

A landscape photograph of a field with trees and a wind turbine, overlaid with a white rectangular frame containing text. The image has a warm, orange-to-yellow color gradient. The text is white and reads "summer in the PSALMS".

summer in the  
**PSALMS**

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# How to use this guide

Review the context and big picture every week – The goal of a book study is not just to learn each individual lesson, but to build understanding of the Bible, how it fits together, and how to study it.

Try not to use this guide as a script. The purpose of this material isn't to give you exactly what to say. Rather it is to give you the content you need to structure and develop your own lessons. Teach as much as you feel is important for your class. Feel free to go off topic if your own study leads you to approach the passage in a slightly different direction.

Don't feel like you have to cover everything. There is a lot of material in each lesson. Some classes like to cover a lot of ground. Other classes like to camp on one point and drill deep. Start by teaching the Main Point, then teach the Main Bullet Points. Use the extra detail and discussion questions as you see fit. The goal is to generate discussion, specifically regarding life-application. So don't worry if you don't get all the way through a lesson.

# Introduction to Psalms

Where Psalms fits in the Bible: Psalms is a book found in the Old Testament. It is classified as one of the Writings. Here is where to find it in the road map of the Bible:

- The Bible is broken into 2 groups: Old and New Testament
  - o Old Testament is written primarily in Hebrew and is about God's choice of the people of Israel
  - o New Testament is written in Greek and is about Jesus and the Church
  - o Psalms is in the Old Testament
- Old Testament is broken down into 4 groups:
  - o Law, History, Writings, Prophets.
- One of the biggest obstacles to reading and navigating the Old Testament —is not understanding this 4-fold division. Take out your Bible, open to the Table of Contents and label the Old Testament books in these groups.
  - o Law – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. (Also Called the Torah, Pentateuch, and the 5 Books of Moses)
  - o History – Joshua through Esther. These books tell the story of the formation, division, collapse, exile, and restoration of the nation of Israel. (See below Old Testament history for more on this.)
  - o Writing – Job through Song of Songs. Proverbs - These books are a collection of wisdom literature; Psalms - Worship Songs; Job and Ecclesiastes – Philosophy; and Song of Songs - Love Poetry.
  - o Prophets – The rest of the OT contains the writings of the prophets. They are divided into two groups: Major and Minor Prophets. This had nothing to do with the importance of each work. It has mainly to do with length. The Major Prophets wrote longer works.
    - Major Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (We include Lamentations, which was written by Jeremiah, in the list of the Major Prophets; however, in the Hebrew Bible, it is listed in the writings with Proverbs, Psalms, and etc.)
    - Minor Prophets – Hosea through Malachi
- Old Testament History in a Nutshell – In order to understand any book of the Old Testament, you need to have a basic understanding of where it fits in the scope of Old Testament history. By placing it in context, you will be able to have a greater appreciation for what is going on.
  - o Patriarchs – the story of God calling Abraham and working in the lives of his children. Contained in the Book of Genesis.
  - o Slavery/Exodus – The story of how God brought Israel out of Egypt, led them through the wilderness and to the Promised Land. Contained in Exodus-Deuteronomy.
  - o Conquest – The story of how the people of Israel entered the Promised Land, conquered the other people living there, and established an early system of rule. Contained in Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and 1 Samuel.
  - o United Kingdom – In 1 Samuel, Israel demands a king so God gives them Saul. The 12 tribes of Israel are only united as one nation for the reigns of 3 kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. Contained in 1 Samuel.
  - o Divided Kingdom – After the excesses of Solomon, the 10 northern tribes of Israel rebelled, broke away, and started their own nation. From this point on, the term Israel refers to the 10 northern tribes. Judah refers to the nation composed of the 2 remaining tribes: Judah and Benjamin. Contained in 2 Samuel, I & II Kings, and I & II Chronicles.
  - o Exile/Return – Both nations became wicked and were judged by God. Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC and were absorbed into their empire. They reappear as the Samaritans in the New Testament. The nation of Judah lasted until around 600 BC when it was also conquered

this time by the Babylonians, who transported many of them to Babylon (modern day Iraq). There they remained in exile for about 70 years before being allowed to return and rebuilt the city and the temple. Contained in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther.

o For more, watch the intro to this sermon on Ruth (starting at about the 4:00 mark): <https://vimeo.com/136524262>

