the sheer basis that I could not afford to have my prayers weakened and derailed.

I was reading the other day about something Ruth Bell Graham wrote. It was when one of her sons, Franklin, was away from the Lord. He was heading off on a very dangerous trip to the Middle East. She was gravely concerned, and after he drove away she went to her desk. She had determined to spend some time praying for him, using the great prayer that Jesus had offered for His disciples in John 17. She was going to adapt that prayer for her son. As she prayed through the chapter she came to verse 19, which brought her up short: “For their sakes I sanctify myself.”
She said, “That was our Lord Himself praying. I could not miss it. I could not bypass it.” She prayed, “Lord, You take care of them. I need to settle some things in my own life with you.” And then she wrote this: “It is unrealistic to ask the Lord to do in someone else’s life that which we are unwilling for Him to do in ours.”
We have never stood in greater need of prayer. In our lives, and in the life of our nation and of our world, we need to have power with God and man. We need to be able to draw down from heaven a revival for our generation. We need to move heaven and earth through the power of prayer. But is it possible that we are so weakened and compromised in our own lives, that our prayers are pathetic and powerless?

Perhaps we need to say, “For their sakes I sanctify myself.”

AGING GRACEFULLY: PONY OR PANTHER
Psalm 71

Two boys trudged along the backroad, looping through the autumnal countryside just as the setting sun diffused a final, lingering glow across the blue meadows and wooded hills. A few impatient stars twinkled in the blackening, and the shadows grew deeper and darker. They were twins, these twelve-year-olds; and they had infused the day with rollicking fun -- climbing trees, chasing rabbits, slashing through laurel thickets, splashing in the creek. But they had frolicked too long and now found themselves caught in the darkness as they drifted home.

Suddenly one of the boys stopped, thrusting out his hand to caution the other. A noise alarmed him -- a dry, rattling noise, the sound of rustling bushes. He heard the padding of footsteps. He saw a shadow pass in the darkness. "The panther," whispered Willie, the words freezing in his mouth. He knew well the stories of the stalking black panther that killed the cattle and terrified the residents of Little Creek. Once when nearly asleep, Willie had heard its squall, a heart-stopping wail that sounded like an infant under torture. The boy’s lungs tightened, his legs froze, the hair on his neck stood on end, and chill bumps coated his body. But...
...but what was happening to his brother? Davie, his knees collapsing, was rolling in the dirt, doubled over in a violent convulsion...
...of laughter! "What’re you afraid of, Willie?" cackled Davie between heaving sobs of laughter. "You ain’t afraid of old Paint, are ya’?"
And at that very moment their old speckled pony stepped from the cowpath into the moonlight. She had gotten whiff of the boys and had come to meet them.
"Willie," Davie scoffed, "don’t you know the difference ’tween a panther -- and a pony?"
Shadows or Sunshine?
No, he didn’t -- and he isn’t alone, for most of us also find that in the shadows of autumn, panthers and ponies can look remarkably similar. Many people fear the prospect of aging, believing it a panther. The suicide rate for people over sixty-five -- an eleven percent

segment of our population -- now accounts for twenty-five percent of reported self-inflicted deaths in America. Many other seniors choose to live, but in silent depression and fear. Statistics show that alcoholism and mental illness plague a disproportionately large number of retirees, and the average white male dies thirty to forty months after retirement.
Sir John Betjeman, British author and poet laureate, once wrote:

> There was sun enough for lazing upon beaches,
> There was fun enough for far into the night.
> But I'm dying now and done for
> What on earth was all the fun for?
> For I'm old and ill and terrified and tight.

Another British poet, Dylan Thomas, wrote hauntingly similar words about aging: "Do not go gentle into that good night / Old age should burn and rave at close of day / Rage, rage against the dying of the light." But Robert Browning, another British poet, looked into the same shadows and saw a pony:

> Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in His hand
> Who saith, "A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid.

Why the opposing perspectives? Why do people see the same life-stage as two vastly different creatures? Well, it's determined by the mental choices and spiritual attitudes we embrace in mid-life, when we are thirty, or forty, or perhaps fifty.

Psalm 71
The Psalmist says as much in Psalm 71, a prayer written by a man facing critical questions about aging. He begins:

> In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge;
> let me never be put to shame.
> Be my rock of refuge,
> to which I can always go;
> For you have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord,
> my confidence from my youth.
> Do not cast me away when I am old;
> do not forsake me when my strength is gone.

This Psalm provides a profile of its author. He was, first of all, a mature believer with an abiding faith in Jehovah. He begins by declaring: In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge. He embraces God as his rock and his refuge. And he's at home living a life of praise, for he says in verse 8: My mouth is filled with your praise, declaring your splendor all day long.
Second, this man's entire life has been devoted to God with never an abiding moment of bitter rebellion or blind distrust. He testifies in verse 6: From birth I have relied on you. And he adds in verse 17: Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds.

Third, he loved the Scriptures, submerging his heart in them regularly. We know this because Psalm 71 is woven almost entirely of fragments and paraphrased portions of previous Psalms. The writer had so immersed himself in the Word of God that he could scarcely pray without using the very phrasings of Scripture.

Fourth, this man gives us a clue to his age, admitting that he isn't a kid any longer. When he writes in verse 6, "You have been my confidence since my youth...," he tells us his youth has slipped away. Yet verse 9 ("Do not cast me away when I am old") indicates he hasn't yet reached the golden years.

Evidentially, this man had reached the middle ages with all its outward pressures and inner fears, and he was unnerved by it. He was stressed, and this Psalm was a cry for help. There are certain ebbs and tides in the lives of many Americans. Most of us are pretty calm for the first 24 months of life; we sleep a lot, cuddle in the arms of a parent, and find ourselves generally happy with life. But about age two, our growth spurts, and things destabilize a little. We're restless, exploding with energy, and tagged "terrible two's." But then, during middle childhood years, our systems recalibrate, making the elementary years the most tranquil of life. Then we hit adolescence!

In our twenties and thirties, we re-stabilize and our lives are again more or less controlled and well-channelled. But sometime later -- let's say in our forties -- a number of factors converge within and upon us to create new and potentially devastating levels of distress. It isn't my purpose to articulate the much-discussed mid-life crisis; but among its difficulties is a creeping, chilling

awareness that we are irrevocably losing our youthfulness and moving inexorably toward "old age" -- and more rapidly than we dreamed possible.

It unnerves us. As the Psalmist looked to the future, as he faceed the specter of aging, he sounded frightened, a plaintive tone entering his voice. In verse 9 he prayed, "Do not cast me away when I am old.... And in verse 18, he cried, Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God..." He saw deepening shadows in the autumn twilight, and in those shadows he thought he saw some panthers.

I have a friend who hasn't aged well. She mourns the fact that her children are now grown with families of their own. She panics at every ache and pain, fearing the worst. She's bored, having pursued few hobbies and interests. Her sweeping depression has alienated her friends. She worries about her husband's health, and to top it off, she's now addicted to the drugs prescribed by her doctors to resolve those things. She feels and fears every lengthening shadow.

The Psalmist, plagued with the same worries, begged God not to forsake him in the autumn when his "strength is gone." How does God answer a cry like that? Well, the Lord answered very decisively within just a few chapters.

Psalm 92

The tone of this Psalm 92 is entirely different, the writer upbeat and joyful, for his life-philosophy is colored by grace and faith. He begins:

> It is good to praise the Lord
> and make music to your name, O Most High,
> to proclaim your love in the morning
> and your faithfulness at night...

The writer then contrasts the wisdom of God with the foolishness of men. He says that evildoers spring up like grass -- a figure of speech purposefully chosen to contrast with words that follow, for he ends his song with a melody of victory regarding senior saints. He compares them, not to withering grass, but to sturdy trees:

> The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
> they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
> planted in the house of the Lord,
> they will flourish in the courts of God.
> They will still bear fruit in old age,
> they will stay fresh and green."

Aging saints are here compared to trees -- a palm and a cedar -- both of which share several distinctives.

Palms and cedars are both long-lived evergreen trees that flourish in harsh conditions -- one is hot climates, the other on windy heights. Both trees are tall, stately, and majestic.

They paint a picture of the spiritual character and the mental caliber of aging Christians. As we grow older, we should remain as fresh in our spirits as evergreens. We should inwardly thrive even in severe conditions. We should have an inner strength, majesty, and poise about us. Finally, we should continue bearing fruit in our old age.

I have a friend, seventy-eight years old, who is still fresh, green, and bearing fruit. The other day I asked his secret for staying young in heart. He told me that his secret includes spending a lot of time with young people.

"My wife and I volunteer as workers at Christian youth camps," he explained. "We take our mobile home, and sing and preach and counsel. And after the evening services, we're always having some of the young people in for cookies, hot chocolate, and games. We talk with them a lot."

They also work extensively with the children and young people at their church, and they devote lots of time to grandparenting. "It keeps us young," he said.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Well," he replied, "I've also volunteered as chaplain at a nearby nursing home so I can minister to the old people."

Old Age or Bold Age

It's attitude rather than arteries that determines the vitality of our maturing years. But what about the arteries? Can we ignore the infirmities of age?

Well, though we can reduce or retard many of them with proper exercise, rest, and nutrition, our bodies nonetheless suffer wear and

tear along the way. Our arteries clog, our memories fail, our joints stiffen, our steps slow. Sooner or later our bodies will fail us completely, then the Lord will take us home to await their resurrection.

But its the assurance of resurrection that provides the optimism of Psalm 92. The aches and pains, malfunctions and dysfunctions of our "earthly tabernacle" are temporary, for the Bible says that at the resurrection Christ "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

Until then, we put up physical pain, focusing on spiritual gain. Robertson McQuilkin, the president of the college I attended, frequently spoke to us in chapel and through periodic newsletters. During my junior year, he wrote a letter I've never forgotten. He had taken an elderly friend, crippled with arthritis, on an errand.

"Robertson," she asked as they drove along, "why does God let us get old and weak? Why must I hurt so?"

"I'm not sure," McQuilkin replied, "but I have a theory."

"What is it?"

He hesitated to share it with her, but she insisted.

"I think God has planned the strength and beauty of youth to be physical," he replied. "But the strength and beauty of age is spiritual. We gradually lose the strength and beauty that is temporary so we'll be sure to concentrate on the strength and beauty which is forever."

Yes, it's attitude rather than arteries that determines the vitality of our maturing years -- and those attitudes are chosen early, in the summer of life. So...

> Grow old along with me!
> The best is yet to be,
> The last of life, for which the first was made:
> Our times are in His hand
> Who saith, "A whole I planned,
> Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid.

What's Wrong With Success?
Psalm 73

Today we're coming to the end of our negative little series of sermons entitled "What's Wrong With…?" in which we have analyzed various topics and trends in our popular culture. Our final topic is: "What's Wrong with Success?"

This has been on my mind all week as I've watched bits and pieces of the Olympic games in Sydney, Australia. Some of these Olympic athletes have trained all their lives just for these moments. They have sacrificed virtually everything. In some cases in Communist or totalitarian lands, they have been taken from their homes and families as small children, interred in training camps for a lifetime of preparation. And yet only a small proportion stand on the middle platform, hear their national anthem, and have a gold metal draped around their necks. Most athletes will leave Sydney with feelings of failure in a society dominated by thoughts of success.

We fervently want our athletes and our athletic teams to have winning records. We want our favorite politicians to ride high in the polls. We want to accumulate wealth and to generate influence. We crave to be respected by our peers. We are head-over-heels in a success-oriented society.

And my question is: "Is there anything wrong with that?"

The answer is: Not necessarily, unless in the process we forget to define success the way the Bible does.

The New International Version of the Bible uses the word success 25 times and the word successful 8 times. Very often the words appear in prayers to God or in promises from God.

The first time the word "success" occurs in Scripture, it is a prayer request by Abraham's servant in Genesis 24, as he goes on a mission for Abraham. He stops his caravan by the well in the town of Nahor and asks God to give him success on his mission. The Lord answers favorably.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Joshua 1:8, which says: "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful."

The problem, of course, is that our culture and society defines success almost exclusively in terms of money, fame, power, and prestige. And in those terms, we are living in remarkable times. When I was a little boy, we'd hear a lot about millionaires, and all of us wanted to grow up to be millionaires. Now, there's nothing particularly special about being a millionaire. There are currently five million families who have a net worth in excess of $1 million, and within ten years that number is expected to quadruple to 20 million.

The thing to be nowadays is a billionaire. In 1982, there were only 13 of them in the world. Now, according to Forbes Magazine,

there are 306 of them. Most of them--267--are Americans. The richest of all of them is Bill Gates. It's hard to know how much he is worth because the market keeps jumping around, especially in light of the government's antitrust lawsuit against him. But he is said to be worth about 92 billion dollars, which means he is worth more than the poorest 100 million Americans put together. As I researched for this message, I was surprised to find that there are entire websites dedicated to helping people figure out how wealthy Bill Gates is. One person had calculated that for him to spend $100,000 on a purchase would be, in proportion, the same as you or me spending a quarter.

Forbes Magazine put it this way: "The extraordinary growth in net worth that began when the market took off in 1982 has produced opulence and ostentation on a scale that previous generations never dreamed possible."

One morning not long ago I woke up and turned on the Today show. They were featuring an interview with Julia Roberts. She was asked about another Forbes Magazine article naming her the most powerful woman on the planet due to her money, fame, and beauty. She gushed and tried to assume a humble look, but she was obviously reveling in her success, as I suppose anyone would. When asked if there was anything in the world that could make her any more happy than she was, she said, "Just being able to sleep late more often with my boyfriend."

I turned off the TV and wondered what it would be like to be inundated with money, fame, and success on that level. Then I sat at my desk to have my daily quiet time--my daily time of Bible study and prayer. As it turned out, I had been reading through the Psalms, and that morning I came to Psalm 73. Though written about 3000 years ago, I found it to be a timely and relevant treatise on the subject of success. Today, I'd like to share this Psalm with you. We can call Psalm 73, "The Bible's Treatise on the Successful Life."

Notice in verse 1 that the Psalmist, Asaph, begins with a presupposition: Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

In other words, he is saying: Surely it must be that God is good to His people. That has to be a given. If that isn't true, nothing in all the universe makes sense. If we don't believe that God is good to His own people, than He is a cruel tyrant and we're all the most miserable of creatures. I have to believe that God is good to His people.

But Asaph's next word is, "But…." But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

Asaph is saying, "I believe that God is good to His people, but if that's true then I have some other observations that are very troubling. If that is true, then how do you explain the fact that God's people often appear to be the least successful people in the world, whilst evil people abound in fame, fortune, and fun?" Asaph was most perplexed by this. He said, "I had nearly lost my perspective on the whole issue of success. I almost lost my emotional footing." Why? Verse 3:

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity (the success) of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their calloused hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds knows no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"

Asaph is deeply bothered by the fact that while in his mind he knows that God is good to His people, his observations about life seem to be telling him just the opposite. The wrong guys are winning. God's people don't make up a very large percentage of the rich and famous and powerful. God's people aren't usually numbered among the billionaires or even among the millionaires. God's people are not often found in the highest levels of power in the governments of the world. God's people are not often seen on the television screens unless they are being ridiculed and made the object of reproach.

How do you explain the fact that secular universities that teach and train generations of young men and women in secular thought are often rich, prestigious, and well-endowed, while Christian colleges down the street are struggling to pay their bills?

How do you explain the fact that a politically-involved Christian who runs on a platform of morality is often mocked and derided, while a Machiavellian politician with liberal or nonexistent morals rides high in the polls?

How do you explain the fact that a godless financier who traffics in illegal drugs lives in a mansion, while across town a humble, honest, holy couple is evicted from their little house because they don't have enough money to pay the rent?

Why is it that the wicked so often seem to have the upper hand in this life? If God really is good to his people, then why does the wrong side appear to be winning? That is Asaph's perplexity. In verse 12, he continues:

This is what the wicked are like--always carefree, they increase in wealth.

They don't care about God. They don't embrace Jesus Christ. Yet they live a lifestyle that most people can't even imagine. Exotic holidays. Stretch limousines. Private airplanes. Limitless cash. Multiple homes. Powerful friends. Political clout. Global fame. Is anything wrong with those things? No, not necessarily; but the Bible says that not many of those people ever come to know the Lord. First Corinthians 1 says: Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God choose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise… He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things….

Here in Psalm 73, Asaph is saying, "I don't understand that. If God is good to His children, why are the wrong people running the show? Why are God's people so often poor and struggling and persecuted and sometimes put to the sword?
Let's read on. Verse 13: Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

It just seems that being a Christian isn't worth it. I have denied myself many things for the sake of the Lord. I have given money I could have spent on myself. I have suffered ridicule and abuse and persecution and privation. It seems it hasn't been worth it. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure.

But now look at verse 15. He knows there is something wrong with his attitude, but he is still confused. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. In other words, it would have been wrong for me to have gone out proclaiming these doubts and questions, but I still have them down in my heart. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me….
But now, we come to this wonderful verse 17: …until I entered the sanctuary of God. I was disoriented and confused until I came to the Lord Himself and began to see things from His perspective, His viewpoint, His frame of reference. Bill Gothard defines "wisdom" as "seeing things from God's point of view." The Bible says that God's ways are not our ways, that His thoughts are not our thoughts. God doesn't see things like we do, but we can come to see things the way He does. And His perspective is the enduring and correct one.

So Asaph brings his questions to the Lord. He enters the sanctuary, the temple, in Jerusalem, and he tarries in the presence of the Lord. He studies the Scriptures. And he begins to understand. Verse 17 continued:

> …till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

He came to understand that compared to eternity, time is like a penny compared to all of Bill Gate's billions of dollars. Time is a passing flash. Eternity is a never-ending, infinite line. And those who are genuinely wise and successful are far more concerned about the things of eternity than the things of time. Let's read on:

> Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

It reminds us of the man Jesus talked about in the Gospels. He was a very, very successful man. His agricultural business had flourished, and he had built one storage barn after another. He was all consumed with his success, and he felt very self-satisfied. But God said to him, "Thou fool. This night shall thy soul be required of thee, and then whose shall these things be?"

Jesus said, "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but he loses his own soul." He said, "A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things that he possesses." John said, "Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."

Asaph was saying, "I became disoriented for a few moment in the heady currents of a success-dominated society. But I went into the sanctuary to think through it in the presence of God, and I came back to my senses. I remembered God's perspective. The externals of life are passing by exceedingly fast. Any so-called success that comes from fame, wealth, and power is exceedingly short-lived."

In fact, Asaph says, I became ashamed of myself for having been so foolish. Verse 21: When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you."

True Success
What then is a truly successful as God defines it for us? That is the remainder of Psalm 73. It is first of all enjoying God's presence. Verse 23 says: Yet I am always with you; you hold me by the right hand. And look down at verse 25: Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. As the old hymn puts it:

Once earthly joy I craved,
Sought peace and rest.
Now thee alone I seek,
Give what is best.

And verse 28: But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge.
The most successful person in the world is the one who can sit on the porch swing or kneel by his bedside with an open Bible, who can tell the Lord of his burdens, who can change the world with his prayers, who can find Scriptures for every trial, and who can

practice the presence of God in his life.

Jeremiah said: This is what the LORD says:
"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness,
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight," declares the LORD.

Second, true success means following God's guidance. Verse 24 says: You guide me with your counsel….
God has a plan for your life. He has created you for something special, and He has custom designed a plan for you. Genuine success is finding and fulfilling that plan. I used to have a plaque that hung on the wall of my office which said: "In His will there is no failure; out of His will there is no success." That is true.
Third, true success means awaiting God's glory. Verse 24, again, says: You guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me into glory.
We can't imagine the fame, wealth, and power of that glorious land to which we're going. Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of men what God has prepared for those who love Him. Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there you may be also."
The old gospel song writer had this in mind when he wrote:

A tent or a cottage, why should I care?
They're building a palace for me over there;
Though exiled from home, yet still I may sing,
All glory to God, I'm a child of the King.

Finally, true success is sharing God's message. Look at the way Psalm 73 ends: I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell all your deeds.
Can there be any greater success in life than helping another person come by faith to Jesus Christ? Helping another person come into the Kingdom?
The famous (or infamous) financier, Michael Milken, has a level of wealth we can't even imagine, but not long ago he faced a kind of personal crisis. First Milken's father and then he himself was diagnosed with cancer, a disease that runs in his family. "For the first time," Milken says, "I faced a problem I couldn't solve by writing a check."
Sooner or later, everyone in the world--even the richest--are going to face a problem they cannot solve by writing a check. The Bible says, Prepare to meet thy God. There's nothing wrong with fame, money, and power. But those things aren't nearly as important as we've made them out to be.
There's an old story about a group of boys who broke into a department store one night. They didn't steal anything. They just changed the price tags on everything. That's what the devil has managed to do in this world. We put a high value on things that are fleeting and temporal, while neglecting the things that are eternal. There is nothing in this world more valuable than…

Enjoying God's Presence,
Following God's Guidance,
Awaiting God's Glory, and
Sharing God's Message

The person who lives in a little cottage by the roadside with that kind of wealth is richer by far than Bill Gates, sitting alone in his techno-mansion outside of Seattle. The person who lives for Christ in a little cottage by the roadside knows in his heart how to sing:

My Father is rich in houses and lands,
He holdeth the wealth of the world in His hands!
Of rubies and diamonds, of silver and gold,
His coffers are full, He has riches untold.
I'm a child of the King, a child of the King!
With Jesus my Savior, I'm a child of the King.

Under The Cloud

1 Corinthians 10:1; 1 Corinthians 10:6; Psalm 77; Exodus 14

Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea…. Now these things happened as examples for us…. —1 Corinthians 10:1, 6 (NASV)

The Lord has never spoken audibly to me, but He almost has—twice. Once when I was a teenager, seeking guidance regarding my schooling. The other occasion occurred years later while flying from Athens to New York. I didn't want to go home. Ahead of me lay an impossible situation, and I was a bundle of nerves. A certain, sensitive area of my life had unraveled, and I inwardly throbbed. Gazing down on the choppy Atlantic, I asked God for His help then opened my Bible. The day's reading, at it happened, concerned another sea—the story of the parting of the waters in Exodus 14. The seat beside me was vacant, but as I read the biblical account, I suddenly felt as though the Lord Himself had taken that seat and was personally tutoring me through the chapter. My fingers reached for a pen, and I started scribbling as fast as I could write.

Ten propositions emerged—ten ways of handling impossible situations, a divine protocol for coping when we find ourselves caught "between the devil and the deep Red Sea." Like any wide-eyed Bible student, I thought I was the first to discover the real power of the Red Sea story, but I later learned I wasn't.

There was a forlorn man in ancient Jerusalem who beat me to the punch…

The Middle Eastern sun had fallen hours ago, and the cold envelope of night had closed around Jerusalem. The streets of the old, stone city were emptying as stragglers stumbled home. All over town, oil lamps yielded the last of their flickering lights and pungent odors, and embers lay dying in the hearths. Under cover of darkness couples embraced, children slept, dogs barked, and young Israeli soldiers joked quietly on the ramparts, unalarmed and unafraid.

The world was at peace. But in a tiny room near the temple, Asaph was awake, shivering and scared, sitting blanket-enfolded on the edge of his small bed. His world was in ruins, and, though exhausted, he couldn't sleep. He would have preferred physical torture to such psychological pain. He battled to believe, fought to remain calm, to quell the rising fear, but it was a lost cause. Worries swelled and broke over him like restless, relentless breakers. He paced and prayed, but God seemed further than the distant moon. He knelt, but his knees hurt. He tried to lay down, but panic pushed him from bed. His imagination saw nothing in the darkness but trouble and terror.

He wanted to cry, but couldn't. Wanted to scream, but wouldn't. Finally he sat at his small table, lit his lamp, picked up his quill, and began pouring his soul onto paper.

Three thousand years have since passed, but we can re-live this episode and learn from it as needed—just by peering over Asaph's shoulder and reading his anguished, angry words, for what he wrote long ago found its way into our Bibles under the heading of Psalm 77.

This 20-verse hymn falls naturally into two parts, with the division occurring between verses 10 and 11. In the first stanza, verses 1-10, Asaph ventilates his feelings and asks six furious questions of God. But in the last half of the psalm, verses 11-20, he works his way from fear back to faith, and, surprisingly, he ends up, like I did, at the banks of the Red Sea. The first half of Psalm 77, then, we might call "Night," and the last half, "Light."

Night

Asaph's first words are: I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted.

Peterson, in his paraphrase of Psalm 77, puts verse two like this: I found myself in trouble and went looking for my Lord; my life was an open wound that wouldn't heal. When friends said, "Everything will turn out all right," I didn't believe a word they said….

He made an effort to pray, but his prayer seemed to die on his lips. I remembered you, O God, and I groaned; I mused, and my spirit grew faint. You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak.

The Living Bible puts it, You don't let me sleep. I am too distressed even to pray.

I hate those nights when I'm too tired to pray and too worried to sleep. For me, they often come when I've made the mistake of trying to pay the bills at bedtime, or when a loved one is ill or hospitalized, or when a child is out with the car past curfew. Especially then.

The devil often chooses to attack under cloak of darkness. It's no accident that Satan filled Judas' heart at suppertime, and that our Lord was subsequently arrested at the midnight hour when both He and His disciples were exhausted. Daniel was thrown into the lion's during the night watches. The disciple's never seemed to sail into storms during the daytime, but only at night when their terror was magnified by darkness. Paul and Silas were whipped just as the sun was setting, then encased in the stocks of a blackened prison to suffer through the night. It was during the evening that a terrified Jacob confronted the divine wrestler, and that David huddled with his men, pursued by his rebellious son Absalom.

During the daylight hours we tend to be a little more rested and busy. Our routines take over, giving us focus and stability. Friends come alongside to cheer us, and the sunshine lifts our spirits. But at night when the rest of the world sleeps, when exhaustion sets in, when darkness pervades, when shadows fall…. At night the devil prowls and growls and pounces on his prey.

"You can have some mighty strange experiences at midnight," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, following a middle-of-the-night phone call threatening the lives of his wife and daughter.

And so it was that Asaph's emotions reeled and rolled through the night like a sinking ship on a stormy sea, causing him at length to spit out a series of six angry questions. We find them in verses 7-9, and they are addressed to God. Their intensity is felt not only by their sharp words but by their rapid-fire, staccato-like delivery:

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

Ever felt like asking those same questions? Ever said such things yourself? These questions are not coming from an atheist, agnostic, or bitter cynic, but from a godly man whose life has thus far been wholly given over to the Lord's work. Asaph was Israel's chief worship leader, a musician, a hymnist who had spent years studying God's Word, practicing its principles, and teaching them to others through song.

But now he was reduced by sorrow to wondering if God's love had worn itself threadbare, if His grace had evaporated, if His promises had expired. As Peterson translates it: "Just my luck," I said. "The High God goes out of business just the moment I need him."

One of my favorite preachers was the North Carolina evangelist Vance Havner. Once as a college student, I spent the afternoon with him and was impressed with his childlike humility, his keen grasp of Scripture, and his deep love and dependence on his beloved wife Sarah.

Later after her death Havner was inconsolable. In one of his last books, he described his feelings like this: I think of a year that started out so pleasantly for my beloved and me. We had made plans for delightful months ahead together. Instead, I sat by her bedside and watched her die of an unusual disease. She expected to be healed but she died. Now, all hopes of a happy old age together are dashed to the ground. I plod alone with the other half of my life on the other side of death. My hand reaches for another hand now vanished and I listen at night for the sound of a voice that is still. And I am tempted a thousand times to ask, "My God, why…?"

It is a question well-known to the heroes of Scripture.

· Rebekah asked in Genesis 25:22: If all is well, why am I like this? So she went to inquire of the Lord.
· Moses asked in Exodus 5:22: Lord, why have you brought trouble on this people? Why is it You have sent me?
· In Numbers 11:20, the Israelites asked: Why did we ever come up out of Egypt?
· Gideon wanted to know, Why then has all this happened to us? (Judges 6:13).
· Naomi groaned, I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why…? (Ruth 1:21).
· Nehemiah asked, Why is the house of God forsaken? (Nehemiah 13:11).
· Job said, Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? (Job 3:11).
· Why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide in times of trouble? asked David in Psalm 10:1.
· Isaiah prayed, O Lord, why have You made us stray from Your ways? (Isaiah 63:17).
· Jeremiah wanted to know, Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable? (Jeremiah 15:18).
· Habakkuk asked, Why do You show me iniquity, and cause me to see trouble? (Habakkuk 1:3).
· Even our Lord cried, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? in Matthew 27:46.

The human soul cannot long live with this much pain, nor does God intend for us to. He wants us to move from night to light, and that is exactly what slowly happened to Asaph in Psalm 77.

Light

In verse 11, Asaph begins to reason his way, logically and by faith, out of anguish. He wrote: Then I thought, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High." I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.

There is only one way of coping with unbearable pain—you must learn to focus your thoughts on something unmovable and sure. I have a friend who endured torture-training in an elite, top-secret military unit. He was deprived of sleep, twisted into painful position, and submerged into vats of ice water. His instructors told that he could survive only by forcing his mind away from the pain and onto something fixed, solid, and sure. He could endure only by the intense focus of his mental energy on something genuinely enduring.

Christians can cope with torturous levels of emotional pain by only focusing on one of three things:

· God's Power in the Past
· His Presence in the Now
· His Promises for the Future

In Psalm 77, Asaph emphasized the first of those. I will remember your great deeds, Lord; I will recall the wonders you did in the

past. I will think about all that you have done; I will meditate on all your mighty acts.

Here, then, is a seminal lesson from God's Word: Remembering God's past faithfulness provides powerful reassurance in present crises. If God has been our help in ages past, He'll be our hope for years to come. If He has begun a good work in us, He'll carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. He hasn't led us this far just to let us drown in bottomless seas of sorrow. The Lord will make a way, for He has a history of doing just that.

Last year, I received a terrible blow that left me wandering around in a sort of spiritual daze which eventually gave way to depression. A friend of mine, seeing my funk, asked to see me. "In all your life," he asked, "has the Lord ever failed you? Has he ever abandoned or forsaken you?"

I was brought up short, for the only possible answer was: "No, He hasn't."

"Then why do you think he has forsaken you now?"

When the present is dark, switch on the flashlight of past blessings. God's faithfulness in past crises is a token of His availability in current adversities. As the hymn says: Praise Him for His grace and favor To our fathers in distress; Praise Him, still the same as ever, slow to chide and swift to bless. Alleluia! Alleluia! Glorious is His faithfulness.

What example of God's faithfulness most enlivened Asaph during his "dark night of the soul?"

The splitting of the sea in Exodus 14. His mind went back to that dramatic moment when, with powerful gusts from heaven, God delivered His people from a hopeless predicament.

Continuing in verse 14, Asaph wrote: You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. With a mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph. The waters saw you, O God, the waters saw you and writhed; the very depths were convulsed.

He then described the wind and thunder and storm that swept over the Red Sea in full view of the huddled masses of trapped and terrified Israelites. Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind, your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked.

And then Asaph said simply: Your path led through the sea.

The Lord often leads us around the waters, and sometimes he walks on the water. But occasionally he takes us through the water. Isaiah once wrote: When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you…. This is what the Lord says—he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters.

Asaph's mind then found relief from its present distress by remembering God's power displayed to those in similar straits who discovered in spectacular fashion, that God can make a way even through the sea.

Psalm 77 ends: Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

The point of it all is this: God put the Israelites in an impossible situation just to show them there are no impossible situations where He is concerned. And he recorded the story in Exodus 14 for our benefit. He wants us to know that His people are never trapped. When we seem caught betwixt sword and sea, He will make a way.

The God of Israel designed one of the most spectacular miracles in the Bible just to teach us that lesson. It's a divine model, giving us a biblical protocol—ten propositions—for dealing with acute anxiety.

Just think of it: The winds blew, the sea split, the waters congealed into towering walls, and the Israelites passed through dry shod, not for the entertainment value of the experience, but to prove to us in earth-shaking, history-making fashion, that, even when we are most anxious and distressed, that…

God will make a way
Where there seems to be no way,
He works in ways
We cannot see.
He will make a way for me.
He will be my Guide,
Hold me closely to His side,
With love and strength
For each new day.
He will make a way.
He will make a way.

So The Next Generation Will Know
Psalm 78

Recently I had a phone call from a young lady in our neighborhood. She told me her name and asked if I remembered her. I did. She said, "I just wanted to thank you for leading me to the Lord Jesus many years ago. Do you remember it?" I had to confess I didn't.

She reminded me of a day long ago when I was taking children home after VBS, and she was the last delivery. She said I had asked her about her relationship with the Lord, if she knew the Lord Jesus as her Savior; she admitted that she didn't. I explained the Gospel to her in simple terms, and she prayed then and there--in my car--for Christ to come into her life.
She recalled how she had run into her house that day to tell her grandmother of her decision, and the two of them had rejoiced together. "In the years that followed," she said, "I got away from the Lord and made some mistakes. But I always remembered that experience of giving my life to the Lord, and I kept coming back to him. Today I have a happy marriage, we're attending church in our area, and I just wanted to thank you for leading me to Christ that day. It has made all the difference in my life."
And I had not even remembered it.

We never know the impact we're having when we work with children. Think back to those church workers, Sunday School workers, Midweek workers, and VBS workers who sacrificed their time to teach and train you in childhood. To paraphrase 1 Corinthians 15:58, our labor on behalf of children in the Lord is not in vain. Children's work, after all, is emphasized throughout the Bible. For example, look at Psalm 78. This is a long Psalm that covers three pages in my Bible. It is divided into two parts. The first part (verses 1-9) says, in essence: Here is what we must teach the children. The last, long part (verses 10-72) says: Here is what we must teach them. We aren't going to look at the entire Psalm today, but I'd like to use its opening verses as an introduction to some other passages that God has placed on my heart.

"O My People"

The Psalm begins: O my people… The writer here is a man named Asaph. He was the "Jerry Carraway" of David's age, the minister of music and worship leader at the temple during the reigns of David and Solomon. He is referred to in the Bible as both a prophet and a poet. As a prophet he had a message from God; and as a poet he expressed that message in deeply moving, emotional language. So here we have him crying out to his people, to the Israelites, and to you and me.
O my people, hear my teaching… This isn't David speaking. It isn't the king of Israel or the high priest of the Jews. It is the worship director; but with his songs and poems he is teaching the people. The job of the minister of music is not only to lead us in worship, but to lead us into truth, to teach us, to instruct us in the ways of the Lord.
Listen to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old. In other words, I have something very deep to share with you, something very profound. What is it?
What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us… Asaph is saying: "I want to remind you of the truth that has been passed down from generation to generation, these truths we have learned in childhood at the feet of our fathers. I want to remind you of what our mothers told us again and again at our bedside."
What had Asaph and his contemporaries learned from their fathers and forefathers? Beginning at verse 9 the entire last part of the Psalm (verses 9-72) is devoted to describing the lessons of the Exodus, how God brought his people from Egypt, how he divided the Red Sea, how he made the waters stand up like walls and created a corridor of deliverance for the Jews, how he guided his people with a cloud by day and a fire by night, how he split rocks in the desert to give them water to drink, how he rained down manna from above to give them food. But the Psalmist here also recounted how the people yet refused to trust and obey the Lord. Despite God's benefits and blessings, the Lord's people drifted away from him, ever and again. They didn't trust him, nor did they obey him. They were chastised for their sins until they returned in repentance to humbly allow him to shepherd them. That is what the Psalmist had learned from his father and grandfather.
But now, look at verse 4: We will not hide them (these lessons) from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, when he commanded our forefathers to teach their children...
In other words, if we do nothing else in life, we must pass down the same message to our children. We must instill into their hearts at an early age the truths of God--who he is and how he works. Why? Verse 6 says: …so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. They would not be like their forefathers--a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him.
By teaching our children the lessons of Scripture, especially the lessons in the books of Exodus and Numbers, we will be instilling within them the wisdom they need to trust the Lord; and we will be helping them to learn from the mistakes of that faithless generation who did not enter the promised land. Paul said to Timothy, "…from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ."
As we teach children the Bible in our homes and in our church, we want them to learn the history of God's people, the lessons of the Lord, and his commandments. We want to teach them the fear of the Lord. We want to teach them the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. But in the remainder of my message today, I'd like to say something else. We must teach our children the promises of God.

Promises for Children

As I look back over my years as a parent I have a few regrets, and one has to do with a treehouse. On one occasion or another--I forget exactly why--I promised to build my children a treehouse. Now a promise is a sacred thing, it is a giving of our word.

Ecclesiastes 5:2 tells us that we should be slow in making promises, making sure we're prepared to keep them. But for some reason, I never got around to keeping that particular promise. I'm not very good with hammers and nails and saws. To this day my children don't have a treehouse, and now they are too big for one. I'll have to try to redeem myself with the grandchildren. But every time I think about it, I feel twinges and pangs of guilt and regret. I want my children to know they can trust me to do what I promise.
God always keeps his promises. The Bible says, "Has he said and will he not do it?" Romans 4 says that Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised." And God loves to make promises to us. There are hundreds of promises in the Bible; and we never encounter any distress or uncertainty in life but what God has given certain promises that meet us at the junction of our need.
Out of the hundreds of promises in the Bible, I have found five that are specifically and especially given to children. After all, if I love my children enough to promise them this or that, don't you think the Lord Jesus Christ might also love them enough to give them some promises of their own? There are five such promises, and I'd like to show them to you today.

Exodus 20:12

The first is found in Exodus 20:12: Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.
This verse is repeated like this in Ephesians 6:1: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is right. Honor your father and mother--which is the first commandment with a promise--that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.
A great deal of research is currently being done on human longevity, and I read last week in the New York Times that a group of scientists meeting in Los Angeles declared that we are on the brink of being able to significantly stretch the human life span. "Future generations," said the scientists, "may be able to avail themselves of scientifically established techniques to stretch the human life span like a piece of taffy until it reaches 150, even 200, years." The article said that researchers have already been able to double the lifespan of the fruitfly. Well, I suppose that what's good for the fruitfly is bound to be good for you and me.
But there was another study released at about the same time that I read on the religious wire. It was conducted by sociologists from the University of Texas, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Florida State University. Their findings were that people who attend church services every week live an average of seven years longer than those who don't.
The Bible teaches that the way we live and the lifestyle we choose has a direct bearing on how long we live. Christian parents know that. Some of them have learned those lessons the hard way; and as they tell us about healthy, holy, wholesome living we do well to heed their words and obey their commands. The writer of the book of Proverbs was forever warning his son not to cast his lot with the wrong crowd, not to visit prostitutes, not to be deceived by wine and alcohol, not to fight and brawl. He warned him against laziness and lying and lust. Hearing and heeding such words adds days to our lives, for obedience to godly parents saves us from life-diminishing habits. As we obey our parents, God blesses us and our lives are extended. That's a promise that God makes especially for children.

Psalm 27:10

A second promise for children is in Psalm 27:10--Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me.
All of us know that children are sometimes abandoned by their parents like old cars along the roadside. We sometimes read of newborns abandoned in public washrooms. We hear of fathers abandoning their families and going off to suit their own pleasures. I began my pastoral career beside our denominational home for children in Greeneville, Tennessee, and my heart went out the children who didn't have a home suitable to live in, or parents fit to raise them. Some of you were abandoned by your father or mother at a young age. But the Psalmist gives this promise to children: The Lord Jesus Christ will never abandon them. He promises to never leave us or forsake us.
When Ruth Bell Graham was shipped off to boarding school at age 13, her heart nearly broke. Her parents were missionaries in China, and she had been sent to high school in North Korea. She suffered from acute homesickness. She cried herself to sleep night after night, praying earnestly that she would die. But one night she stumbled across this verse, Psalm 27:10. She knew her parents had not deliberately forsaken her, but she felt forsaken, abandoned, and very much alone. Here in this verse she found comfort by the assurance of the ever-present love and watch-care of the Lord.
We cannot always be with our children, but he who keeps them never slumbers nor sleeps.

Proverbs 8:32

In Proverbs 8:32 we find another promise for children: Now, then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself…
Picture here a man, a father, with his sons sitting on the sofa beside him. He is talking to them and making them a promise from the Lord. If you keep my ways, you will be blessed. If you listen to me every day, you will be blessed. Blessed is the one who watches daily at my doors and waits at my doorways.

In other words, my son, my child, if you read and obey your Bible each day, God will bless you all your life.
Children need to know this, because they have a lot on them today. I read an article some time ago in USA Today entitled "Young Minds Can Carry a Heavy Load of Worries." The article reported on a survey of 1200 kids across the country, age 5-16, and the researches were alarmed at how deeply children were stressed and worried. What were they worried about? Their greatest worry was that one of their parents would die. They were also worried about being in a car wreck, getting a bad report card, failing a grade in school, having to go to the hospital, and the possibility of their parents divorcing.
How important it is to learn early in life to meet with the Lord Jesus each day in Bible study and prayer, to cast your cares on him, and to grow in the knowledge of his word and his will from day to day! Addressed to children, Proverbs 8 says: Blessed are those who listen daily to the Lord, watching daily at his door and waiting at his doorposts.