- Where Psalms Fits in Old Testament History – Psalms is Israel's hymnal. It is a collection of poems and worship songs from throughout Israel's history. There are songs that refer to the time of Moses, to the judges, to the kings, and to the exile.
- The Organization of Psalms – The book of Psalms is divided into 5 books. We do not know when they were divided into books or why. The division is not based on chronology, theme, or any other discernable organizational principle.
  - o Book 1: 1-41
  - o Book 2: 42-72
  - o Book 3:73-89
  - o Book 4: 90-106
  - o Book 5:107-150
- The Purpose of the Book of Psalms – The purpose of the Psalms is to remind us that worship is at the center of everything. Many people like to talk about God in the 3rd person. The Psalms remind us to talk to God directly. It is full of all the praise, worship, adoration, repentance, frustration, confusion, longing, and whatever else people felt comfortable pouring out of their heart to God.
- Who Wrote It – There is no single author for the Psalms. David is listed as the author of 73 psalms. A man named Asaph wrote 12 psalms. The sons of Korah composed 11 psalms. Other psalms were written by Solomon, Heman the Ezrahite, Ethan the Ezrahite, and even Moses (Psalm 90). But many are anonymous. Many people think that Ezra or some other Jewish leader compiled the Psalms into their existing order during the period after the exile.
- Fun fact – There are some books that people always mispronounce by making it plural when it should be singular or vice versa. One notorious example is the book of Revelation. It is singular. One revelation. But still, many people make it plural and call it "Revelations," to the chagrin of professors and Bible teachers across the globe. The good news is that this mistake is impossible with Psalms. The word Psalm simply means song. Since each individual chapter is a separate song. It is perfectly acceptable to refer to it in the singular: Psalm 23. But since the whole book together is called Psalms, it is also okay to use the plural: Psalms 23.

# Psalm 1: Finding the Blessed Life

Psalm 1: If you walk through any bookstore and do a basic computer search, or if you listen to the radio or a podcast, you will find that we are all searching for keys to how we can live our best life possible. Answers abound ranging from the right job, diet, vacation, partner, hobbies, etc. We are simply overwhelmed by all the possible choices. Our lives are characterized by making a choice of one of these paths, try them for a little while, then either we don't see results or we lose patience, and then we move on to a new track.

I could tell you I know of a path that would guarantee you a life of fruitfulness and fulfillment. I may even sneak in the word prosperity, but you would dismiss what follows as “huckerism” or you would say I'm angling to become a TV preacher. However, that is precisely where the book of Psalm starts, it begins with the staggering claim that such a life awaits the blessed man. Keep reading if you have always wondered what makes a man blessed.

## Verse 1: The Blessed Man Rejects

The description of blessed man starts with the negative. Though it might seem odd, it makes sense when you think about it. If you want to find the right path, the first step is getting off the wrong one. Psalm 1:1 starts by telling us three things that the blessed man does not do.

1. Walk in the counsel of the wicked
2. Stand in the path of sinners
3. Sit in the seat of scoffers

The list above describes ways people depart from God. Psalm 1:1 tells us pursuing blessedness starts with rejecting all three.

- o Rejecting Bad Ideas: “Counsel of the wicked” – The counsel of the wicked refers to who you listen to. Ask yourself, who do you allow as voices in your life? Who do you consider as experts, mentors, and role models? The voices you listen to shapes the way you think. Blessedness begins with identifying the negative voices and learning to leave them behind.
- o Rejecting Bad Actions: “Path of sinners” – Wrong thinking leads to a wrong action. If you listen to evil counsel, you will walk into evil paths. The voices you listen to will ultimately become the people you follow.
- o Rejecting Bad Company: “Seat of scoffers” – This path starts with wrong thoughts, the next step is wrong behavior, which ultimately ends up in a wrong community. Who you listen to becomes who you follow, who you follow becomes who you identify with, and who you identify with becomes who you are.

## Verse 2: The Blessed Man Delights

You would not intentionally choose an evil role model. You will not know for a fact which role model will lead you astray. Psalm 1 does not give a checklist of wicked people, actions, or ideas to stay away from. However, it does say that the easiest way to know what to avoid is to focus on the source of blessedness. The blessed man delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night.

- o Guided by God's Word: The law of the Lord is not just a reference to the commandments of God, or to the laws given to Moses at Sinai. The literal meaning is instruction or guidance of God and therefore refers to all of scripture. The blessed man knows he doesn't have all the answers, he knows God is the source of life and joy and he is eager to be guided by God.
- o Consumed by God's Word: Most people associate commands and obedience with compulsion and slavery. While Psalm 1 associates the blessed man as one who delights in the law of the Lord. He is eager to learn what God commands and to obey it knowing that it is the path of life - this is a process we grow into. Commands forces us to do the things that will bring us joy in the long run. It's like exercising, to the out of shape it is unenjoyable but as we become healthier, we start enjoying what was once drudgery. The process starts with the art of obeying, as we do so, we learn that obedience brings life. The only way we will learn what God commands and be motivated to live it out is by filling ourselves with His word. This is why the Psalm says the blessed man meditates on it day and night. It is what consumes him, it is what he talks about, it is what his mind is always chewing on.