Mark 10:14

The next promise is one of our favorites, found in Mark 10:13 & 14: People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, "Let the little children come unto me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.
I believe Jesus was telling us that children can be saved, that they can come to know him, that they can understand enough of the Gospel to receive it. Several years ago we conducted a survey of our church to find out the ages at which our members had become Christians. The results:

- 10% were saved at five years or less
- 50% were saved between the ages of 5 and 10
- 20% came to Christ between 11 and 15 * 20% were converted at age 16 or later
- 20% were converted at age 16 or later

One of my favorite preachers is the British fireball Stephen Olford whose commanding voice can boom like a cannon and snap like a whip. His insights into Scripture are marvelous, and for many many years he has been proclaiming the Gospel throughout England, America, Africa, and around the world. Many of you have heard him. How did Stephen Olford become a Christian? He grew up in Africa where his parents were missionaries. On his seventh birthday, after the cakes and presents had been enjoyed, his mother Bessie led family devotions. She read from John 14, emphasizing especially the verse that says, "If I go away I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am there you may be also." Suddenly she paused, looked at her son, and said, "Stephen, when the Lord Jesus comes back, will you be ready to meet him?"
The question was left unanswered. Stephen looked down, fidgeting with his hands and uncomfortable. But that evening the question bounced around in his mind, keeping him from sleep. He tossed and turned throughout the African night until finally he called out in the darkness, "Mother!"
Bessie ran in expecting to find a hyena or other wild animal outside his window. She sat on the bed and held him, his little body trembling. No, it wasn't a wild animal. His fitful thoughts had imagined Jesus coming again, only to leave him behind. Bessie lit a lamp and opened the Bible to Colossians 1:27: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."
"If you want to be sure of going to heaven, Stephen, you must have Jesus in you, in your heart. Do you want to invite Jesus into your heart?" Stephen nodded, and the two knelt by the bed to make the transaction.
"Before my pillow seemed stuffed with bricks," Olford later recalled, "but now a wonderful peace came into my heart. Mother was the undergirding of that conversion. In those early formative years, it was her training, her teaching, her example and counseling that drew me to the Lord." He was only seven, but he was born again.

Acts 2:38-39

The final promise is found in Acts 2:38ff. The Apostle Peter has been preaching here to multitudes in the city of Jerusalem. The people, being deeply convicted, asked how they might be saved. Verse 37 says that they were cut to the heart and were asking, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter's famous reply is in verse 38: "Repent and be baptized everyone of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord will call."
This is a promise for "you and your children." The children are included. It is a promise for the children--that if they give their lives to Jesus Christ they will receive both forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Holy Spirit will come and make his home in their hearts. Children can be indwelled by the Holy Spirit. They can be filled with the Holy Spirit. Their hearts can be his home.
Why do we invest so much money and manpower in children's ministry? Why is it a distinctive of our church? Why do we take Christian education seriously in our homes? Because Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world. And in Psalm 78 he commands us to teach them the truths of his word, and that includes all his promises--especially five very special ones, given by God to children:

- The promise of longevity for those who obey their parents
- The promise of God's constant care and keeping, even if abandoned by father and mother
- The promise of blessing for those who read his word daily
- The promise of salvation for all who come to him
- The promise of the Holy Spirit's indwelling for those who make Jesus Christ Lord of their lives

So teach your children. Read them the Bible. Share with them the verses and verities of Scripture. Rededicate yourself to children's ministry in this church. And…
Let the little children come unto him and forbid them not.
For of such is the kingdom of heaven.

Marching Orders
Psalm 96

We've selected several missionary-oriented songs for today's service, as you'd expect on our annual world missions Sunday. It's our theme for the day, and there have happily been some wonderful new songs and hymns recently written to celebrate the missions mandate of the church. But perhaps the most famous missionary hymn in Christian history is an old one, one we seldom sing anymore. Its words and tune are archaic and nearly forgotten, but for several generations it was sung with tones of victory at hundreds of missions conferences and missionary commissionings. It is the hymn that begins with the words, "From Greenland's icy mountains, from India's coral strand…."

It was written on May 29th, 1819. The author was a 36-year-old poet and preacher named Reginald Heber, who later went on to write the great hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy." Heber had inherited a good deal of money, but he was known as a humble, hardworking young man, and he had married a preacher's daughter in Wrexham, in North Wales, United Kingdom. On that evening, May 29, 1819, he was with his father-in-law in the vicarage, when the older man told him that the next day, Sunday, May 30th, was a missions emphasis day, much as we're having today. "Will you write me a poem," he said in words to this effect, "a few lines with which to end my message?"

Reginald Heber retired to the corner of the room and, in just a few moments, wrote the words that were to make him famous to Christian history as the author of "From Greenland's Icy Mountains." Later Rev. Heber went himself as a missionary, and died in India.

But having told you that story, I would also like to tell you that "Greenland's Icy Mountains" is not the oldest or the most famous missionary hymn in history. It is nearly 200 years old now, but there's an even older hymn that is even better. It was written 3000 years ago, and we call it Psalm 96. We can say that Psalm 96 is perhaps the oldest missionary hymn in existence. Let's read it together:

> 1 Sing to the LORD a new song;
> sing to the LORD, all the earth.
> 2 Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
> proclaim his salvation day after day.
> 3 Declare his glory among the nations,
> his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
> 4 For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
> he is to be feared above all gods.
> 5 For all the gods of the nations are idols,
> but the LORD made the heavens.
> 6 Splendor and majesty are before him;
> strength and glory are in his sanctuary.
> 7 Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,
> ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
> 8 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
> bring an offering and come into his courts.
> 9 Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness;
> tremble before him, all the earth.
> 10 Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.
11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
12 let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them.
Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy;
13 they will sing before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his truth.

We often think that the Old Testament is about the Jews, the nation of Israel; and the New Testament is about the church. But it's also true that both the Old and New Testaments are primarily concerned about the condition of the whole world, and about reaching the entire earth with the message of God's love. Here in this Psalm, God's people are given their Marching Orders to go into all the world. Notice these phrases:

- All the earth - Ps 96:1
- Among the nations - Ps 96:3
- Among all peoples - Ps 96:3
- …the nations - Ps 96:5
- O families of nations - Ps 96:7
- All the earth - Ps 96:9
- The nations… the world… the peoples… the earth… - Ps 96:10 & 11
- The earth… the world… the peoples - Ps 96:13

This is the Great Commission, 1000 years before Christ spoke it in Matthew 28. It is God's love and His kingdom and His message reaching out to every kindred, every tribe on this terrestrial ball. Notice there are six simple orders here—six words that are direct and commanding and which constitute our marching orders.

Sing

First, we're told three times at the beginning of this Psalm to "sing to the Lord." The writer says, "Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth (and with that phrase we begin to think in global terms). Sing to the Lord, praise His name.

One of the major news stories of the past year has been the controversy concerning the web site called Napster, as thousands of people have been downloading free music onto their computers. But there is a sense in which God has a heavenly Napster, a Napster of the soul. His song and His music is always available for downloading into our hearts.

We talked about this last week in our passage from Ephesians 5: Do not be drunk with wine which leads to moral looseness, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in your hearts to the Lord.

I read somewhere that scientists have satellite dishes that are picking up music from the stars, a melodious humming or vibrating sound that travels through space. We know that the atmosphere around us is God's equivalent to a symphony orchestra. The crickets and frogs on a Spring night, the sound of the wind whistling through the trees, the sound of a bubbling brook, or of the waves of the ocean swelling and breaking against the coast. We know how beautiful the birds sing, especially as the dawn breaks and the sun rises. Someone wrote:

This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ear,
All nature rings and round me sings
The music of the spheres.

In this passage we're told that all the earth is to sing praises to the Lord.

Proclaim

Second, we are to proclaim his salvation day after day. In other words, we're to be his daily witnesses. Trula Cronk, our dear friend and pioneer missionary to India, recently bought me the manuscript of her autobiography, and I couldn't put it down until I had read every page of it. In one section she tells of a time, shortly after she and her husband Dan had arrived in India, when he went on a tour to the Nepal border, leaving her alone in the town where they lived. While Dan was gone, the townspeople decided to honor the memory of Mahatma Gandhi on the first anniversary of his assassination. A platform and loud speakers were set up on the athletic field. The organizers wanted to have all the major religions included, and at the very last minute, they remembered that Christian missionary and his Scriptures. So a young man was sent posthaste on his bicycle to ask Dan to read from the Holy Bible.

When Trula explained that Dan wasn't home, the young man insisted that she come and read. She had just washed her hair, but she

combed it back, grabbed her Bible, got on her bicycle and followed him.
The playing field was thronged, but she was squeezed onto the platform. The program began with the Indian national anthem, and by and by it was her turn to read. She read in English, knowing that at least the educated in the audience would understand her. When it was all over, she got on her bicycle and returned home. But she was very discouraged over not being able to read in any of the national or native languages.
A few days later there was a knock at the door. A young Sikh was standing there. He explained, “I heard Mrs. Cronk reading from the Bible the other day on the athletic field, and I have been searching ever since. Those were absolutely the sweetest words I have ever heard. I have come to hear more.”
Dan invited him in, and the two men talked awhile. “I’ll give you a New Testament so you can read for yourself,” Dan told him. But the man didn’t want to take the Bible with him, for he was afraid of the reaction from his friends and acquaintances. “I’ll just come here each morning and read until time to go to work,” he said. And that’s exactly what he did. He read the New Testament from cover to cover in English. Then he went back and read it cover to cover in Urdu. Then he read it cover to cover in Punjabi. I don’t have time to tell his entire remarkable story, but suffice to say, through his reading of God’s Word, he made a decision that made the angels sing.
And all because Trula Cronk, unprepared, hair wet, jumped on her bicycle and rushed to read the Scriptures when the opportunity presented itself. When was the last time you or I did that? When was the last time we bore a simple witness for Christ? We’re to proclaim His salvation day after day.

Declare
Third, we’re to declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples. The world doesn’t want a god of weakness or obsolescence. They want a God of power and relevance, and as they hear of such a God, they will respond.

I want to tell you two things. First, never in human history has Christianity been under attack as it is now, today, in our own time. Here in the West, Christianity is under assault philosophically and politically.
Did you hear what happened the other day in Yuma, Arizona. The city was having a parade for a rodeo, and a local church constructed a float, and on it was a verse of Scripture—John 3:16. The city banned that float from the parade. But at the same time, the city took no action against a float advertising a homosexual bar.
Here in the West, the church is under attack philosophically and politically, but in other parts of the world, the church is under attack physically.
The world has been horrified this weekend as the ruling Taliban of Afghanistan ordered the destruction ancient statues considered among the world’s most priceless treasures. Some of them are ancient Buddhist statutes dating almost from the time of Christ. Two sandstone figures carved into an Afghan mountainside are particularly priceless, for they are the largest stone statues in the world at approximately 174 feet tall. A cry has literally gone up from the government of one nation after another at the destruction of these artifacts by the Islamic government of Afghanistan.
What I don’t understand is why isn’t there a similar outcry against the destruction of Christian human beings that is currently taking place at the orders of Afghanistan’s ruling Taliban. Statutes of stone and sand are one thing, but human lives are even more precious. It was recently announced by the Afghan government that anyone converting to Christianity, anyone trying to evangelize, anyone naming the name of Jesus Christ would be executed. And yet…
And yet the world is hungry for a God of power and love and forgiveness. While this is the greates time of persecution the church has ever known, it is also the greatest period of church growth in Christian history.
According to missiologist Ralph Winter, only 1% of the world’s population knew Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior in the 15th century. Today, according to studies done by Dawn International, that figure is at 11.1%—and growing. Out of a worldwide population of six billion, there are some 680 million Evangelical Christians in the world today - people who started to follow Christ after a personal conversion. The rate of increase is around 7% per year, compared to around 2.6% for Islam.
One study I read said that the growth of the church is outstripping the general growth of world population by two and a half times. Why? Because the Bible is truth, and gives the world the one thing that, more than anything else, the world needs—a God of glory and strength and infinity and grace.

Ascribe
Fourth, we have a series of words given in Ps 96:7-9: Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name…. In other words, we have marching orders telling us to warn the world around us to bow down and to acknowledge the Lord God of Creation. Perhaps there is someone here, and this message is for you: Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name. Is your life bringing glory to God?

Worship
Ps 96:9 goes on to say: Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness; tremble before Him all the earth. In other words, our job is to call the world to worship.

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with fear, His praise forth tell,
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

Say
Finally, look at that little word in Ps 96:10: Say! —Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns."
Those three words, The Lord reigns, are characteristic of this portion of the Psalms, and they are so very powerful.

> Jesus shall reign where're the sun
> Doth its successive journeys run.
> His kingdom spread from shore to shore
> Till moons shall wax and wane no more.

When missionary Hudson Taylor was seeking to establish his China Inland Mission, he spoke to a group of 2000 ministers and Christian leaders from all over Scotland. He began his address by telling the group of an experience he had had while traveling from Shanghai to Ning-po aboard a Chinese boat. Among his fellow passengers had been a Chinese man who was educated in England and went by the name Peter. Hudson talked with him and acquainted him with the teachings of Christ, but Peter had not yet made a personal commitment to Christ. The two men talked extensively.
One day as the boat approached a particular city, Hudson was in his cabin, preparing to go ashore to preach and distribute literature when he heard a splash and then a cry of alarm that a man had fallen overboard. Rushing to the deck, he didn't see his new friend Peter.
"He went down over there," said the captain of the boat, showing no signs of alarm.
Hudson jumped into the water and began swimming toward the sight, but he couldn't locate Peter. Just then he spotted some nearby fisherman with a dragnet.
"Come!" Hudson cried to them. "Come and drag over here. A man is drowning!"
"Vah bin," the fishermen replied. "It is not convenient."
"Come quickly, or it will be too late," Hudson pleaded.
"We are busy fishing."
"Never mind your fishing. Come at once and I will pay you well."
"How much will you give us?" the fishermen wanted to know.
"Five dollars. But hurry."
"Too little!" they called back. "We won't come for less than thirty."
"I don't have that much with me, but I'll give you all I have."
"How much is that?" they asked.
"I don't know," shouted Hudson. "About fourteen dollars."
They finally brought their net over, and the first time they passed it through the water they dragged up the missing man. But it was too late. Peter was dead.
Having told that story, Hudson looked at his audience and said, "We condemn those heathen fisherman. We say they are guilty of the man's death—because they could easily have saved him, and did not do it. But what of the millions whom we leave to perish… eternally? What of the plain command, 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature'?"
The Bible tells us to sing… to proclaim… to declare… to ascribe… to worship…to say…
…to say among the nations: "The Lord reigns."

That's missions. That is our mandate. And those are our marching orders.

I NEED HELP WITH MY ATTITUDE
Psalm 100:1-5

Today's message is entitled, "I Need Help with my Attitude," and I should know never to preach on such a subject, because as soon as I announce a topic like that, the devil tries to find ways to test me on it. The devil tests our attitudes every day, and he does everything he can to damage them. Too often we let him.

One of my favorite stories is about the woman who left home one morning to do her shopping. It was a small European village where you go to every shop individually, and so she went to the cheese shop for some Swiss cheese for her quiche. Then to the bakery for a baguette. Then to the fruit stand for some oranges. Then to the vegetable market for some salad fixings. Then to the

patisserie for dessert. But everywhere she went she frowned and turned up her nose and said how terrible everyone else smelled. Every shop had a bad aroma. Every person had an unpleasant odor. The very streets smelled badly. She complained to everyone she met about the stink in the air. It was only after she returned home and unpacked her purchases that she discovered that the clerk at the cheese shop had given her limburger cheese instead of Swiss, and limburger cheese has a very ripe odor to it. She had been complaining about everyone else when in reality she had been carrying the problem around her in her own packages. The problem had been with her all the time.

That's the way it is with our attitudes. Sometimes we think our circumstances stink. We think other people stink. But when we're perpetually unhappy or irritated or depressed or angry or anxious or unpleasant, the real problem may be our own attitudes which we're carrying around inside of ourselves all the time.

I have found three different quotes from three different sources on this problem. I've never seen these three quotes together in one place, but they are so similar as to make them easy to remember.

- The Roman statesman and philosopher, Seneca, said: "A man is as unhappy as he has convinced himself he is."
- Abraham Lincoln reportedly said: "A person is about as happy as they make up their mind to be."
- And the great Scottish preacher, Robert Murray McCheyne, once said: "I feel it my duty to be as happy as the Lord wants me to be."

Today I would like to ask you to choose a different attitude, a better attitude for your life. Let's adopt the words that we find in the very middle of the Bible, in the grand old 100th Psalm.

> Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands!
> Serve the Lord with gladness;
> Come before His presence with singing.
> Know that the Lord, He is God;
> It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
> We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
>
> Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,
> And into His courts with praise.
> Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.
> For the Lord is good;
> His mercy is everlasting,
> And His truth endures to all generations.

This Psalm divides into two stanzas. These stanzas are very similar, but they each have their own distinctive theme. The theme of the first stanza is… well, I'm going to coin a word here. I've often accused of making up words during my sermons, and occasionally I do. Well, here's a word I've made up, but I think it's a good one. Gladatude.

GLADATUDE PSALM 100:1-3

Gladatude is having a glad attitude. Do you remember that old song, "Jesus is All the World to Me." One of the lines say, "When I am sad to Him I go; no other one could cheer me so. / When I am sad He makes me glad. He's my Friend."

Well, according to this passage, Gladatude is made up of four ingredients.

A. Shout.

The first ingredient is—Shout: "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all you lands." Or as the New King James puts it: "Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands!" You say, "Well, I'm not really into shouting. I don't even shout at ballgames." Well, you can shout in your heart. The Psalmist is telling us to practice letting positive, praiseworthy things come out of our mouths. Practice the art of praise. The Hebrew word here means to shout or to make a noise.

- This was the word the Hebrews used for the trumpet's call at the beginning of a battle.
- It was the word they used for the shouted call to worship at the beginning of a temple service.
- It was the word they used for the shout that went up when the king suddenly appeared among them.

Now, the Psalmist doesn't come up with this advice just out of the blue. He doesn't just suddenly take a notion to blurt this out.

Psalm 100, opening as it does with such exuberance, immediately follows Psalm 95 through 99, which are called the Enthronement Psalms. Look at the way this theme unfolds:

- Psalm 95: Oh come, let us sing to the Lord! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving. Let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.
- Psalm 96: Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! Sing to the Lord all the earth.
- Psalm 97: The Lord reigns; Let the earth rejoice; Let the multitude of the isles be glad!
- Psalm 98: Oh, sing to the Lord a new song! For He has done marvelous things.
- Psalm 99: The Lord reigns; Let the peoples tremble! He dwells between the cherubim; Let the earth be moved! The Lord is great in Zion, and He is high above all peoples. Let them praise Your great and awesome name—He is holy.

You can't submerge yourself in these Enthronement Psalms without coming out of them shouting, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!" You can't submerge yourself in the glorious, eternal, providential, perpetual reign of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ without lifting up your voice and telling all the earth that we've a reason to shout and sing and praise and be happy.

B. Serve.

The first ingredient to a good attitude is shouting. The second is serving. Look at verse 2: Serve the Lord with gladness. This verse has personal meaning for me, because a number of years ago, I grew quite discouraged and depressed in ministry. I don't know if you realize that discouragement has been called the occupational hazard of ministry, and there are many pastors and missionaries who are laboring with all their hearts for the Lord, but who are battling terrific bouts of discouragement. It was one day when I was in a very defeated frame of mind that the Holy Spirit brought this verse to my mind: Serve the Lord with gladness.

I'd been serving the Lord, all right—with faithfulness, with hard work, with exhausting labors, with drudgery, with a heavy heart, and with a burdened soul. But I had not been serving Him with gladness. And I realized that I had been carrying around a pound of limburger cheese.

C. Come.

The third ingredient is Come. Look at Ps 100:2 again: Come before His presence with singing. Many of you know that I come from the Tri-Cities area of East Tennessee, near the Virginia and North Carolina borders. There is a classical concert series in that area known every year as the "Symphony of the Mountains." Last week, there was a young conductor who led a very unusual concert in the mountains. It was built around the healing power of music, and it included some of the greatest classical music ever written to sooth and heal the mind and body. They even included some unusual instruments, such as a set of large, white crystal bowls which are played by moving a rubber mallet around the edge of the bowls, causing them to vibrate like wine goblets, only with a bigger and deeper sound. Everything about the concert was designed to soothe and heal the body, mind, and soul.

Well, God created music; and even though I don't have much a singing voice, I know that God's music is very powerful and very therapeutic and very healing. How many times, when I've been weary and worn, have I found the healing power of singing that great song by J. Wilber Chapman:

> Jesus! What a Friend for sinners!
> Jesus! Lover of my soul;
> Friends may fail me, foes assail me;
> He, my Savior, makes me whole.
> Hallelujah! What a Savior!
> Hallelujah! What a Friend!
> Saving, Helping, Keeping, Loving,
> He is with me to the end.

Or Henry Van Dyke's great song, which I memorized once during a particular difficult period because it was just the prayer I needed to seek God's help and healing for my attitude, which was sinking toward depression:

> Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
> God of glory, Lord of love;
> Hearts unfold like flow'rs before Thee,
> Opening to the sun above.
> Melt the clouds of sin and sadness;
> Drive the dark of doubt away.

Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day.

D. Know.

Make a joyful noise before the Lord. Serve the Lord with gladness. Come before His presence with singing. And fourth: Know that the Lord…

And now, the Psalmist is going to bring us to the heart of the matter. If we are going to shout and serve and come, then we must know three things about the Lord. And those three things are found in verse 3:

First, He is our God. Know that the Lord, He is God. Those five words—the Lord, He is God—is what separates this Psalm from all of the rest of the whole body of literature of the subject of positive thinking. You may know that there is a vast body of literature on the subject of optimism and positive thinking. In my library are books such as The Power of Optimism by McGinis and The Power of Positive Thinking by Peale and Learned Optimism by Dr. Martin Seligman, and many others. Many sales representatives listen to motivational tapes and CDs by positive thinking specialists.

But positive thinking is worthless unless it is grounded in the truth of God's theology. It's nothing but cotton candy and vaporous thoughts without this truth—The Lord, He is God.

On the other hand, the power of the existence and perpetual reign of the Lord Himself as God of the universe is sufficient to fuel anyone's optimism. Those five words—The Lord, He is God—is the answer to every problem, the solution to every heartache, and the remedy for every perplexity that we will ever face. The Lord, He is God. He is on His throne. He is in control. He is our God, and nothing can withstand Him. When Martin Luther was facing one crisis after another, he would often say, "Come, Melanchthon, let's sing the forty-sixth Psalm," and they would sing Luther's version of Psalm 46: "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing."

Second, He is our Maker. Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves.

There are no self-made men. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by a creator/designer of infinite skill and wisdom. Mark Cowart and I just returned from West Point Military Academy where we were studying the lives of two sisters named Susan and Anna Warner who lived on Constitution Island, just across the Hudson River from West Point. These two women were very prominent authors of the children's song, "Jesus Loves Me."

Despite their literary success, the Warner sisters never seemed able to recover from the staggering financial reverses their family had suffered in the stock market crash of 1836. But as Mark and I toured their home, I saw a beautiful seashell, and I remembered a story about them.

One day Miss Anna was very perplexed. Bills were unpaid, necessities must be had, and someone sent her this exquisite shell. As she held it she realized that if God could make such a beautiful home for a little sea creature, He surely take care of her. And He did. He is our Maker.

Third, He is our Shepherd. Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves. We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by.

My soul He doth restore again;
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness,
Even for His own Name's sake.

Yea, though I walk in death's dark vale,
Yet will I fear no ill;
For Thou art with me; and Thy rod

And staff my comfort still.

My table Thou hast furnishèd
In presence of my foes;
My head Thou dost with oil anoint,
And my cup overflows.

Goodness and mercy all my life
Shall surely follow me;
And in God's house forevermore
My dwelling place shall be.

Now, does this attitude of gladatude really work? Sure, it works when everything is going well, when there are no crippling difficulties, when we're receiving no body-blows in life. But what about when everything does go wrong? Can we still maintain an attitude of gladatude?

Perhaps you remember the story that flashed around the world some time ago regarding the kidnapping of two missionaries in the Philippines. Martin and Gracia Burnham were serving with New Tribes Mission where Martin was a missionary pilot. They wanted to celebrate their anniversary at an island resort, but their holiday weekend turned into a nightmare when terrorists with ties to Osama bin Laden burst into the resort and dragged them into the jungle. They spent a year in captivity, faced near starvation, and were caught in the middle of frequent gun battles. In the end, both were shot. Martin was killed, but Gracia lived to tell the story. She said that near the end of their ordeal, one of the passages of Scripture that sustained them was Psalm 100.

One night it looked like it was going to rain, so the Burnham's set up their hammocks with plastic covers over them, but before they laid down, Martin said, "You know, Gracia, I don't know why the Lord has allowed this to happen, but today I've been thinking about Psalm 100, how we can serve the Lord with gladness. Just because we're here doesn't mean we can't serve Him with gladness, so let's serve the Lord with gladness."

So they prayed together and lay down in their hammocks. It was then that the gunfire started. Gracia fell to the ground wounded. The ground was wet from the rain, and she slid down a very steep hill and came to rest beside Martin. He was bleeding from his chest, and he was breathing heavily. Then he gave one final deep, heavy breath, and he was gone.

But those words from Psalm 100 never died in Gracia's heart. She said, "The Lord has given me joy. We can have a hard day here at home, but I'm still just dumb enough to be really, really happy. And even when they were dragging me up the hill from Martin and I could see he was white and I could tell he was dead, you know what? I was so happy in my heart that I was getting out of there. I can't explain it, but I don't think I have to feel guilty or deny it."

So make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands! Serve the Lord will gladness; come before His presence with singing. Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

GRATITUDE PSALM 100:4-5

The last half of the Psalm prescribes the second great attitude we're to cultivate—gratitude. Ps 100:1-3 tell us to be glad, and Ps 100:4-5 tell us to be grateful.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands!
Serve the Lord with gladness;
Come before His presence with singing.
Know that the Lord, He is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,
And into His courts with praise.
Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.
For the Lord is good;
His mercy is everlasting,
And His truth endures to all generations.

The most famous quote in the twentieth century on the subject of our attitude came from the great Viennese psychologist Viktor Frankl, who endured the horrors of the Nazi death camps. He spent 3 years at Auschwitz, Dachau and other concentration camps. The Nazis took everything from him: All his property and possessions, all his family and friends, all his future and hope, and even the very clothes on his back. Out of it, he wrote a very powerful book entitled Man's Search for Meaning, in which he said: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

In this passage, the Psalmist is telling us to make our way into the tabernacle, to enter through the gates, to nter the courtyard, to approach the Tabernacle in worship, and to do it with an attitude or thanksgiving and praise. Be thankful to Him and bless His name.

Thankfulness is the opposite of almost every negative attitude you can think of.

- What is the opposite of complaining and grumbling? Thanksgiving.
- What is the opposite of discouragement and depression? Thanksgiving.
- What is the opposite of anger and anxiety? Thanksgiving.

Several years ago, we had a special Thanksgiving service here at our church, in which the speaker was our own dear Dr. Robert Hill, who has gone on to be with the Lord. That night he told of visiting Bangkok, Thailand, where he was invited to a special celebration given by the King and Queen. His Thai guide, a young man named Joseph, asked several questions as he drove them to the pavilion. He knew a little English and was delighted to carry on a conversation. When he asked where the Hills lived, they told him Richmond, Virginia. "Oh, you are a rich man?" asked the boy.

Bob laughed and told him, no, he wasn't rich. Bob recalled, "Then he asked if we owned an automobile and I told him we had two cars in our family. His next question was about the house where we lived. I told him it was a rather simple house with ten rooms. He was amazed at its size, especially when he related his and his family lived in just two small rooms.

"Then he asked about our family. We told him we had four healthy children, two in college and two still at home.

"Joseph was silent for a moment or so, and then he replied, 'You are a rich man.' We laughed, but deep in our hearts we knew he was right, though we had never thought of it in those terms. We were rich. But were we thankful?"

Well, in this passage the writer of Psalm 100 gives us three specific reasons to be thankful, and all three have to do with the character of our God.

First, the Lord is good. Years ago, I spent some time looking up this word "good" in the Bible, and I discovered something I had never seen before. When the Bible uses the word "good" as it relates to God, it doesn't just mean "good." It's not like we say, "That was a good book!" Or "That was a good pizza." When the Bible uses this word, it presents it as a very attribute of God.

In means perfect and desirable and morally excellent. It refers to the highest quality of divine goodness. And it very frequently uses that word to describe God. In fact, the word "good" occurs nearly 800 times in the Bible.

For example, in Genesis 1, we're told that God made the light and it was good. He made the earth, and it was good. He made the stars and they were good. He made a human being, and it was good. He saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.

In Exodus 33, Moses is battered down by some things, and he begs the Lord to show him His glory. And the Bible says that God caused His goodness to pass before Moses, and it was so bright and majestic that Moses had to be hidden in the cleft of the rock so as not to be consumed.

When the Ark of the Covenant was brought into Jerusalem, all the people gathered together in great joy and sang a song about the Lord, saying, "For He is good. His mercy endures forever."

When Jesus came, He came preaching the Good Tidings, the Good News. He said, "I am the good shepherd." The Bible says that He went around doing good.

Paul said that all things work together for good to those who love the Lord; and James said, “Every good and perfect gift comes from above, from the Father of lights, from whom there is no shadow or variation of turning.”

We can be very thankful, for He is very good.

Second, His mercy is everlasting. The current issue of Forbes Magazine lists the four hundred richest people in the world. Bill Gates came in number one, with forty-eight billion dollars. I don’t suppose that a single person in this room can imagine being that wealthy. We can’t visualize it or relate to it or understand it. But even Bill Gates, despite all his money, could spend himself into poverty, given enough time. His wealth is not infinite or inexhaustible.

But the mercy of God is infinite and inexhaustible. No matter how much of it He uses, there is still an undiminished supply left for us, upon which we can continually draw. Now if God was good but not merciful, we’d be in a fatal position, because the same Bible that says God is good also says about you and me, “There is none good, no not one.” So if we hold to the doctrine of the goodness of God, we should be exceedingly thankful for the mercy of God.

Someone asked me last week, “Will God keep on forgiving me despite the fact that I sin over and over and over.” The answer is, “Yes, He will if you keep sincerely repenting and seeking His help.”

This church is known as a “Grace Church.” That is, people can come here, being battered and beaten up by sin; and we’re not going to batter them and beat them, we’re not going to condemn them. Now, that doesn’t mean that we tolerate sin or violate the holiness of God; it means that we believe in the rehabilitating power of Jesus Christ. We believe in the rehabilitating power of Jesus Christ, because His mercy is never-ending.

The third reason why the Psalmist is thankful is because of God’s truth. The last stanza says: “His truth endures to all generations.”

God will never retire His promises. Recently I read a new biography of Charles Spurgeon, written by Clive Anderson. One day Spurgeon faced a tough situation. It was in 1854, when Spurgeon was just in his early twenties and was a new pastor in London. The neighborhood in London where he ministered was hit by an epidemic of Asiatic cholera, and many in his congregation contracted the disease. Family after family called for him, and almost every day he preached another funeral. He gave all his youthful energy to visiting the sick, caring for the dying, burying the dead, and comforting the bereaved. He became very weary of body and sick of heart, and his friends feared that he himself was coming down with the deadly disease.

One day when he was at the breaking point, he was riding back from a funeral, so tired and sick that he was near collapse. Glancing up from his carriage, he saw a sign in the window of a shoemaker on Dover Road. It was a Scripture quotation from Psalm 91:1-2: “Because thou hast made the Lord, which is thy refuge, even the Most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.”

Spurgeon said, “The effect upon my heart was immediate. Faith appropriated the passage as her own. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying in a calm and peaceful spirit. I felt no fear of evil. I suffered no harm. The providence which moved the tradesman to place those verses in his window I gratefully acknowledge, and in the remembrance of its marvelous power I adore the Lord my God.”

Those words were written in the book of Psalms thousands of years ago. King David lived about 1000 B.C.—about 3000 years ago. And yet that verse was just as relevant and true as it was when it was first written. The promises of God don’t age. They don’t expire. They can’t be retired. They’ll never become obsolete. Heaven and earth may pass away, but His words abide forever. His truth will endure through all generations.

If you know the story of Samson in the Bible, you know that he was led into the temple of Dagon to be tormented and ridiculed; but he found that the temple was supported by two great columns, two middle pillars, which Samson, in a final display of his remarkable strength, pushed over and destroyed.

The whole temple of our attitude in this world is supported by two great central columns which can never be pusher over and destroyed if they are based on the Word of God. The first is gladatude. The second is gratitude. So…

> Shout to the Lord, all the ends of the earth,
> Serve Him with gladness in your heart,
> Come ye before His matchless Name,

And bid your gloomy thoughts depart.

Know ye the Lord is God indeed;
He is the Maker of our frame.
Not by ourselves do we exist,
But by His gracious, holy Name.

He is the Shepherd of His flock,
His tender mercies never cease,
We are the trophies of His gracious care,
And of His never-ending peace.

Enter into His gates with joy;
Come to His courts with loudest praise.
For He is good, His mercies never cease;
His truth endures through endless days.

Nothing But Praise
Psalm 103

I love overcast skies, especially up in the mountains where the mist hangs over the hills and pockets of fog gather over the hollows. I also love partly-cloudy days, particularly at sunrise and sunset, when the sky is painted scarlet and the clouds are all ablaze. But my favorite days are the clear ones in which you can look from one end of the heavens to another and find not a cloud in the skies, not even one the size of a man's hand. I love sunny, bright, cloudless days.

That's why I love Psalm 103. It is the one chapter in the Bible in which there are no clouds of any sort. Psalm 103 is devoted exclusively to counting our blessings, to lauding our Lord and Savior; and it is the one prayer in the Bible that contains nothing but praise. No dismal moods, no prayer requests, no petitions, no problems. Psalm 103 contains nothing but praise. Let's read selected portions of it together:

Praise the Lord, O my soul;
All my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
And forget not all his benefits-
Who forgives all your sins
And heals all your diseases,
Who redeems your life from the pit
And crowns you with love and compassion,
Who satisfies your desires with good things,
So that your youth is renewed like the eagles….
The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.
He made known his ways to Moses,
His deeds to the people of Israel:
The Lord is compassionate and gracious,
Slow to anger, abounding in love.
He will not always accuse,
Nor will he harbor his anger forever;
He does not treat us as our sins deserve
Or repay us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the dearth,
So great is his love for those who fear him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has he removed our transgressions from us.
As a father has compassion on his child
So the Lord has compassion on those who fear him…

Praise the Lord, you his angels,
You mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word.
Praise the Lord, all his heavenly host everywhere in his dominion.
Praise the Lord, O my soul.

G. Campbell Morgan said that Psalm 103 was perhaps the most perfect Psalm of pure praise to be found in the Bible; and Charles Spurgeon said, "It is one of those all-comprehending Scriptures which is a Bible in itself, and it might alone almost suffice for the hymnbook of the church." We don't have the time to look at the entire Psalm in depth, so today I would like to focus on the preamble —verses 1-5.

The first words say: "Praise the Lord." The writer is telling someone here to praise God. To whom is he speaking? He is speaking to himself! "Praise the Lord, O my soul." The writer is giving himself a much-needed pep-talk. The writer here is David, King of Israel, who had learned a few things about dealing with his own moods. Several years ago as I was studying through the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel, I noticed two verses that impressed me on this subject. They came back to my mind this week as I studied this passage. The first was 1 Samuel 23:16. In 1 Samuel 23, David was in deep trouble, almost insane with fear and tension. Several disasters had fallen upon him, and he was extremely distraught. But we read in 1 Samuel 23:16 that his friend Jonathan came along and "strengthened his hand in the Lord." Jonathan encouraged him, gave him a pep-talk, helped him regain his strength and peace and composure.

Seven chapters later, in 1 Samuel 30, David again found himself in terrible, soul-crushing distress. This time Jonathan was unable to be with him, and there was no one to comfort him. There was no one to encourage him or to give him a pep talk. So what did David do? 1 Samuel 30:6 says, "David strengthened himself in the Lord."

This is a most important technique to learn. Sometimes there is no one around us to uplift or encourage us. Sometimes we have no one on whom to lean. What can we then do? We must learn to encourage ourselves in the Lord. We must learn to give ourselves pep-talks, to talk ourselves out of depression and despair.

How do we do such a thing? Well, that is just what Psalm 103:1 teaches us. The Psalmist is talking to himself here, telling himself the truth—the facts—about the blessings and benefits found in his God. You might say that Psalm 103 is true, biblical positive thinking: Praise the Lord, O my soul.

When was the last time you talked to yourself like this, saying: "Self, you have been down in the dumps long enough. You have been fretting and fearful and fainthearted. Now, it is time to shake it off. Cheer up! Remember God's blessings to you. Don't forget his benefits toward you. Have you forgotten his divine presence? Have you been overlooking his promises? Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name."

Recently I read a wonderful testimony by a woman in New York who listened to her pastor preach one Sunday on this very theme. A few days later she awoke to find it was raining, and her truck had a flat tire. Her husband fixed the flat, but she left for work late. As she drove down the street, the truck's exhaust pipe dropped off, hit the ground, and started dragging. She wanted to scream in frustration.

But she remembered to talk to herself: Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. She took a deep breath, thought a moment, and thanked God for her husband who fixed her flat. She thanked God that it had been raining, for the rain had caused her to drive more cautiously and slowly when the exhaust pipe broke off. She reminded herself that the exhaust pipe hadn't gotten mangled under the vehicle or caused a wreck. She thanked God for the coat hangers she found in the truck with which she was able to wire the tailpipe to the chassis, and she praised the Lord for an old burlap sack in the truck's cab that she put on the ground when she laid down to wire the exhaust pipe.

She thanked God for the dexterity of her fingers as she wrapped the coat hangers around parts of the chassis. And she thanked God that no other trucks or cars came along to splash her with dirty water.

She later said, "That day I realized that I can choose how to respond to the things that happen to me. The problems I face can make me grumble or give up, to be bitter and angry, or I can choose to search for the good that is hidden in each trial—and I can thank God for every situation."

That is what the Psalmist here is seeking to do. Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget his benefits.

The Courtroom

What benefits and blessings are we to consider? Well, the Lord takes us on a little tour, and the first stop is the courthouse where we can remind ourselves that we have been declared "Not Guilty."

Praise the Lord, O my soul;
All my inmost being, praise his holy name.
Praise the Lord, O my soul,
And forget not all his benefits-
Who forgives all your sins

Later, in verses 11 and 12, the Psalmist uses a graphic comparison to underscore God's forgiveness: For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

In other words, God's love and forgiveness is as vast and infinite and inexhaustible as the universe. How vast is that? Well, I'd like for us to use our imagination for a moment. Pretend the earth was a grape. If, in the scale of things, planet earth were the size of a grape or marble, how far away would the sun be? In proportion, the sun would be the size of a beach ball and would be 163 yards away--a little less than the length of two football fields.

The largest planet in our solar system, Jupiter, would be about the size of a grapefruit, and it would be about five blocks up the road.
What about the nearest star? In our scaled down universe, the nearest star would still be 24,000 miles away.
How big would the Milky Way be? If the earth were a grape, the Milky Way, reduced to a proportionate size, would still be 55 billion miles wide. And that is only the galaxy we happen to belong to. The universe is filled with other galaxies. Who can imagine the size of the universe? Who can tell how high the heavens are above the earth? Who can measure the distance between east and west?
/For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

A young man came to see me recently who was utterly miserable. He had gotten involved in a fraternity at his university and had been led deeply into prolonged sin. He felt absolutely hopeless and guilty and abandoned by God. He said, "I have confessed and confessed and confessed my sins, but I feel so badly I can't imagine God's forgiving me." I picked up my copy of Daily Light and turned to the back, to a page of verses on God's forgiveness. I said, "Read these verses to me." He began reading: There is forgiveness with you… You have forgiven the iniquity of your people; you have covered all their sin. You have taken away all your wrath; you have turned from the fierceness of your anger. Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you. You, being dead in your trespasses he has made alive together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses. Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Day and night your hand was heavy upon me. I acknowledged my sin to you and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us./
As my friend read those words, he began crying and sobbing, and he claimed them for his own. In Jesus Christ we are declared "Not Guilty" by virtue of forgiveness.

The Hospital

After taking us by the courthouse, the Lord walks beside the Hospital with us, reminding us that God not only forgives our sins, he heals our diseases. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits--who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases. How does God heal all our diseases? I can not accept the assertion of some that it is always God's will to always heal all our diseases in this life, for that runs counter to the overall teachings of Scripture and to the actual experiences of every Christian who has ever lived. If God always healed every the physical diseases of his people in this life, none of us would ever die. I do believe God can and often does give us healing in answer to prayer; but even Paul himself was not healed of his disease, which he called a thorn in the flesh. God said to him instead, "My grace is sufficient for you."

But what of Paul now? What if we had a telescope that could look up into heaven and see into the city of God, the New Jerusalem? We would see Paul healthy and happy and disease free. There is no cancer in heaven, no heart disease, no high blood pressure. God will either heal us in this life or he will heal us through the process of death, but in either case the Bible says that "by his stripes we are healed."

The Slave Market

Third, when we are down and out, the Lord wants remind us of something else. Not only does he walk with us beside the courthouse and the hospital, he takes us by the slave market and shows us that we have been purchased from a cruel master and set free. We have been redeemed: Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit.
In the days of slavery, some cruel masters threw their slaves into deep holes where they sunk down in the brackish mud. The holes were sealed shut, and there the slave was, hungry, helpless, left in the darkness to the rats and to the terrors of the blackness, for hours or days at a time.

That is a picture of the eternal condition the devil desires for you. But Jesus Christ saw you and me when we were enslaved to that cruel master, and he purchased us with his own blood. We are redeemed from the prince of darkness and from the pit.

The Palace

And where do we go from there? We go from the pit to the palace, to the throne room. Read on: Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion…

I have never been in an actual throne room, but when Katrina and I went to England for our twentieth wedding anniversary a couple of years ago, we visited the Tower of London and saw the British crown jewels. In the very first glass case we came to sat St. Edward's Crown, which is a five-pound crown dating from the 1600s which is placed by the archbishop upon the head of each new monarch in Westminster Abbey on coronation day. It is worn for twenty minutes, then locked away until the next coronation. It has a solid gold frame adorned with 444 semi-precious stones. The most breathtaking crown is the Imperial State Crown, which is the one Queen Elizabeth wears for official state functions. It is covered with 3,733 jewels, including over 2000 diamonds, over 200 pearls, 17 sapphires, 11 emeralds, and 5 rubies. It is perhaps the single most expensive and precious collection of stones and jewels in the world. But when you and I come to Jesus Christ, he crowns us with something infinitely more valuable—his infinite love and compassion. He wore a crown of thorns that we might wear a crown of glory.

The Banquet Hall

The Lord wants us to bless him, to thank him, and to praise him with all that is within us. He wants us to forget none of his benefits. So he takes us by the courthouse and reminds us that we are forgiven. He takes us by the hospital and reminds us we are healed. He takes us by the slave block and reminds us we are redeemed. He takes us by the throne room and reminds us we are crowned with love and compassion. Then he takes us by the Banquet Hall and reminds us that he meets all our needs. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
When it says, "He satisfies our desires…" that implies that we have certain needs and desires. What kind of needs do you have right now? Financial needs? Physical needs? Relationship needs? Do you need inner peace and strength? Do you need guidance? Do you need inner healing? Do you need strength? When we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all these other things will be added to us. When we make him our shepherd, we shall not want. When we delight ourselves in the Lord, he will give us the desires of our heart.

He satisfies our desires with good things so that our youth is renewed like the eagles.

Now, let me show you one last thing. Look at the previous Psalm—Psalm 102. Here the Psalmist is pessimistic, afflicted and troubled. He begins to pray saying, "Hear my prayer, O Lord; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress… For my days vanish like the smoke… My heart is blighted and withered like grass; I forget to eat my food. Because of my loud groaning I am reduced to skin and bones. I am like a desert owl, like an owl alone in the ruins."

In his troubled and pessimistic state, what kind of bird is this Psalmist? He is a brooding, lonely, ponderous old owl—sad, silent, grim.

But just one chapter over, when he remembers to praise the Lord, to bless the Lord—when he remembers to praise God with all his heart, top to toe, what kind of bird is he? When he talks to himself and reminds himself of God's blessings and benefits toward him, what does he feel like? When he strolls by the Courthouse, Hospital, Auction Block, Palace, and Banquet Hall, what bird does he identify with?

With the eagle—strong, majestic, soaring high. And it was perhaps this very verse that Isaiah the prophet had in mind 300 years later when he said, "Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up on wings like eagles. They shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

So the next time you're needing a pep talk and there's no one around to give it to you—learn the secret of strengthening yourself in the Lord. Take a little tour of God's blessings, and learn to say: Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

A THANKSGIVING TRILOGY

PSALM 105-107

Today is Thanksgiving Day. Yes, I know that as an official American holiday, we have to wait until Thursday to observe Thanksgiving. As a nation, we only allocate one day a year for Thanksgiving. But for the people of God, every day is Thanksgiving. There are 365 thanksgiving days every year—except on Leap Year when we have an additional day on which to be thankful. So on this Thanksgiving Day, I would like to turn to three of the greatest thanksgiving chapters of the Bible—Psalm 105, 106, and 107. Let's begin with Psalm 107 and notice how the theme of this chapter is stated four times:

> Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness (Psalm 107:8-9).
>
> Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! For He has broken the gates of bronze, and cut the bars of iron in two (Psalm 107:15-16).
>
> Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing (Psalm 107:21-22).
>
> Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men. Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, and praise Him in the company of the elders (Psalm 107:31-32).

Now, I have a theory about preaching. I think that a lot of preachers say the same thing Sunday after Sunday and bore their congregations. They never show their people any new truths or insights from the Bible. Well, in a sense we do say the same thing every week because we preach the same Gospel. But in another sense, the Bible is a huge book and if we are preaching the whole council of God, we should always be discovering new things that amaze, intrigue, and edify us. Well, this week I had planned to speak just from Psalm 107, but as I studied for today's message I discovered something I had never seen before, and it has been a great blessing to me and I want to share it with you this morning.

To my surprise, I discovered that Psalm 107 is the final installment of a divine trilogy of poems that serve as a sort of epic, chronicling the entire history of ancient Israel in three movements.

To explain this, let me give you the history of the Old Testament in sixty seconds. In Genesis, God called a man named Abraham and promised to give to him and his descendants a portion of land on which to build a nation. Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob, were all given the same promise. Jacob's son Joseph was shanghaied to Egypt as a slave, but he eventually moved from the prison to the palace, and he became the Prime Minister of the entire nation. He moved his brothers and their families to Egypt, and for the next four hundred years the Israelites multiplied into a great nation; but, in the process, they were enslaved by the Egyptians. Then God raised up Moses who, after a dramatic contest with Pharaoh, led the Israelites out of Egypt. His successor, Joshua, led them at long last into the land promised to them by God and they possessed the land and built there a mighty nation, a theocracy centered in the dynasty of King David. That was Phase One of Old Testament History—Possessing the Land.

Then we come to Phase Two. As the centuries passed, the nation of Israel went into a slow spiritual decline and eventually they collapsed both morally and militarily. As a result, they were driven from the land by the invading empires of, first, Assyria and then, Babylon. The Israelites were exiled and driven to the four winds of heaven. It was the discipline of God and the chastening of heaven.

Seventy years pass, and then we come to Phase Three: Israel's return to the land. Not all of the exiled Jews or even most of them, returned; but a remnant or portion of the Jewish people migrated back to the land of Israel during the time of the Persian Empire, and at that point the Old Testament closes. When we open the New Testament, four hundred years have passed and in the nation of Israel a baby is born on a wondrous night while the angels announce His birth over Shepherd's Field in Bethlehem.

So that's the history of the Old Testament in three movements.

- Phase One: Israel possesses the land.
- Phase Two: Israel is driven from the land.
- Phase Three: Israel returns to the land.

These three movements form the sum and substance of three great epic poems that we know as Psalm 105, Psalm 106, and Psalm 107. These are three of the greatest classic works in ancient literature, and yet they have been largely overlooked. One commentator said something to this effect: Had such epics appeared in the writings of Theocritus or Virgil, they would have been regarded as masterpieces.

Psalm 105 describes Israel's possessing the land. Psalm 106 describes Israel's loss of the land. Psalm 107 describes Israel's return to the land.

Now to me the most remarkable thing is that the overall tone and texture of these three epic poems is one of thanksgiving. The theme of Psalm 105 is thanksgiving for the goodness of God in giving the land of Israel to His people. The theme of Psalm 106 is thanksgiving for the discipline of God in removing His people from the land and watching over them despite their sin. The theme of Psalm 107 is thanksgiving for God's mercy in bringing back His people to the land He had promised them. And we can learn a mighty lesson from this observation.

Psalm 105: Thank God for His Promises and Provision

Psalm 105 teaches us to thank God for His promises and for His provision. A friend of mine recently gave me a book by missiologist Don Richardson. I've only started the book, but I'm already intrigued by it. In the opening chapter, Richardson tells of a passage in the holy literature of India which describes a tree growing upside down. This tree in Indian lore is not upside down because it has been uprooted. Instead, it is upside down because its roots are in heaven and its branches are spreading over the earth, yielding fruit for humanity. [Don Richardson, Secrets of the Koran (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003), p. 17].
I thought to myself—what an apropos picture of God's goodness. His tree of blessing has its roots in heaven, but its branches are on earth, and every day we enjoy the fruits of God's goodness.

Notice how this shows up in Psalm 105. It begins:

> Oh, give thanks to the Lord! Call upon His name; make known His deeds among the peoples! Sing to Him, sing psalms to Him; talk of all His wondrous works! Glory in His holy name; let the hearts of those rejoice who seek the Lord.

Why should we give thanks? Psalm 105:7ff says:

> He is the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth. He remembers His covenant forever, the word which He commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, and confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant, saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as the allotment of your inheritance" when they were few in number, indeed very few, and strangers in it.

The rest of the Psalm describes how Joseph was sold as a slave in Egypt, how he became a mighty Prince and there in Egypt the people became a great power. They multiplied in their captivity until they became a mighty nation, enslaved as they were. Then God raised up a deliverer named Moses who contested Pharaoh and led the children of Israel out of Egypt; and the Lord brought the Israelites into the Promised Land as He had sworn.

Psalm 105:37 says:

> He also brought them out with silver and gold, and there was none feeble among His tribes. Egypt was glad when they departed, for the fear of them had fallen upon them.

Psalm 105 ends this way with Psalm 105:42ff:

> For He remembered His holy promise, and Abraham His servant. He brought out His people with joy, His chosen ones with gladness. He gave them the lands of the Gentiles, and they inherited the labor of the nations, that they might observe His statutes and keep His laws. Praise the Lord (Psalm 105:42-45).

Why should we praise the Lord? Because He gives us His promises and provision. He brings us into the fullness of His promises.

I was thinking just the other day that God is under no obligation to give us even one little promise. He owes us nothing, and we have no right to expect anything from Him. But He has given us a book filled with hundreds—and maybe thousands; there is no way to count them—of promises. Every single promise is more wonderful than words can describe, and each one meets a critical need or desire in our lives. And there will never be a divine promise that God does not perfectly fulfill.

In preparing my books on the history of hymnology, I studied the life of the "Father of the English Hymn," Isaac Watts. One of his biographers wrote that when Dr. Watts grew old and infirm, he had quoted a minister who once referred to the "plain promises" of the Gospel. Watts liked that description, and in his old age he said,

> "And so I find it; they are the plain promises of the Gospel that are my support, and I bless God they are plain promises, which do not require much labor or pains to understand them, for I can do nothing now but look into my Bible for some promise to support me, and live upon that." [Paxton Hood, Isaac Watts: His Life and Hymns

(1875), p. 262.]

That's a rather good description of living by faith. We simply look into the Bible for some promise to support us, and we live upon that promise."

Have you ever thought of how good is was of God to give us birds? What if He had created everything just as it is, but with no birds in the sky. No sparrows. No robins. Last week I drove to Missouri for some meetings, and late in the day I saw great, long columns of birds, so thick that the sky was black. They were migrating, I suppose, to South America for the winter. It looked like a great moving cloud as far as I could see from North to South, and I turned off my car radio and praised the Lord for the majesty of His creation.

The other day I arrived at a meeting a little early, and so I walked very slowly from my car. All at once, I became aware of a symphony playing all around me. The birds were singing with all their hearts. I had almost ducked into that building without even noticing the living symphony of nature.
There's an old song that says:

> This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,
> The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise.

I think we have to train ourselves to see the promises and the provisions of God, for we're apt to take them for granted.

Psalm 105 tells how God promised to give the land of Israel to the children of Israel, and how He fulfilled that promise and brought them into the land. And it calls upon us to praise and thank Him and to make known His deeds among the people.

Psalm 106: Thank God for His Chastening and Correction

The next Psalm—Number 106—tells a different story, but it also calls us to thanksgiving. We should be thankful for God's chastening and correction. Let's look at this one together. It begins:

> Praise the Lord! Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.

What mercy is the writer talking about? The mercy that chastens and corrects us in love. Look at Psalm 106:6:

> We have sinned with our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly.

He then goes on to say that even though the children of Israel who came out of Egypt were stubborn and unfaithful, the Lord nevertheless kept His promises to them. And when they entered the Promised Land, they still tended toward rebellion.

Psalm 106:40ff says:

> Therefore the wrath of the Lord was kindled against His people, so that He abhorred His own inheritance. And He gave them into the hand of the Gentiles, and those who hated them ruled over them.

Psalm 106:47 says:

> Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the Gentiles, to give thanks to Your holy name, to triumph in Your praise. Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say "Amen!"

In some ways this is a sad chapter to read, for it is almost entirely given over to the long history of the faults and failures and foibles of the Israelites. And yet the entire Psalm both begins and ends with praise and thanksgiving.

Why? Because God corrects and chastens us in His love for our good. When we sin, He does not cast us off forever. He allows chastening to come in order to purify and correct us, and we should be thankful for that. Hebrews 12 says that whom the Lord loves, He chastens. Sometimes He simply allows us to face the consequences of our sins so that we will learn from them. Other times, He is more direct.

When I was in college, one of the preachers I most enjoyed listening to was the British preacher, Alan Redpath. I believe I first heard him at Ben Lippen Conference Grounds in North Carolina, but for a number of years he was pastor of Charlotte Chapel in Edinburgh, a church I visited only a couple of years ago. Early in his ministry at Charlotte Chapel, Redpath had a traumatic experience. He had just returned from a conference and went to his study to prepare for the services the next day. Suddenly as he was writing, he lost control of his hand. As he rose to call for help, his legs gave way. His right side became paralyzed and his speech was gone. He had suffered a stroke. The doctors told him he was very lucky, for there seemed to be no brain damage, but that he would have to give up his work. Redpath later confessed that he went through a very difficult and emotional period. He kept asking God why such a thing had happened to him at the very moment his ministry was taking off in Edinburgh. He said, "The depths of despair to which I sunk were beyond description; sometimes I spent hours each day weeping." Furthermore, he found

himself under assault by tremendous temptations. To his surprise, he found himself subject to “sinful thoughts, temptations to impurity, and bad language” After months of such struggle, the clouds suddenly parted and Redpath felt the presence of the Lord draw near to him. The Lord seemed to say: “The devil had nothing to do with this. It is I, your Savior, who have brought this experience into your life to show you two things: First, that this is the kind of person—with all your sinful thoughts and temptations—you are…. Second, I want to replace you with Myself, if you will only allow Me to be God in you.” Redpath realized that in the busyness of his ministry, his life had been in a slow internal decline and he determined that his illness had been the correction and chastening of God. Oh, he said, how thankful I became for that stroke. It was like when David said in Psalm 119: “It was good for me that I have been afflicted.” The Lord proceeded to heal Dr. Redpath completely, except for some slight damage to his right hand which, he said, was a very minor matter but a constant reminder of the lessons God had taught him.

God sometimes uses illness and sickness to correct us. It has always been very interesting to me that in 1 Corinthians, Paul warned the church at Corinth that some of them had been sick and a few had even died because they had been careless and thoughtless in the way they observed the Lord’s Supper, and God was chastening them for that. Paul himself attributed his sickness—his famous “thorn in the flesh”—to God disciplining him and bringing humility into his life, lest he be puffed up and proud.

Now, not all sickness is divine chastening; and not all divine chastening comes in the form of sickness. But how thankful we should be for those corrections (in whatever form) that God sends into our lives for our good. Even as I prepared this message, I received a phone call that told of one of God’s erring children whom He allowed to get caught in his sin, but for the purposes of chastening and correcting him.

> Job 5:17 says: "Behold, happy is the man whom God corrects; therefore do not despise the chastening of the Almighty."

In his autobiography, Dr. Paul White, a missionary physician to Africa, tells about a terrible drought that spread across the area in which he worked. The witch doctors and sorcerers tried in every way to call down rain, but the skies were bronze. The people waited day after day, week after week, for rain. Conditions grew serious. When the clouds gathered, the sky would rumble with thunder, but not a drop of rain would fall. The people began fearing a famine. It was just at the moment of desperation that the chief of the tribe came to visit the Christian leaders, and Dr. White was invited to meet with them. The chief said very simply, “We have sinned. We must ask God’s forgiveness and His help. Can we have next Sunday as a day of repentance and prayer for rain.”

And so it was announced. That Sunday the sky was overcast, but there was not a hint of rain. The people gathered at the church, and the place was packed. The chief was there and all the leading men of the village. The local pastor stood and described all the sins and evils of their community, and He begged the people to confess their sins and to turn in repentance to Jesus Christ. A tremendous prayer meeting followed as the people knelt and wept and confessed their sins. Then a hush fell over the church, and they left with a strange sense that God had heard their prayers. The people went home silently, and within one hour a soft, gentle rain was falling, and three inches fell within the next three days.

The people of Dr. White’s village understood that God had used a drought to correct and chasten them, as He had often done in biblical times. And how thankful they were that God corrects and chastens in His mercy and for our good.

Is it possible that something has come into your life right now that represents the correcting and chastening hand of our Lord Jesus Christ? Thank Him for that, and respond in repentance and faith. Give thanks to Him for His promises and provision, and for His correction and chastening.

Psalm 107: Thank God for His Restoration and Renewal

Then we come to Psalm 107 which tells us to thank God for His restoration and renewal. Psalm 107 is the third installment in this trilogy, and it is a song of thanksgiving for God’s goodness in bringing His people back into their land. This is a very picturesque Psalm. It has an introduction, and then it gives us four examples of people who should be thankful.

The introduction, beginning with verse one, says:

> Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever.

Notice those two words: mercy and goodness. I couldn’t help but think of the ending of Psalm 23:6:

> “Surely goodness and mercy follows me all the days of my life.”

Psalm 107:2 continues:

Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy, and gathered out of the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

That's the introduction: Thank God for bringing His people back into their land from all the lands—east, west, north, and south—to which they had been driven.

Now, part one of this Psalm gives us four examples of God's restoration, and each section ends with the same refrain.

In Psalm 107:4-9,

> He restores the wanderers in the wilderness: They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses, and He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city for a dwelling place. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men.

Have you ever called out to God in your distress? When He hears and answers and helps, don't forget to praise Him and thank Him for all He has done for you. As I prepared this message, I thought of some of the stresses and distresses I've encountered over the years. Some of you may not know that in the early 1980's when we built our educational wing where our offices now are, we encountered a terrible problem that put us into a crisis. Our contractor went bankrupt without having paid his subcontractors and we were liable for a vast amount of money. We called earnestly on the Lord and sought out the best financial and legal advice possible, and the issues were resolved better than we ever could have hoped. But I'm not sure we ever set aside a day of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for His help. We were certainly relieved when it was all over with, but looking back now, I wonder if we really thanked God as we should.

So often in life, we neglect to thank God for His deliverance and for His answers to prayer. So the Psalmist says,

> "Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!"

In Psalm 107:10-16, He restores dwellers in the darkness:

> Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and irons—because they rebelled against the words of God, and despised the counsel of the Most High, therefore He brought down their heart with labor; they fell down, and there was none to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their chains in pieces. Oh that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.

Have you ever known someone who fled from the Lord until they "hit bottom" and then they turned to Him and He brought light and life into their hearts? Whenever this happens, we should praise the Lord and render to Him all our thanksgiving.

In Psalm 107:17-22, He restores fools in their folly:

> Fools, because of their transgressions, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted. Their soul abhorred all manner of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distresses. He sent His word and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!

We have a great example of this in Jonah, as he fled from the Lord. He used some of this very terminology about sinking down and drawing near to the gates of hell. But he cried out to the Lord and was delivered. It reminds me of the old song that says:

> When I was sinking down, sinking down, sinking down,
> When I was sinking down, sinking down,
> When I was sinking down beneath God's righteous frown,
> Christ laid aside His crown for my soul, for my soul,
> Christ laid aside His crown for my soul.

In Psalm 107:23-30, He restores sailors on the seas:

> Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on the great waters, they see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep. For He commands and raises the stormy wind, which lifts up the waves of the sea. They mount up to the heavens, they go down to the depths; their soul melts because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wits' end. Then they cry to the Lord in their trouble,

> and He brings them out of their distresses. He calms the storm, so that its waves are still. Then they are glad because they are quiet; so He guides them to their desired haven. Oh, that men would give thanks to the Lord for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men.

Have you ever been at your wits' end? Some of you may be at your wits' end right now. What do you do? You cry to the Lord in your trouble, and He will in His own way and time bring you out of your distress that you might thank Him for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men.

One of our pioneer missionary heroes was Alexander Duff. On October 26, 1829, when he was twenty-three years old, he left from Portsmouth, England, with his young bride. They sailed aboard the Lady Holland, bound for India. From the beginning, the voyage was beset by misfortune, and as they finally limped toward India, having survived storm and gale, disaster struck. It was ten o'clock at night and most of the passengers were settling into their berths. Duff was half-dressed when he felt a terrible shock run through the ship. They had stuck a reef. Rushing to the deck, he heard the captain wail, "Oh, she's gone! She's gone!" It was a fearful night as the passengers huddled together expecting any moment to be swept to their deaths. They cried to the Lord in their distress, and He heard them. It was discovered they were near land, and somehow all the passengers made it to shore, although the ship and all her contents sunk beneath the water. Gone was Duff's personal library of 800 books. But as he looked out at the sea, he saw a package bobbing in the waves. He waded out and retrieved it. It was his Bible. He gathered the people and read to them this very Psalm—Psalm 107: Oh, that men would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men. Let them also exalt Him in the assembly of the people, and praise Him in the company of the elders.

We've all been wanderers in the wilderness, dwellers in the darkness, fools in our folly, and sailors on the high seas. But God is a God of deliverance, and Jesus Christ is our great deliverer. There's no prayer too small for Him to answer, and no problem too big for Him to resolve.

Let's thank Him for His promises and provisions, for His correction and chastening, for His restoration and renewal.
Oh, that we would praise the Lord for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men!

Ten Ways To Lift Your Spirits
Psalm 118:24

In one of his books, Norman Vincent Peale recalled sitting as a boy in church and looking over to the next pew where Deacon Jones sat. It seemed that Deacon Jones always wore a dour and severe expression, and one Sunday little Norman leaned toward his mother and asked about it: "Why does Deacon Jones always have that sour look on his face."
"Oh," said his mother. "That isn't a sour look. It's a pious look."

But Norman Vincent Peale wasn't fooled one bit; he later recalled that even as a child he could recognize a sour look--and a sour man--when he saw one.

A sour, depressed or dejected Christian is a sorry recommendation for the Christian faith. But many of us--myself often included--go around with dropping spirits and sour faces. We falter under the burdens of life. There have never been so many of us so depressed in all of history. Psychologist Martin Seligman recently wrote, "Americans, on average, may be more depressed, and at a younger age, than they have ever been: (We have) unprecedented psychological misery in a nation with unprecedented prosperity and material well-being."

The reason, of course, is that despite our prosperity and material well-being, life is hard, and sometimes it just seems to get to us.
Well, today I would like to speak on the subject, "Ten Ways to Lift Your Spirits." This is the last message in our series entitled, "Trade Secrets of Successful People: 54 Helps, Hints, and Habits to Strengthen Your Life." I've already shared 44 of these secrets in our previous message, and today we'll look at the last ten in this message, "Ten Ways to Lift Your Spirits."

Our Scripture reading is from Psalm 118:24--This is the day the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

1. Rejoice And Be Glad

And straightaway we come to my first point: To lift our spirits, we must learn to say, "This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it." The context of this verse is interesting. We don't know who wrote Psalm 118, but he seems to have been the leader of a country that had just been thorough a major international crisis, a period of war, a nation encircled by hostile nations wanting to destroy it, an underdog in an unwelcome fight. Look at verses 10ff: All nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I will destroy them. They surrounded me, yes, they surrounded me like bees….

Think of how the smaller nations of Europe must have felt when they were systematically gobbled up by Hitler during World War II. Think of how Poland and Romania felt when they were given to Stalin. Think of how the people of Kuwait felt during the invasion of Iraq. Think of how the Jews felt when, on the very day they announced the reestablishment of the state of Israel in 1948, they were immediately encircled and attacked on every side by every Arab nation in the Middle East.

Sometimes we feel like we are similarly besieged; it seems our enemies and our problems are surrounding us like bees, like a swarm of wasps. But here in Psalm 118 the Lord had answered prayer and had intervened to deliver this nation and this head of state. The author of this Psalm wrote: I called on the Lord in distress; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? And in that spirit he tells his people, "This is the day that the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it."

Do you have a lot of problems right now? Are you surrounded by disappointments like a man in the midst of a swarm of bees? Then you are just where this Psalmist was. But Christ is the victor and faith is the victory; therefore we can say, "This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it."

2. Accentuate the Positive--Count Your Blessings

Second, accentuate the positive and count your blessings. I'm thinking now of Psalm 103. Here, again, was a man who was struggling to keep his head above water, and he was greatly tempted to give way to the blues. But he decided to count his blessings and to accentuate the positive. He said, Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits; who forgives all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with lovingkindness and tender mercies, who satisfies your mouth with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

John Maxwell says that our attitude determines our approach to life. The story of the two buckets underlies this truth. One bucket was an optimist, and the other was a pessimist. "There has never been a life as disappointing as mine," said the empty bucket as it approached the well. "I always come away from the well full, but I return empty time after time."

"There has never been such a happy life as mine," said the full bucket as it left the well. "I never come to the well empty, but what I go away again full."

Which kind of bucket are you?

3. Get Proper Rest

Third, we can't keep our spirits up emotionally if we become run down physically. There is a remarkable interplay between our spiritual, our emotional, and our physical selves. One of the reasons the disciples fell apart and deserted our Lord when he was crucified on Good Friday is that they were utterly exhausted. The arrest of Jesus came at the end of an exhausting week, and at the time of Jesus' crucifixion, they had been going for more than 24 hours without sleep.

Sometimes even a brief nap can help us. The other day I was very tired, and my spirits were low. I had a supper appointment, and I just thought I just couldn't make myself get up and go to it. But as it turned out, I arrived at the restaurant a few minutes early, and I leaned back in my car seat and dozed off for about 10 minutes. Thankfully, I woke up in time to go meet my friends, but you wouldn't believe how much better I felt with just those few winks.

4. Do Something For Someone Else

Fourth, do something for someone else. Recently I read an article that Lois Neely of Ontario, Canada wrote. On Good Friday one year not long ago, Lois was struggling with the blues. She had expected to spend Easter with friends in Florida, but a serious illness had cancelled her plans. She was bitterly disappointed, and as she sat gazing through a frosted window at the cold, barren landscape, her thoughts went to the swimming pool and tall palm trees she was missing. Several problems confronted her, and she was worried and weary.

Finally she prayed. "Lord," she said, "if you could gladden the hearts of those sad followers who had been walking to Emmaus, You are able to do it for me."

Remembering that the Emmaus disciples in Luke 24 had invited a friend to dinner, she decided to do the same. The friend came, and the two women had a lovely time. Then, remembering the women who visited the tomb on Easter Sunday, she called the chaplain in her retirement center and the two began planning an Easter Sunrise service.

To her surprise, forty seniors showed up; and the whole group seemed energized to sing, Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Alleluia! That evening, Lois wrote in her diary, "A most excellent day!" --which is, after all, what Easter is supposed to be!

What made the difference? Instead of sitting around feeling sorry for herself, she decided to be proactive and do some things for others.

5. Listen To Happy Music

Fifth, listen to happy music. A few years ago I found myself becoming easily depressed about things, and I decided to do whatever I needed to do to snap out of it. One of my strategies was this. I went down to the public library and checked out a dozen selections of music--classical music and pop music and Christian music. I found the happiest and brightest pieces of these and started listening to them in the car. I discovered that music is a very emotional medium, and it is hard to keep your spirits up when you listen to melancholic music, but by the same token, it is hard to remain melancholic when you listen to bright and happy music.

6. Exercise

Sixth, exercise. When you look at the characters in the Bible, you notice that they generally kept themselves in good physical shape. Consider Elijah's running, Jonathan's archery, Samson's body-building, and Daniel's healthy diet. Apparently Christ Himself had a strong physique, able to walk long distances, work long hours, and bear great pain. Paul, too, was fit enough to tread water a day and a night in the deep. Doctors tell us that when we walk or run or exert our bodies in some way, it releases endorphins which are nature's pep pill. Automatically we begin to feel better, not just physically but emotionally. Some people think that exercise tires them out, but our fatigue is more often caused by nervous strain than by physical exertion. Exercise provides a way of relieving our bodies of that daily stress and improving their ability to deliver and utilize oxygen.

7. Make Up Your Mind To Be Happy And Enthusiastic

Seventh, make up your mind to be happy and enthusiastic. Abraham Lincoln was absolutely right when he said, "A man is about as happy as he makes up his mind to be."

8. Take A Little Break and Do Something For Yourself

Eighth, take a little break every day and do something your yourself. It might be a hot bath or a cold glass of tea. It might be a walk in the park or a pretzel in the mall. But treat yourself to a little break every day, and learn to enjoy being with yourself. Cultivate your own companionship.

9. Claim the Promises of God

Ninth, get into the Scripture every day and claim the promises of God.

On May 8, 1984, Benjamin M. Weir, veteran Presbyterian missionary to Lebanon, was kidnapped at gunpoint by Shiite Muslims in Beirut. During his sixteen-month imprisonment, he was constantly threatened with death. On his first night in captivity, one of his captors came to him, telling him to face the wall, which he did. "Now take your blindfold off and put this on." The man handed Benjamin a pair of ski goggles in which the eye holes had been covered with thick plastic adhesive tape. They totally blocked out the light. In Weir's mind, the sun had set. He later wrote:

> In the twilight there came to mind the hymn, "Abide with me fast falls the eventide." I felt vulnerable, helpless, lonely. I felt tears in my eyes. Then I remembered the promise of Jesus, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask what you will and it shall be done unto you."
> "Lord, I remember your promise, and I think it applies to me, too. I've done nothing to deserve it but receive it as a free gift. I need you. I need your assurance and guidance to be faithful to you in this situation. Teach me what I need to learn. Deliver me from this place and this captivity if it is your will. If it is not your will to set me free, help me to accept whatever is involved. Show me your gifts, and enable me to recognize them as coming from you. Praise be to you."

For the next sixteen months, his hope and joy was that he was not simply abiding in captivity. He was abiding in Christ, and thus able to "bear much fruit."

10. Cast Your Burden on the Lord

Finally, learn the art of casting your burdens on the Lord. I was recently greatly encouraged by reading about the great Methodist missionary E. Stanley Jones. He had gone to India with visionary passion, but his energy had evaporated amid unbearable heat, hostility, and anxiety. He felt himself unraveling. His doctor prescribed a year's rest in America, but he collapsed aboard ship while trying to speak at a Sunday morning service at sea and barely made it home. Once there, Jones tried to rest, but his nerves crackled like a short-circuiting electrical connection. He insisted on returning to India a year later, but he no sooner landed in Bombay than he collapsed again and was sent to the mountains for several more months of R & R. Finally returning to work, Jones quickly used up

his meager emotional reserves and was plunged again into depression and debilitation. Friends feared for his life. It was in this state that Jones traveled to the city of Lucknow to conduct a series of meetings. There one night while praying, he suddenly felt the Lord speaking to him. Though not audible, the Lord's voice almost seemed so. Jones sensed these words: Are you yourself ready for this work to which I have called you?
"No, Lord, I am done for," Jones replied. "I have reached the end of my resources."
If you will turn that over to Me and not worry about it, I will take care of it.
"Lord," Jones said, "I close the bargain right here." At that moment, E. Stanley Jones later said, a great peace settled into his heart and pervaded his whole being. "I knew it was done! Life--Abundant Life--had taken possession of me. I was so lifted up that I scarcely touched the road as I quietly walked home that night. Every inch was holy ground. For days after that I hardly knew I had a body. I went through the days, working far into the night, and came down to bedtime wondering why in the world I should ever go to bed at all, for there was not the slightest trace of tiredness of any kind. I seemed possessed by life and peace and rest--by Christ Himself."

Jones labored on for decades, serving over forty years in India, preaching around the world--sometimes three times a day, writing a dozen books, and becoming one of the most famous missionaries of his generation.

From his evening encounter with the Lord at Lucknow until his death in January, 1973, E. Stanley Jones lived in the glow of the sufficiency of Christ Himself, never forgetting the Lord's promise, If you turn that over to Me and not worry about it, I will take care of it.

I'd like to suggest to you today that if you will:

- **Rejoice in the Lord**
- **Accentuate the Positive and Count Your Blessings**
- **Get Proper Rest**
- **Do Something for Someone Else**
- **Listen to Happy Music**
- **Exercise**
- **Make up your Mind to be Happy & Enthusiastic**
- **Take a Break and Do a Little Something for Yourself Every Day**
- **Claim the Promises of God**
- **And Cast your Burden on Lord**

-- it will become overwhelmingly possible for you to awaken each morning and say: This is the day that the Lord has made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.

PSALM 118:24

Since the first of the year, we've been working our way through 100 different Bible verses that everyone on earth should know by heart. Today we're coming to the verse that may be the easiest of all of them to memorize. The reference isn't so easy—it's Psalm 118:24. I had more trouble remembering the reference than I had memorizing the verse. But the verse itself is simple to learn, and it's a verse we can quote every morning upon awakening: This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This verse tells us that God is in the day-making business. The Ancient of Days is the Manufacturer of Days. He has a vast, continually-running conveyer belt stretched from the sun to the earth and from heaven to this world. One new day rolls off God's assembly line every twenty-four hours, right on schedule, each one unique.

This verse reminds us that God's compassions never fail; they are new every morning, for great is His faithfulness. Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives; and as our days may demand shall our strength ever be.

Day by day the promise reads,
Daily strength for daily needs.

It's the happy privilege of the Christian to rise from bed each day with the knowledge that from the workbench of God's wisdomcomes an endless succession of sunrises and sunsets, all of them individually crafted and each one packaged with grace and wrapped in love.

This is the day the Lord hath made;
He calls the hours His own;
Let Heav'n rejoice, let earth be glad,
And praise surround the throne.

Now, whenever we see a verse like this in the Bible, we want to ask ourselves, "Why did the Psalmist write this verse? What made Him write down such a stupendous thought?" And the answer is found in the overall content of Psalm 118. As I prepared for this message a few weeks ago, I read through Psalm 118 over and over, trying to see its overall message. And it seems to me, at least in rough terms, that the Psalm has three general divisions—and they're all bound together by the idea: "This is the day the Lord has made."

This is the Day of God's Love (Ps 118:1-4)
The first four verses of Psalm 118 are clearly an introduction or preamble, in which the Psalmist tells us that this is the day of God's love: Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever. Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever." Let those who fear the Lord say: "His love endures forever."

Several different groups are enjoined here to sing this little phrase, that the love of God endures forever. We're all to sing it in Ps 118:1. Israel is to sing it in Ps 118:2. The House of Aaron, being the priests, is to sing it in Ps 118:3. And everyone who fears the Lord is to sing it in Ps 118:4. This is a call to celebration.

Now, I'm not sure how to convey the sense of these four verses in a way that will take them off the page and put them right in our hearts. It's not just a mantra of four words: His love endures forever. It's not just a slogan or motto or abstract truth. It is a real element of God's personality with constant implications for our relationship with Him and for our emotional well-being. One day while I was trying to think my way through Psalm 118 and through this verse, I grew low in my spirits. It was a day of some frustrations and failures, and I just felt a little beaten up and a little behind in several areas of life. But since I was studying this passage, I just tried to think of that phrase—His love endures forever. I thought of the praise chorus we sing with those words. His love keeps on going. His love never gives out. His love never wears down. His love never grows cold. His love is never distant or inaccessible.

I thought of the time a couple of years ago when I had a medical test, and I was rolled into the operating room. It was freezing in there, and I began to shiver from the cold. Just as the anesthesiologist began to do his work, a young man came and asked if I'd like to have a warm blanket. He spread a heated blanket over me, and I think that's one of the most comforting experiences I've ever had. Many of you know what I'm talking about. It really was a heated blanket in a cold room at a strange moment, and it just felt wonderful. As I thought about these four verses, I had the same sort of feeling. God's love is that tangible, that accessible and real; it's that warm and comforting. So the Psalmist said: Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever. Let Israel say: "His love endures forever." Let the house of Aaron say: "His love endures forever." Let those who fear the Lord say: "His love endures forever."

This is the Day of God's Help (Ps 118:5-18)
Now, in the next series of verses the Psalmist is going to tell us something about the operating room he was in when he rediscovered God's love. In other words, from Ps 118:5 through Ps 118:18, he's going to describe what he was going through; and we can label these verses: This is the day of God's help. Look at Ps 118:5:

In my anguish…

The word "**anguish**" is a vivid word, a word that describes someone who is being tortured in some way, physically, mentally, emotionally; someone who is going through a painful experience, one that causes agony. So here with Ps 118:5, we have what movie makers call a "flashback." The writer is going to go back now and give us the background or the backstory.

In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and He answered by setting me free. The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; He is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

Now he's going to get specific. This man has been in a war. His nation had been overrun or his land was being invaded. His situation had seemed to be hopeless, but somehow God had delivered him and given him victory.

All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off. They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the

Lord I cut them off. They swarmed around me like bees…

What a vivid image the Psalmist uses. In Bible times people were very aware of swarming bees. I've had two or three times in my life when I've mowed into a hornets' next and been pretty badly stung. Here the Psalmist was saying that he suddenly found himself swarmed with problems and enemies.

They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off.

I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.

Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things! The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!"

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death.

Several years ago, I read the story of a World War II veteran named Robert W. Schumacher. He was with the United States Navy during the invasion of North Africa in 1942, and he was serving on board the USS Bliss, which was a transport vessel with a troop capacity of over 2400 men. On November 12, 1942, the USS Bliss was riding anchor off the coast of Morocco, and Schumacher was resting on his cot. All day long he'd been unloading ammunition, gasoline, rations, and equipment for the invasion, and now he was resting on his bunk smoking a cigarette.

Unknown to him, at that very moment a German submarine had slipped among the ships in the harbor and was aiming a missile at his ship. Suddenly the loudspeakers came to life with "Now hear this," and instantly a great explosion knocked Schumacher to the floor. Another explosion went off, and he lost consciousness.

When he came to a few moments later, the ship was filled with a dense, acrid smoke and he felt his hair on fire. Sailors were walking over him. He got to his feet, put out the fire with his hands, and stumbled forward. All around him men were screaming. Somehow he managed to get to the deck and over the side into a crowded life raft. The sailors managed to put a little distance between themselves and their sinking ship when the USS Bliss exploded with a tremendous blast. It burned until 2:30 the next morning, and then sank. Schumacher said that it was like a little foretaste of hell, and he trembled at the thought that many of his friends had been trapped and had died, unprepared for eternity.

Many of Schumacher's friends died in the tragedy, and he himself realized he wasn't ready to die or to face God's judgment. He began reading the New Testament, and one night, alone in his pup tent, he asked the Lord to come into his life and be his personal Savior.

Shortly afterward, Schumacher made it to Anzio, Italy, but here again he found himself in the thick of the war. His convoy was attacked, and day and night he was the target of bullets and bombs. Perhaps the worst moment came when he was pulling guard duty on the harbor. Another ship was hit. It instantly exploded, and as Schumacher watched a thousand pieces of flaming debris flew through the air and a sound wave hit him with enough force to knock him off his feat.

When his relief man arrived, Schumacher said, "I returned to the sanctuary of my foxhole and took out my New Testament with Psalms. I began reading Psalm 118. It seemed written especially for me."

In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and He answered by setting me free. The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? The Lord is with me; He is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies….

All the nations surrounded me… They swarmed around me like…

…but the Lord helped me. The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.

Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: "The Lord's right hand has done mighty things! The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!"

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done. The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death.

The Lord's love endures forever… This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (Adapted from Robert W. Schumacher, "First Person," in Moody Magazine, November, 1989, pp. 95-96.)

I want to suggest that Schumacher's experience is a parable for our lives. We go along with little thought for God, and then something happens to us or some awareness comes to us, and we are gloriously saved, wonderfully converted. We discover that God's love endures forever and that it reaches even you and me. And from that point on we learn that we're swarmed with problems like hornets. We're facing great enemies. We're in constant danger. All around us is alarm, and all around us is anguish. And that's when we learn the reality of some of the great phrases found here in Psalm 118:

- I cried to the Lord, and He answered me.
- The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid.
- The Lord is with me; He is my helper.
- It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in men.
- I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me.
- The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.
- The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!

Every morning we can awaken and say: This is the day of God's Love! This is the day of God's help!

This is the Day of God's Son(Ps 118:19-29)
And that leads to the final part of Psalm 118. This is the day of God's Son, this is the day of Jesus Christ. At the risk of belaboring the outline of this Psalm, I want to review the three parts of Psalm 118. The first four verses are a celebratory preamble that establishes the theme: "God's love endures forever."

Then verses 5-18 are a personal testimony telling us how the writer had been in anguish, he had been swarmed, he had been pushed back, he had been in desperate straits, but the Lord had answered and helped him.

Now in this final part, a day of national worship and thanksgiving has been proclaimed. There's going to be a great festive procession through downtown Jerusalem, through the gates of the temple, and right into the House of the Lord. So the writer composed this Psalm for the occasion, and in succeeding and subsequent years it was sang by the crowds as they approachedJerusalem and the temple during the great worship festivals. And it came to have a very poignant meaning to Jesus Christ. In fact, this is a Messianic Psalm that prophetically points to Jesus Christ.

Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter. I will give You thanks, for You answered me; You have become my salvation.

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone….

As the pilgrims approached the temple they saw the great stones that had been used. One was the cornerstone (or some translations say capstone). This seems to hearken back to a Jewish story—not one that is in the Old Testament, but one that is in Jewish lore—that when the Temple was originally built all the stones were cut to size in the quarry. The stone masons had exact plans, and they cut every stone to size; but when one particularly large or oddly-shaped stone showed up at the building site, the builders thought it was a mistake and pushed it aside and down a ravine. Only later did they realize that it was the perfectly-cut cornerstone or capstone.

This verse from Psalm 118 is quoted five times in the New Testament as relating to Jesus Christ. It's found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, Acts, and Peter. It's a prediction that Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone for our lives and for His church. He was rejected by men, but accepted by God. He was rejected by the builders, but He became the chief cornerstone.

> The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.
>
> This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

This day when the rejected stone became the cornerstone, this day when the Son of Man became Savior of the world, this day when He became our strength and our song and our salvation—this is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

But read on—Ps 118:25:

> O Lord, save us…

This Hebrew word, translated "Save Us!" became an exclamation of praise, and when it was transliterated into Greek and into English, it literally is: **Hosanna**!

> (Hosanna); O Lord, grant us success. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.

This is the Psalm they were singing on Palm Sunday as Jesus rode into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passion Week.

From the house of the Lord we bless you. The Lord is God, and He has made His light shine upon us. With boughs in hand, join in the festal procession up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give You thanks; You are my God, and I will exalt You. Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever.

And the Psalm ends the way it begins:

> His love endures forever!

So let me put it together for us. Here you had a man—the Psalmist—who had been plunged into war and nearly defeated. But at the last moment, God had helped him. God had delivered him. God had given the nation of Israel a wonderful, come-from-behind victory. So he wrote this Psalm as a festival song of national thanksgiving. He opens with the chorus: His love endures forever. Then he tells the story of his experience. And then he invites everyone to march into the Holy City with him, through the streets, and onto Temple Mount, through the gates of worship and into the Lord's house, and as they march they sing this song:

> The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone!
> This is the Lord's doing!
> This is the day the Lord has made!
> Hosanna in the highest!
> Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!

And a thousand years later, this Psalm was vividly fulfilled as a prophecy that literally came true as Jesus Christ rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to offer Himself as a rejected king who would die for the sins of the whole world. And because of that, we can say about today and about tomorrow and about every day: This is the day of God's love. This is the day of God's help. This is the day of God's Son.

> This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it!

HOW TO DEAL WITH VERBAL ABUSE
Psalm 120-134 Introduction

This week there was a story in a West Coast newspaper about a hospital in Richland, Washington, that has designed an innovative program using music. It has placed a baby grand piano in its lobby, and found thirteen piano players, ranging from a 13-year-old to a woman with 77 years of experience. The theory is that as patients come to the hospital for surgery and for admission, the classical music in the lobby will have a calming and therapeutic effect. Not only that, but the hospital lobby is directly beneath the operating room, and the music filters up into the waiting room and surgical areas. It's believed that the music will calm the nerves and increase the rate of recovery for the people above.

I think that is a wonderful idea. Music is a gift from God. He created the musical scale. He made the notes, the tones and the vibrating sound waves that travel invisibly through the air. He created the human ear to hear it, human creativity to compose it, and the human voice to sing it. He ordained which music notes would harmonize with one other, and music is one of His great blessings to our hearts.

The Bible talks about music and singing from Genesis 4 to Revelation 19, but right in the middle of the Bible God placed a hymnbook—it's the longest book in the Scriptures. It's called Psalms.

The ancient Hebrews gave this book a special title, a Hebrew term meaning, "The Book of Praises." When the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek language, the word chosen was the Greek term, psalmos (singular) or psalmoi (plural). This Greek word literally means "music accompanied with string instruments." Gradually the word came to simply mean "praise." When the Bible

was translated into English, this word, psalmos, was just transliterated—that is, it just moved from Greek into English with roughly the same spelling and pronunciation—and so today we call this the book of Psalms.

The are 150 of these hymns making up the book of Psalms, and there is one section of the Psalms that has been particularly dear to me since I was a student in college, and that is a special section of 15 psalms called "The Psalms of Degrees" or "The Psalms of Ascents." They begin with Psalm 120 and run through Psalm 134. It's this little "hymnbook within a hymnbook" that I would like for us to study over the next several weeks.

It evidently started as a little collection of songs all its own, and when the entire book of Psalms was compiled, it was included as part of the whole book; yet each of these Psalms retained its designation as a "Psalm of Ascents" or "Psalm of Degrees."
Notice the way Psalm 120 begins. It says, "Psalm 120: A Song of Ascents." Now look at Psalm 121: "A Song of Ascents." And so on for fifteen straight chapters.

What does this word mean? Psalms of Ascent? Or, in the older translations, Psalms of Degrees? The Hebrew word is a plural word that literally means: "Goings Up." A literal rendering of the title says: "Psalms of the Goings Up."
So why did some ancient author or editor give these fifteen Psalms this rather unique and mysterious designation? Scholars have been puzzled over that question for years. Let me give you some of the main theories.

1. The great German reformer and Bible translator, Martin Luther, thought this word simply meant that those who sang these hymns were to ascend up the steps to a platform. When he translated this phrase in the German Bible, he called these "Songs from the Choir Loft." He said, "I abide in the simple and plain sense as much as I may, and judge that these psalms are called The Psalms of Degrees because the Levites or priests were wont to sing them upon the stairs or some high place." He pointed out that to this day a choir sings and a preacher preaches from platforms, that all may see and hear clearly.

2. The reformer, John Calvin, believed that these Psalms were to be sung on a higher key than other music, they were pitched higher.

3. Some commentators believe that the Psalms of Degrees have this title because they progress, step-by-step, in the thoughts expressed. The fourteenth century Bible scholar, Michael Ayguan, for example, believed that the Jewish rabbis divided these fifteen Psalms into three groups, the first dealing with trouble and distress; the second with faith and confidence, the third in communion and fellowship with God. So in reading them, one would ascend, step-by-step, from bitter distress to sweet devotion.

4. Other ancient commentators believed that these 15 Psalms reflected the 15 steps leading up to the Temple, and that on Feast or Festival days, pilgrims were to pause on each of the steps to sing each of the Psalms in order. Indeed, the Jewish Talmud notes the coloration between the 15 Psalms and the 15 steps leading from the courtyard of the women to the courtyard of the men in the Jewish Temple.

5. Fifth, there are some who speculate that these 15 Psalms were the songs used by the remnant of the Jews as they returned to Jerusalem after the seventy years of Babylonian Exile. There are the "going up" Psalms reflecting the conditions they faced as they returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple and restore Jewish worship.

6. Another theory is bound up with the Old Testament story of King Hezekiah. These 15 Psalms, as I said, are called in the older translations, "The Psalms of Degrees." Literally, it is "The Psalms of the Degrees," indicating that perhaps specific "degrees" are referred to. There is another time when the word "degrees" occurs like this in the Old Testament, and that is in connection with the life of King Hezekiah of Judah, who was a good and godly king who faced three great challenges during his reign.
The first was moral depravity in his kingdom. The people had sunk very deeply into sin and evil, and Hezekiah worked hard to bring about reform and revival. The second was an invasion by the Assyrian King Sennacherib who swooped down like a vulture upon the little land of Israel and surrounded the capital city of Jerusalem. The third crisis was an illness that struck Hezekiah which appeared to be terminal. The prophet Isaiah told him to put his affairs in order for he was going to die. But Hezekiah felt he still had work to do, and he prayed earnestly for healing. The Lord answered by telling him that his life would be extended 15 years. "As a sign," said the Lord, in effect, "I will perform an immediate miracle. Do you see that sundial in the palace courtyard? Keep watching it this afternoon. I will make the shadow on it reverse by 10 degrees. That will be a sign that I will lengthen your life by fifteen years." There are interesting parallels between the story of Hezekiah and Psalms 120-134. First, the repetition the word "degrees." Second, there are 10 degrees and 15 years; there are 15 total Psalms of the Degrees, and 10 of them are anonymous, perhaps written by Hezekiah himself, for in Isaiah 38:20, Hezekiah says that following his recovery he wanted everyone to sing "his" songs. And third, the contents of Psalm 120-134 seem to correspond nicely to the events we read about in the life of Hezekiah. So there is a possibility that this was a little book of songs compiled by Hezekiah in appreciation for the way God blessed him and extended his life.
I believe this theory, which has been advanced by British expositors like Lightfoot, Scroggie, and Baxter, makes a lot of sense. But here's another one that makes a lot of sense, and these two—numbers 6 and 7—may both be equally true. They aren't mutually

exclusive.

7. The prevailing theory in the world of biblical scholarship is that these are pilgrim psalms, compiled especially for the pilgrims who were going up to the feasts and festivals of the Jews in Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, the Jewish people were instructed to journey to Jerusalem thrice yearly to celebrate the great holidays of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Thousands of people traveling alone and in groups, families and clans together, on foot and on donkey, traveling to Jerusalem, marching to Zion. Many people believe that these 15 short little Psalms were originally a sort of small pilgrim's songbook, and that these 15 hymns were the songs sang as the people ascended up to Jerusalem to celebrate their faith.

Not only is that a very reasonable theory, but it's one to which we can relate. The Bible teaches that every Christian is a pilgrim. Do you think of yourself that way? Let's say someone asks you about your birthday. When someone asks you how old you are, what do you say?

I know you should never ask a woman her age, her weight, or whether her diamonds are real. But suppose someone asked your age. How would you answer? In Genesis 47:9, Pharaoh asked the old patriarch Jacob about his age. Jacob's answer was: "The years of my pilgrimage are 130 years."

The years of my pilgrimage. The word "pilgrim" comes from a Latin word meaning "foreigner." The prefix, "pil" comes from a preposition meaning "through," and the word "grim" comes from a Latin word meaning, "land." So the English word literally means, "Someone who is walking through a land, one who is traveling on foreign soil, a foreigner. Both the book of Hebrews and the book of 1 Peter say that we are strangers and pilgrims in the world.

This is reflected in our Christian literature. One of the greatest Christian books of the ages is a commentary on the Christian life called Pilgrim's Progress. This is reflected in our hymnology. We sing, "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land." "

> While I walk this pilgrim pathway
> Storms may overspread the sky;
> But when traveling days are over,
> Not a shadow, not a sigh.
> I am a poor wayfaring stranger,
> While traveling through this world below.
> There is no weakness, toil, or danger,
> In that bright world to which I go.

The Psalms of Ascents, then, were written for pilgrims. They are Songs for those on Pilgrimage. And before we began looking at them one by one, I want to make sure we don't miss the overall importance of this, the one overriding message: Pilgrims need music for their journey; we need traveling music. We need psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs as we travel through this world below.

Elevates our Emotions

Now, we know that music is an important part of worship, and that through music we glorify God and express our praise and our prayers to Him. But what I'd also like to point out is this: The right music also does something for our own hearts and souls. First, it can elevate our emotions.

I learned this several years ago when I had a bout with depression. As I tried to battle my way through a difficult time, I began to realize that the music I was listening to was a big part of the problem. I was listening to melancholy music, slow, moody, sad music. I discovered that I was deliberately turning on that sort of music because it when you're depressed, you tend to do things that keep yourself that way.

So I went out and found happy, upbeat music. Some of it was Christian music, and some of it was just fast-paced, positive, cheerful, optimistic music. And when I deliberately choose to listen to that kind of music, it elevated my feelings, and it really was an important step in my recovery.

When it is distinctively Christian music—either traditional hymnology, or Gospel music, or contemporary Christian music—you have the power of the tempo and the melody, coupled with words of truth. And that is indeed a very powerful uplifter of our hearts.

There was a very prominent pastor of a generation ago named Albert B. Simpson who founded the Christian and Missionary Alliance. In his biography, I read of a time earlier in his life and ministry when he suffered a physical and emotional breakdown, and he sunk so deeply into depression he wasn't sure he could ever go on. In Saratoga Springs, feeling sorry for himself, he strolled out to a religious meeting at a nearby camp ground. There was an African-American quartette singing a simple little song. It wasn't very deep, and it didn't contain great theological truth. It was just a simple little spiritual with words that frequently repeated and a refrain that said: "My Jesus is the Lord of Lord; No man can work like Him."

Simpson later said: "It fell upon me like a spell. It fascinated me. It seemed like a voice from heaven. It possessed my whole being. I took Him also to be my Lord of Lord, and to work for me. I knew ht how much it all meant; but I took Him in the dark, and

went forth from that rude, old-fashioned service, remembering nothing else, but strangely lifted up."
He left that place a different man, and he went on to do great things in the Lord's work. There's something about the right music that elevates our spirits.

Aggravates our Enemy

Second, the right music aggravates our enemy. Last year, I spent several months reading everything I could by and about missionary Amy Carmichael, and one of the things that most impressed me was something she had once written in a letter to a friend: I wonder if you feel as I do about the heavenliness of song. I believe truly that Satan cannot endure it, and so slips out of the room—more or less!—when there is true song.

Satan cannot stand good, sincere, uplifting, faith-building, Christ-praising Christian music; and one of the best ways to get him to leave the room is to start singing.

Recently I've talked to several young men about the temptations they have with their thought life, keeping their minds pure. I've suggested that one weapon they need to utilize is to select a "hymn of the day" during their devotions. "After your Bible study and prayer time," I said, "reach for a hymnbook and go on to work (if you have your devotions in the morning), or go on to bed (if at night) singing that hymn. Keep it with you all day long; for Satan can't stand to be around Christian music."

On this pilgrimage of life, the right music elevates our spirits, it aggravates our enemy, and, third, it articulates our faith.

Articulates our faith

You may remember that I've previously spoken of a time last year when I was utterly worn out. I walked alongside a little lake and unconsciously began singing quietly to myself some of the grand old hymns that I love:

> The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
> He makes me down to lie
> in pastures green;
> He leadeth me
> the quiet waters by.

As I sang those hymns so quietly to myself, I was somehow reminded of the many comforting truths that reflect the promises and power of God as revealed in Scripture. And in articulating my faith, my faith was strengthened.

Recently I received a letter from a woman in Northern California who told her story, and she has given me permission to share it. Some of the things that happened to her in childhood were so devastating that, as she put it, "I have been in recovery from shell shock for many years. It has been a long, long road back. You see, when I was a child, I witnessed horrific murder and mutilation of others at the hands of my own dad and older brother. I was beaten, raped, and threatened with death should I ever tell. In order to survive, I developed amnesia."
In 1989 and 1990, a flood of recollection came pouring into my consciousness of these events. She lost control of her motor functions and feared she would never recover. "Images of what I saw tormented my mind," she told me. "Unable to stop it, it frequently disabled me to even walk or talk. During one of those times, my knees gave out from under me and my husband helped me to bet into the shower and let the water flow over me. As he stood helping me under the water to stand, while I couldn't speak, much less stand or walk, the words to the song, "Amazing Grace," came out of my mouth: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me…."
It was the part that said, "I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see" that reverbed over and over deep within me. To recall what I had deeply buried for my lifetime, had been blindness, but now I was seeing. As awful as it was, it was necessary to my restoration. Yet in it, I was no longer lost, but found.
"I have never forgotten that day. And I know that it is because of what I endured that God now uses me so effectively in music ministry. Today I am a new person. Yes, I still grieve and still occasionally must walk through painful memories that I prefer not to. But healing is a journey, not a one-time event. Not to mention a lot of hard work and perseverance. Yet it amazes me that today I am able to earn a living in music ministry. What a miracle."

Someone wisely pointed out that in the Bible all three members of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are said to be singing.
Where in the Bible does it say that God the Father sings? The little prophet Zephaniah says that God rejoices over us with singing (Zephaniah 3:17). Where do we read about Jesus Christ singing? In the Upper Room on the night He was betrayed. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that after they had sung a hymn they departed from the room.

Where does it say that God the Holy Spirit sings? He sings through His church. Ephesians 5 says, "Be filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, making melody in your hearts to the Lord."

Some of you need a song in your hearts today. We're pilgrims—and we need the Pilgrim Psalms ringing in our hearts as we make our ascent to Zion.

Come, we that love the Lord,
And let our joys be known;
Join in a song with sweet accord
And thus surround the throne.
We're marching to Zion,
Beautiful, beautiful Zion;
We're marching upward to Zion,
The beautiful city of God.

TRAVELING MUSIC
Psalm 120

This morning we began a series of studies into a portion of the Bible known as the Psalms of Ascents. Our morning study was introductory to the whole series, and tonight I'd like to plunge right in to the first of these wonderful songs—Psalm 120—which speaks to a very relevant topic:

How Do You Deal With Verbal Abuse:

A song of ascents.
1 I call on the Lord in my distress,
and he answers me.
2 Save me, O Lord , from lying lips
and from deceitful tongues.
3 What will he do to you,
and what more besides, O deceitful tongue?
4 He will punish you with a warrior's sharp arrows,
with burning coals of the broom tree.
5 Woe to me that I dwell in Meshech,
that I live among the tents of Kedar!
6 Too long have I lived
among those who hate peace.
7 I am a man of peace;
but when I speak, they are for war.

There was an interesting report out this week from Ohio State University in which researchers have discovered what it is about stress that makes people sick. When someone is under extended stress, according to the study, blood tests show that a chemical called Interleukin-6 sharply increases in their bloodstream. Interleukin-6 has been linked to several diseases, included heart disease, arthritis, diabetes, and cancer. There's something about stress that stimulates the production of this chemical in the human body.

Well, all of us live under a certain amount of stress, and often that stress is caused by other people and by what they say. I try not to have arguments with people, but whenever I get into an angry verbal exchange, it talks awhile for me to get over it. Recently I made some mistake or another in driving, and an angry, uncouth man rolled down his window, stuck his face out the window, and screamed at me. I couldn't quite make out what he was saying, but I got the impression it wasn't complementary. I don't know if that's ever happened to you, but there's no doubt that at one time or another, you've been the recipient of insults or of angry words. It's very upsetting. When our boss or a co-worker yells at us, or when a family member attacks us, or when, as in my case, a total stranger unleashes a volley of angry words, it is very stressful.

I've had people tell me in painful, vivid detail of a cutting remark made years ago by a teacher or a parent. Those words linger a long time and do a lot of damage.

I was reading an interview this week in the AARP Magazine with the comedian Jonathan Winters who said that his entire life had been lived under the shadow and with the scars of cruel things that his parents said to him when he was a child. He said, "I'm no

crybaby, but I remember things with almost total recall—there's a lot of pain there…." He remembers very vividly his father's telling him, "You're the dumbest kid I know."

When he joined the Marines and went off to the South Pacific during World War II, he felt no support from his mothers, and when he came back home he found she had given away a lot of his precious, personal things he had stored up in the attic. He was very upset, but her response was: "How did we know you were going to live?"

Many people—including some of you in this room—have scars caused by people who used words as weapons. Well, the Psalms of Ascent open with an unknown, unnamed Psalmist talking about the way that he was handling the stress of hostile and angry words.

> In my distress I cried to the Lord, and He heard me. Deliver my soul, O Lord, from lying lips and from a deceitful tongue.
>
> What shall be give to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? Sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals from the broom tree!
>
> Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

This seems like a strange way to begin a hymnbook. Why would this collection of Psalms of Ascents begin on a note like this? Why wouldn't it begin on a note of praise or thanksgiving, or with a petition of mercy or traveling grace? Well, there's a good answer. Remember our basic supposition—that these are Pilgrim Psalms. The Psalmist here is starting out in a foreign land, or in a strange place, or in the middle of hostile, critical neighbors. By the time we got to the last of the Psalms of Ascents, he's in the temple, worshipping and expressing thanksgiving for those who tend the temple lamps by night. So this Psalm begins here, where we live, where angry words sometimes fly.

What do we do when hateful, hurtful, harmful words come our way? The genius of this Psalm is found in the simplicity and wisdom of the Psalmist's response. What does he do? He has a three-fold response.

Talk to Your God (Ps 121:1-2)

First, he talked to God about it. I mentioned this morning that one of the theories about the Psalms of Ascend or the Psalms of Degrees is that they were compiled during the days of King Hezekiah to celebrate the fifteen extra years of life the Lord had given him. One of the reasons this theory has some merit is because the subjects in these Psalms mirror the record we have of Hezekiah's life and reign. For example, look at Isaiah 37:

> In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them.2 Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem. When the commander stopped at the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Washerman's Field, 3 Eliakim son of Hilkiah the palace administrator, Shebna the secretary, and Joah son of Asaph the recorder went out to him. 4 The field commander said to them, "Tell Hezekiah, "'This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? 5 You say you have strategy and military strength—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? 6 Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man's hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. ? And if you say to me, "We are depending on the Lord our God"—isn't he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, "You must worship before this altar"?
>
> 11 ....then Eliakim, Shebna and Joah said to the field commander, "Please speak to your servants in Aramaic, since we understand it. Don't speak to us in Hebrew in the hearing of the people on the wall." 12 But the commander replied, "Was it only to your master and you that my master sent me to say these things, and not to the men sitting on the wall—who, like you, will have to eat their own filth and drink their own urine?"
>
> Isa 38:9 Now Sennacherib… sent messengers to Hezekiah with this word: 10 "Say to Hezekiah king of Judah: Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, 'Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria.' 11 Surely you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all the countries, destroying them completely. And will you be delivered? 12 Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my forefathers deliver them—the gods of Gozan, Haran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar? 13 Where is the king of Hamath, the king of Arpad, the king of the city of Sepharvaim, or of Hena or Ivvah?" 14?Hezekiah

> received the letter from the messengers and read it. Then he went up to the temple of the Lord and spread it out before the Lord . 15 And Hezekiah prayed to the Lord: 16 “O Lord Almighty, God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. 17 Give ear, O Lord , and hear; open your eyes, O Lord , and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to insult the living God. 18 “It is true, O Lord , that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. 19 They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. 20 Now, O Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all kingdoms on earth may know that you alone, O Lord, are God.”

The result is one of the greatest of the Old Testament miracles. The Lord dispatched a powerful angel who single-handedly defeated the armies of Sennacherib, and the great Assyrian general limped pitifully back to his own country where he was assassinated by his own sons.

Interestingly, there is a subtle archaeological evidence to support this.

There’s a six-sided clay prism called the Sennacherib Prism that was discovered in Iraq in 1830 and is currently on display at the Oriental Institute in Chicago. It is actually the records of Sennacherib himself, containing his account of this very military campaign. He claims to have defeated country after country, and he refers to his campaign against Hezekiah, but remarkably, he never claims to have defeated Hezekiah or captured the city of Jerusalem.

The point is—when you’re the recipient of hostile or angry words, when someone has said something that has hurt you—take it to the Lord. Spread it out before Him. He knows how to deal with it; He knows how to handle it. And very often there’s nothing more we need to do except to pray about it and leave it in the Lord’s hands.

Talk to Your Foe (Ps 120:3-4)

In this case, however, in Psalm 120, there was something more that the Psalmist did. Having talked to his God about it in Ps 120:1 and Ps 120:2, He talked to his foe in Ps 120:3-4. He gave an answer.

> What shall be given to you, or what shall be done to you, you false tongue? Sharp arrows of the warrior, with coals from the broom tree.

The wood of the broom tree was often used for firewood because it burned longer than other woods. Here the Psalmist was saying this, in effect. “You can shoot your arrows at me if you like, but God is going to take care of it. He’s going to shoot his arrows at you, and He is going to set you on fire.”

It helps us to understand this passage if we compare it with Psalm 64:

> They sharpen their tongues like swords and aim their words like deadly arrows. They shoot from ambush at the innocent man; they shoot at him suddenly without fear….
> But God will shoot them with arrows; suddenly they will be struck down. He will turn their own tongues against them and bring them to ruin.

Most arguments are lose-lose propositions, and the best thing we can do is to under-respond to angry words. Jesus did this when He was on trial before Caiaphas, the High Priest. Those in the courtroom railed against Jesus, shouting accusations left and right against Him. Jesus under-responded. He stayed quiet until Caiaphas finally shot to his feet, said charged Him under oath to answer as to whether or not He was the Son of God. At that point, Jesus said, “I am, and the day is coming when you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming in the clouds of heaven.”

That’s very similar to what the Psalmist did. He had absorbed hostile, hateful, hurting words. He talked to God about them; He gave an answer to his enemy that conveyed both quietness and strength and truth. And then, in the last three verses, he talked to himself and calmed himself down.

He Talks to Himself (Ps 120:5-7)

Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar! My soul has dwelt too long with one who hates peace. I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.

Mechech was an area far to the North of Israel, and Kedar was an area far to the South of Israel. Both areas were occupied by Gentile barbarians, and it seems the Psalmist here was speaking figuratively, saying, “Woe is me, I live in a hostile world. I live among barbarians.” He was just being realistic with himself. He was saying, “The reason I’m facing these hostile words is not

because I deserve them; it's because I'm in an angry, hostile world. I'm a person of peace, but I live in a hostile world. I'll not live in this world forever. I'm bound for a better place. But for right now, I might as well expect such as this, because this world is an angry, acrimonious place."

He was just calming himself down and helping himself to keep perspective.

If you've been bruised by words recently, or if you're still suffering from verbal abuse from years ago, try this approach. Talk to your God very earnestly, talk to your enemy very honestly, and talk to yourself very realistically. And trust God to give you the wisdom to deal with the words that are being flung about in this hostile world. As the old song says:

> I want to live above the world
> Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;
> For faith has caught the joyful sound,
> My prayer, my aim is higher ground.

PSALM 121
THE TRAVELER'S PSALM

Some chapters in the Bible are so special that they've been given their own title. We call 1 Corinthians 13, The Love Chapter; Hebrews 11 is The Faith Chapter; Psalm 23 is The Shepherd Psalm; and 1 Corinthians 15 is The Resurrection Chapter of the Bible.

In our study through the Psalms today we're coming to one of the most beautiful and beloved of all the chapters of the Bible—Psalm 121. It has been called, "The Traveler's Psalm." Let's read it together from the old King James Version:

> 1 I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. 2 My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. 3 He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. 4 Behold, he that keepeth Israelshall neither slumber nor sleep. 5 The LORD is thy keeper: the LORD is thy shade upon thy right hand. 6 The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night. 7 The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. 8 The LORD shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

This is the second of the fifteen "Psalms of Degrees" or "Psalms of Ascents," which run consecutively from Psalm 120 to Psalm 134. Last Sunday we looked at the background for these chapters, saying they were perhaps compiled during the reign of King Hezekiah to commemorate his recovery from a fatal illness and the extension of life God gave him. We also speculated that this compilation became a little hymnbook popularly used by Jewish pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem for the three annual Hebrew festivals. So these are, it would seem, Pilgrim Psalms. Certainly Psalm 121, by the nature of its content, lends itself toward that view. This is a chapter for anyone setting out on a pilgrimage, and for anyone who is leaving home or traveling.

Haddon W. Robinson recently wrote a devotional for the booklet, "Our Daily Bread," in which he said that Psalm 121 was a favorite of his father. He wrote, "When my father left the 'old country' as a teenager to sail alone to the United States, he was bidden farewell with this psalm." When he was heading off into the World War and at various other critical points of life, the elder Mr. Robinson leaned on this Psalm.

That's a scene that has been repeated many times in Christian history. James Montgomery Boice said in his commentary on the Psalms that this was a very dear chapter to him because his mother always gathered the family together and read it before they left on trips, or before one of the children in the family left home.

The great missionary explorer, David Livingstone, read this Psalm as he worshipped with his father and sister before setting sail forAfrica; and his mother-in-law, Mary Moffat later wrote to him, telling him that Psalm 121 was always on her mind as she thought and prayed for him.

So today, let's look at the "Traveler's Psalm"—Psalm 121. In terms of its structure, there are eight verses here, and it seems that the first two are set apart from the last six. In Psalm 121:1 and 2, the Psalmist is lifting up his eyes, speaking in the first person, giving his own testimony: "I will lift up my eyes…. My help comes…" In Psalm 121:3, he shifts pronouns lifts up his voice: "He will not

allow your foot to slip…. He who keeps you will not slumber…" So in Psalm 121:1-2 he's proclaiming what God has done for Him; and in the remainder of the Psalm, he's promising what God will do for you and me. In verses 1-2, he lifts up his eyes to God to reassure himself. In Psalm 121:3-8, he lifts up his voice to reassure others.

For the purposes of our outline today, let's put it this way: In Psalm 121:1-2, we're told to keep our eyes on God, and in verses 3-8, we're told that God keeps His eyes on us.

Our Eyes on God (Psalm 121:1-2)

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth.

And here we encounter an exegetical difficulty. The ancient Hebrew manuscripts do not tell us how verse 1 should be punctuated. Some people believe it should end with a period, and others think it should end with a question mark. Is the Psalmist saying, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help"? Or is he saying, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?"

Most commentators and most of the newer translations take the latter approach, putting a question mark at the end of Psalm 121:1: "I will lift up my eyes to the hills. From whence comes my help? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." In other words, here is the pilgrim starting his journey. As he looks toward the horizon, those distant hills present a great challenge. They are steep, and sometimes the trails are dangerous. Many travelers have had disastrous falls when their feet have slipped on the rocky pathways. There are thieves and bandits in the mountains around Jerusalem, as we see in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan. The path is steep and uphill, and perhaps our traveler is older and he's worried that he might not have the strength to make it. He lifts up his eyes to the hills and there he sees challenges, danger, and adversity. It is a rigorous, dangerous journey.

So it is with life's pilgrimage. We're going to encounter much difficulty and danger along the way. Where will our help come from? Where do we find someone to give us safety and strength for the mountains of life? The Psalmist said: "I lift up my eyes and see the dangers and difficulties of the mountains? Where can I find strength and security to face them? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

The second way to interpret this verse is to put a period at the end of Psalm 121:1, like the older translations do. "I will lift up my eyes to the hills from whence comes my help. My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth." I'm in the minority here, but this is the interpretation I favor. I grew up in the mountains of East Tennessee, and no one who grows up in those mountains ever takes them for granted. Every day they are there, rising up in our backyards, forming the backdrop to the roads and highways that thread through the valleys, providing breathtaking vistas for hiking and picnicking. From the mountain streams comes our water supply. From those hills come the logs and lumber to build our homes. They surround us, providing shelter and protection—a certain isolation—from the outside world. These Appalachian Mountains are towering and rugged, green in the summer, golden red in the autumn, and snow-clad in winter. They almost seem as solid and sturdy as God Himself. They are, as it were, a witness to His creative majesty. They serve as a constant reminder of His glory.

Many years ago here at our church we had a wonderful banquet which featured the Poet Laureate of Tennessee, a man named Pek Gunn. I became friends with Mr. Gunn, who lived over in East Nashville, and one day he gave me a framed, signed copy of his most famous poem, which was on this subject. I'll not read the whole poem, but what it says in essence is this: I was getting older and starting to worry about the future, about what was going to happen to me in the years to come. But as I was fretting about it, I went up to the Eastern part of the state—to East Tennessee—and took at the mountains. They were alive with beauty, towering with majestic serenity and solidarity.

As I stared at dem big mountains, trees and flowers everywhere
From my heart there welled up praises, 'cause my Lord had put 'em there.
Now I'se ain't frettin' any longer for there's one thing dat I see,
If my good Lord made dem mountains, He can shore take care of me.

So I think the Psalmist was saying, "I will lift up my eyes to the hills and remind myself that the God who made these mountains is the same God who is watching me. That leads to the second part of Psalm 121. Verses 1-2 tell us to keep our eyes on God; but verses 3-8 tell us that as we do, He is keeping His eyes on us.

God's Eyes On Us (Psalm 121:3-8)

Now it is easy to uncover the dominant theme of these six verses, because the Psalmist uses the same word over and over again. You don't pick it up in the English translations; for some reason they translate this word differently from one verse to the next. Perhaps the translators were trying to remove the redundancy of using the same word over and over. But in the original Hebrew, the

word “shamar” occurs six times in these six verses.

Let’s read it like that:

He will not allow your foot to be moved;
He who shamar(s) you will not slumber.
Behold, He who shamar(s) Israel
Shall neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord is your shamar(-er);
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The Lord shall shamar you from all evil;
He shall shamar your soul.
The Lord shall shamar your going out and your coming in
From this time forth, and even forevermore.

The word shamar in the Hebrew is very much like our English word keep. It has a wide variety of meanings, but in this connection it literally means to keep a close watch on something. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, which is one of the best tools we have for dissecting the vocabulary of the Hebrew Scriptures, gives this definition to the root of shamar: To exercise great care over.

In other words, God has promised to keep a close eye on His children. He exercises great care over you. This particular Psalm tells us when and where He does that.

He Keeps an Eye on Our Ups and Downs (Psalm 121:3)
First, He keeps a close eye on our ups and downs. Verse 3 says: “He will not allow your foot to be moved.” A better translation is: “He will not allow your foot to slip.” The picture is of a traveler going through the mountains, over a rocky pathway. A false step could send you into the gorge. Last year we vacationed at the Grand Canyon, and my girls and I hiked a long way down inside the canyon. The footpath was only a yard or so wide, and there were places where a false step could have sent us over the edge. It was quite frightening.

But it’s a picture of life. Sometimes we’re going uphill, we have an uphill journey with our finances, for example, or with our jobs or with our marriages or with our kids. Other times, we’re going downhill and things are a little easier. We may slip and slide a little bit, and the gravel may roll under our feet. But Psalm 121 says that God’s eyes are on His children, and He isn’t going to let us go over the edge.

I had breakfast this week with a dear friend, a young man, who told me that he and his wife had encountered difficulty in conceiving; but finally they were successful and expecting a child. But then she miscarried, and the child was lost. They were devastated, but they chose to trust God with it. They felt enormous pain. I remember calling him the day it happened, and the two of them were hurting very deeply. But this week my friend said that one morning sometime afterward they both just work up with a sense of peace. They couldn’t explain it, but they could experience it. They knew God was exercising great care over them, keeping a close eye on them, and they were able to trust His peace. There are still some tough days, and occasionally they’ll shed tears or have to talk through things again, but that peace has never left them. They didn’t fall over the edge of grief. They didn’t fall over the edge of bitterness. They didn’t fall over the edge of depression. He didn’t allow their foot to slip.

He Keeps an Eye on our Days and Nights (Psalm 121:3-4)
So the Lord watches over our ups and down. Second, He watcher over our days and nights. Verse 3 continues: He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, He who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.

There’s an old and famous story about a woman who was too worried one night to sleep. She had a great problem, and it was keeping her awake. Finally she opened her Bible in the wee hours and it fell open to this verse. Having read it, she closed her Bible and said, “Well, Lord, if you’re going to stay awake, I’m going to bed. There’s no need in us both staying up.”

I think she understood very well what the Psalmist was trying to say here. When someone asked Alexander the Great how he could sleep so soundly at night though surrounded by death and danger on every side, he replied that Parmenio, his faithful guard, was always standing watch through the night watches.

How wonderful to know that we have a Faithful Guard whose eyes are always watching out for us day and night.

He Keeps an Eye on Our Sunshine and Shadows (Psalm 121:5-6)
Third, closely related to that, our Father keeps an eye on our sunshine and shadows. Verses 5 and 6 say: The Lord is your keeper; the Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.

In the deserts of the Negev, it could become dangerously hot during the day and bitterly cold at night. The desert is a strange place, a place of extremes, and a place of discomfort and danger. God did not promise to adjust the temperature so that His people would always live in a pleasant 72-degrees environment. We're bound to have some uncomfortable days, but there will never be a day however hot or a night however cold in which the watchful, loving eye of the Lord will not be upon His children.

He Keeps an Eye on Our Comings and Goings (Psalm 121:7-8)
The next verses tell us that God also keeps an eye on the comings and goings of His children: The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in….

What a comfort this is. Someone asked me recently if I was afraid of flying. I said, "You mean am I ever nervous about being stuffed in a little cigar-shaped metal tube and hurled 700 miles an hour thousands of feet above the ground from one continent to another? Why should that make me nervous?" The answer is yes—I'm always a little nervous about flying. But I frequently remind myself of these verses. This is, after all, the Traveler's Psalm.

To be honest, I'm more nervous thinking about my children being out on the highways. There was a remarkable story in the news this week from a town called Mountain View, Arkansas. A man named Terry Wallis has just emerged from a coma there. He has been comatose for 19 years, ever since he was involved in a car crash in 1984. He was 19 when the crash occurred, and he is 39 years old now, and has just come to almost 20 years later. He thinks Ronald Reagan is still president. He's still living in 1984, and he doesn't realize how much time has gone by.

There are so many things that can happen to us, so many dangers, so many toils, so many snares. But Psalm 121 says that God watches over the travels—over the comings and goings—of His children. Does that mean that Christians whose eyes are on the Lord—Christians who are in God's will—will never have accidents? That's right. Christians are never involved in accidents.

That doesn't mean Christians won't have wrecks. Most of us know dedicated Christians who have been hurt or killed in a wreck of some kind—but not in an accident. There are no accidents for those whom God is over-watching. As A. W. Tozer puts it, "To the child of God, there is not such thing as accident. He travels an appointed way…. Accidents may indeed appear to befall him and misfortune stalk his way; but these evils will be so in appearance only and will seem evils only because we cannot read the secret script of God's hidden providence."

In Psalm 120, the Lord does not promise to keep us from every danger or to protect us from every wreck. What is promised is that He will watch over us carefully.

The story of Job is very instructive on this point. The Bible says that God had put a hedge around Job and around his family and around all that he possessed. Satan was unable to touch Job or his family or his possessions without the Lord's allowing it, which He did on one occasion as we see in the book of Job. It resulted in a very difficult period in Job's life, but the end of the process was increased blessings for Job.

When we're following Christ, nothing can separate us from God's will for our lives. Romans 8 says: "Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ…. In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

He watches over our ups and downs, over our days and nights, over our sunshine and shadows, over our comings and goings. And finally, His eye is on His children both now and forever.

He Keeps an Eye on Us Now and Forever (Psalm 121:8)
Look at the glorious way this Psalm ends: The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth and even forevermore.

Notice the words: Both now and forever. This Psalm ends very much like Psalm 23—Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Blessings both now and forever. In other words, this Travelers Psalm never expires. It doesn't expire with old age. It doesn't expire with death. It doesn't expire with the end of human history. It is always going to be in effect. The promises in this Psalm will still be working on our behalf 100 years from now, 1000 years from now, a million years from now, a billion years from now. Both now and forevermore.

This is a Psalm for God's people—for those who have taken Jesus Christ as their Savior. Have you done that? Are you His child? The old Scottish Christians had a habit of taking the Psalms and putting them in verse form to be sung. I'd like to close with this wonderful versified arrangement of Psalm 121:

I to the hills will lift my eyes;
O whence shall come my aid?
My help is from the Lord alone,
Who heav'n and earth has made.

He will not let thy foot be moved,
Thy Guardian never sleeps;
With watchful and unslumbering care,
His own He safely keeps.

Thy faithful Keeper is the Lord,
Thy Shelter and thy Shade;
'Neath sun or moon, by day or night,
Thou shalt not be afraid.

From evil He will keep thee safe,
For thee He will provide;
Thy going out, thy coming in,
Forever He will guide.
(Scottish Psalter, 1912)

So keep your eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ; He never takes His eyes off you.

MARCHING TO ZION
Psalm 122

For many years I've been an advocate for children's Bible memory, and I'm very thankful for the ministries along that line we have here—especially our Wednesday night M & M program. If we can hide God's Word in the hearts of our children when they are young, it will help establish them for life, morally and spiritually. One of the reasons I'm feel so strongly about this is because of my own personal experience. The verses I memorized in childhood have had—and continue to have—a great effect on me. A good example is Psalm 122:1, the first verse that I ever recall having memorized. It was in Sunday School, and I still remember the Sunday our class memorized this verse. I credit it to a great extent with shaping the way that I feel about church to this day: I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord.

Well, tonight, in our series of messages from the Pilgrim Psalms (Psalms 120-134), we're coming to Psalm 122, and as wonderful as verse 1 is, it's even better when we see it in its fuller context. Let's read this passage together.

I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord."
Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!

Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together, where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
For throne are set there for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your walls, prosperity within your palaces." For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, "Peace be within you."
Because of the house of the Lord our God I will seek your good.

There are three ways to look at this Psalm, and all of them are insightful and helpful. First, we need to look at it plainly so that we can determine what the Psalmist was literally saying.

Plainly – The Joy of Being in the Earthly Jerusalem
In these chapters, our pilgrim has left home in Psalm 120, enduring the taunts and insults of those who derided him. He traveled through dangerous mountains in Psalm 121, and now in Psalm 122 he has arrived in Jerusalem. As he expresses his feelings in this Psalm, we see three different attitudes or emotions.

The first is cheerfulness (Psalm 122:1-2).

> "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'
> Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!"

The word "glad" is the Hebrew word sameach (see word study - sameach), meaning: "to be elated, to have a feeling or attitude of joy and happiness."

This pilgrim is exuberant to be there. Devout Jews who visit Jerusalem for the first time can never fully describe their experience. One of them said that he felt he had arrived at the very center of the world.

I remember the first time I visited Jerusalem. As we rounded the hill and I saw the golden walls of that ancient city, tears came to my eyes and to those of everyone in our group. Later in the day, as I was walked along the cobblestone street of the old city I stopped in tracks, looked down at my feet, and thought of this verse: Our feet are standing without your gates, O Jerusalem." There is something extraordinarily special about being in Jerusalem.

Why is that?

In Deuteronomy 12:5, Moses said, "But you shall seek the place where the Lord your God chooses out of all your tribes, to put His name for His dwelling place, and there you shall go."

Later, when Joshua led the Children of Israel into the Promised Land, the city of Jerusalem was populated by a wicked Canaanite civilization and its king, Adoni-zedek, who led a confederacy of Southern Canaanite armies against the Israelites. The confederacy was defeated, and King Adoni-zedek was killed. But the city of Jerusalem itself was not taken.

The city was taken by the Israelites later, during the days of the Judges, but it was recaptured by the Jebusites. And it remained in Jebusite hands until it was conquered by the armies of King David himself in about the year 1000 B.C.

David moved quickly to establish Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, building there administrative offices as well as a royal palace. His most significant action was moving the Ark of the Covenant, making Jerusalem the spiritual center as well as the political center of Israel. Indeed, it represented the fact that Jerusalem was now the city of God Himself, the city He had chosen to put His name for His dwelling place.

For 3000 years, this has been the political and spiritual home for the Jewish people. In the years of their suffering and exile, they would always end their Passover meal, wherever they were in the world, with the words: "Next year in Jerusalem!"

The Jewish attitude toward Jerusalem is best expressed in Psalm 48: "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised in the city of our God, in His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, is Mount Zion on the sides of the north, the city of the great King."

There was a very interesting article on this subject last week in an Israeli newspaper entitled Israel Insider. It was by a man named Gerald Honigman, and I'd like to quote a little of it for you. It has to do with the fact that the Palestinians and the Muslims are claiming rights to Jerusalem.

Honignman wrote:

> While it keeps getting shoved onto the back burner for fear of the intense heat that it will generate, there's no doubt that Jerusalem will be one of the most difficult issues to resolve in any so-called "peace process." It's time to take a look at some blunt facts regarding this issue, despite the risk of ruffling even some friendly feathers.
>
> While Christians, Muslims, and Jews all have ties to Jerusalem, these ties are in no way "equal." In religious Jewish sources, for instance, Jerusalem is mentioned over 600 times, but it is never mentioned even once in the Koran. It is alluded to in the latter in passages about the Hebrew Kings… but a mention of Jerusalem itself is no where to be found in the Muslim holy book... interesting, since it was recorded in many other places besides the writings of the Jews themselves for over 1,500 years before the rise of Islam….
>
> Throughout over three millennia since King David conquered it from the Jebusites, renamed it, and gave it its Jewish character, no other people except the Jews has ever made Jerusalem their capital, despite its conquest by many imperial powers, including that of the Arab caliphal successors to Muhammad as they burst out of the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century C.E. and spread in all directions. Damascus and Baghdad were the capital seats of caliphal imperial power, and Mecca and Medina the holy cities. This is not to say that Jerusalem was ignored by its Muslim conquerors (i.e. the Umayyads built the Dome of the Rock/Mosque of 'Umar on the Temple Mount making it Islam's allegedly third holiest city), but it is to say that Jerusalem was and is in no way the focus for Islam that it is for Jews and Judaism.
>
> Since David made Jerusalem his capital and it became the site of his son Solomon's Temple, Zion became the heart and soul of Jewish national and religious existence. Jews from all over the early Diaspora made their pilgrimages and sent offerings to its Temple. "By the Rivers of Babylon we wept..." and "If I forget thee O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning..." were just a few of the many Biblical expressions of the Jews for Zion.
>
> Such yearning persisted throughout subsequent millennia in the Diaspora as well. "Next Year in Jerusalem" sustained the Jew throughout countless degradations and humiliations culminating in the Holocaust. There is no Muslim parallel to these claims, regardless of efforts to portray Palestinian Arabs… as the "new Jews." Jews, from a hundred different lands, didn't have twenty-two other states to potentially choose from and suffered dearly for this statelessness…
>
> In modern times, Jews constituted the majority of Jerusalem's population from 1840 onwards. When Jordanian Arabs - whose nation itself was formed from 80% of the original mandate for Palestine issued to Britain on April 25, 1920 - seized East Jerusalem after their invasion of reborn Israel in 1948, they destroyed dozens of synagogues and thousands of Jewish graves, using tombstones to pave roads, build latrines, etc. When the Jews were denied access to their holy sites for almost two decades, the whole world remained silent. After Israel was forced to fight a defensive war in 1967… Jerusalem became reunited. Access to all peoples and faiths subsequently became unhindered. It was at this moment that much of the world next chose to rediscover Jerusalem... demanding its redivision, internationalization, etc. Now there's justice for you! Sickening...but, unfortunately, not really shocking or unexpected in the Jewish experience.

That article helps explain why for 3000 years the Jewish people have been passionate about Jerusalem, and why it is going to be the powder-keg issue for the world in the years to come. So here in Psalm 122 we have a pilgrim who is just exuberant because he is headed toward the house of the Lord, his feet are finally standing inside the walls of old Jerusalem.

His second attitude is thankfulness (Psalm 122:3-5).

He says that Jerusalem is a beautiful city to which he has come to give thanks, especially because it represents the political and spiritual axis of his life:

Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together, where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord.

For throne are set there for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

The phrase, Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together, is a little difficult to translate.

- The New Living Translation says: Jerusalem is a well-built city.
- The New Revised version says, "It is built as a city that is bound firmly together."

- The New Century Version says: Jerusalem is built as a city with its building close together.

The Psalmist seems to be saying something like this: "I'm so thankful for this city—compact and close and well-built, and well-established." And he is also thankful that it is both the political and spiritual center of his life. In verse 4 he describes its spiritual significance: Where the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, to the Testimony of Israel, to give thanks to the name of the Lord." The phrase, "the Testimony of Israel" is a reference to the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies, representing God's presence in the midst of the city. The following verse extols the fact that Jerusalem is also the political center of Judaism, and potentially of the world: For thrones are set there for judgment, the thrones of the house of David.

So his attitude is marked by cheerfulness, by thankfulness, and, third, by prayerfulness. He is concerned for the well-being of this city, and he wants you and me to pray for the peace of Jerusalem: Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. Peace be within your palaces." For the sake of my brethren and companions, I will now say, "Peace be within you." Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek your good.

I think the Lord still intends for us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. In our prayer meetings, we often take prayer requests, and we pray for the things on one another's hearts. But have we ever thought of asking God for His prayer requests? What does He want us to pray about? Well, here is one of them—pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

Poetically—the Joy of the Church

So our primary interpretation of this passage is literal and practical—it is a pilgrim's aspiration towards Jerusalem. He is cheerful, thankful, and prayerful. But having said that, there is another application for our hearts, another way of looking at this. We can look at it not only practically, but poetically. Not only literally, but symbolically. For we have here a picture of the love we should have for the church of the Lord Jesus—the spiritual Zion.

I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord." When I memorized this verse as a child, I didn't have any awareness of the Jewish realities behind this Psalm. What it said to me was simply: "It's a great thing to go to church. I should be glad to go to church." The church of Jesus Christ is compact—that is, it is well-designed, well-built, and unified. It's a place for thanksgiving and for judgment. We should pray for the church and be concerned about it. The way that the Jewish pilgrim feels about Jerusalem is the way we should feel about the church.

Now, the church has gotten a lot of bad press recently, what with the tele-evangelist scandals of the 80s and 90s, the sex abuse scandals of the Roman Catholics, the controversial positions of the religious right, and the occasional bizarre events that are reported, such as the man who put arsenic poison in the coffee pot in the church in Maine.

Well, the church has never been perfect, and a lot is happening in the name of the church that isn't really being done by genuine Christians. And the church exists in a world that isn't friendly. Our world doesn't want the restraints and truth of righteousness. But Jesus promised, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." And I can still say—now more than ever—I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord."

Prophetically

There is a third way of looking at this psalm, and that is prophetically. The Bible says that the early Jerusalem is only a symbol and type for a far greater city to come—the city foursquare, the Heavenly Jerusalem.

As time fades into history and eternity dawns, we're told that God is going to recreate the heavens and the earth, and establish on this new earth a great city—the New Jerusalem—that will be His home and headquarters forever.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. And there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with me, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people. God Himself shall be with them and be their God.

Those verses in Revelation 21 introduces a two-chapter travelogue of the coming city of New Jerusalem and it closes the Bible with that note of anticipation. This Psalm 122 expresses our desire for the Celestial City toward which we are marching on pilgrimage.

When Katrina and I were in California recently on vacation, we were amazed at the diverse beauty of what we saw—the rugged

coastline of the Pacific, the steep hillsides of San Francisco, the towering waterfalls of Yosemite, the gorges of King's Canyon, the giant Sequoia trees, some of them dating back 2500 years. There was a title of an old Gospel song that kept coming to my mind: "How Beautiful Heaven Must Be."

The loveliest spots on this fallen planet fade into ugliness when compared with how beautiful heaven must be. And we're on our way there—we're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion. We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God. That's our Jerusalem.

So whether we take this practically, poetically, or prophetically—let this be a theme verse in your life: "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go into the house of the Lord.'"

LOOKING UP
Psalm 123

> Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens.
>
> Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us.
>
> Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud. – Psalm 123

Who do you look up to? Every year we see the results of surveys and polls that reveal the most admired man or woman in America. Reader's Digest often has articles by various people on the subject, "My Most Unforgettable Character." All of us have our own set of heroes and role models.

In this Psalm, the writer tells us that he is looking up to someone, but he is looking a long way up, beyond the horizon, beyond the horizontal, beyond the human realms. He is looking upward toward the Almighty. He begins: Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens.

As I studied this passage, it brought to mind several other passages in the Bible.

The first, of course, is Psalm 121, two Psalms back, which we looked at last week. It begins on a similar note: "I will lift up my eyes unto the hills from whence comes my help. My help comes from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth." It seems that Psalm 123 is an expansion of the thought that is introduced to us in Psalm 121.

A second passage that came to my mind is the story of King Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20. When his kingdom was invaded by a ruthless enemy, it appeared all Judah would be annihilated. But Jehoshaphat gathered his people together at the Temple, trapped as they were behind their own city walls, and he led them in prayer. In one of the most eloquent pleas in the Bible, he said, "O our God… we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes are upon You."

What a great verse! We don't know what to do in the face of this great difficulty, but our eyes are on you. Perhaps that's a verse you need today. The Lord subsequently delivered His people.

Another passage that comes to mind is Matthew 14, when Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water. To me, this is one of the most vivid and helpful lessons in all the Bible. It was a windy night, and the disciples were caught on a stubborn sea. Jesus came to them in the wee hours, literally walking across the lapping waves. Seeing Him, Peter said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you upon the water." Jesus said, "Come." Peter stepped from the boat and literally began crossing the boisterous billows toward Jesus. But it wasn't as easy as it looked, and when a powerful gust of wind hit him and he felt the stinging spray of the sea, he became distracted, got his eyes off Jesus, and started to sink. Jesus reached out and caught him. The lesson is this—when we are in rough water, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. We can remain above the circumstances only so long as we remain focused on Him. There are undoubtedly those in this room who are facing stormy weather today, and you've taken your focus off Jesus. As a result, you're starting to sink. The Psalmist can help us correct that; he said, "Unto You, I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens."

The fourth passage that comes to mind in Hebrews 12: "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."

This was evidently written to some older Hebrew Christians who were encountering renewed persecution and who were unsure as to whether they had the strength to keep going. The writer told them to keep their eyes on Christ. There may be someone here wondering today if you can keep on going. We can always keep on going so long as we keep our eyes on the Lord Jesus Christ. The Psalmist said, "Unto You, I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens."

So this wonderful theme of Psalm 123—looking up, looking upward to the Lord Jesus Christ—is carried throughout the Scriptures. It's like the old hymn that says:

Turn your eyes upon Jesus.
Look full in His wonderful face.
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,
In the light of His glory and grace.

Except for one thing. That is not exactly what this Psalm 123 is saying. As I sat on the front porch this week, reading and re-reading Psalm 123, I suddenly noticed a word I had been overlooking, and it is a very important word. I had memorized this Psalm during my college years, and I've always loved it. But I had never noticed this one word before, and when I saw it I was a bit startled, like: How could I have missed that? It's the word "hand." Did you notice the word "hand"? This Psalm does not tell us to turn our eyes to look full in His wonderful face, but to look at His hand.

> Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You who dwell in the heavens.
>
> Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He has mercy on us.

We're to look at His hand. Why? What's the significance of looking at the Lord's hand? Well, as I mulled it over, it seemed to me that His hand signifies three things.

Direction

First, direction. One hundred years ago in Palestine and Syria, the culture was very similar to what it had been in biblical days. In fact, it still is today in many places in the Middle East, and so we can learn a great deal by observing it. I read of a traveler who spoke of this in an old document—it was an anonymous excerpt in Spurgeon's Treasury of David. He had been in the city of Damascus, entertained there in the home of a wealthy man. He noticed the lord of the house did not issue verbal commands to his servants. It was all done by hand signals. The traveler said, "As soon as we were introduced and seated on the divan, a wave of the master's hand indicated that sherbet was to be served. Another wave brought coffee and pipes. Another brought sweetmeats. At another signal dinner was made ready. The attendants watched their master's eye and hand, to know his will and do it instantly."

The lesson here is so clear and so wonderful. We need to keep our eyes on the hands of our Heavenly Father, ready in an instant to do His will. Just a flick of His finger or a wave of His hand should send us this way or that. There's an old hymn that says:

> He leadeth me, He leadeth me,
> By His own hand He leadeth me.
> His faithful follower I would be,
> For by His hand He leadeth me.

Psalm 139:9-10 says:

> If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.

People often ask me, "How do I know what God wants me to do? How do I know God's will in this matter or in that matter?"

Let me give you a little formula based on the letters PTL. Usually we think of those letters as standing for "Praise the Lord," but they can also serve as a codeword for knowing God's will.

P stands for "Pray."

Tell God you're willing to do whatever He commands, and ask Him to show you what He wants you to do. Proverbs 3 says, "Acknowledge Him in all your ways and He shall direct your paths." Carefully pray through all the decisions of life.

T stands for "Think."

I'm a firm believer that God usually guides us by guiding our normal thinking processes and helping us to make wise, well-thought-through decisions. When the Lord created the human brain, He created the marvel of the universe. And when He gave us the capacity to think, He gave us one of His greatest gifts. He expects us to use our minds. Whenever I have to make a decision, I get all the advice I can, I try to think things through, I make lists of pros and cons, and I try to prayerfully make the best decision I can.

L stands for "Launch."

Having prayed over a decision and having thought it through as well as we know how, then we just have to launch out and do it. Some people become so paralyzed, so afraid they'll make a wrong decision, that they don't make any decision at all. There's a famous story of the donkey between two haystacks who starved to death because he couldn't decide which one to eat. There comes a point when you just need to decide. What if you make the wrong decision? Well, your faith in not in your own infallible decision-making process. Your faith in is an infallible God who is able to reroute you and redeem the situation even if you do make a bad decision.

Now, of course, there is also a time for "waiting on the Lord." The same Bible says both: (1) "Wait on the Lord," and (2) "Launch out into the deep." The waiting comes during the "praying" and "thinking" stages. But sooner or later, we have to make the best decision we can and launch out, trusting God to either bless it or redirect it.

I think one of the best illustrations of being sensitive to God's guidance is seen in Billy Graham's decision to extend his 1949 Crusade in Los Angeles. At that time, few people had heard of Billy Graham. He was just another relatively unknown Southern evangelist on the sawdust trail. He had been invited to conduct a campaign in Los Angeles, but there was absolutely no name recognition. Arriving in Los Angeles before the crusade, Mr. Graham gave a news conference attended by a few reporters. The next morning, he eagerly searched the newspapers to see how the crusade would be publicized. Not a single paper carried the story. But among the supporters Graham did have was the influential Presbyterian Bible teacher Henrietta Mears, who invited Billy to her home in Beverly Hills to speak to a group of Hollywood personalities. Present that day was a hard-drinking star of cowboy westerns named Stuart Hamblen who also hosted one of the most popular afternoon radio shows on the West Coast. He was infamous for his gambling and brawling. The two men took a liking to each other, and Billy longed to win Stuart to Christ, but there was no indication that was going to happen. It was a three-week campaign, and as it drew to a close Mr. Graham prepared to pack his bags and head to the next city. But the local crusade organizers sensed that momentum for the meetings was building, and they wanted to extend them. Billy had never extended a meeting before, and he was hesitant. He prayed about it, thought it through, and asked God help him make a good decision. The next morning at 4:30, he was awakened in his room at the Langham Hotel by a phone call. It was Stuart Hamblen, and he was in tears. Billy woke his wife and friends, who gathered in another room to pray while Stuart and his wife, Suzy, drove to the hotel. That night, Stuart gave his heart to the Lord Jesus. It was the sign Billy needed to extend the meetings. It went on for eight solid weeks. Meanwhile, Stuart excitedly told the story of his conversion on his radio show, and the local newspapers picked up the story. Soon all Los Angeles was buzzing about the Billy Graham meetings. The resulting publicity launched a half-century of mass evangelism virtually unparalleled in Christian history.

There's also an interesting postscript to the story. Shortly afterward, Stuart Hamblen reportedly met movie star John Wayne on a street in Los Angeles. "What's this I hear about you, Stuart?" asked the actor. "Well, Duke, it's no secret what God can do." "Sounds like a song," said John. Stuart went home and, sitting at his piano, wrote the Gospel song "It is No Secret."

The lesson here is that it's very important to be eager for and sensitive to the Lord's specific guidance in our lives. We need to keep our eyes on His hand for direction.

Provision

Second, we need to keep our eyes on His hand for provision. I think this is the primary emphasis of Psalm 123, because the last two verses of the Psalm tell us that this man had some needs that could only be met by God's gracious provision. Look at verses 3-4: Have mercy on us, O Lord, have mercy on us! For we are exceedingly filled with contempt. Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorn of those who are at ease, with the contempt of the proud.

This Psalmist had been the object of scorn, and Christians in the world today can certainly identify with that. I saw an interview on the Today Show this week in which a Christian was interviewed and you could just hear the scorn in the voice of the host; and

Christians have always had to live with scorn and contempt. So we need God to open His hands and give us mercy.

It might be that your soul isn't filled with scorn and contempt, but it is filled with fear. I talked to a man this week who is facing very uncertain medical tests. He's just a young man, but he doesn't know what might be wrong with him physically. But he smiled and said, "I know the Lord is in control, and I'm just trusting Him." The Lord had opened His hand and provided grace.

It might be that your soul is filled with hurt. Perhaps someone has said something or done something that has inflicted damage.

It might be that your soul is filled with anger… or doubt… or confusion. What ever your need, the answer is found in God's hand. I looked up the word "hand" in the concordance, and there were too many references to follow. The word "hand" occurs nearly 2000 times in the Bible. But I did check every reference in the book of Psalms, and I wasn't prepared for the blessing I found there. Over and over we're told that the answer to all our needs in life is found in the hands of God. Just listen to these verses:

Psalm 16:11 says: In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 17:7 says: Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand, O You who save those who trust in You.

Psalm 18:35 says: Your right hand has held me up, Your gentleness has made me great.

Psalm 31:5 says: ?Into Your hand I commit my spirit.

Psalm 31:15 says: My times are in Your hand.

Psalm 37:24-24 says: The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD. and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down; for theLORD upholds him with His hand.

Psalm 63:8 says: My soul follows close behind You; Your right hand upholds me.

Psalm 95:7 says: We are the people of His pasture, and the sheep of His hand.

Psalm 119:173 simply says: Let Your hand become my help,

Finally Psalm 145:16 sums it all up: You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing.

Whatever we need, His hand provides. Is you soul filled with contempt? Is it filled with anger? It is filled with hurt? Is it filled with loneliness? He opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing. He will provide for you. From the hand of God comes direction. From the hand of God comes provision. And finally, from the hand of God comes salvation.

Salvation

Why do we look to the hand of our Lord? Because those hands are nail-pierced hands. There's a new movie out on the last 12 hours in the life of Christ. It's called "The Passion," and it's produced by Mel Gibson. I haven't seen the movie, but I have viewed some still pictures and a trailer, and it certainly presents the crucifixion of Christ in all its graphic, violent, bloody horror. I have mixed feelings about it, because on the one hand we don't want to sanitize or sugarcoat the ugliness and the reality of the cross of Jesus Christ. But on the other hand, the Bible does not dwell at length on the terrible physical aspects of crucifixion. Its emphasis is on its spiritual ramifications.

But one thing the Bible does tell us repeatedly—that His hands were pierced.

Psalm 22 predicts that the hands and feet of the Messiah would be pierced. Isaiah 53 tells us that He was pierced for our transgressions. The prophet Zechariah tells us that at the return of Christ, His tormentors will see Him whom they pierced. Revelation 1:7 says the same thing—that when Jesus comes again, the world will see Him whom they pierced.

One of our favorite scenes in the Gospels is when the risen Christ appeared to His disciples on the evening of that first Easter Sunday. They were in the Upper Room, full of rumors and gossip and news about the possible that Christ had actually risen from the grave. Suddenly Jesus Himself was there, standing in their midst. How did they know it was really Him? How did He prove Himself to them? It says in John 20:20 that He showed them His hands and side—the scars—the marks of His crucifixion. And the verse goes on to say, "Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord."

But Thomas wasn't there, and he later doubted the incredible reports of the others. He said, "Unless I see the scars—the prints—of the nails in His hand, I will not believe." And so it was that a week later, the disciples were again gathered together, this time with Thomas. And again Jesus appeared to them and, looking at Thomas, He held out His hands and said, "Reach your finger here and touch my hands. See the scars. Reach here and feel my side where it was pierced. And be no longer faithless but believing." Thomas fell at His feet, saying, "My Lord and My God."

That same nail-pierced hand is reaching out to you today, offering to lift you out of your pain, your sin, your despair, your sadness, your sin, your sorrow, your death. That ancient omnipotent hand, that beautiful hand, that crucified hand is reaching out to you today. As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their masters, as the eyes of maidens look to the hand of their mistresses, so may our eyes look to the Lord for direction, provision, and salvation until He has mercy on us.

As the old song says,

"Just reach out to Jesus; He's reaching out to You."

WHAT IF?
Psalm 124

During the twenty-five years I've spent in pastoral ministry, there's one statement I've heard over and over as I've ministered to people in times of trouble and sorrow. When loved ones have been sick or dying, when storms have arisen, when disasters have occurred, so many have said to me, "What would we do without the Lord? How do people who don't know Him deal with these things?" I have no answer for that, because I can not personally imagine facing life and death and eternity without the Lord beside me. Life is difficult, and what would we do if we could not confide and reside and abide—and sometimes justhide—in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Have you ever thought it might be good to occasionally imagine what our lives would be like without Christ? There are two occasions when biblical writers take that approach. The New Testament version of this exercise is found in 1 Corinthians 15 when the apostle Paul tries to imagine what it would be like to live without the reality of the resurrection power of Christ.

"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God… for if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost… (and) we are to be pitied more than all men." But, he adds, "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."

The Old Testament version in this exercise is found in the text we're coming to today in our study through the Pilgrim Psalms, the Psalms of Ascents. The Psalmist wants us to imagine what it would be like if God were not on our side. It is Psalm 124, and I'd like for us to read it together:

"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,"
Let Israel now say—
"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
When men rose up against us,
Then they would have swallowed us alive,
When their wrath was kindled against us;
Then the waters would have overwhelmed us,
The stream would have gone over our soul."

Blessed be the Lord,
Who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
The snare is broken, and we have escaped.
Our help is in the name of the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth.

What If?

This Psalm is a hymn of two stanzas. The first stanza is made up of verses 1-5, and the second stanza is made up of verses 6-8. It's easy to give a title to each of these stanzas, and the first stanza we'll call: "What If?"

What if the Lord were not on our side? What if Christ had not risen from the dead? What if there were no God, no Christ, no Bible, no truth of Scripture? Well, there are a lot of people in the world who would say, "The world would be better off. Christianity has been the source of endless problems. Christianity is the root of all evil."

Increasing numbers of social scientists are telling us that the world would be better off without Christianity. Here's the way one British authority put it: "Billions of non-Christians in the world reject the Christian idea of God and His Son. Are they all unhappy? They might well be unhappy, not because they miss Christianity, but because Christian bankers and multinational corporate bosses take their money and their livelihoods. People in the Third World would be better off without Christianity. Christians are too smug and self-centered to even think of this."

Another article said, "Christianity has harmed, debased, degraded, and exploited all the people on this planet who have come under its sway. It has done so physically, emotionally, psychically, and existentially for one hundred generations."

People who feel this often point to the Medieval Crusades, to the religious wars of Europe, to the Spanish Inquisition, to the witch burnings in New England, and to other distortions of Christianity in the world and in history. Perhaps you've had people say to you, "Look at all the destruction and damage Christianity has caused in history." How do you answer that? What do you say? I have three answers.

First, true Christians have never claimed to be perfect people. When people find out that we're Christians, they expect us to act in a certain way. They expect us to display a certain set of attitudes. In essence, they expect us to be perfect, and we can't blame them because we do claim to be followers of someone who claimed Himself to be perfect and who demands that we live as He teaches. But though we are people who have been forgiven of sin by the blood of Christ, we are still "under construction." We are pardoned, but we are not perfect. Speaking for myself, I know I'm far from perfect, and there are many times when I don't display the kind of love that I should. But hopefully we are growing in Christ and becoming increasingly conformed into His image.

But second, and more to the point, we must realize that not everything done in the name of Christianity is Christian. Let me give you an example. Suppose that I had a distinctive coat I wore. Perhaps it was an outlandish color or a peculiar style, and everyone who saw that coat in the distance knew it was me. Now suppose a thief stole my coat and then robbed a bank. People would see a man running out of the bank wearing that coat, and they might think that I was the thief. I would be the prime suspect.

Jesus said that a lot of people throughout history are going to do evil things while wearing the coat of Christianity. He used a slightly different figure. He talked about wolves in sheep's clothing, but the illustration is the same. The apostle Paul said that Satan himself knows how to transform himself into an angel of light.

But the Bible says there is one way to detect genuine Christians—they will know you are Christians, He said, by your love. John the Apostle put it similarly when he said, "By their fruits you shall know them." So when you read about someone claiming to be a churchman, claiming to be a religious leader, claiming to be a Christian who drags someone else down into the torture chambers and puts him on the rack or burns him in the flames—it's easy to blame Christians for that. But it is important to remember that just because he is wearing the coat of Christianity on the outside doesn't mean he has the character of Christianity on the inside. One of the devil's favorite tricks is to disguise himself in Christian garb so that we'll be blamed for his evils. So remember that not everything done in the name of Christianity is Christian.

The third answer is this—look at the enormous amount of good that true Christians have done in the world.

There is an intriguing book out, entitled Why America Needs Religion, written by a man named Guenter Lewy of the University of Massachusetts Dr. Lewy is an agnostic who grew tired of hearing Christians talk about the moral and spiritual decline of the nation. He got tired of hearing us blame our nation's problems on the fact that America is becoming less and less religious. So he set out to write a book on the subject, "Why America Doesn't Need Religion."

But as he researched for his book he was shocked to discover the opposite of what he expected. Religion in general and Christianity in particular—he primarily deals with Christianity—has had a profoundly beneficial effect on society. It has provided the philosophical and moral foundations for a free and healthy society. Lewy has concluded—to his own surprise—that Christianity is essential to a healthy, humane culture. And thus the title of his book became: Why America Needs Religion.

Let me list eight big areas of social impact that have flowed from Christians and from Christian principles:

- Hospitals and health care
- Orphanages and child care
- Soup kitchens and rescue missions
- The education of the masses
- The reform of prisons
- The abolition of slavery
- The rise of democracy
- And humanitarian assistance in times of famine, disaster, and starvation.

Christians have always been at the forefront in these areas. The international missions arm of own domination, after two years of research by Clint Morgan, has just voted to began a non-governmental organization to provide humanitarian assistance to needy parts of the world, especially to Central Asia.

Several years ago, Charles Colson addressed this issue when he was awarded the Templeton Prize. In receiving the award he gave a powerful speech. Here's a little of what he said:

"Despite the failures of some of its followers—the crusades and inquisitions—this (Judeo-Christian) heritage laid the foundations of freedom in the West. It has established a standard of justice over both men and nations. It has proclaimed a higher law that exposes the pretensions of tyrants. It has taught that every human soul is on a path of immortality, that every man and woman is to be treated as the child of a King. This muscular faith has motivated excellence in art and discovery in science. It has undergirded an ethic of work and an ethic of service. It has tempered freedom with internal restraint…. It has sent legions into battle against disease, oppression, and bigotry. It ended the slave trade, built hospitals and orphanages, tamed the brutality of mental wards and prisons. In every age it has given divine mercy a human face in the lives of those who follow Christ—from Francis of Assisi to the great social reformers Wilberforce and Shaftsbury to Mother Teresa …."

So it is an interesting exercise to think of what the world would be like if there were no God, if there were no Christ, if there were no Bible, if there were no hope.

But the writer of Psalm 124 isn't primarily speaking in historical or sociological terms as I've been doing this morning. He is just speaking personally. He was saying: "What if I didn't have a God to help me in my own personal crisis? What if I didn't have a Bible to lean on in times of danger and distress? What if God had not been on my side? I would have been a goner."

There's an old Gospel song that says, "Where could I go but to the Lord?" I feel that way, and so did the Psalmist.

"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,"
Let Israel now say—
"If it had not been the Lord who was on our side,
When men rose up against us,
Then they would have swallowed us alive,
When their wrath was kindled against us;
Then the waters would have overwhelmed us,
The stream would have gone over our soul."

Praise Be!
So here we have the first section of Psalm 124 entitled: "What If?" But now we come to the last portion of the Psalm, and the key idea here is "Praise Be!" Look at verse 6: Blessed be (Praise be to—NIV) the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

Notice the four metaphors the Psalmist uses from nature to describe himself. He tells us in verses 1-2 that he is facing a foe. Men are rising up against him. They are like carnivorous animals that wanted to devour him alive. Have you ever had a human enemy that came against you? Have you ever had someone who wanted to destroy you?

In verse 3, the Psalmist used another figure, saying he was facing a fire—men's wrath kindled against him. The word "kindle" is a word connected with fire. The NIV says, "flared up," which is the same concept. Have you ever been caught in a fire? Trapped in a

burning building? Unable to save yourself? Have you ever found yourself in a “firestorm”?

Third, he said he felt he was being overwhelmed and swept away in a flood. Verses 4-5: Then the waters would have overwhelmed us, the stream would have gone over soul; then the swollen waters would have gone over our soul.

Fourth, he said that he was not only facing foes, fires, floods, a fowler: Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth. Our soul has escaped as a bird from the snare of the fowler; the snare is broken and we have escaped.

When Katrina and I were in Finland, we stayed at a lovely park in which there were exhibits showing how Finns used to live in earlier days. There in the woods they had built a little primitive Finish village, and one of the exhibits showed the variety of ingenious traps that the fowlers set for birds. I was amazed at how simple and clever these traps were, and how hopeless it was for the poor little bird that fluttered down, were drawn in the bait, and ensnared.

The devil is a fowler who knows you and he knows your weaknesses and he has set traps everywhere for you and for me.

So in this world you and I are going to face foes, fires, floods, and fowlers. But here’s the point. The Psalmist tells us that God is on our side, that our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

I love that word “help” as we find it in the Bible. Do any of you need help today? Do you need help in facing foe, fire, flood, or fowler? Let me give you some “Help” verses to remember.

- Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, “Thus far has the Lord helped us.”—1 Samuel 7:12

- With him is only the arm of flesh, but with us is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles.”—2 Chronicles 32:8

- Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance.—Psalm 42:5

- God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.—Psalm 46:1

- I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help; my help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth —Psalm 121:1

- Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you; Yes, I will help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand—Psalm 41:10

- Likewise the Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses—Romans 8:26

- Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in times of need—Hebrews4:16

For many years, there was a man named Thomas A. Dorsey who led the singing at Chicago’s Pilgrim Baptist Church. In August of 1932, he was scheduled to be the soloist at a large revival meeting in St. Louis. He and his pregnant wife, Nettie, were living in a little apartment in Chicago’s South Side. When time came for Thomas to travel to St. Louis, he kissed his wife goodbye and left for the train station. Soon he was in the midst of a great revival and evangelistic campaign. One evening as he finished playing the piano, a Western Union messenger approached the stage and handed him an urgent telegram. He ripped opened the envelope and read the four words of the telegram: “Your wife just died.”

Dorsey’s’ world began spinning. People on every side of him were happily singing and clapping, but he had just been hit by foe, fire, flood, and fowler. He rushed home to find that Nettie had died while giving birth to a little boy; and on the night of his arrival the little boy died, too. Mother and baby were buried in the same casket. Dorsey was devastated and embittered, and for awhile he seemed overwhelmed with anger, grief, sorry, and depression. But one day he went to a piano and started composing a melody as it came into his head. The words seemed to come naturally. The song said:

Precious Lord, take my hand,

Lead me on, let me stand,
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.

The Psalmist said: "What if God didn't help me? But praise be! He does." What if? Praise be! That's the thought of Psalm 124. And the same God wants to help you. The same Jesus wants to take your hand. The same Lord is reaching out to you, whatever you're facing. Will you give Him your hand? Will you give Him your heart? Will you give Him your life? If so, He'll give you His hand and His heart and His life. He will become a very present help in trouble, for our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth.

LIVING A FAITH-BASED LIFE
Psalm 125

The news media around the world has discovered a new adjective, partly as a result of the Bush-Chaney presidential campaign of the year 2000. It's the phrase "faith-based." I looked up this phrase on an internet search engine that specializes in current newspaper articles, and just this week alone there have been a multitude of stories about faith-based groups, faith-based leaders, faith-based grants, faith-based initiatives, faith-based education, faith-based giving, faith-based drug-treatment programs, and so forth.

This morning I would like to talk about the importance of living a faith-based life.

From one perspective, every human being lives a faith-based life. Everyone bases their life on some belief-system. Some people base lives on their faith in atheism. I'd like to read to you something written by a famous scientist, Dr. Richard Lewontin, a geneticist and one of the world's leading exponents of neo-Darwinian biology. This quote shows how blatantly many scientists base their conclusions on assumptions that arise from a blind faith in atheism and materialism. Dr. Lewontin wrote (and the italics are his):

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, in spite of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world, but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover, that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.'

In other words, I think he is saying he is approaching science by faith in materialism—that there is no reality in the universe but physical matter, that there is no God, no Creator, no supernatural. And that faith establishes the presuppositions which leads to the conclusions he espouses, regardless of whether they seem sensible or not.

So atheists have faith in their atheism; agnostics have faith in their agnosticism; Mohammedans have faith in Islamism. All of us approach life from a faith-based perspective.

Christians live faith-based lives, as well, of course; but our faith is based on a series of truths given to us by God in a special book called the Bible, and these truths are verified and validated by a remarkable body of evidence. We believe there is a God who is both infinite and intimate. He is both supremely powerful and wonderfully personal. He created us in His image and told us how to live. When we disobeyed Him, we brought separation and death upon all of humanity. But the Bible teaches that God loved us so much that He Himself became a man, came down to live perfectly among us, died on the cross for our sins, providing atonement and forgiveness by His blood. He rose again and is coming one day for His children.

And we believe that He has given us a book full of truths, instructions, and promises to meet every contingency in life. There is a promise for every need that we're facing today or that we will ever face. There is assurance here for both life and death.

And the Lord tells us to trust Him.

We're to trust Him with both blessings and burdens, with both crosses and losses, with both our disasters and our delights, with both life and death. We're to trust Him day by day, moment by moment, and step by step. Christians are to live a faith-based life.

What kind of life is that? What sort of people will we be as we live in total, daily, constant, continual trust in our Lord Jesus Christ? That's the subject of the passage of Scripture we're coming to today in Psalm 125. It gives us a graphic symbol for what a faith-based life is like. It compares the faith-based life to a great and fabled city—the city of Mount Zion.

Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.

For the scepter of wickedness shall not rest on the land allotted to the righteous, lest the righteous reach out their hands to iniquity.

Do good, O Lord, to those who are good, and to those who are upright in their hearts. As for such as turn aside to their crooked ways, the Lord shall lead them away with the workers of iniquity.

Peace be upon Israel!

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The Psalmist begins with a great declaration: Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion. If you are trusting the Lord today, you are like Mount Zion. If we have a church full of people today who are trusting the Lord, we have several hundred Mount Zions sitting here in our building today.

To really understand the significance of that, we need to know what Mount Zion is. Zion has become a popular word in our English vocabulary. The word "Zion" appears in many of our hymns, such as "We're Marching to Zion." There a lot of churches, schools, and hospitals named Zion. There are towns and cities in the United States with this name, such as Zion, Illinois and Zion, California. One of our great natural treasures is Zion National Park in Utah. And of course, there is the Zionist movement of the 1800s and 1900s that led to the reestablishment of the nation of Israel.

But what does the word "Zion" really mean and what does it signify?

This is a Hebrew word, the origins of which are obscure. It perhaps came from a root term meaning to protect or to defend. It was the name given to a hill between the Kidron and Tyropean valleys in Jerusalem. When David became the King of Israel, he captured this hill from the Jebusites and it became known as the City of David. It was just to the South of the area known today as the Temple Mount, and it later came to include the Temple Mount itself. Even later, the term Zion was used as a synonym for all of Jerusalem. But primarily when we think of Zion, we think of the slopes on the southern flanks of Jerusalem and extended up to the Temple Mount, where God's Temple stood and where God Himself dwelled in the days of the days of the Old Testament.

So when the Psalmist says, "Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion," what does He mean? In what way is a faith-based life to be compared with the southeastern slopes of Jerusalem and with the Temple Mount of the Old City? Well, we don't have to speculate and we don't have to make up all kinds of creative analogies, because the writer goes on to list for us several points of comparison between living by faith and Mount Zion.

A Stable Life

First, a faith-based life is a stable life. Verse 1 says: "those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion which cannot be moved." Peterson's translation says: "Those who trust in Yahweh are like Zion Mountain: Nothing can move it, a rock-solid mountain."

The most stable, rock-solid people on earth are those who are trusting the Lord come what may, trusting in His promises and in His providence. The other day I had breakfast with a man who is facing a strange and unknown illness, but he smiled and said, "Whatever happens, my wife and I have a deep sense that God is in this, that He knows what is happening, and that He is going to take care of us and to use this situation for good."

This week I read a remarkable story in the current edition of a magazine entitled "The Voice of the Martyrs," a publication that tells stories of persecution against Christians in the world today. The cover story was about a Christian woman in Nigeria named Nvou Dauda. Last year militant Muslims raided her village and threatened to return and to kill her if she did not renounce Christianity. She

refused to comply with these demands, and several weeks later, on the evening of December 2, 2002, she was nearly asleep in bed when she heard gunshots and realized that the militant Islamics were back. They burst through the door, armed with shotguns and machetes. They shot her in the hand, stomach, and right leg. As she fell, her 2-year-old son, who was tied to her in African fashion in a tightly-wrapped shawl, came loose. The militants poured gasoline on her house and set it afire. Somehow she managed to crawl to the door, but her baby boy perished in the blaze. Not only that, but she was seven months pregnant, and the gunshot that pierced her stomach killed her unborn baby.

As it happened, there was a team of American doctors on a mission's trip to that area of Nigeria, and they saved her life. In the article, Nvou said that her life was in God's hands. "I've handed everything over to God, and I pray He will take care of me," she said. "I will continue to work for God; and even if I am killed, it will mean I was killed in the name of the Lord."

The old evangelist, Vance Havner, once faced a tragic turn of events in his life, and he explained his approach to it by simply saying that he was "shipwrecked on God and stranded on omnipotence."

The Psalmist said, "Those who trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion which cannot be moved."

That doesn't mean we're never alarmed with life, but it does mean we don't stay that way. I noticed something interesting recently in the story of Jehoshaphat in 2 Chronicles 20. Everything seemed to be going very nicely for him until one horrible morning when dramatic and unnerving news arrived: a number of powerful armies had combined and were marching toward Jerusalem to capture and destroy it. The next verse says, "Jehoshaphat was alarmed." But then the passage goes on to say how he determined to trust the Lord with this terrible news, and the Lord honored his faith and delivered him.

I think many times we're alarmed, but then by God's grace He gives us the power to process the difficulty through the eyes of faith. This may take a few minutes or a few days or a few months or even a few years. But the Lord intends to teach us to trust Him with the difficulties of life, and when we do we become like Mount Zion which cannot be moved.

An Eternal Life

Second, a faith based life is an eternal life. Look at verse 1 again: Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. Zion is a city that is going to abide forever. It's the only city in the world that is truly eternal. Poets call Rome the "eternal city," but that's wrong. It is Jerusalem. Mount Zion. It will endure as long as the world shall last. And after that?

Revelation 21 says: "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people and God Himself will be with them and be their God."

So Zion will endure throughout the history of this world. And at the end of world history when the earth and heavens are recreated, there will Zion be once again as the eternal capital of God's eternal empire.

Now, Psalm 125 tells us that those who place their faith and trust in the Lord will be a part of all this, that we will be like Mount Zion that abides forever. It reminds us of what John said when he used that same phrase—abides forever—in 1 John 2:15-17:

"Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever."

Last week one of the greatest evangelists in the entire history of the church passed away—Dr. Bill Bright. Some people claim, and perhaps rightly, that more people have come to Christ through his ministry than through any other man in the history of the church. He began a ministry to reach college students called "Campus Crusade for Christ" which has had a profound effect in many areas. More recently, it was out of this ministry that the Jesus Film has become the most powerful evangelistic tool since the printing press.

This film, which Bright conceived and funded through Campus Crusade for Christ, is the most widely viewed film ever produced. It has been translated into more than 730 languages and viewed by more than 4.5 billion people in 234 countries, with 300 additional languages currently being translated. More than 148 million people have indicated making salvation decisions for Christ after viewing it live. Additional tens of millions are believed to have made similar decisions through television and radio versions of the JESUS Film.

When Bill Bright passed away last week, his wife, Vonette, immediately flew to Orlando, Florida, where thousands of Campus Crusade workers were meeting in a conference. She told about her husbands last days and hours. When he realized that he wasn't going to recover, he asked his son to pray that he would end his days with praise on his lips. The doctors had warned him that his particular disease usually ended with a very violent and painful death. He wanted to die with praise on his lips. So in the days leading up to his death, he focused his attention on the great hymns of the faith. He studied them and read about them and tried to sing them.

When his family and friends—a group of about 13—gathered around his bed for the last time, they had a hymnfest. They started singing some of the popular praise choruses as well as the great doctrinal hymns of the faith. They sang for about an hour as his breathing slowed and decreased.

Finally they paused, and Vonette leaned over to him and said, "Honey, I want you to go on to be with the Lord, and I know that's what you want and what Jesus wants. Why don't you just go on and crawl up into His arms."

They began singing the song, "Our God reigns," and as they were singing, his soul slipped from his body and ascended on to heaven. Vonette said, "We sang Bill right into heaven."

The Bible teaches that one day when Christ comes again there will be a resurrection, our bodies will come from the tombs just as the body of Jesus rose on Easter Sunday, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. This makes all the difference about the way we feel concerning life and death.

Recently I found an interesting old poem by Isaac Watts. It says:

Why do we mourn departing friends,
Or shake at death's alarms?
'Tis but the voice that Jesus sends
To call them to His arms.

That's the attitude of Christians, for those who trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion which cannot be removed but abideth forever.

A Surrounded Life

Psalm 125:2 goes on to tell us that a faith-based life is also a surrounded life: As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.

This is Rule #7 in the Red Sea Rules—Envision God's Enveloping Presence. For His children, He serves as both guard and guide. He both precedes us and protects us. He is simultaneously our shepherd and shield. He is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the One who goes before, guiding into the future; and the One who goes behind, gathering up our debris, our failures, and our poor attempts at ministry, blessing us and leaving a blessing behind us for others.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds His people from this time forth and forever. Psalm 5 says that God surrounds His people with favor as with a shield.

Psalm 32 says that God surrounds His people with songs of deliverance, that mercy surrounds those who trust in the Lord. Psalm 33:22 says, Lord, let your constant love surround us, for our hopes are in you alone (LB).

Psalm 139:5 says, I look behind me and you're there, then up ahead and you're there, too—your reassuring presence, coming and going. This is too much, too wonderful—I can't take it all in! (Peterson).

The book of Job says that God puts a hedge around His people to protect them from the evil one.

Earlier this year I read the remarkable autobiography of Dr. V. Raymond Edman, the president of my alma mater, Wheaton College. It was a remarkable book, filled with remarkable stories. For example, Dr. Edman wrote about something that happened to him in World War I.

He was a buck private, a member of the medical detachment of the 28th Infantry assigned to the First Battalion and attached to B Company. They were in Germany, and it was bitterly cold. They were traveling on foot across a frozen landscape, trudging through

deep snow, and it was more than some of the soldiers could take. They would fall by the wayside. Their compatriots would make sure they had water in their canteen, and then leave them in the hope that an ambulance would come that way later.

Edman himself was getting sick. He felt a fever taking over his body, and the marching seemed endless. Finally, Edman himself could go no further, and he collapsed in the snow. Later, coming to, he found himself alone. Struggling to his feet, he trudged into a nearby village on the Rhine where he found his fellow soldiers housed up in a schoolhouse. He had missed supper, so he fell onto the bare floor of the school and slept.

The next day, they were off again. This time the sky was clear and the sun was bright, but it was dangerously cold and the snow was deeper than ever. Hour after hour they marched until finally they came to a run-down prison camp. They found a building with the roof and windows partially gone, but it afforded some degree of protection against the wind and weather. And Edman knew that he had no strength to go on. His fever was raging, and he was exhausted, hungry, and sick.

One day about noon, a runner from battalion headquarters entered the camp and handed the sergeant a message which said, "Transfer five men to C Company at once." Edman prayed that he would not be chosen, but almost instantly that miserable old sergeant barked out the orders: "Edman, you are in charge of this detail." Then he picked out four other solders, all of whom immediately began cursing and complaining while rolling up their packs.

In his autobiography, Edman wrote:

> While my men began rolling their packs with grumbling and profanity, I slipped into a small room adjoining the prison barracks. It had been a bierhalle, a sort of tavern, but now was entirely unoccupied. I knelt down by a bench and made my earnest plea to the Lord.
>
> "Lord Jesus, I cannot go. I do not have enough strength to go anywhere. I do not know where C Company is located. I cannot go!" How long I remained on my knees after that troubled petition, I do not know, perhaps a moment or two. Then and there for the first time in my Christian life, I was aware of the immediate presence of the Savior. There was no one I could see, or touch, or hear; but I knew He was there. In the depths of my young heart, I was aware of His voice saying, 'I will go with you."

In the strength of that assurance, Edman arose, rolled his few belongings in his two blankets, took his orders and little detail of men, and started off. By nightfall he had arrived at C Company and was assigned a room. It wasn't in a deserted prison barracks. It was in a home. He was taken to a German home where a good German mother was preparing supper. She took one look at him and said in alarm, "You are sick!" Edman protested as well as he could that he would be all right, but she said, "You must not sleep in that room. It is too cold. There is no heat. You will become more ill there. Come with me and I will show you what you must do."

She led him up a little staircase from the kitchen to the attic to a little room under the evens of the house. There was a bedroom with a huge featherbed. She put him to bed with the assurance that he would be warm. She fed him, and there he was nursed back to health.

He later said, "I wanted to stay in that miserable Russian barracks and sleep on the floor—and all the while the Lord had prepared for me a mother's care and a featherbed!" Edman continued that out of that experience he began to understand the reality of the all-encompassing, surrounding, hedge-like presence of God.

As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord will surround His people both now and forevermore.

Psalm 125 goes on to give us three other ways in which those who trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion, but we don't have time to cover them today, so we'll just stop here with verse 2. You can study the others on your own. But the great question is—are you really trusting the Lord? Are you trusting Him for salvation? Are you trusting in the finished work of Christ for eternal life? Are you trusting Him to forgive your sins and to give you eternal life on the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus our Lord? And then, are you trusting Jesus with the stresses and strains of life? You can tell if you are, for…

Those who trust in the Lord are as Mount Zion,
Which cannot be moved, but abideth forever.
As the mountains surround Jerusalem,
So the Lord surrounds His people both now and forevermore.

BETTER THAN COOPERSTOWN
Psalm 127

There was a tragic story in the newspaper last week about a man in Allen, Texas, outside of Dallas, who received a letter from a married couple, friends of his. It arrived by Airborne Express, and when he opened it he was alarmed by its contents. The couple had written that they were at the end of their rope, they had exhausted their options, they were out of work and out of money. Even worse, they were estranged from their families for some reason or other. They asked this man to be the executor of what little estate they had, and told him they wanted to be cremated. As the man read the letter, he grew alarmed and called the police who rushed to the couple's house, but it was too late. They had shot themselves. The man told the newspaper that the couple had lost two things—their relationship with God and their relationship with their family. And without those two things, they just couldn't go on.

That is exactly the theme of the passage of Scripture we're coming to today—Psalm 127. Our relationship with God must be the most important thing in our lives, and our relationship with our family must be close behind. If we work hard to keep those two relationships healthy, everything else will be all right. If we don't work hard to keep those two relationships healthy, nothing else really matters. Let's read this passage together then see how the Psalmist works this out.

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

This little Psalm falls into two sections, and at first glance the two sections seem to have little in common. The first section says that unless the Lord is blessing whatever you are doing, then whatever you are doing is useless. The last section talks about the happiness that comes from our children. Two seemingly different subjects; but there is a common theme, and that theme is: What is really important in life?

The answer is—our partnership with the Lord and our friendship with our families.

Our Partnership with the Lord (Ps 127:1-2)
The first half of Psalm 127 talks about our relationship with the Lord: Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it; unless the Lord guards the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows; for so He gives His beloved sleep.

The superscription of this Psalm indicates it was written by Solomon, and we can believe it for two reasons. First, it was Solomon who engineered the building of the great Temple of the Lord is Jerusalem, and this seems to have been his working philosophy for the project. We're building the house of the Lord, but we aren't really building it ourselves—God is building it through us. We're the Lord's junior partners. We're working for Him. Unless He builds this Temple, it is worthless. Unless He guards this city, it is useless. It's foolish for us to work ourselves into the ground, to get up before the sun and go to bed in the wee hours of the morning. God wants us to take care of ourselves, to get the sleep we need, to stay healthy. So as you build this Temple, remember that you aren't building it; God is building it through you.

The second reason we can believe that Solomon wrote this Psalm is because it uses one of his favorite words: vain. It occurs here three times: It is vain… it is vain… it is vain…. In his book of Ecclesiastes Solomon talked about how vain and empty and useless life is without the Lord. He begins the book saying, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity"—referring to a life with no spiritual foundation.

So the idea of this first section of Psalm 127 is making sure the Lord is in charge of everything we're doing. I think we can frame out these two verses like this:

We must be committed to doing the will of God in our lives, and only the will of God. If God tells you to build a house or to guard a city, then you can do it with the full assurance that it isn't you doing it, it is God doing it through you. The lesson is that we must learn to commit everything about our lives to the Lord and seek His blessings, or what we are doing will prove to be empty and vain.

As I was working through these verses, I thought of something the old Methodist circuit riding preacher, Peter Cartwright, once said.

He lived in the 1800s, and for 53 years he served as a traveling evangelist through this area. His autobiography is one of the great classics of American church history. He was about as rough and plain-spoken as you can get. In one section he tells of traveling on horseback through the Cumberland Mountains on a Saturday night. He was tired and lonely, but he came to an inn to spend the night. As it happened, there was a dance going on. He took a seat at a corner table, and a young lady come up to him, smiled, and asked him to dance with her.

He took her hand and walked with her to the middle of the dance floor, and the fiddler began some fast-paced song. But Cartwright turned to the fiddler and asked him to stop playing for a moment, and he addressed the people in the room. He told them that for several years he had not undertaken any matter of importance without first asking the blessing of God upon it, and now he wanted to ask God's blessings of the young lady and on all who were in the house. He said, "Let us all kneel down and pray."

Grasping the lady's hand tightly, he dropped to his knees and began praying, as he later said, "with all the power of soul and body that I could command. The young lady tried to get loose from me, but I held her tight. Presently she fell on her knees. Some of the company kneeled, some stood, some fled, some sat still, all looked curious. The fiddler ran off into the kitchen."

As Cartwright continued praying, people began to weep and some cried out for mercy. He rose to his feet and began preaching. Cartwright sang and prayed and preached all night. Fifteen people were saved that evening, a revival broke out that lasted several days, and Cartwright organized a church with 32 members. The owner of the inn became one of the leaders of the church, and some of the young men who were converted at the dance became preachers of the Gospel.

I thought of that story because of Cartwright's statement that he never undertook any matter of any importance without first having committed it to the Lord. I think this is an extraordinarily important approach to life.

When I was a teenager, I preached my first sermon on a Sunday that had been designated "Youth Sunday." I had found a printed copy of a sermon someone had given on the radio and, using that sermon as a basis, I carefully prepared my message. My pastor at the time, Rev. Winford Floyd, tutored me in the process, and when I was all prepared I showed him my notes. He was pleased with them, then he said to me, "Now we must kneel down and commit this sermon to the Lord." He told me that, having prepared his sermon each week, he would kneel down and lay the notes before the Lord and request God's blessings. I've never forgotten that lesson.

We should not undertake anything of importance without first committing it to the Lord. For several years, I've made a practice of praying about purchases I wanted to make. Seldom do I buy anything of any significance on impulse. I pray about renovations and improvements to my house. I pray about writing and speaking opportunities. I pray about trips I'm going to take and even about conversations I'm going to have. I keep a little prayer list that I've kept since January 11, 1973, and I try to never undertake anything of importance without first committing it to the Lord.

Verse 2 goes on to stress the futility of doing things in life that do not represent the will of God for you. Forbes Magazine has an article in the current issue that says that job stress is America's leading cause of illness, depression, and workplace violence. Americans are overextended and stressed out. But here is the Bible's remedy. Let me read verse 2 in several different translations:

* It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat; for God gives rest to his loved ones—New Living Translation

* It is useless to work so hard for a living, getting up early and going to bed late. For the LORD provides for those he loves, while they are asleep—Today's English Version

* It is senseless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, fearing you will starve to death; for God wants his loved ones to get their proper rest—The Living Bible

* It's useless to rise early and go to bed late, and work your worried fingers to the bone. Don't you know he enjoys giving rest to those he loves?—the Message

Verses 1 and 2 say this: It is useless to live a life that isn't a perfect reflection of God's will for us. It is useless to do things that are not committed to God. We only have so many years and days and hours, and for every moment spent doing something outside of God's will is a moment lost to doing what God has really called us to do. So if the Lord wants you to build a house or guard a city, do it as one who is committed to Him, understanding that when you do the will of God, it is God Himself doing His will through you. Exhaustion comes when we start stuffing our lives full of things that are outside of God's will for us. When we are doing His work,

there is a sense of rest and refreshment for He wants us to get the rest we need.

This reminds us of our Lord's words in the Gospel: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.?"

Our Relationship with our Families (Ps 127:3-5)
So the first important thing in life is our partnership with the Lord as we see in verses 1-2. The second important thing is our friendship with our families as seen in verses 3-5.

Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them; they shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

A week or so ago, several men were inducted into Baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Among them was Gary Carter, former player for the New York Mets. Over his 19-year career, he hit 324 home runs and drove in more than 1,200 runs. While I was driving in the car, I listened to an extended report from the Hall of Fame and the broadcasters replayed portions of Gary Carter's speech. But they left out portions of it. I'd like to share with you a portion of this baseball player's speech that was not widely reported by the media. Notice how his words reflect the emphases of Psalm 127.

Above all I want to thank my Lord & Savior Jesus Christ. A great verse that spoke to me while writing my speech that kind of explains what it's all about comes in Psalm 18. "I love you, Lord, you are my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress, my Savior; my God is my rock, in whom I find protection. He is my shield, the strength of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call on the Lord, who is worthy of praise."

I praise the Lord, my God, my best friend, who gave me the ability, the love, the desire that brought me here today. Without You, I would be nothing. I thank you, Lord, for giving me such wonderful parents. My parents can't be here today in person, but I know that they are smiling down from Heaven today, because they have the best seats in the house. I've said to a lot of people that my father's on my right shoulder today and my mom's on my left….

…Well, to my immediate family there is so much to say, but not enough time to say it. So, the one thing I remember the most is how much the kids and Sandy would be at all the games. You know I never felt comfortable or relaxed until I saw their happy faces sitting in the stands behind home plate. What a blessing I've truly had for my wife and kids to be right there with me through it all…

…To my three precious children, I love you all very, very much and I'm so proud of each and every one of you and for all that you have done. I am so thankful that each one of you has chosen to walk with the Lord…

There, it seems to me, is a perfect example of a man who knows the meaning of Psalm 127. The important thing is not being in the Hall of Fame, as wonderful as that may be. It isn't having a fabulous and famous career, as exciting as that may be. The important thing is our relationship with our Savior and our relationship with our families.

And the Psalmist specifically mentions our children. Notice how he ends: "They (your children) shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies at the gate." Let me paraphrase this: "When your life—even down to the details—is committed to the Lord and you are in His perfect will, it will create an environment in which your children will grow up so confident and secure that they can stand in a place of danger and face the enemy without flinching."

Proverbs 14:26 says the same thing using different words: In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge.

Let me close by giving you six quick take-aways from this message.

First, make sure that Jesus Christ is the Absolute Lord of your life. If you're doing things that are not in His will, push them out of the circle of your life. If you are not doing things that are in His will, pull them into the circle of your life. Remember that Jesus used His time very frugally while He was on earth. He only had 33 years of life, and only 3 years of public ministry. There were many things He did not do. Many things He did not experience. Many things—even good things—that He deliberately excluded from His life because they were not things that represented the Father's perfect will for Him. But He did do the things that were vital. He said, "I always do the things that are pleasing to Him." We need to live as He did. Is your life full of unimportant, unnecessary things? Are

you missing God's perfect will for your life? Make a decision today to follow Jesus Christ in full obedience and to let Him be your Lord and Master.

Second, learn to commit everything you do to the Lord. Develop the practice of praying over your decisions, purchases, opportunities, and involvements.

Third, learn to get the rest you need. This promise in verse 2 is a wonderful promise to claim. In her wonderful autobiography, the Southern Baptist missionary Bertha Smith tells of a lesson she learned in China. She was in the area of Shantung, which was afflicted by terrible wind and dust storms. Sometimes the winds would blow so heard that the sky would turn yellow from the dust and the stores would close. Everyone would rush home to close the doors, but even then the fine silt would creep into every crack and keyhole. Some nights the dust storms would be so bad, Bertha said, that the next morning her bedroom would be coated in a layer of fine yellow dust, and the only white place in the room would be the spot on her pillow where her head lay. The dust storms would sometimes last for three days or more.

One evening, Bertha said, the wind was raging so badly that she was frightened and disoriented. Her nerves were almost shot. Her Old Testament reading that night came to this Psalm—Psalm 127—and those words, "He gives His beloved sleep," jumped up from the page into her heart. "Thank you, Lord," she said. "I am Your beloved because You see me in Your beloved Son, so I take sleep from you." In a moment she was sound asleep until morning, even though the wind raged all night. She later said, "From that experience I learned to take peace from the Lord during the varied storms that arose in the work."

As we go about living our lives within His will, the Lord wants to give us a sense of rest and peace.

Jesus, I am resting, resting,
In the joy of what Thou art.
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.

Fourth, enjoy your children and grandchildren and work hard at building friendships with them. Many of you know that yesterday one of our daughters was married to her high school sweetheart here at our church, and this week two of our daughters are moving to other cities. I made up my mind I wasn't going to get too sentimental or emotional, but I did look back over my diary notes through the years. I want to encourage you to keep a diary or journal. I've used it, among other things, to write down the wonderful things my girls have said that I didn't want to forget. For example, when Grace was just starting school somehow she learned a little French. Coming home, she explained to Katrina, "If France, you are a Mademoiselle." Then she looked at me and said, "Dad, you're a Mister Moiselle." We truly enjoy our children, and it's wonderful to have them old enough to enjoy on an adult level.

Fourth, let your children see you reading your Bible.

Fifth, if you have preschool or elementary children, take time to read to them every day, and make sure you read the Bible to them or with them every night. Cultivate within them a love for God's Word. Help them memorize Bible verses. Go to your local Christian bookstore and look at all the great products that are available now to help parents teach biblical truth to their children. In the entire history of Christianity has never been so many great products—books and Bibles and videos and CDs—to help parents instill the Word of God in the hearts of their children. If you're too busy for that, it might be that there too many things crowding into your life that don't represent God's will.

So make sure Jesus Christ alone is the Lord of your life. Commit all you do to Him. Remember that He gives His beloved children sleep. And He wants us to create homes and environments where our children can grow up to be strong enough to meet the enemy at the gate.

Lord, all is vain if You don't bless
Our moments and our days.
All is bare within our hearts
If we should miss Your ways.

So be the builder of the house,
The guardian of the gate.
Bestow on us Your will and work,

As we both work and wait.

And may we keep two things in view:
Two vital things to do:
To love the Lord with all ours hearts,
And love our families, too.

I NEED HELP WITH MY MARRIAGE
Psalm 128

Today's message is entitled "I Need Help with My Marriage." Surveys I've seen have reported that Americans value a happy marriage over almost everything else in life. It is more important to them than money and wealth, job satisfaction, and even health. We also know that ninety percent of all Americans sooner or later get married.

But half the time it doesn't work out. The divorce rate in America is fifty percent.

So we try again. Seventy-five percent of people who divorce get married again, but this time the results are even worse. The rate of divorce among those who remarry is 60 percent. So obviously we need help with our marriages. Even those of us who are not divorced or divorcing need help with our marriages, because marriage is never static. It is either getting a little better or a little worse every day. It requires constant maintenance. It requires work. And it requires the blessings of God.

Well, there is a lovely little piece of advice on this subject tucked away in the book of Psalms, and I'd like to show it to you today. Let's read Psalm 128:

Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.

When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house, your children like olive plants all around your table. Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

The Lord bless you out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

Earlier this year, I preached a series of messages entitled "Marching to Zion" on the Psalms of Ascents or, as some of the translations call them, the Psalms of Decrees. These begin at Psalm 120 and run through Psalm 134. For some reason or another which I can't remember now, I was interrupted in the series and ended up skipping this Psalm. To the best of my knowledge, I have never spoken on this Psalm before in my life, and it's a shame because it offers a simple and sagacious plan for living a happy life. There are three parts to this Psalm and you can see them as clearly as the lines on your hand.

First, Psalm 128 begins with a Pronouncement. It makes a ringing declaration of a general truth: Blessed (happy, fortunate, in an enviable position) is the person who does two things. He fears the Lord and He walks in His ways.

To fear the Lord means to be very, very aware of God in your everyday life and to regard Him with awe, amazement, astonishment, and admiration. That is the inward attitude we should have toward God. The outward response to that is obedience. We are to walk in His ways. The person who does this is fortunate and enviable. He or she is sagacious. He or she is blessed. That is the pronouncement with which this Psalm begins.

Second, we have a set of promises. There are four of them altogether. If you respect and reverence the Lord, seeking out the commands of His Word and obeying them out of godly fear, then there are four ensuing blessings.

1. You will be blessed in your labor: When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy….

2. You will be blessed in your life: …and it shall be well with you.

3. You will be blessed in your marriage: Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the very heart of your house….

4. You will be blessed in your home: …your children are like olive plants all around your table. The Psalmist then sums all this up in verse 4: Behold—stop and look and listen to this: Thus shall be person be blessed who fears the Lord.

Those are the promises. So we open Psalm 128 with a pronouncement: Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways. Psalm 128:2-4 give us a set of promises relating primarily to his marriage and home.

The psalm then ends in verses 5 and 6 with a prayer: The Lord bless you out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

What does Psalm 128 say to the person who is crying out: "I need help with my marriage ASAP"? The underlying truth is that our homes and our marriages need a spiritual foundation. They need to be blessed by God. They can only be obtained by fearing God and walking in His ways. There is no other way to have a genuinely enriching marriage or a truly happy home. Notice that the words bless or blessed occur three times in Psalm 128, one time in the pronouncement, one time in the promises, and one time in the prayer.

- Psalm 128:1: Blessed is every one who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways.
- Psalm 128:4, in the promise section: Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.
- And finally, in the prayer in Psalm 128: 5: The Lord bless you out of Zion.

We need God's blessings our on marriages and homes, and therefore we must be a people who fear the Lord and who walk in His ways. There must be a spiritual dynamic at work in our lives and in our families if we're going to be happy husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers.

What does that mean? How can we arrive at this? How can our lives reflect the fear and obedience of God, and how can our homes reflect His blessings?

Well, if we fear the Lord and walk in His ways, we have to know what His ways are. We have to search out the commands of the Bible and obey them. We have to fear the Lord enough to take seriously what He says to us and to put it into practice. We have to be people who reflect the essentials and the ethics of Jesus Christ who performed His first miracle at a marriage ceremony. So today I'd like to show you some of the "ways of the Lord" as it relates to marriage, so that we can walk in these ways. We're going to have to turn to several different Scriptures, but it'll be worth it if it improves our understanding of marriage and family life. I'm going to give you four B-vitamins for your marriage.

Be Affectionate
1 Corinthians 7:3: Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

What is affection? It is hugs and kisses and cards and flowers and holding hands and tenderness, and sometimes we aren't very good at that.

I read about a woman who told her husband, "Orson, I've been watching that young married couple across the street. Every morning when that young man leaves the house he kisses his wife goodbye, and every evening when he get home he kisses her again and hugs her and gives her flowers. Now why can't you do that?"

Orson replied, "Well, honey, I can't do that. I hardly know her."

I think he missed the point, and a lot of us miss the point. Sometimes when I come home in the evening, my wife will say to me, "Robert, you haven't hugged me or kissed me all day." Well, I didn't realize that I didn't. I was too caught up in all the things I had been doing all day. I always try to immediately repair the damage. I think a lot of us become too busy to be affectionate. We jump out of bed, jump into the shower, jump into the car, jump into our work, and we're so busy jumping all day that we forget about hugging. And hugging is more important than jumping.

But it's not only busyness that keeps us from showing affection. It is background. So many people grow up in homes where love isn't expressed, and it takes a while to learn to hug and kiss and say I love you and give affection.

In preparation for this message, I read a letter set to Dr. Willard Harley, who is one of the best marriage counselors in the country. The letter was from a woman who said:

Dear Dr. Harley…

> My husband and I have recently decided to give our troubled marriage (14 years) another chance after a two-year separation. My biggest problem is that he does not know how to be affectionate to me. He tells me, "You don't accept the love I have for you." He thinks that because he feels love for me, that should be enough. He doesn't understand how much I need him to show me his love with physical attention....I… fear… that my husband will never be affectionate to me. His parents rarely showed physical attention to anyone in their family, whereas, my parents always caressed and verbally showed us love. He says he knew he was loved without their affection. Does his upbringing have anything to do with his inability to show me love?

That letter reminds me of a woman in the Bible, In Genesis 29, a woman named Leah was married to Jacob, but he was not an affectionate man. When she gave birth to a son, she named the little boy Levi. Do you know what the name Levi means in the Hebrew language? Affection. Attachment. The Bible says that she named her son Levi for she thought surely now my husband will show me affection.

But he didn't.

What does the Bible say? It's right here in 1 Corinthians 7:3: Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.

If you've been making a failing grade at this, you can start doing better this very day.

Be Physical

Second, this affection should include (but certainly not be limited to) frequent and regular occasions of physical intimacy. Look down the page at verse 5: Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

This is one of the most remarkable verses about sexuality in the Bible. It says that a married couple should be very active in their intimate relationship, the only exception being if one partner, with the permission of the other, sets aside a personal time for fasting and prayer because of a particular need. Even then, the interruption should be brief. Why? Because if the needs of a man or a woman is not satisfied, Satan will have an open door to tempt and to cause profound trouble.

Be Gentle

Memorize Proverbs 15:1 and abide by it consistently: A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Marriage experts tell us that every couple has differences and disagreements, and every couple has stress and tension. According to what I've read, the major predictor as to whether a couple will survive is how they discuss and process these differences and disagreements. If there is screaming and shouting and yelling and arguing and fighting in your home, you need to seek help. Your marriage is in trouble.

It's really a matter of anger management. Many years ago, I became so angry over a particular situation that I could hardly sleep for two weeks. I was just seething over it. Finally, I decided that my biggest problem wasn't the situation that was provoking me, it was my own internal reactions to it. So I sat down on a Saturday morning and turned to the book of Proverbs. I prayed something to this effect: "Lord, you know that my anger isn't wise and it isn't healthy. I know there are a lot of verses about anger management here in the book of Proverbs. Please give me one that will help me with this problem." And I started reading through the book of Proverbs, noting every verse on the subject of anger. None of them seemed to speak to me until finally I came to Proverbs 29:11. It said: "The fool gives full vent to his anger, but the wise man keeps himself under control."

Suddenly my whole perspective changed, and the Holy Spirit helped me regain control of my reactions.

Several years later, I was speaking at a Southern Baptist marriage conference in Georgia. I told that story and quoted that verse. At the end of my message a big, burly man came up to me with his little wife in tow. He said, "You really hit me over the head tonight. I've always had a short temper, and I've taken it out on my wife. I've always told myself that it was good to express my anger and to communicate my feelings, but you said that a fool gives full vent to his anger while a wise man keeps himself under control. That verse is going to change my marriage and it is going to change me."

Well, in a healthy marriage, the partners are honest and they express their feelings. They may sometimes disagree and argue. But

the disagreements and arguments don't turn destructive. They don't tear each other down. They don't tear each other apart. They've learned the importance of gentleness. A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Be Spiritual
And finally, I'd like to return to our original text in Psalm 128 to say that in a good marriage, the husband and wife have a habit of fearing God and keeping His ways.

I read something that I'm going to pass onto you with a caveat. I don't know if this statistic is true or not, and I don't know its source. I found it in some of the reading that I did in preparation for this message, but I can not confirm it. But I believe it may very well represent the truth. While the divorce rate in the United States is at about fifty percent, that number drops to less than five percent in marriages in which the partners prayed together each day.

Many couples don't pray together for one of two reasons. First, often the husband is too proud to do it. Prayer is a humbling activity, because it is an acknowledgment that Someone else is greater than we are. And so for many people, especially for many men, it seems awkward at first. I would just say that everything that we ever learn to do seems awkward at first. Remember learning to ride a bicycle? Remember learning to drive a car? Remember learning to throw a football? Remember your first day on a new job? Everything is a little awkward at first, but that's no reason not to begin. Pretty soon it became an enriching habit.

The second reason that most couples don't pray together is because they are too busy. I think the secret is learning to pray frequently.

My wife and I have our own individual devotions in the morning, but we pray together at meals and at bedtime. When we pray together at meals, if we're alone and it's just the two of us, we don't necessarily pray a short little memorized prayer. We might use it as an occasion to pray over something that is bothering us at that moment. When we go out on a date, we often pray. When we begin a trip, we pray. When we're facing a crisis or an uncertainty, we'll stop to pray. And at night we almost always pray together in bed. Find those "pray-able" moments throughout the day and take advantage of them.

There was a very interesting article this week from the Associated Press. There is a church—it's a Church of Christ—in a town in Connecticut that straddles the city limits of two different counties. The church was built in 1850, and it sits on top of a hill and the county line runs right down the middle aisle of the church. The laws in that area say that you have to get married in the county in which the marriage license is issued. And so couples have to stand on either one side of the church or the other when they are married, or their marriages will not be legal.

Well, I want to say that if you want your marriage to be healthy, you have to be in right standing with God. You have to be standing over on His side. I want every couple in our church to be in good standing with the Lord Jesus, to be blessed, to be standing in the place of blessing. And that means being affectionate, being physical, being gentle, and being spiritual. And as we learn to do these things, God's promise is sure and certain: Thus shall the couple be blessed who fears the Lord.

WALKING MIRACLES
Psalm 129

We're in a series of messages on a special, wonderful category of Psalms called the Psalms of Ascent. They run from Psalm 120 to Psalm134. Last Sunday morning we looked at Psalm 127, and last Sunday evening we were to look at Psalm 128, but I just wasn't able to bring that message; so we'll skip that passage and come back to it later in the fall. This morning's text is Psalm 129. I'd like for us to read it together.

"Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth," let Israel now say—"Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth; yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers have plowed on my back; they made their furrows long." The Lord is righteous; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked.

Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back. Let them be as the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor he who binds sheaves, his arms. Neither let those who pass by them say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you; we bless you in the name of the Lord."

One of the most basic rules for Bible study is that each particular passage of Bible text has only one interpretation, though it may have many applications. In this case, I'd like to share with you what I believe to be the correct interpretation of this Psalm, then we'll look at several applications. The direct interpretation here has to do with the nation of Israel. We know that because of verse 1: Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth…."

Someone here had been abused and tormented and afflicted from infancy. Who was it? It is the nation of Israel. Look at the verse again: Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth," Let Israel now say, "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth."

In other words, from the time of its inception, the nation of Israel has been afflicted. The Hebrew word here has as its basic meaning something that is tied up or tied down. It's the picture of a victim tied to a whipping post and being lashed. Look at verse 3: The plowers plowed on my back; they made their furrows long.

In other words, the writer is saying that from her youthful days, Israel has been a nation that has been afflicted, bound, and lashed over and over again. Israel has been the object of continual flogging by the nations of the world. And yet the nations of the world have not prevailed.

The last part of Psalm 129 is a pronouncement of judgment on those who are the tormenters and abusers:

Let all those who hate Zion be put to shame and turned back. Let them be as the grass on the housetops, which withers before it grows up, with which the reaper does not fill his hand, nor he who binds sheaves, his arms. Neither let those who pass by them say, "The blessing of the Lord be upon you; we bless you in the name of the Lord."

That last sentence is very interesting because it tells us something about the culture of those days. You may remember that in the book of Ruth, there was a landowner named Boaz. When he went into the fields to check on his workmen, he greeted them in an unusual way. Instead of saying, "Hello!" or "Good Morning!" he said: "The Lord be with you." And they greeted him with "The Lord bless you!"

Even today when you're in Israel, you say "Hello" and Goodbye" using the Hebrew word "Shalom," meaning, "May God give you peace." So the common greeting in those days was, "The blessings of the Lord be upon you. We bless you in the name of the Lord." But the Psalmist was saying in verse 8, "Don't say that to those who anti-Semitic tormenters of the Jewish people. Don't say that to those who are trying to destroy our nation."

So Psalm 129 says in summery: "The Jewish people have been afflicted from her beginnings as a nation, but our enemies have not prevailed. May the blessings of God be withheld forever from those who torment Israel."

Now, just a cursory study of Jewish history will demonstrate the truthfulness of this statement and of this prophecy.

The nation of Israel had its beginning in Genesis 12, when God called Abraham and set him aside from all the other people on earth in order to produce from his loins a nation through whom the Messiah would come and redeem the world. Abraham had a son, Isaac, and a grandson, Jacob, whose name was also Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, one of which was Judah (or Yehuda), from which the name Jew derives.

These twelve sons became twelve tribes of peoples who united into a nation while they were enduring slavery at the hands of the Egyptians. Their backs were plowed with Egyptian whips like fields being prepared for planting.

About 1400 B.C., Moses led these tribes out of Egypt, and Joshua led them into the land promised to them by God. From the very beginning, powerful political and military enemies—Palestinians—tried to drive them from the land that God had promised.

Finally, about 700 B. C. during the days of the prophet Isaiah, the Assyrians succeeded in driving out many of the Jews from the northern regions of Israel; and in 587, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, burned down the temple, exiled the survivors, and destroyed completely the nation of Israel.

Then came the Persians with the evil Haman trying to annihilate the dispersed Jews wherever they were found on then earth. Then the Greeks, including the terrible tyrant Antiochus IV, who tried to annihilate every last Jew on earth.

Then came the Romans who again destroyed Jerusalem and burned down the Second Temple. Then came the Byzantine Empire, then the Muslims flooded the land, then the Christian Crusaders came, then the Ottoman Empire, then the British Empire. Then

came Adolf Hitler who tried to annihilate every last Jew on earth, and did in fact succeed in murdering six million of them in the Nazi death camps.

Then, on May 14, 1948, the Jewish nation was reborn under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion, but the very next day the armies of five powerful Arab nations invaded the new nation and tried to drive them from the land. They tried again in 1956 with the Sinai War; again in 1967 during the Six Day War; and again in 1973 with the Yom Kippur War.

Right now, the nation of Israel is in a bitter fight for its very survival, and is being regularly lashed by its Arab neighbors, sometimes by the United Nations, and often by the news media around the world.

And as I said in our sermon series earlier this year, there will be one final massive global attempt to destroy the nation of Israel at the end of time as the Antichrist gathers the armies of the world to annihilate every last Jew on earth. Only the intervention of Jesus Christ at the Second Coming will save the Jewish nation.

So Psalm 129 is a powerful piece of biblical prophecy: "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth." Let Israel say, "Many a time they have afflicted me from my youth' yet they have not prevailed against me. The plowers plowed on my back; they made their furrows long." The Lord is righteousness; He has cut in pieces the cords of the wicked.

The survival of the Jew in history is one of the greatest mysteries and miracles of history.

There is a famous story about Frederick the Great, the King of Prussia. He was discussing with his chaplain the truthfulness of the Bible. He had been influenced toward skepticism by the French writer Voltaire, and he asked his chaplain what proof existed that the Bible was a true book. In response, the chaplain reportedly pointed to one of the king's advisors across the room, a man who was a Jew. The Jews are walking miracles.

Let me read you something that Charles Krauthammer wrote in The Weekly Standard:

"Israel is the very embodiment of Jewish continuity: It is the only nation on earth that inhabits the same land, bears the same name, speaks the same language, and worships the same God that it did 3,000 years ago. You dig the soil and you find pottery from Davidic times, coins from Bar Kokhba, and 2,000-year-old scrolls written in a script remarkably like the one that today advertises ice cream at the corner candy store."

This is the way Derek Kidner put it: "Whereas most nations tend to look back on what they have achieved, Israel reflects here on what she has survived"

James Montgomery Boice said, "The Jews are the longest-enduring distinct ethnic people on the planet. They have been slandered, hated, persecuted, expelled, pursued, and murdered throughout their long existence, but they have survived intact. In fact, many are now back in their own traditional homeland of Israel. They are a brilliant, talented people, but survival has been their chief achievement."

I don't know of any greater evidence in the veracity of the existence, survival, and rebirth of the nation of Israel in accordance to biblical prophecy. From her youth, she has been afflicted, lashed, beaten, opposed, hated, and attacked. But her enemies have not prevailed, nor will they be blessed by the Lord. God will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse Israel.

Now that is the interpretation of this Psalm. It is a response to those in every age and in every generation who are trying to flog and destroy the nation of Israel. But now, let's take the truth of this passage and apply it in three different ways.

The Messiah

First there is a Messianic application. Jesus Christ was and is the ultimate Jew, and everything that is said here about Israel applies perfectly to Him. The plowers plowed on His back, but they did not prevail. Isaiah 53 tells us that by His stripes are we healed. He was afflicted from His youth, and His back was lashed. Yet His enemies can never prevail against Him. He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and He will reign for ever and ever. He is a walking miracle.

The Church

Second, there is an ecclesiastical application. What is said here about God's chosen bride in the Old Testament—the Jews—is true of Jesus' chosen bride in the New Testament—the church. For 2000 years, the devil has been trying to destroy the church. There is no way to estimate how many Christians have been captured and tortured and killed for their faith. The plowers have plowed on

their backs, making their furrows long.

One of the first things that happened to the apostles as they began to preach the resurrection of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem is that they were arrested and flogged. Christians have been arrested and abused in every single century and in every single generation in history. And just this week there was a story in a Pakistani newspaper about two Christian men, Filipino Christians in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, who were arrested and sentenced to be flogged with 150 lashes each because of their faith in Jesus Christ.

And yet the world has not prevailed against the church, for Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Sometimes we get discouraged because of the moral decline of our nation. But don't forget that around the world, the church of Jesus Christ is larger and stronger than it has ever been before in all of human history.

There's a great hymn entitled, "The Church's One Foundation." The words say:

The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord,
She is His new creation
By water and the Word.
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy bride;
With His own blood He bought her
And for her life He died.

But there is a forgotten stanza that has been omitted from most of our hymnbooks. It says:

The Church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish,
Is with her to the end:
Though there be those who hate her,
And false sons in her pale,
Against a foe or traitor
She ever shall prevail.

To the Christian

But now there is a final application we can make to these truths, and that is a personal application for the Christian, for you and for me. You may be going through a lot of tension and turmoil in your life right now. The devil may be flogging you with all kinds of afflictions and troubles, but because of the presence of Jesus Christ in your life, Satan cannot prevail over you. Let's read portions of this Psalm and paraphrase it that way:

"Many a time the devil and his henchmen have afflicted me from my youth up." Let each one of us say, "Many a time the devil and his demons have afflicted me from my youth. But they have not prevailed against me. They have tried to flog and torture and abuse me. Satan has tempted me and tried me sore, but the Lord is righteous; He has cut to pieces the cords of the evil one. And those who bless me will be blessed, and those who curse me will be cursed; for the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ hangs over my life."

When I was writing Then Sings My Soul, the book of hymn stories that I compiled for Thomas Nelson Publishers, I corresponded quite a bit with a man named Ed Rhoad who had spent many years researching the life of his great aunt, Eliza Hewitt, the author of such favorite hymns as "My Faith Has Found a Resting Place," and "When We all Get to Heaven." She was a radiant Christian who had a great love for children, and one of her greatest desires was to teach unfortunate and underprivileged children in the downtrodden areas of Philadelphia. But when she was 35, as she was trying to teach an unruly group of kids in a school for the underprivileged, one of the students struck her violently with a heavy slate across her back, causing a severe spinal injury which left her partially paralyzed. The doctors placed her in a heavy cast for six months, and we can hardly imagine what she endured in those days—the late 1800s—when she was immobilized that long in a large, awkward, primitive cast.

Finally the day came when the cast was removed, and for the first time in half a year, Eliza tried to walk. It was a warm Springtime day, and she took a tentative little walk into the sunshine of Fairmont Park. Returning home, her heart was filled with joy and victory. She instantly set down and wrote a great Gospel song that for many years was a favorite of congregations everywhere.

There's sunshine in my soul today,
More glorious and bright,
Than glows in any earthly sky,
For Jesus is my light.

The devil attacked her, but he could not prevail for she had the sunshine of Jesus Christ in her heart. What did she do with the anger? With the bitterness? With the injustice? With the pain and hurt and fear? She just let go of it.

Recently a woman in our church who has struggled for many years with a difficult problem told me, "I just wished I had learned earlier the secret of letting go and letting God."

A few weeks ago, I received a letter from another woman who had faced a terrible problem that almost drove her out of her mind. Her son was on drugs, and he was especially prone toward the drug Ecstasy. She wrote in some detail about the nightmare she faced, then she said she came to the absolute end of her ability to cope. Going to a nearby beach, she sat down on the sand and sobbed, pouring out her heart to the Lord. Suddenly, she said in her letter, the Lord just whispered to her, "Let go and let me handle this." And that night became the turning point for both her and her son, who is a member of our church today.

The other day I read a wonderful sermon preached by the president of Temple Baptist University in Louisiana, Dr. Ron Ostten. It was entitled, "Let Go and Let God." He began by describing the terrible series of tragedies that had struck his family. The Ostten's oldest daughter had been killed when her car stalled on the railroad tracks and was hit by a train. On the day of the funeral, Dr. Ostten's father died. The family went into shock, reeling from sorrow upon sorrow. But in his message, Dr. Ostten said they soon realized they had resources that lost and backslidden people do not have. And he had four points to this sermon entitled, "Let Go and Let God." I'd like to give you his four points:

1. Turn to the Lord, our great God.
2. Trust in the Savior and His precious Word.
3. Thank Him for what is happening and for what He is doing.
4. Testify about the grace of God in the trial.

I don't know that I've ever heard of four more powerful "T's": Turn, Trust, Thank, and Testify. That's the secret to victory. The Bible says, "This is the victory that overcomes the world, even your faith."

The poet, Jason Raymer, wrote:

As children bring their broken toys
with tears for us to mend,
I brought my broken dreams to God,
because he was my friend.
But then, instead of leaving him
in peace, to work alone,
I hung around and tried to help,
with ways that were my own.
At last, I snatched them back and cried,
"How can you be so slow?"
"My child", he said
"What could I do?
you never did let go."

If you're being afflicted today, cast your burden on the Lord and He will sustain you. He will never allow the righteous to be moved. Cast all your cares on Him, for He cares for you. Let go and let God, for His people are walking miracles—more than conquerors through Jesus Christ who loves us.

PHOTOS OF FORGIVENESS
Psalm 130

Our Scripture reading today is from Psalm 130, one of the most tender and plaintive of the Psalms:

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in His word do I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning —yes, more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with Him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

This man is crying to the Lord from the depths. The Hebrew word is a nautical term for deep water. He's in over his head, drowning, almost gone. His chest is bursting with pain, his lungs filling with water, he's sinking for the final time; but somehow he gets his head above surface for a moment and he cries out: Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!"

What is his problem? He's not really in water, of course; he's in some sort of trouble so anguishing that it feels like a man drowning. What kind of mess is he in?

He is in an ocean of guilt and shame; and he needs a life preserver of forgiveness. Look at it again: Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared....

One of my dear friends, Bill McCoy, is a U.S. army chaplain now serving our troops in Iraq. He and I were roommates at Columbia International University, and he's the man who led me to turn my life over to the Lord. Recently he sent me a very interesting manuscript of some of his experiences and observations as an army chaplain. He wrote of a girl named Jenny (not her real name) who was raised in a haphazard environment. Her father would disappear for long stretches of time, and her mother was addicted to crack cocaine. Jenny and her sister lived in an old car. They watched as their mother entertained a string of men, one after another, often in the back seat of the car. Sometimes the girls were themselves sexually abused by their mother's boyfriends. Jenny eventually joined the Navy where she was determined to make something of herself.

But by the time she showed up in Bill's office seeking counseling, her life was in a mess. She was involved with a boy, and she told Bill she was going to get married; but she was taking into the marriage a lot of baggage. Bill said, "I cautioned her a bit about marriage knowing myself that she didn't have much of a chance to succeed, but encouraged her as much as I could and we parted."

Some time alter, Jenny was back in Bill's office. She was leaving her young soldier husband for another man or two. She was facing military discipline for being AWOL, and she was repeating all the mistakes she had learned from her mother in the car.

As time passed, Jenny created one mess after another; and she was finally demoted, punished, and eventually "chaptered" out of the military with a less than honorable discharge.

She just could never break free from the patterns of the past and from the cycle of sin and shame she had acquired from her mother.

Now, every one of us carries a certain amount baggage into life; none of us is perfect, and none of us is from a perfect background. We are all damaged people, to one extent or another. But at some point, we have to break free from the past. We have to break the cycle and get a new, strong, stable, lasting, healthy start to building a whole and happy life.

One of the necessary elements to that is to really comprehend the extent of the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ. The grace of God is a tremendously liberating thing. But we have to grasp how infinite it is, and how infinitely available it is to us. That requires three things.

Verbalize It

First, we must verbalize it; that is, we must explain and articulate the truth of the Bible as it relates to God's forgiveness. Notice what the Psalmist said here: "There is forgiveness with You, that You might be feared." In other words, it is in God's nature to forgive. He has a predilection and a predisposition towards forgiveness. He is a God of grace. You don't have to walk across burning coals or

wallow in mud and manure trying to gain His forgiveness. He wants to forgive; He's quicker to forgive than we are to ask for forgiveness. He is a God of grace.

But it isn't a cheap forgiveness. It's a forgiveness based on the shed blood of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes in cooking, the recipe will tell you to take a sauce and let it boil awhile until much of the water evaporates and you've boiled down the liquid to its essence. If we were to take the entire New Testament and boil it down to its essence, you would be left with the words Jesus spoke in the Upper Room on the night He was betrayed: "This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins."

There is moral evil in the universe, and that moral evil infects each of our hearts and lives. This evil demands and deserves to be judged and punished; but to spare us from bearing this punishment, God Himself became flesh and died on the cross, shedding His own blood. It is that precious blood that remits and forgives sins.

The word "blood" occurs exactly one hundred times in the New Testament (New King James Version); and only through the blood of Christ can we experience divine forgiveness, which sets the stage for self-forgiveness and inner cleansing.

So we have to verbalize that: "There is forgiveness with You, that You might be feared…. This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." We have to articulate the truth and understand something of the theology behind God's grace.

Visualize It

Then, second, we must visualize it. The Psalmist says here: "If You should mark iniquity…." That word "mark" is a word-picture. What comes to your mind when you hear that phrase? A school teacher putting a mark on the board for every time you misbehaved? A judge filing out reports detailing your faults and failures?

One of the things I've noticed recently is that the Bible often utilizes word-pictures to help us visualize the scope of God's forgiveness. Let me show you six of those.

First is the scapegoat of Leviticus 16. This is a strange thing; but here it is in the Bible; and as we study it we find that it's strangely wonderful. Begin reading in Leviticus 16:6:

"Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household. 7 Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the LORD at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. 8 He is to cast lots for the two goats—one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat. 9 Aaron shall bring the goat whose lot falls to the LORD and sacrifice it for a sin offering. 10 But the goat chosen by lot as the scapegoat shall be presented alive before the LORD to be used for making atonement by sending it into the desert as a scapegoat..."

15 "He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. 16 In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.

20 "When Aaron has finished making atonement for the Most Holy Place, the Tent of Meeting and the altar, he shall bring forward the live goat. 21 He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the desert in the care of a man appointed for the task. 22 The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a solitary place; and the man shall release it in the desert.

Here were two goats. One of them was sacrificed for the sins of Israel as a foreshadowing and picture of the death of Christ on the cross. Then the High Priest laid both his hands on the head of the other goat, confessed over it all the wickedness and sin of the Israelites, and drove the goat into the wilderness, far away, never to be seen again. There are different ways of interpreting this, but it seems to me that the lesson is fairly clear.

The first goat pointed to the atonement of Christ on the cross. The other goat symbolizes the removal of sin and guilt from our account.

With this second goat—the scapegoat—you have a picture of sin being placed on the back of another and borne out of our presence forever. Try to visualize this. Here you had an entire nation of people gathered together. Their lives were characterized by hasty

words, immoral episodes, filthy thoughts, selfish ways, and social discord. But now, all their sin was removed from their presence. As they watched that goat become a speck in the distance and finally disappear in the horizon, it represented the fact that God had removed their sin from them—past, present, and future.

When our sins have been placed under the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross, they are removed from us. They are placed, as it were, on the scapegoat and driven far away, never to be seen again.

All the baggage of your past is strapped onto that goat. All your failures and embarrassments are tied to him. Every last lapse of judgment, every last moral failure you have ever or will ever commit is strapped down to that goat. And there he goes, out of the camp, over the hill, into the horizon, gone forever, never to return. There's an old song that says:

Living, He loved me; dying, He saved me;
Buried He carried my sins far away…

That's a biblical photo of God's forgiveness. Now, let's take it a step further. How far does that goat travel? How far away from us are our sins taken? For the answer to that, look at Psalm 103:12: As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.

That's the second great picture I'd like to show you. The Bible visualizes the extent of God's forgiveness in geographical terms. If you shoot a rocket into space going East and another into space going in the opposite direction, they just grow further and further apart. The distance between East and West is an infinite distance.

Here's what the great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, had to say about this verse: O glorious verse, no word even upon the inspired page can excel it! Sin is removed from us by a miracle of love! What a load to move, and yet is it removed so far that the distance is incalculable. Fly as far as the wing of imagination can bear you… so far were our sins carried by our scapegoat.

Then what are our lives like? What do we look like? What condition are we left in? Let me show you some other biblical photos of God's forgiveness.

Jesus said it's like a man whose debts have been forgiven. In Matthew 18, Jesus compared God's forgiveness to a wealthy king who cancels the debt of a poor servant who can't pay what he owes.

The apostle John used another figure in his books of 1 John and Revelation. He said that being forgiven by God is like having the ultimate bath. 1 John 1:7 says: If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

Revelation 1:5 refers to Christ as He who loves us and washed us in His own blood. This is the picture the hymnist used as he wrote:

There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins.
And sinners plunged beneath the flood,
Lose all their guilty stains.

The prophet Isaiah uses several figures to help us visualize this: Isaiah 44:22 says: I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions, and like a cloud your sins. In other words, just as the wind sweeps the clouds from the sky, leaving a blue vista rising over our heads like an azure canopy, so the grace of God sweeps all the clouds of sin and guilt from our lives, leaving us with a the blue sky of God's blessings over our heads.

In his first chapter, Isaiah uses perhaps the most beautiful picture of all. Isaiah 1:18 says: Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson they shall be as wool.

Here the idea is one of blazing, blinding whiteness. One of the first preachers in America to go on the radio was a man named E. Howard Cadle. He began preaching on WLW in Cincinnati many years ago, and he became one of the most successful evangelists of his era.

But he didn't start out that way. He was born into a dysfunctional family. His mother was a Christian, but his father was an alcoholic. By age 12, Howard was emulating his father, drinking and out of control. Soon he was in the grip of sex, gambling, drinking, and getting heavily involved in the Midwestern crime syndicate.

But his dear mother knelt down and prayed for him night after night, every evening precisely at eight o'clock. One night Howard was in a bar, and he got into a fight with a man. Pulling out his gun, he squeezed the trigger; but for some reason, the gun didn't fire. Bystanders wrested it from his hand and stopped the fight, otherwise Howard would have gone to prison for life or to the electric chair. He looked at the clock and noticed that it the time was exactly eight o'clock.

Presently Howard's health broke, and the doctor told him he had ruined his body and had only six months to live. Howard staggered home, fell into his mother's arms, and said, "Mother, I've broken your heart. I'd like to be saved, but I've sinned too much."

The old woman opened her Bible to this verse—Isaiah 1:18—and read it to him. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.

That day Howard gave his life to Jesus Christ, confessing his sins and trusting the Lord to the full extent of the promise God has given about forgiveness. The forgiveness of Christ was so vast, so complete, and so powerful that it enabled Howard to break the dysfunctional patterns of his life that had gone back, perhaps for generations, and he went on to become a successful businessman, an evangelist, and one of America's pioneers in radio ministry.

So if you need to be released from past dysfunctional patterns in life, first you have to verbalize God's forgiveness. Understand the Bible's profound truth on this subject. Then visualize it, using the photos of forgiveness found throughout the Bible. Draw a mental picture of yourself in those photographs.

- It's like a goat disappearing over the horizon with our sins, never to be seen again.
- It's like the distance between East and West.
- It's like having all our debts cancelled.
- It's like having a soul-cleansing bath.
- It's like having the clouds swept out of the sky.
- It's like being as fresh and pure as the freshly driven snow.

These are some of the pictures God uses to help us visualize the extent of His grace and forgiveness.

Vocalize It

Then what? Having verbalized it and visualized it, then vocalize it. When the devil comes with all his rotten lies, trying to rob you of your encouragement and self-esteem and new beginning, just quote one of these great verses:

As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us

"Come now, and let us reason together," says the Lord. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson they shall be as wool."

If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.

Many people have been genuinely forgiven by the Lord Jesus; they have come to the cross, confessing their sins and have been truly forgiven in God's sight. He remembers their sins no more. But they don't view His forgiveness adequately. They still feel guilty. They still feel ashamed. They don't feel like the freshly driven snow. They know that there are still sinful patterns inside them, and they know they aren't perfect. And they can't seem to break free from the cycle of sin and guilt.

The most powerful tool you have is memorized Scripture. Learn and memorize some of these great verses about God's grace, and whenever you find yourself feeling plagued by sin, guilt, shame, and defeat—quote them. Quote them over and over and over until they begin to take hold of your soul and until they begin to reshape your thought patterns.

If you don't know where to begin, here's a good place—this Psalm 130.

Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If

you, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.

Out Of The Depths
Psalm 130

USA Weekend recently featured a cover story on the subject of Resilience, asking the question: Why do some people bounce while others break? The writer defined Resilience as "the ability to get through, get over and thrive after trauma, trials, and tribulations." A simpler definition just refers to resiliency as the ability to "bounce back."

The article said that while Self-Esteem was the buzz word of the 80s and 90s, Resilience is going to be the new emphasis, and in our current headlines it is chiefly exhibited by President Clinton who has demonstrated such a remarkable ability to bounce back from adversity that he has been dubbed the "Come-Back Kid." But it isn't just a skill for successful politicians.

- Many major corporations now offer their employees training in Resilience techniques, and job placement firms are now sponsoring seminars in career resilience.
- Prominent psychologists are writing books now on the subject, and the self-improvement gurus are talking about "bounce-back" skills.
- One of Oprah Winfrey's most popular recent shows was devoted to the theme of Resiliency, as she interviewed people who had survived unbelievable disasters and come back stronger than ever.
- In sports, more and more experts are studying why some athletes and teams perform better than others after suffering a defeat, an area of inquiry that has been dubbed "athletic resilience."
- The National Cancer Institute is studying why some patients seem more physically resilient than others.
- Researchers from major universities across America are engaged in studying why some people are more emotionally resilient than others.
- All of us would like have more of a cork-like quality to our personality, like the little children's poem that says:

A little brown cork fell in the path of a whale
Who lashed it down with his angry tail.
But in spite of its blows it quickly arose,
And floated serenely before his nose.
Said the cork to the whale:
"You may flap and sputter and frown,
But you never, never, can keep me down;
For I'm made of the stuff
That is buoyant enough
To float instead of to drown.

Well, I suppose that the Bible is the world's best textbook on Resiliency, and one of the best passages to study is the 130th Psalm:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord;
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.
If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins,
O Lord, who could stand?
But with you there is forgiveness;
Therefore you are feared.
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
And in his word I put my hope.
My soul waits for the Lord
More than watchmen wait for the morning,
More than watchmen wait for the morning.
O Israel, put your hope in the Lord,
For with the Lord is unfailing love
And with him is full redemption.
He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

The superscription of Psalm 130 calls it a "Song of Ascents." This is the heading given to Psalms 120-134, and most scholars

believe they are called this because these are the Pilgrim songs sung by the Jews as they made their way toward Jerusalem for national feasts and festivals. You may not realize it, but the Sea of Galilee in the north of Israel actually lies below sea level. To the south, the Dead Sea is the lowest body of water in the world. Jerusalem, on the other hand, rises up 2700 feet above sea level. So as the Jews made their way to their capital, whether traveling from the north or from the south, they were ascending. As they ascended, they sang these 15 songs, dubbed in our Bibles the Songs of Ascents."

These are Pilgrim Songs, and thus they are just what we need as we journey through this world to the Celestial City.

Now apparently, some of these pilgrims were carrying heavy loads. They were going toward Jerusalem, but there were carrying in their hearts some very heavy burdens. The Psalmist begins by admitting that he is in the depths of difficulty: Out of the depths I cry…

What kind of depths was the Psalmist experiencing? He doesn't tell us. It might have been the depths of financial distress. Nothing can weigh a person down more than being overextended on his credit cards, having more bills to pay than money coming in, with insufficient funds even to cover the necessities of life. Perhaps the Psalmist felt he was drowning in debt.

Or perhaps he was drowning in grief. Several years ago I was asked to conduct a funeral for a family I had never met. I arrived at the funeral home to find them inconsolable. They didn't know the Lord, and they were in a state of shock and trauma—especially since an estranged son had threatened to show up at the funeral to murder one of the other family members. The police were there, and I tried to preach as well as I could; but right in the middle of my funeral sermon, the wife burst into bloodcurdling screams and wails. The audience jumped as if struck by lightning, and policemen leaped over the pews to reach her. There was no murderous attack. The wife was just so overcome with despair that we had to curtail the service. She was drowning in grief over a dead husband and a set of contentious children.

Some people find themselves in the depths of terrible circumstances. Some time ago while visiting the hospital, I was approached by a family who recognized me. They asked me to pray with them, for their husband and father, a relatively young man, had had a heart attack and was on life support. They were deeply distressed and they needed to pray.

There Is Prayer (Ps 130:1-2)

Well, that's what the Psalmist was saying here in Ps 130:1 and Ps 130:2: Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. In other words, when we find ourselves in the depths of difficulty, there is prayer. We have recourse to the throne of grace.

Why is it that we pray best when we're in crisis? My most earnest and intense praying is done when I'm in the depths. I sometimes think that God occasionally sends us problems just to perk up our prayer lives.

I read recently of a group of men discussing the posture of prayer. One man said, "The best way to pray is on our knees." Another said, "No, we should pray while standing upright in God's presence with our hands lifted to heaven." Another said, "We should clasp our hands, and pray reverently with bowed head." But an old farmer had the last word. He said, "A few years ago, I tripped over my own feet and fell headfirst in the well. There I was with my head pointing down and both heels sticking up. And it was then and there—in that position—that I prayed the best prayer I've ever prayed."

Well, the best prayers we pray are usually offered when we are in the depths. Hebrews 4:16 says, Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in our time of need. The old hymns says:

> Sweet hour of prayer, sweet hour of prayer
> That calls me from a world of care,
> And bids me at my Father's throne,
> Make all my wants and wishes known.
> In seasons of distress and grief
> My soul has often found relief
> And oft escaped the tempter's snare,
> By thy return sweet hour of prayer.

John Bunyan once said: We can do more than pray after we have prayed, but we cannot do more than pray before we have prayed.

There Is Forgiveness (Ps 130:3-4)

So in times of distress, there is prayer. The next two verses also tell us that there is forgiveness. If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.

I read an article recently which said that when a crisis hits us with brutal force and leaves us asking the question Why? We usually

experience feelings of self-deprecation and guilt. God is letting this happen to me to punish me. I must be pretty worthless.
Now, sometimes our problems are of our own making. But whether they are or not, the Psalmist is reminding us here that when we are under the blood of Christ, there is no record anywhere of any sin on our account. God no longer keeps a record of the sins listed against us. They are expunged, erased, blotted out, washed away. As far as the east is from the west so far has he removed our transgressions from us. There is forgiveness with Him that He might be feared.

There is Waiting (Ps 130:5-6)

Third, there is waiting. Ps 130:5 and Ps 130:6 say: I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

Waiting on the Lord implies two things. First it involves the anticipation that God is going to act. He has given us certain promises, and he will keep them. And so we stand on tip-toe, waiting expectantly, for him to do for us what he has promised.

As I researched this message, I came across a story that took place on the night preceding August 1, 1830. That was the day when the slaves in the Western Indian Colonies were to be given their emancipation. Thousands of them did not go to bed all night. They assembled in churches, praying, singing praises to God, and waiting for the first streak of light signaling the beginning of the day on which they would be set free. Some of them were sent up into the hills so that they might get the first view of the sunrise and signal down to the brothers in the valley that the day of their deliverance was breaking.

And so it is that we have adversity, burdens, crises and disasters. But we wait with expectancy, for God has promised to answer our prayer and bring us out of our distress.

But waiting on the Lord also implies patience. The Lord works in his own timing, and so we have to wait patiently on him. On my recent trip to Israel, I took a wonderful little book with me, published by OMF, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship (formerly China Inland Mission), the missions organization founded by J. Hudson Taylor. The book was entitled When the Roof Caves In, and one chapter was written by a woman named Fay Goddard.

Fay was a missionary with OMF in the Philippines, and she loved it. Jungle trials. A new little grass-roofed house sitting on stilts. Great opportunities among the Buhid tribe of Mindoro Island. Her work really seemed to pick up following her first furlough. The Buhids seemed to have a new eagerness to learn from her, and in particular they wanted to learn to read. Fay thought it through and decided she needed to consult an OMF linguist, so she set off down the mountain for the OMF base, unsuspecting that she would never return to her little house or to her precious people.

She woke up the next Monday feeling "really rotten," and she found that she had almost no strength, not even for the simplest of daily chores. The next day her weakness was accompanied by a pounding headache and a strange burning sensation on her lower spine. On the following day, her whole body throbbed, especially her head, back and knees. Her condition became so grave that she was airlifted to Manila where the examining doctors told her she had polio.

She was stunned. At only twenty-nine, she had been vigorous and strong, the picture of health. Just a week before she had been hiking through the mountains; now she was all but helpless, unable even to hold a full glass of water.

Back in Seattle she was fitted for a wheelchair and told that she would be severely handicapped the rest of her life. How did she bounce back?

Well, the first thing that helped her, she said, was this. When she had returned to the Buhid following her furlough, she had taken time to kneel down in her little bedroom and reaffirm the Savior's lordship over her life. She told him she was willing to be used by Him however he chose. At that moment at my bedside I was happily conscious of being right square in the middle of God's will…
Her second help came from God's word. His promises hadn't changed. The grace was still there for the taking.

Fay's third strength came from a model, fellow missionary John Thompson who has previously contracted polio in the Philippines. She had visited him and found herself uplifted by his attitude.

And then she rediscovered the joy of ministry during her nine months in rehabilitation at the University of Washington Hospital. I was aware that God had just changed my mission field. Instead of g-stringed, barefoot Buhid, He had put me right in the middle of a group of people whose lives had been shattered by accidents, crippling disease… teenage boys paralyzed from the neck down in falls on ski slopes or in twisted auto wrecks…

After being released from her extended stay in the hospital, she was invited to join the home staff of OMF at their headquarters in Philadelphia. "We'll find something for you to do," they said. But that's when her real depression hit. The something to do turned out to be stuffing envelopes, licking stamps, and trying to find enough to do to fill the day. Her life began to lose its purpose or meaning, and the devil attacked her spirit. But the Lord seemed to say to her, "If I want you to stuff envelopes and lick stamps, what is that to

you. Just follow me." And Fay said, "Okay, Lord. I'll do it." And she made up her mind to obey.

Within days she was given the job of producing the mission's magazine, East Asia Millions. She ended the account that I was reading by saying: Now, more than twenty years later, I am still putting the magazine together—editing the material, doing the layout, and seeing that it is properly ready for printing. The joy is still there.

It required waiting on the Lord, and trusting his guidance even in times of darkness and doubt. So the Psalmist says, "When you are in the depths, remember: There is prayer. There is forgiveness. There is waiting. And finally, there is hope.

There Is Hope (Ps 130:7-8)
Look at Ps 130:7 and Ps 130:8: O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.
These are two wonderful verses. There is hope. Whatever your circumstance, however bleak it looks, there is hope. There is an ocean of hope. Why? For three reasons. Look at these verses again.

O Israel… (You can put your own name there).
O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love. God loves you, and his love will never fail to provide what you need in any given circumstance.

What else? O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him if full redemption. He is going to redeem your soul, and he is going to redeem your circumstances. All things work together for good to those who know the Lord, to those who are called according to his purpose.

What else is there? There is God Himself. Notice the way it is stated: O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself… will (do it).

He Himself!

The God who made the galaxies that we see the through our telescopes and the germs we see under our microscopes—the God who is concerned about things infinitely large and infinitesimally small—the very God who made you… He Himself has promised to care for you through His Son Jesus Christ.

Have you given yourself to Christ? Have you done what the OMF missionary Fay Goddard did, kneeling down somewhere and affirming the lordship of Jesus Christ over your life? Is he your Lord today?

He doesn't promise to save us from adversity, burdens, and crises in this life, but he does make us resilient people. He gives us his own qualities of unsinkability. We can bounce back. Even when we're floundering in the depths of difficulty, even when we think we're going under for the third time, there is prayer. There is forgiveness. There is waiting. There is hope.
I have told you these things that in me you might have peace, said our Lord Jesus in John 16. n this world you will have tribulation. But be of good cheer. Take heart! For I have overcome the world.

THE CURE FOR STRESS
Psalm 131

Today we're coming to the end of our series of messages from the Psalms entitled "God's Little Medicine Shop." There are 150 Psalms, and during these weeks we've looked at eleven of them, and I hope that they have whetted your appetite for the remaining 139. I'm very fond of the Psalms myself, because they are both prophetic and poetic. They contain the truth of God, but they do so in a form that is more emotional that just didactic teaching. And so we get a double dose of truth, as it were, when we read one of the Psalms. Both its substance and its form speaks to us. And somewhere in the book of Psalms we find the cure for every emotional and spiritual problem that we'll ever encounter.
Well today we're looking at Psalm 131—the Bible's cure for stress. Now, stress isn't all bad. Pioneer radio evangelist Michael Guido once told of his first violin recital. He was age ten and quite nervous. But he had tuned his violin and everything seemed just right. The teacher introduced him, the audience welcomed him, and he started to play. That's just when he realized that while his back had been turned his rascal-of-a-friend had slipped around and loosened all the strings. "Oh," he said, "it was awful."
Then he added, "Tension is essential to lovely music. And it's essential to a meaningful life."
None of us could live without pressure. We need atmospheric pressure to supply the oxygen we breathe. We need water pressure to provide us something to drink. We need for our blood pressure to be sufficient to pump the oxygen to our brains and toes. We need air pressure in our tires, and pressure-treated lumber for our homes. We have pressure-cookers for food and pressure-

washers for our houses.
So pressure is all right when it is measured out just right. Too little of it is bad, but too much of it is worse. Too much pressure can crush us. Well, Psalm 131 presents an interesting alternative to unhealthy pressure and stress. It is one of the shortest chapters in the Bible—and one of the simplest. But that doesn't mean that is isn't profound. Charles Spurgeon likened it to a little pearl, and said, "It is one of the shortest psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn. Today I'd like to read it from the New King James Version—Psalm 131, the cure for stress.
Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.

A Statement of Humility – Ps 131:1
Here we have three verses, like three petals of a clover. The first verse is a statement of humility:Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me.
He is saying, "Lord, I've learned that it isn't all about me." Peterson's translation puts it this way:Yahweh, I'm not trying to rule the roost, I don't want to be king of the mountain. I haven't meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans.
A lot of our stress in life comes from over-reaching. Now, I'm all for ambition, and I'm a fairly ambitious person myself. I like to set goals, and I like to reach them. But I don't think that's what the Psalmist is talking about here. He isn't talking about passivity. He isn't attacking ambition. He's warning us about being ambitious for all the wrong things. He's warning us against the dangers of the desire for personal greatness.
Humility is when we decide to fulfill God's plan for our lives rather than our own. When we're trying to fulfill our own plans, everything is stressful. It's always an uphill fight. Our significance our self-image depends on our attainments. But when we're seeking to fulfill God's will for our lives, we say in the words of that old Ray Hildebrand song:

If I live, well, praise the Lord!
If I die, well, praise the Lord!
If I live or die, my only cry
Will be "Jesus in Me—Praise the Lord!"

A Picture of Tranquility - Ps 131:2

So in verse one, we have a statement of humility. In verse two we have a picture of tranquility:Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.
This man has gotten control of his own emotions. He has calmed himself. Now, I find that this is often what I should do. Sometimes I have a disturbing thought, and pretty soon I feel worry and anxiety or anger shooting through me like tracer bullets. What do I do? I can either give in to these feelings, or I can deliberately take myself in hand and calm myself down.
About a year ago, I searched through a number of translations of the Bible, looking up the word "calm." It's such a wonderful word, and I found it highly recommended in a number of passages. Let me read them for you:

- Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart…--Isaiah 7:4 (NIV)
- A man of understanding is of a calm spirit—Proverbs 17:27 (NKJV)
- You ought to keep calm and do nothing rash—Acts 19:36 (NASV)
- Gideon built an altar for worshipping the Lord and called it, "The Lord Calms Our Fears"—Judges 6:24 (CEV).
- He calms the storm, So that its waves are still. Then they are glad because they are quiet; So He guides them to their desired haven—Psalm 107:29-30 (NKJV)
- He replied, "You of little faith, what are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm—Matthew 8:26 (NIV)
- "Calm down, and learn that I am God! All nations on earth will honor me." The Lord All-Powerful is with us. The God of Jacob is our fortress—Psalm 46:10-11 (CEV)
- Pause, and calmly think of that!—Psalm 46:11 (AB)

And here in Psalm 131: Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me.
But there was something about this verse that bothered me. Why a weaned child? Why not a baby, or just a child. Why did the Psalmist use that word "weaned." I think I know. In the ancient, oriental cultured, when they didn't have baby food, children were weaned at an older age than now. They drank longer from mother's milk than now. And when that day came when the child was hungry and thirsty, but it was time for the child to go on to another form of nourishment, it was somewhat traumatic for the child. He was being denied something that he felt was absolutely necessary. Something very dear and precious was being taken away from him. He was suffering a physical and emotional loss that he could not understand.
But the wise parent loved the child through the crisis, diverted him to what was really best for him, dried his tears, and gradually

weaned him from what was temporary that he might come to enjoy that which was much more lasting.

Is that not what the Lord does with us?
Once early joy I craved, sought peace and rest.
Now Thee alone I seek. Give what is best.

How many times have we lost something very precious. How many times have we suffered a disappointment. But through it all, we have trusted God anyway. And later, looking back, we see that He knew what was best all the time, and that God was weaning us from things that were temporary that we might cherish things that are eternal.

An Attitude of Stability - Ps 131:3

Finally we come to verse three, which gives us an attitude of stability: O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.

Amy Carmichael was reading through the Psalms once, and when she came to this verse she suddenly realized how often the Psalms, regardless of their mood and subject, end with an exhortation like this. She called it a "look-up." She said, "I had never before realized how many 'look-ups' there were in the book of Psalms."

Earlier I mentioned the pioneer radio evangelist Michael Guido, whose biography I've been reading. He has written a book of devotionals, and on the first of March this is what he wrote:

I look forward to the possibilities of this month and to the promises of our Lord.

His sun will rise each morning and His stars will shine each night. His mountains will stand and His rain will fall. His Scriptures will be expounded and His salvation will be experienced. No problem will be too big for His power and no person too small for His pity.

For our weariest day He'll be our stay; for our darkest night He'll be our light; and for our weakest hour He'll be our power.

For our grief, there'll be His grace; for our faults, there'll be His forgiveness; for our struggles, there'll be His strength; and for our wants, there'll be His wealth.

I'm expecting this month to be a great and glorious month. Aren't you?

That's exactly what it means to hope in the Lord.

I'd like to end today's message by telling you the true story of a remarkable man who, I think, embodied the reality of Psalm 131. He was a friend of Dr. Bob Pierce, founder of a couple of benevolent organizations you might be familiar with—World Vision and Samaritan's Purse. Dr. Bob's status gave him access to places that other Christians couldn't go, and one such place was the Korean Island of Kojedo, which was used as a detaining camp during the Korean War. Communist POWs were kept there. But when Dr. Bob arrived there, he was shocked to find hundreds of prisoners standing in the bitter cold before sun-up singing hymns. Their favorite hymn was "Jesus Loves Me."

How could this be explained? It all went back to one simple South Korean Christian named Pastor Im. He was a humble little man who had found Jesus Christ as his Savior while a simple rice farmer and had attended Bible School at the Presbyterian center at Pyongyang. He was pastoring a small church when the Communists came, and before long they swooped him up, without even letting him see his wife and children, and they sent him to prison. For eighteen months he didn't know what had become of his family.

Then the day came when General Douglas MacArthur with U.S. and U.N. troops and tanks crossed the 38th parallel into North Korea and took the capital city of Pyongyang. They released the prisoners, and among them was Pastor Im who had just one thought—to go home and find out about his family. Ragged and unwashed, he started out on foot as fast as he could, northward to his home. Along the way, he was mistaken for a Communist by the American forces in the area. They saw him as running away became they had captured the Communist capital. He didn't know a word of English; the Americans didn't know a work of Korean; and the pastor was given no opportunity to explain through an interpreter. They arrested him and threw him into prison on the island of Kojedo, locking him in with thousands of other North Korean prisoners.

Pastor Im was heartbroken and distraught. The one thing he wanted more than anything else had been denied him—to see his family. Satan troubled him with disturbing thoughts: "Where is your God? Why does He let you be so mistreated?"

But Pastor Im adopted the Psalm 131 attitude, and he prayed, "Dear Lord Jesus, if You have let all this heartache come to me and my family, it must be because You have something for me to do. What can I do for You here on this prison island?"

He looked around and saw many miserable men, locked away, most with no knowledge of God and no hope. One evening as the sun was going down, he gathered together the six or eight men whom he knew to be Christians and suggested they sing Christmas carols. "Look," he said, "maybe God has brought us to this place for such an hour as this. Let's get together and sing the love of Jesus."

Though it was forbidden, the men gathered and began to sing, right out in the open in the bitter cold with the guns of guards and sentries pointed at them. Pastor Im stood on a wooden box and began to sing in Korean the carols the American missions had brought and taught. As they sang, "Silent Night, Holy Night, other voices began to join in with them.

The U.S. guards listened in amazement. Those were not Communist songs. They were tunes they knew even though they didn't understand the Korean words. Thinking it must be a trick, the guards aimed their guns toward the little group, but none of them moved. They kept on singing carol after carol. Finally the guards, not knowing what to do, sent for a high officer; but before he could arrive, man after man slipped out of the tents and gathered around Pastor Im until there was a group of about 500. They officer eyed

the scene and called for the group to be dispersed by the guards, but something held the guards back.
Pastor Im took out an old worn Bible and began reading the Christmas story.
Afterward the guards called the chaplain, who was an American who understood Korean, and when he had heard Pastor Im's story, he arranged for him to be given an armband allowing him permission to wander about and preach and hold prayer meetings all over the camp.
Within a year, groups of up to 1200 men were meeting in each of the compounds, getting up before dawn to sing and pray. Over 6000 men finished a six-month course of Bible study. Later, after the prisoners were released, over 600 men finished Bible School and Seminary and began preaching the Gospel throughout Korea, all because of one dedicated little Christian who was caught in a deep personal tragedy during the bitterest hours of the war in Korea.
Such is the power of the man or woman who approaches life with a statement of humility, a picture of tranquility, and an attitude of stability.
Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty. Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me. Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever.

STANDING ON THE PROMISES
Psalm 132

For the last several weeks, we've been developing a friendship with a group of Psalms in the middle of the Bible. They are called the "Psalms of Ascent," and they run from Psalm 120 to 134. Some people believe they are called the "Psalms of Ascent" because they were written for the Pilgrims to sing as they ascended up the roads and hills to Jerusalem for the Jewish feasts and festivals. The Psalm we are coming to today would seem to bear that out. Psalm 132 is the longest of these Psalms of Ascent, and in some ways it appears at first glance to be a little difficult. Let's read it together:

Lord, remember David and all his afflictions;
How he swore to the Lord and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob:
"Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house,
Or go up to the comfort of my bed;
I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids,
Until I find a place for the Lord,
A dwelling for the Mighty One of Jacob."

Behold, we heard of it in Ephrathah;
We found it in the fields of the woods.
Let us go into His tabernacle;
Let us worship at His footstool.
Arise, O Lord, to Your resting place,
You and the ark of Your strength.
Let Your priests be clothed with righteousness,
And let Your saints shout for joy.
For Your servant David's sake,
Do not turn away from the face of Your Anointed.

The Lord has sworn in truth to David;
He will not turn from it:
"I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body.
If your sons will keep My covenant
And My testimony which I shall teach them,
Their sons also shall sit upon your throne forevermore."

For the Lord has chosen Zion;
He has desired it for His dwelling place:
"This is My resting place forever;
Here I will dwell, for I have desired it.

I will abundantly bless her provision;
I will satisfy her poor with bread.
I will also clothe her priests with salvation,
And her saints shall shout aloud for joy.
There I will make the horn of David grow;
I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed.
His enemies I will clothe with shame,
But upon Himself a crown shall flourish.

The first ten verses of this Psalm are all about a vow that David made to the Lord. See how it begins: Lord, remember David and all his afflictions; how he swore to the Lord, and vowed to the Mighty One of Jacob.

The last eight verses are all about a vow that the Lord made to David. Look at verse 11: The Lord has sworn in truth to David.

We might say that this Psalm is all about David and the Lord swearing to each other. David swears an oath or makes a solemn promise to God in verses 1-10; and in verses 11-18, The Lord swears an oath or makes a solemn promise to David. Now, we can even subdivide this outline quite easily. Verses 1-5 tell us about David's oath to the Lord; and verses 6-10 tell us how it was fulfilled. Verses 10-12 tell us about the Lord's oath to David, and verses 13-18 tell us how it was and is being fulfilled. We can outline it like this:

I. David's Oath to God (Psalm 132:1-10)
   A. The Oath (Psalm 132:1-4)
   B. Its Fulfillment (Psalm 132:5-10)
II. God's Oath to David (Psalm 132:11-18)
   A. The Oath (Psalm 132:10-12)
   B. It's Fulfillment (Psalm 132:13-18)

So with that as our basic outline, let's plunge right in with verse 1 and see what this is about.

Verse 1 begins: Lord, remember David and all his afflictions. I think this means, "Lord, remember the house of David, and don't forget about the line and lineage of David. Look on all their problems and remember how David once made a promise to you.

Lord, remember David and all his afflictions; how he swore to the Lord, and vowed to the Mighty 0ne of Jacob (which is another name for the Lord).

Now, what did David vow? What oath did he make? He said: Surely I will not go into the chamber of my house, or go up to the comfort of my bed; I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.

Now, from the rest of the Psalm we understand that he is talking about the great symbol of God's presence, the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant. Last year, I preached a series of sermons on the subject of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant, and we learned that the Tabernacle—that elaborate tent set up by Moses in the desert—and the Ark of the Covenant—that beautiful chest that resided in the inner room of the Tabernacle—were wonderfully symbolic. They symbolized the presence of God among His people. The Tabernacle and later the more permanent Temple represented the literal House of the Lord on this planet—the resting place or dwelling place of Almighty God among His people. And the Ark of the Covenant—that mysterious box—represented the earthly footstool of God's heavenly throne.

Moses and the Israelites established this in the desert at Mount Sinai, and after the Israelites entered the Promised Land, the Tabernacle was set up in the little town of Shiloh, and in other places.

When David became the King of Israel, the Lord led him to establish Jerusalem as the capital of his kingdom, and Jerusalem became the political center of Israel. David moved quickly to have the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant moved to Jerusalem, too. This passage—Psalm 132—tells us that he made a vow, the made a solemn oath that he would not rest until he had established God's Tabernacle and Ark in the holy city of Jerusalem. That's the meaning of verse 4: I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob.

In other words, he wanted Jerusalem to be not only the political center of Israel, but its spiritual center. We don't have time to read

it, but the story of David's moving the Tabernacle and the Ark into Jerusalem is one of the most interesting and insightful stories in the Old Testament. When the day came that the Ark actually entered Jerusalem, David was so excited and filled with exuberance that he worshipped and shouted and danced until he risked being viewed as foolish.

So now, says Psalm 132, we remember this story whenever we go to Jerusalem....

Now, there's an important principle here, and that's what I want to talk about. King David was determined to, in as literal a way as possible, put God right in the center of his world. He wanted his personal home and his political capital to also be the center of his spiritual life. He made a vow that God was not going to be on the fringes of his life. The Lord was not going to be on the outskirts of his town. He wanted the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant—which prophetically represents Jesus Christ—right in the center of his world.

It reminds me of something Bill Bright, the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, used to say. There are three kinds of people in this world. There are non-Christians—Christ isn't in their lives. There are carnal Christians—Christ is in their lives but not in the center of their lives; He's on the outskirts. And there are spiritual Christians—those who realize that if Christ is God He demands and deserves to be right in the center of our lives, sitting on the throne of our hearts.

What kind of person are you?

David made a vow, a solemn promise that he would not rest until the Lord was right in the center of His world.

Now, the last half of Psalm 132 tells about the vow that God made to David. Verse 11 says: The Lord has sworn in truth to David; He will not turn from it: "I will set upon your throne the fruit of your body…

Verse 14: This is My resting place forever; Here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread. I will also clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints shall shout aloud for joy.

Notice all the "I wills"—promises that God made to David.

What's the real, underlying lesson of Psalm 132? It is this: That if we will make a commitment to Jesus Christ, to put Him in the very center of our lives, all the promises of God in the Bible become ours. He responds to our commitment with a vow of His own. He responds to our promise to center our lives around Christ by giving us a promise for every occasion and need in life.

I remember reading years ago about a woman who had a little gift box containing many cards. On each card was a biblical promise. She would pull one out every day, read it, and then slide it to the back of the stack. One day she was deeply troubled by a crushing distress, and she desperately needed to find one of God's promises for her. In her nervous haste, she dropped the box and the promises went flying everywhere. As she fell to her knees to gather them up, she suddenly realized that she was literally surrounded by the promises of God. "Just think," she later said. "I was looking for one promise, when all the great promises of God were available. I was surrounded by His promises."

I have several favorite quotes on the subject of God's promises that I've read in sermons so many times that I've almost memorized them. But if you'll allow me, I'd like to read them one more time.

The first is by missionary Hudson Taylor. Once his missionary fund was exhausted and he had only twenty-five cents. But he seemed carefree and at peace with the situation. When someone asked him why, he replied, We have twenty-five cents and all the promises of God.

The second quote I found in J. I. Packer's wonderful book, Knowing God. Packer wrote: In the days when the Bible was universally acknowledged in the churches as "god's Word written," it was clearly understood that the promises of God recorded in Scripture were the proper, God-given basis for all our life of faith, and that the way to strengthen one's faith was to focus it upon particular promises that spoke to one's condition.

Packer then went on to quote this sentence from another writer: A fixed, constant attention to the promises, and a firm belief of them, would prevent solicitude and anxiety about the concerns of life. It would keep the mind quiet and composed in every change, and support and keep up our sinking spirits under the several troubles of life…. Christians deprive themselves of their most solid comforts by their unbelief and forgetfulness of God's promises. For there is no extremity so great, but there are promises suitable to it, and abundantly sufficient for our relief in it.

Recently I found a wonderful little poem written by the quaint old British preacher, John Newton, author of the hymn, “Amazing Grace.”

When my faith is faint and sickly,
Or when Satan wounds my mind,
Cordials, to revive me quickly,
Healing med’cines here I find:
To the promises I flee,
Each affords a remedy.

The last quote is from the German Christian, George Muller, who is best known for the orphanages he founded in 19th century England. When someone asked him how he came to have enough faith to trust God with his great work, he replied: My faith is the same faith which is found in every believer. It has been increased little by little for the last 26 years. Many times when I could have gone insane from worry, I was at peace because my soul believed the truth of God’s promises. God’s word, together with the whole character of God, as He has revealed Himself, settles all questions. His unchangeable love and His infinite wisdom calmed me. I knew, “God is able and willing to deliver me.” It is written, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things” (Rom 8:32)—George Muller

I used to be a very anxious person, and sometimes I still am. But over the years, I’ve learned enough about God’s promises to be much more relaxed. I want to live with a sort of heavenly carelessness, trusting God come what may. But I still find myself fretting sometimes at bedtime. Just when I’m about to go to sleep, some nagging fear or worry will fly into my brain and trouble me. However, I’m learning that if I can focus my mind on one of God’s promises in Scripture, my mind relaxes and goes right to sleep. Recently I’ve been memorizing Psalm 134, which is very short. Only three verses. But that simple little Psalm has been my tranquilizer at night all this week.

Many of us have read the story of the Dutch Holocaust survivor, Corrie Ten Boom. She and her family had a secret hiding place in their home that helped Jewish refuges find safety during the terrible days of the Nazis. The family members would quietly ask each other, “What do you have in your shoe Mama?” “What do you have in your shoe, Daddy? “What do you have in your shoe, Betsy?” The answer—precious portions of Scripture that they had torn from their Bible, specifically Romans 8, Ephesians 1, and 2 Corinthians 4. They would copy these passages and put them in their shoes so that they were literally standing on the promises of God.

Recently I read the autobiography of the great Christian writer, Catherine Marshall. She was writing about the sudden death of her husband, Peter Marshall, the powerful Scottish preacher who became Chaplain of the United States Senate. He died unexpectedly of a heart attack at age 45. His wife, Catherine, in her autobiography, wrote that in her anguish and despair she remembered a technique that Peter had often used. It was the method of finding a specific promise in the Bible that applied to one’s need and then claiming it as a definite transaction between an individual and his Lord. In that spirit, she found and claimed Romans 8:28: And we know that all things (the things we understand and those we do not; the joyous things and the tragic) work together for good to them that love God, to them that are the called according to His purpose.”

How many and how wonderful are the exceedingly great and precious promises of God:

- All things work together for good to those who love the Lord.
- Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.
- Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
- I will never leave you or forsake you.
- God is our refuge and strength; a very present help in trouble.

And so many others. All the promises are available for those who bring Jesus Christ into the very center of their lives.

Do you need to move the Tabernacle of God and the Ark of the Covenant into downtown Jerusalem? Do you need to make the Lord a resting place in the very center of your life? Do you need to bring everything in life under His Lordship?

Today let Christ move into center spot in your life, and learn the joy of saying:

Standing on the promises that cannot fail,
When the howling storms of doubt and fear assail,
By the living Word of God I shall prevail,
Standing on the promises of God.

MOUNTAIN DEW AND SWEET PERFUME
Psalm 133

This week on our television sets we saw hundreds of thousands of Shiite Muslims marching in a 100-mile funeral procession, mourning the death of a leading Iraqi cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir al-Harkim. He was killed when a car bomb exploded outside his mosque in Najaf. What you may have missed was the subject of the Ayatollah's sermon, the one he preached moments before he was killed. He was preaching on the subject of unity. He had no sooner finished his sermon on unity than a car bomb broke the unity and killed him and over 80 other men and women.

Today I'd like to speak on the same subject—unity—but from a very different perspective. I'd like to show you what the Bible has to say about unity and oneness. And while I don't expect a car bomb to explode afterward, I do know that Satan is trying to destroy unity in our homes, our friendships, and our lives. He does his best to drive his "car bombs" into our relationships. He wants to destroy the peace and tranquility of our lives.

One of the best ways to prevent his success is by knowing what the Bible says about this subject, so today let's study Psalm 133, as we come near to the end of our studies through the Psalms of Ascents.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; For there the Lord commanded the blessing—life forevermore.

These three verses tell us three things about unity.

Well-Pleasing (Ps 133:1)
Ps 133:1 tells us that unity is well-pleasing. Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity. The word behold draws our attention to this. It's saying, "Hey, look! Check this out! Notice this! When people get along with each other it is both good and pleasant.

Now, there are many things that are good, but they aren't pleasant. Some foods are good for you, but they aren't pleasant. Discipline and correction are good for us, but they aren't always pleasant. Going on diets and getting our exercise are good for us, but not always pleasant.

And there are many things that are pleasant, but not good. The Bible talks about the pleasures of sin, for example.

But here is something that is both morally good and emotionally pleasant—getting along with other people. Suppose two different families invited you to supper on the same night, and you could only accept one of the invitations. You knew that one family was at each other's throats. They were fighting badly among themselves, and you knew you would be walking into a tense house. The other family was happy and loving, and mealtime there was a joy. Which invitation would you want to accept?

Suppose you had the option of attending one of two different churches. One church was fragmented and divided. The members were fighting among themselves, and the atmosphere was tense and unpleasant. The other church was filled with members who loved each other dearly, and they'd hang around long after the services, just enjoying each other's fellowship. Which church would you rather attend?

Suppose you had to choose between two different ball teams. One team was full of ego-maniacs who were at always jealous of each other and sniping at each other. The other was full of good athletes who understood the importance of playing together as a team. They liked each other and worked together as a group. Which team would you choose?

The Psalmist said: Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.

Sweet-Smelling (Ps 133:2)

Ps 133:2 tells us that unity is not only well-pleasing, it is sweet-smelling. It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments.

This is a very interesting picture, and it's one that I would not have thought of. If someone asked you to draw a picture that illustrated unity, what would you draw? I might draw a picture of a mosaic—a thousand little tiles that unite together to form one beautiful picture. I might draw a picture of a bouquet of flowers. Many different flowers with different colors and shapes, all united in one vase to form a beautiful arrangement. I might draw a rainbow made up of various colors, all uniting in one majestic sweep across the sky.

But I would never have thought of drawing a picture of Aaron the High Priest being anointed with oil. There must be something very significant about this, something that requires a little study to understand.

In the Old Testament, God created an ordinance, a symbol, to signify the setting apart of certain objects or people for divine service. This symbol was being anointed with oil. The oil represented the Holy Spirit coming upon someone or something, sanctifying and setting apart that person or object for holy use. Thus when Samuel anointed David as king of Israel, the young shepherd boy knelt while Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it over his head. It ran down his hair, down his face, and onto his clothing. It was symbolic of the fact that the Holy Spirit was coming upon David to equip and empower him for this assignment from God. We read of several times when these kinds of anointings took place in Old Testament days.

What is being referred to here is the anointing of Aaron that took occurred in Leviticus 8. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they stopped at Mount Sinai where the Lord gave them the Ten Commandments, the law, and various instructions about setting up their national and their religious life. God instructed Moses to appoint his brother Aaron as High Priest, and to anoint Aaron with oil, signifying the blessings of the Holy Spirit upon that office. And so in Leviticus 8 we read:

Then Moses took the anointing oil and anointed the Tabernacle and everything in it, and so consecrated them. He sprinkled some of the oil on the altar seven times, anointing the altar and all its utensils and the basin with its stand, to consecrate them. He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head and anointed him to consecrate him…

The interesting thing to me is the makeup of this anointing oil. It's described for us in the instructions God gave in Exodus 30. It was a unique, God-given recipe for perfumed oil. The manufacture of perfume goes back 3000 years, and today it's a billion-dollar industry; but here is one of the oldest recipes for perfume in human history, and it is given by God Himself. Look at Exodus 30:22ff:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Take the following fine spices: 500 shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much (that is 250 shekels) of fragrant cinnamon, 250 shekels of cassia—all according to the sanctuary shekel—and a hin of olive oil. Make these into a sacred anointing oil, a fragrant blend, the work of a perfumer. It will be the sacred anointing oil. Then use it to anoint the Tent of Meeting…

Anoint Aaron and his sons and consecrate them so they may serve me as priests. Say to the Israelites, "This is to be my sacred anointing oil for the generations to come. Do not pour it on men's bodies and do not make any oil with the same formula. It is sacred, and you are to consider it sacred. Whoever makes perfume like it and whoever puts it on anyone other than the priest must be cut off from his people.

This was a unique, sweet-smelling perfume. As Aaron knelt in submission before the Lord, Moses slowly poured a gallon or so of it over his head. It ran down his face and beard, it saturated his clothing and ran down to the fringes of his garments. It covered him with a unique and wonderful fragrance.

And David said in Psalm 133—that's what the unity of the body of Christ is like. It's something the Holy Spirit does as He is poured out upon the church, saturating and drenching the people of God, making them one and bestowing on them a wonderful fragrance.

Now with that in mind, let's read Ephesians 4:30-32:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed (anointed) for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

In other words, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, if you have made Him your Savior and Lord, you have been anointed with the fragrant oil of the Holy Spirit. Don't make a mess of it. Don't ruin the unity He wants you to have by an angry, bitter, brawling attitude.

Earlier in my message I mentioned the car bomber in Najaf. What in the world could make a person become a car bomber or a suicide bomber? Why would someone blow themselves up to achieve an act of terrorism? It's anger. They become so angry that they literally explode. In many cases, these people have been abused since birth. They've been put down. They've lost loved ones —brothers and sisters and parents. They've been subjugated and humiliated until they just can't take it anymore and they just explode.

And the same thing causes so many bombs to go off in our marriages and homes and churches. People feel that they've been mistreated in some way. Perhaps they had parents whom they could never please. Perhaps they were humiliated in school. Perhaps they were bullied as children. Perhaps they had bad experiences as teens. One thing after another has happened, and they are walking time-bombs, just waiting to go off.

Years ago, I had a man in a church I pastored who was always angry with me. After nearly every service, he would tell me something that was wrong with the service, or wrong with the music, or wrong with my sermon, or wrong with the church. He was just negative and critical all the time. I took it for awhile and finally I started responding. I said, "You know, we're not a perfect church and I'm not a perfect pastor, but the real problem here is your negative, critical, angry attitude. Why are you so angry? What are you so mad about?"

We had a real blow-up over it, and he left the church. But years later he came back and said, "You know, you were right. I was getting shafted at work, and I was just very, very angry. It came out toward my wife. It came out toward my church. It poisoned my relationships. It just made me an angry, irritable, unpleasant person."

Well, I believe that God has given us the Holy Spirit in order to enable us to trust Him with those people or things that are making us angry. There comes a point when you say, "Lord, you know what my parents did to me. You know what my ex-wife is saying about me. You know how I was treated in school. But now I know that Jesus loves me and thinks enough of me to die for me, and I know that He's big enough to settle things up. I'm going to leave it with Him.

One of the best remedies for anger and friction is faith in Jesus Christ. And I think one of the functions of the Holy Spirit is to give us the wisdom and faith needed to trust Christ with the things that otherwise would drive us to anger and rage. There are many things in this life that could drive us to become angry, bitter, people. But the Holy Spirit helps us to trust Christ with those things, and the Holy Spirit teaches us to be forgiving, patient, and trusting. We have the anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Let me give you an example. Years ago in my first pastorate, my car was struck by a hit-and-run driver. I was driving along a narrow, country road outside of Greeneville, Tennessee, and someone came barreling around the curve at a high rate of speed, lost control, swerved into my lane, crashed into my car, swerved out again, accelerated, and sped off.

I was absolutely furious. I turned around as quickly as I could and tried to chase him, but he was long gone. I had liability insurance, but no collision insurance. Katrina and I had this new little car, only one between us, and little money. The fact that someone was out there, driving recklessly, endangering my life, damaging my car—and that I was being stuck with the repair bills made me mad as fire. Everyday for the next week I went driving around looking for that man's car so I could confront him.

But finally I realized that God knew who that person was. I realized that the Lord would settle the score in His own way and in His own time. And I also realized that the Lord would provide for me. He had protected me from being hurt or killed, and He could certainly provide for my car to be repaired.

So I just had to let go of the anger and trust the situation into God's hands. And when I did, the fragrance of the Holy Spirit came back into my heart and life. And so it's as the Bible says:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed (anointed) for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassion to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

Life-Giving (Ps 133:3)

Now, Psalm 133 goes on to say that this kind of unity is not only well-pleasing as we see in verse 1, and sweet-smelling as we see in

verse 2, but life-giving as we see in verse 3: It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded blessings—life forevermore.

This is another interesting word picture of the benefits of unity. Mount Hermon is the highest mountain in Israel. It's actually a tall range of mountains on the Israeli, Lebanese, Syrian border. It rises up 9200 feet above sea level. It is always covered with moisture—with snow, rain, and dew. This moisture runs off into steams and rivulets that flow into the Jordan River. The River Jordan then runs from North to South, into the Sea of Galilee and out again, down through the Jordan Valley, and finally into the Dead Sea. It irrigates and gives life to all of Israel.

The Psalmist was saying that's the way the unity of the Holy Spirit is—it gives life.

A marriage that is united and strong is life-giving; one that is divided is dying.

A church that is united and strong flourishes and gives life to others; one that is divided is dying.

A denomination that is united and strong is a powerful force; but one that is divided is dying.

A sports team or an organization of any kind that is united in heart and mind is a force to be reckoned with; but when people become negative and critical and unloving and unforgiving, they begin to die.

I wonder if someone here has a bitter, angry, critical spirit. You need the Holy Spirit's help as you seek to trust God with those things or those persons who have created the anger within you. You're a walking time-bomb when you should be a sweet-smelling sacrifice. I believe the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to help you with this. I believe that Jesus Christ is real enough to give you an overcoming attitude. Nothing is too hard for Him.

Behold, how good and how pleasant it is when we dwell together in unity. It is well-pleasing; it is sweet-smelling; it is life-giving. It's like the perfumed oil that ran down Aaron's head. It's like the refreshing waters of Hermon that irrigates the dry valleys of life.

Bring your frustrations to Jesus Christ and trust Him to do what He alone can do. And may He heal our homes, restore our relationships, give us patience, and make us one.

THE GRAVEYARD SHIFT
Psalm 134

> Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord. The Lord who made heaven and earth bless you from Zion (Psalm 134).

Today we're coming to the end of our summer series of messages entitled "Marching to Zion," based on expositions of Psalms 120 through 134, the famous "Psalms of Ascent." At the beginning of this series, I said that among the theories behind the ancient compilation of these Psalms is this one—they were compiled as a special little hymnal for Jewish pilgrims who were going up to Jerusalem for the three annual Hebrew religious festivals. These are evidently Pilgrim Psalms. Since all of us are pilgrims in this world below, these Psalms are especially meaningful. They provide traveling music for our pilgrimage.

The Psalms of Ascents begin with Psalm 120, when our Pilgrim is leaving for his journey. We've traveled week-by-week, Psalm after Psalm, and now here in Psalm 134, we have finally arrived in Jerusalem. It's late in the day, but we just have to visit theTemple before settling down for the night. We can't rest until we pay at least a quick visit to the House of God, the object of our Pilgrimage.

The sun is low, the shadows long, the night air brisk, and we are tired from the journey. As we approach the temple we see the evening shift of priestly workers arriving to care for the house of God during the night hours. They've rested some during the day, and now as the sun goes down, they are going to work. All night long, they'll guard the holy places. They will lead in evening worship. They will pray through the night watches and keep the lamps burning.

As we see them entering the Temple, we're filled with excitement and praise, and we shout something in their direction. We offer a shout of encouragement: "Behold! Bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord! Lift up

your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord."

And the evening servants turn and return the greeting with the words of verse three: "The Lord who made heaven and earth bless you from Zion."

This Psalm is written in the form of a reciprocal blessing. It is antiphonal. Ps 134:1 and Ps 134:2 are an exhortation to the night workers at the Temple complex to bless the Lord, and Ps 134:3 is the returning blessing from them to us.

Now, I love this Psalm because of the way it honors and highlights those who otherwise might be forgotten—the night workers at the temple. They worked from sunset to sundown, and so their days and nights are reversed. These kinds of hours make for a more difficult life. My parents were school teachers, so my father never worked a nightshift; but our house in Elizabethton was just about a mile from downtown, and in downtown Elizabethton was the Tennessee Chair Factory. Every night at 10 o'clock the shift would change, and a very loud whistle would sound. I could hear it in my bedroom, over a mile away. As an elementary school child, that 10 o'clock whistle represented my bedtime. My parents would say, "You can stay up until the 10 o'clockwhistle." Sometimes I'd be tired and I'd go to bed a little early. But I still remember lying in bed and hearing that 10 o'clockwhistle sound every night of my childhood.

It was to mark the graveyard shift, which, in that factory, ran from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. It was for the men and women who would keep the factory going through the dark hours of the night. Ever since the innovation of the light bulb, American factories have felt that it was cost efficient to keep their equipment running all the time. But it isn't easy to work the graveyard shift. Some of those men went to my church. Some of them were the dads of my friends. And I knew that it was a hard life. Sometimes I'd go over to a buddy's house after school to play or to watch television, and we'd have to be very quiet because "my dad's asleep. He's working graveyard this month."

This summer the magazine Business Week carried a very interesting story about the Graveyard Shift. It reported that a new study has discovered that graveyard shift workers make five times as many serious mistakes and are 20 percent more likely to suffer severe accidents than those who work during the day. They are less likely to get regular exercise, and more likely to eat unhealthy foods. All-night workers tend to have heart disorder rates 40 percent higher than those on dayside shifts. The divorce rate is 60 percent, and the study found that maintaining a graveyard shift was actually costing American companies over $200 billion a year in related costs.

There are some in this service who have worked all night long, who have gotten off at seven this morning, and who have come here to church before going home and going to bed. I deeply appreciate those of you who make such a sacrifice.

Psalm 134 is written for the Graveyard Shift.

Now, I'd like to show you two key words in this Psalm, then make three practical applications.

The first word is "Bless." The Psalm begins: Behold, bless the Lord. What does it mean to bless the Lord? I looked up this word Bless in the Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semitic Domains. It is the Hebrew word, barak, and it comes from the Hebrew word for "knee." It literally means to kneel with the back straight and the hands lifted to heaven. It represented a distinct posture for prayer and praise. We see this illustrated in 2 Chronicles 6:13, which describes a prayer of worship made by King Solomon: Solomon had made a bronze platform five cubits high, and had set it in the midst of the court; and he stood on it, knelt down on his knees before all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands toward heaven.

That's the idea behind the word barak, to bless. Behold, bless the Lord all you servants of the Lord who by night stand in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord.

Now, the same word is used in the antiphonal response in verse 3: The Lord who made heaven and earth bless you fromZion. This is a remarkable thought—that the Lord God Almighty Himself gets down on His knees to be with us. He stoops down to our level and stretches out His hands toward us to bless us. Someone once wrote a book about God entitled, The God Who Stands, Stoops, and Stays. Like a dad who gets down on the floor with His children, the Lord stooped down to be among us through His Son, Jesus Christ, to bless us.

The second word is stand. Some of the newer translations say serve, but the literal Hebrew word means: to stand as one who is serving. Verse 1 says: Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord.

There we have a great summarization of our Christian lives. We're to stand and serve, and we're to kneel and bless. Now, in practical terms, what does all this mean to you and me? I think there are three applications that may be helpful.

Literally

The first is literal. We're to bless and to praise God through the hours of the night. There was a book published back in the 1880s entitled, Night Scenes in the Bible. Have you ever noticed how very often the Lord met people at night when they could not sleep? Check it out in the Bible—how many people had evening encounters with the Lord.

- It was at night that Jacob wrestled with the angel, until the break of day.
- It was at night that the Christmas angels appeared to the shepherds of Bethlehem who were keeping the Graveyard Shift.
- It was at night that Nicodemus came to Jesus, seeking answers to life's great questions.
- It was at night that Jesus found the disciples straining at the oars on the storm-tossed sea.
- It was at night that Paul and Silas were singing praises to God in the Philippian jail.

A few weeks ago we looked at Psalm 127 which says God gives to His beloved sleep. That's true, and yet there are some nights when we just can't sleep. We have too much on our minds. We've had too much coffee or caffeine. We've been awakened for some reason or another. What can we do on those nights? We can do one of three things. We can either remain in bed, tossing and turning. Or we can get up and watch television—which is an absolute waste of time. There's nothing of redeeming value on the tube at 2 a.m., (and very little anytime else). Or we can get up, grab our Bibles, and say, "Well, Lord, I'm going to spend some time with You until You let me get drowsy. I'm going to pray. I'm going to bow down and praise Your name." Some of our greatest moments of prayer and some of our greatest insights into the Word can come in the middle of the night when sleep eludes us. Learn the secret and develop the habit of Psalm 134: Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord.

Missiologically

During this Missions Month of September, I don't think it's too great a stretch to apply this to our missionaries. Like the Levites on the Graveyard Shift, they are working in a darkened area, away from our normal view and vision. They're working in a spiritual Graveyard Shift. Those on the other side of the world are literally working for Christ while we are sleeping in our beds. What can they do when the darkness nearly overwhelms them, when the fatigue grows, when they feel unnoticed and under-appreciated?

They can lift up their hands in the sanctuary and bless the Lord. There is nothing that praise cannot cure. A life that learns to praise the Lord can bear the burdens of the night. A life that learns to praise the Lord can work through the darkness, shining a light that can never be quenched. They can stand and serve, then kneel and bless.

Personally

Now there is one other application of this Psalm I'd like to make, and that is a personal one, a metaphorical one. Sometimes life seems very dark. We have bad news or we struggle with difficult problems. The theme of Psalm 134 is that we should praise God at life's dark moments. We should stand and serve Him and kneel and bless Him during life's Graveyard Shift.

This week I read a moving little book entitled Why God, Why? It was written by a Christian evangelist in India named P.P. Job. In recent years there has been a dramatic increase in persecution against Christians in India by militant Hindus. The Indian government has not done enough to stop these attacks, and on December 4, 1998, there was a protest rally in New Delhi. A huge crowd gathered on Parliament Street to protest the increasing violence against Christian. Dr. P.P. Job spoke at that Rally, and shortly thereafter began getting threats against his life and against his family.

Dr. Job had a brilliant son, a Christian young man named Michael who was a medical student at the University. He was training to be a medical missionary. When he entered the university he was the only Christian among 500 medical students, but his vibrant faith and outgoing attitude won over many of the students. He was a witness wherever he went.

One evening as he was walking near the university, a white Fiat with Delhi number plates, traveling at a high speed, changed lanes diagonally from right to left, rammed into Michael, and sped away without stopping. Michael suffered massive brain damage, and he died a few days later.

Dr. Job was almost inconsolable. He wrote, "It happened because I am a preacher of the Word of God. I was shattered. There are no words to describe the pain I went through." But as he was reading his Bible, searching for some word of explanation or comfort, he came across Philippians 1:12: What has happened to me has really served to advance the Good News. Now, Dr. Job's anguish has become an alleluia, and it is incredible to see how God has used the death of this brilliant, young Christian inIndia to advance

the cause of the Gospel.

There is the Michael Job Orphanage, the Michael Job Christian High School, the Michael Job Residential Art and TrainingCollege, and the Michael Job Memorial Chapel. Multitudes of students have been touched and inspired by this story, and God is gaining glory for Himself throughout India because one father learned to praise God during the Graveyard Shift.

Let me give you another example in closing. Most of us are familiar with Charles Wesley's great hymn, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing." But did you know that Welsey's hymn was undoubtedly inspired by an earlier hymn entitled, "O That I Had a Thousand Voices," by a German pastor named Johann Mentzer.

Johann Mentzer was pastor in the small village of Kemnitz, located in the middle of the forests of Eastern Germany, near the Polish and Czech borders. Most of his parishioners were poor surfs whose hard work primarily benefited their wealthy masters. Mentzer's heart went out to his people, toiling in poverty and trouble, and he often counseled them to praise the Lord whatever the circumstances.

One evening Johann was returning from a Bible study in a nearby village. The night was dark, but as he approached his church, he grew alarmed at a frightening red glow in the sky. Hurrying onward, he found his own home, the church parsonage, ablaze. It had been set afire during his absence.

As he later inspected the ashes and ruins, he was disturbed and downhearted. It was just then that a serf reportedly tapped him on the shoulder and asked, "So, Pastor, are you still in the mood for praise and thanksgiving?" Johann offered a silent prayer for grace, and at that moment his whole attitude changed. It seemed to him that a Christian's praise to God should be louder than the sound of the tongues of flame that had just consumed his own home. The next day, he composed this hymn: "O that I had a thousand voices / and with a thousand tongues could tell / of Him in whom the earth rejoices / who does all things wisely and well."

Years later, Charles Wesley, undoubtedly inspired by this hymn, wrote his more famous, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing."

If you can't sleep at night, get up and bless the Lord. If you find yourself working for Christ in a benighted area, learn to praise the Lord in the darkness. If you're facing difficulty right now, try praise and thanksgiving.

Behold, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who by night stand in the house of the Lord! Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the Lord. The Lord who made heaven and earth bless you from Zion.

HOW PRECIOUS ARE YOUR THOUGHTS, OH LORD
Psalm 139

Today I would like to begin a simple series of messages on the subject Undervalued Assets—the Precious Things of God. Our English word "precious" comes from the same Latin root as the words "price" and "premium." It refers to things of great value; those things that are highly cherished. If I were to ask you to name the most precious things in your life, you would perhaps tell me about your children or about family members or loved ones. Perhaps you'd share a precious memory. Maybe there is an item or object in your home that holds great significance for you. We talk about precious stones and precious metals.
But does the Bible consider anything precious? In other words, from God's perspective what should we most highly esteem in life. Where should our values be? Well, if you'll take a concordance and look up the word "precious," you'll find there are about a dozen items, objects, realities or truths that are given this adjective in Scripture, and I'd like to spend a few weeks studying those passages and studying the subject of the precious things of God.

Let's begin right in the middle of the Bible, with Psalm 139:17—How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake I am still with you.

There was an article a couple of weeks ago in USA Today that caught my eye. The headline said: Church Boosts Kids' Self-Esteem. We know that a lot of people don't feel good about themselves, and increasing numbers of young people are having severe self-esteem trouble. If your self-esteem is low, you're more vulnerable to temptation, you're more vulnerable to peer pressure, you're more critical, and more easily depressed. This article, which was based on a study of over 1200 eighth-grade students, said that young people relentlessly compare themselves with peers and often come up short. They watch MTV and other entertainment venues and compare themselves to the images on the screen. And many of them suffer the hidden anguish of a

tattered self-image.

But the study also demonstrated that teenagers who go to church rate significantly higher in areas of self-esteem. The researchers weren't sure of all the reasons for this. They discussed the possibility that teens who go to church also tend to have a closer relationship to at least one parent; and a close, positive tie to parents correlates with high adolescent self-esteem. But I would like to suggest another that reason plays a part in this, too. Without the truth of the Word of God, this world has no foundation—not even a foothold—for self-esteem. The theory of evolution reduces us all to accidental by-produces of godless, mindless chance, who are destined to live a survival-of-the-fittest life until we perish, and without having any divine guidance or eternal significance. The Bible, on the other hand, provides us with the healthiest possible set of truths and gives us the foundation for a sober and healthy view of ourselves. For example, Psalm 139 is a wonderful description of the way God thinks of us, and I'd like to take you briefly through this passage.

The Psalmist begins by saying: O Lord, and the word he used for Lord can more accurately be rendered Jehovah, or Yahweh. Bible scholars call this special name for God the Tetragrammaton. The prefix tetra means four. The word grammaton is akin to our wordgrammar, and it means letters. The study of grammar is the study of the letters of the alphabet. Whenever the Hebrews wrote the personal name for God, they wrote it with four letters of their Hebrew alphabet. Now, the name Jehovah or Yahweh has more than four letters, both in the English and in the Hebrew; but the ancient scribes would not write out all the letters. They would leave out the vowels, writing only out the consonants, which in the Hebrew correspond to our YHWH. They considered the word too holy to write, and so they used the consonants as a sort of code. Nor would they pronounce this word. If a rabbi was reading aloud from the Old Testament and he came to these letters YHWH, he substituted the word <adonay which means Lord, very much as we do with most of our English translations. So when in your King James or New International Old Testament you read the word LORD in small capital letters, it is the name Jehovah or Yahweh which was considered too holy to be written out or spoken by the ancient peoples.

For that reason, no one today knows exactly how the personal name for the God of Israel should be spelled or pronounced. Most of the translations use the word LORD in small capital letters. Some of the more literal translations, such as the American Standard Version, use the word Jehovah. Some of the newer translations, such as Peterson's, use the word Yahweh.

But it is a very holy and special word—Almighty God's own name—and we think that the meaning of this word has to do with God's self-existence. The self-existent or eternal one. Before the burning bush, when Moses asked God about His personal name, Jehovah replied, "I am who am I am. Tell them 'I Am' sent you." We have a God who was and is and is to come. We have a God without beginning or ending. We have a God who is an uncaused first cause—the creator of time and space.

This is our God, the self-existent, eternal almighty Jehovah. And yet He thinks of us. Continue reading: Lord—Jehovah—Yahweh, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. When I was a child, I remember visited the Tennessee Valley Fair and going in the exhibition hall. One of the most interesting displays were the glass bee hives. Inside, seeming unaware that they were being observed, were thousands of bees hustling and bustling in frantic activity beneath the pane of glass that covered their colony. The bee keeper showed us the queen, and explained about the workers, the guards, and the drones—all of them oblivious that their every move was being observed by a higher intelligence.

In the same way, our heads, as it were, are glass hives and God sees every thought that buzzes through our brains. Psalm 139 says: You perceive my thoughts from afar. Other Scriptures confirm this.

Psalm 7 says that God searches our minds and hearts. Psalm 94 says that He knows our thoughts. Jeremiah said that God tests our hearts and minds. In the Gospels, we're told that Jesus could read the minds and thoughts of those around him. In Mark chapter two, for example, some of the teachers of the law were sitting there, listening to our Lord, and as they listened their thoughts were critical. They were thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like this? He is blaspheming!" Mark 2:8 says, "Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this is what they were thinking in their hearts."

As the Psalm unfolds, we have more of God's attributes described for us, and the writer especially dwells on the wonderful truth that God is omnipresent—He is always everywhere, and thus He is always with His children. Look at verse 5: You hem me in—behind and before… . Where can I go from your Spirit?

Then He describes God's masterful creation of every human being. Ps 139:13 says: You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

And God has a plan for our lives. Verse 16 says: All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

And now we come to Ps 139:17, in which the writer states what he has already implied—that God love us so much that He thinks of us all the time, and that He thoughts of us are precious.

The Bible says several things about God's thoughts. First, the Bible says that He thinks in a way that is complete different than our way of thinking. Isaiah 55:8-9 say: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

How high are the heavens above the earth? The other day I saw a fantastic picture taken from the Hubble Space Telescope of an incredibly beautiful nebula small named 30 Doradus which is in a small neighboring galaxy 166,000 light years away. A light year is the distance that light can travel in a year's time—and light travels at 186,000 miles a second. I can't even calculate how far away that is. But the Psalmist said that God's thoughts are as far removed and far above our own thoughts as the distant galaxies are above the earth.

We know that God is omniscient—that means He possess total knowledge. In his book The Knowledge of the Holy, A. W. Tozer points out that means God is unable or incapable of learning anything. He has never learned and cannot learn. "Could God at any time or in any manner receive into His mind knowledge that He did not possess and had not possessed from eternity, He would be imperfect and less than Himself. To think of a God who must sit at the feet of a teacher, even though that teacher be an archangel or a seraph, is to think of someone other than the Most High God, maker of heaven and earth," said Tozer.

To continue with Tozer's observations: "He knows all that can be known. And this He knows instantly and with a fullness of perfection that includes every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn. God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters…. Because God knows all things perfectly… He can never discover anything. He is never surprised, never amazed…."

But according to Psalm 139, His thought are not only profound, they are personal. They are not only infinite, but intimate. And the Psalmist was absolutely overwhelmed when he realized that the Eternal, Almighty Jehovah whose thoughts are higher than the heavens and whose knowledge was omniscient—this Jehovah thought of him with thoughts too precious and too numberless to count.

Psalm 139:17 says: How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.

Have you ever fallen in love with someone and for awhile you could think of no one else or of nothing else? That person was on your mind all the time. You had a little obsession?

Well, that's the way God is about you! He is obsessed (so to speak) with you. He loves you and cares for you and thinks about you with precious thoughts too numberless to count. As the old Scottish rendition of Psalm 139 puts it:

> How precious are Thy thoughts of peace,
> O God, to me! How great the sum!
> New every morn, they never cease:
> They were, they are, and yet shall come,
> In number and in compass more
> Than ocean's sands or ocean's shore.

I'd like to illustrate all this through the lives of two people. The first is a deacon at an Assembly of God church. His name is Stanley Praimnath, who lives on Long Island. Last week, on September 11, 2001, he got up early, took a shower, had his prayer time, and for some reason, he felt led to spend some extra time in prayer. He said, "Lord, cover me and all my loved ones under your precious blood." He prayed that over and over with deep feelings. Then he took the train to Manhattan and arrived at the World Trade Center Tower Two where he took the elevator up to his office on the 81st floor. He was a vice president for the Fuji Bank Limited, which occupied floors number 79 through 81.

He went to his desk, picked up his phone, and started retrieving his messages. As he did so, he glanced out the window at the other tower. Suddenly he saw balls of fire erupting from that building. He ran from his office and took the elevator down to the 78th floor where he and his fellow employees headed down to the concourse level. But a security guard stopped them and asked them where they were going. Stanley told him about the fire in Tower One. The guard replied, "Oh, that was just an accident. Tower Two is secured. Go back to your office. The group turned around and went back upstairs. And Stanley returned to his office on the 81st floor. A friend called to see if he was all right, and as he talked on the phone and looked out the window, he saw a passenger jet heading straight for him. It was bearing down on him, and it seemed to be happening in slow motion. He threw down the phone and cried, "Lord, you take control. I can't help myself here." He dove under his desk, and the last thing he saw was his New Testament on top of his desk. As he saw it, he had a strong impression that God was thinking of him personally and was going to take care of him. He curled into a fetal position and heard the building explode around him. When he lifted his head, he saw a smoldering portion of a airplane wing in the doorway.

He knew he needed to get out of there fast, but he was trapped under the debris. He cried out, “Lord, you take control. This is your problem now.” And somehow the adrenaline and strength surged through him, and he was able to push his way out the debris. He later said, "I don't know where I got this power from, but the good Lord, He gave me so much power and strength in my body that I was able to shake everything off. I felt like I was the strongest man alive."

But the walls were collapsing around him, and the smoke was blinding. He said, “Lord, help me make it out of this,” and suddenly he saw the beam of a flashlight. For a moment it stunned him, and he wondered where someone would get a flashlight on that 81st floor. But as he tried to follow the light, he found himself trapped with the exits blocked and a wall between him and the staircase. It was becoming impossible to breathe, and he just fell on his knees and said, “Lord, you’ve got to help me. You’ve brought me this far, help me get to the staircase.” And then Stanley did something unusual. While there on his knees, he shouted to the man on the other side of the wall, “Do you know Jesus?” The man said, “I go to church every Sunday.” The two men prayed together, asking God to enable them to break through that wall. And Stanley felt another surge of strength. He jumped to feet, looked at the wall, and said, “You’re going to be no match for me and my Lord.” And together with the Lord’s help, the two men managed to punch enough of a hole in the wall for Stanley to crawl through. The two men embraced and even kissed each other, then headed for the stairwell.

When they finally made it down the 81 flights of stairs, only fire fighters were there, shouting, “Run! Run! Run!” The concourse was surrounded by fire, so they wet themselves under the building’s sprinkler system, and ran to safety to Trinity Church, about two blocks away. Just as he got to the gate of the church, Tower Two collapsed. When Stanley finally made it home, he hugged his wife and two children and they cried and prayed and thanked God for sparing his life, and Stanley told God that whatever he did from that moment on would be for His glory.

Now, do you think this man believes Psalm 139:17: How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.

But what about those who didn’t survive last week’s tragedies? Was God thinking of them, too? Or did he forget them. Well, did you hear the story of Todd Beamer? He was on United Flight 93 when it was high-jacked. He picked up the air-phone and got the GTE operator. He told her what was happening and that the crew of the plane was likely dead. He told her that he knew he wasn’t going to make it out of this. He then asked the operator to say the Lord’s Prayer with him, and the two prayed together on the phone. Todd then prayed and specifically asked Jesus to help him. Then he gave the operator his wife’s name and phone number and asked that she call her and tell her he loved her. Then he told the operator that he and some of the other men on the plane were going to attack the high-jackers. The last thing the operator heard was Todd speaking to the other men on the plane. He said, “Are you ready? Let’s roll.” After that, she heard some screams and some commotion. She stayed on the line for 10 more minutes until the flight went down.

Larry King, on his interview show, asked Todd’s widow if she was surprised that Todd prayed with the GTE operator. She replied, “Not at all. Todd, like I said, was a man of faith. He knew this life was not all there is, and this life was just here to prepare him for his eternity in Heaven with God and with Jesus. And Todd made sure every day that he did his best. He wasn't perfect, and neither am I. But he did his best to make sure that he was living a life that was pleasing to God and that would help him know God better, and he acted on that all the way to the end, and I'm so proud.”

God has His people everywhere. He has heroes everywhere. He sometimes puts them in harms way, but He knows what He is doing and He has a plan for them, and for us—and He is constantly thinking about them.

And He is thinking of you all the time.

He was especially thinking of you on the cross. I believe when Jesus died on the cross, somehow during those never-to-be-repeated three hours of darkness, the names and faces and lives of every person came into his heart and mind. You are so important to Christ that had you been the only person on the face of the earth, He would have given His life and died on the cross for you.

Well, what exactly does God think when He thinks of you? What are His thoughts? We can know them, for He reveals them to us in the Scripture. Recently I came across a piece called “Father’s Love Letter,” written from various Scripture passages that were compiled by a man named Barry Adams. I asked him for permission to read it to you, and I’d like to read it; I’ll omit the Scripture references, but they will appear on the screen behind me. This is what God thinks of you:

My Child…

> You may not know me, but I know everything about you…Psalm 139:1
> I know when you sit down and when you rise up…Psalm 139:2

I am familiar with all your ways…Psalm 139:3
Even the very hairs on your head are numbered…Matthew 10:29-31
For you were made in my image…Genesis 1:27
In me you live and move and have your being…Acts 17:28
For you are my offspring…Acts 17:28
I knew you even before you were conceived…Jeremiah 1:4-5
I chose you when I planned creation…Ephesians 1:11-12
You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book…Psalm 139:15-16
I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live…Acts 17:26
You are fearfully and wonderfully made…Psalm 139:14
I knit you together in your mother's womb…Psalm 139:13
And brought you forth on the day you were born…Psalm 71:6
I have been misrepresented by those who don't know me…John 8:41-44
I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expression of love…1 John 4:16
And it is my desire to lavish my love on you…1 John 3:1
Simply because you are my child and I am your father…1 John 3:1
I offer you more than your earthly father ever could…Matthew 7:11
For I am the perfect father…Matthew 5:48
Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand…James 1:17
For I am your provider and I meet all your needs…Matthew 6:31-33
My plan for your future has always been filled with hope…Jeremiah 29:11
Because I love you with an everlasting love…Jeremiah 31:3
My thoughts toward you are countless as the sand on the seashore…Psalm 139:17-18
And I rejoice over you with singing…Zephaniah 3:17
I will never stop doing good to you…Jeremiah 32:40
For you are my treasured possession…Exodus 19:5
I desire to establish you with all my heart and all my soul…Jeremiah 32:41
And I want to show you great and marvelous things…Jeremiah 33:3
If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me…Deuteronomy 4:29
Delight in me and I will give you the desires of your heart…Psalm 37:4
For it is I who gave you those desires…Philippians 2:13
I am able to do more for you than you could possibly imagine…Ephesians 3:20
For I am your greatest encourager…2 Thessalonians 2:16-17
I am also the Father who comforts you in all your troubles…2 Corinthians 1:3-4
When you are brokenhearted, I am close to you…Psalm 34:18
As a shepherd carries a lamb, I have carried you close to my heart…Isaiah 40:11
One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes…Revelation 21:3-4
And I'll take away all the pain you have suffered on this earth…Revelation 21:3-4
I am your Father, and I love you even as I love my son, Jesus…John 17:23
For in Jesus, my love for you is revealed…John 17:26
He is the exact representation of my being…Hebrews 1:3
He came to demonstrate that I am for you, not against you…Romans 8:31
And to tell you that I am not counting your sins…2 Corinthians 5:18-19
Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled…2 Corinthians 5:18-19
His death was the ultimate expression of my love for you…1 John 4:10
I gave up everything I loved that I might gain your love…Romans 8:31-32
If you receive the gift of my son Jesus, you receive me…1 John 2:23
And nothing will ever separate you from my love again…Romans 8:38-39
Come home and I'll throw the biggest party heaven has ever seen…Luke 15:7
I have always been Father, and will always be Father…Ephesians 3:14-15
My question is…Will you be my child?…John 1:12-13
I am waiting for you…Luke 15:11-32
Love, Your Dad. Almighty God

Well, will you? Why not come to Christ today and let Him embrace you in the fullness of His love. He is thinking of you right now.

What Happens When We Die

Matthew 28:5-6; Ecclesiastes 3:11; Psalm 144:4

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