### Verse 3: The Blessed Man Described

The lives of those who learn to delight in and meditate on the word of God are compared to a tree planted by a river. The tree does not do anything except drink in the nourishment. If we will plant our lives next to the stream of God's word and focus on learning to drink deeply from it, this Psalm promises we will notice three results:

- o **Fruitful: "Brings forth its fruit in season"** – The word of God will make our lives fruitful. He created you for a reason and His desire for you is to grow into the fullest expression of who He created you to be. 'I would like to take a moment to focus on a three-letter word – "its." We tend to skip over this word while reading this passage. The tree brings forth "its" fruit in "its" season. God made us all different kinds of trees. We produce different kinds of fruits. We take different amounts of time to produce them. Our focus is not supposed to be on copying other people or comparing ourselves to someone else's timeline. Our focus is on drinking in the Word and trusting that God will produce the fruit in us that He desires when the time is right.
- o **Fulfilled: "Leaf does not wither"** – A withered leaf is a sign of disease or malnutrition. It is a sign of lack. Proof that something is missing. A life filled with the word of God will not know such lack. However, that does not mean we will never know hardship or difficulty. It means that in the midst of hardship, we will have what we need to endure.
- o **Effective: "In whatever he does, he prospers"** – This one is a bold promise, and there is no getting around it. When we become the people God intended for us to be, we will know what true prosperity looks like, to prosper means not getting all the success, money, and status you desire but achieving all that God has laid out for you to do.

### Verse 4-6: The Blessed Man Contrasted

In contrast to the blessed man who is rooted and prosperous, the wicked man is disconnected.

- o **Rootless: "Like chaff"** – Having no root in something larger than himself, he dries up and goes where the wind blows him.
- o **Defenseless: "Will not stand in the judgment"** – He has lived only for himself, so when he is called to account for his life choices he will not have a leg to stand on.
- o **People-less: "Nor in the assembly of the righteous"** – Because the wicked man lives only for himself, he is cut off from other people. He does not have a community to support him, he does not belong to anyone.
- o **Lifeless: "The way of the wicked will perish"** – Ultimately, the path of the wicked leads to destruction. Those who persist in following such path meet an obvious end.

## **APPLICATION**

1. Seek Happiness by Seeking God: True joy and fulfillment are found in God and in becoming who He created us to be. This Psalm invites us to commit ourselves to seeking God
2. Seek God by Studying His Word: Second, this Psalm encourages us to seek God by studying his Word. We read the Bible not to learn Bible facts or religious trivia. We read the Bible to see how God has revealed himself first to Israel (Old Testament) and through Jesus (New Testament). We read the Bible to see God clearly and to know Him more. In an age of shortcuts, quick fixes and instantaneous solutions, studying the Bible is often thought of as a difficult and pointless task. But the truth is that reading the Bible is the surest path to learning who God is and how to seek and serve Him.
3. Study God's Word by Just Doing it: People often ask about the best ways of studying the Bible. Some people start at the beginning then get bogged down in a book that they are getting nothing out of and give up. The truth is learning to study the Bible is a process. Like exercise, it takes time and the best advice is to do something, anything, and to just keep going. Read the Bible for yourself, but not by yourself. Have a community of people you can go to for help, advice, and encouragement. And above all, pray. Remember that you are reading the Bible to know God more. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you as you read. Ask Him to show you something about who He is and who you are. Expect to be encouraged, challenged, equipped, and nourished.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the link between thinking, doing, and belonging? How do they build on each other? How can this work for good and evil?
2. What does it mean to delight in the law of the lord and to meditate it day and night? How can we tell what consumes our thoughts? How can we learn to get our minds chewing on God's word?
3. What do the three promises of fruitfulness, fulfillment, and effectiveness mean? How are they sometimes misunderstood?
4. What does it mean that the wicked are disconnected? Who are they cut off from?



# Psalm 8: What is Man?

In September 1977, Nasa launched Voyager 1 to study the outer solar system. On February 14, 1990, after completing its primary mission and preparing to leave the solar system, NASA engineers turned its camera around and took a final picture of earth from a distance of almost 4 billion miles before it left the solar system for good. The picture is called “A Pale Blue dot” because that is all earth looks like from that distance.

The astronomer and writer, Carl Sagan, in a speech he gave at Cornell University in 1994, described the lesson he took from the picture:

*“If you look at it, you see a dot. That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever lived, lived out their lives. The aggregate of all our joys and sufferings, thousands of confident religions, ideologies and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilizations, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every hopeful child, every mother and father, every inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species, lived there on a mote of dust, suspended in a sunbeam. The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark.”*

Carl Sagan compared himself to the size of the universe and suddenly felt small. He was right. We are small. But he was only half right. There is more to the story than that. Sagan’s statement about insignificance was motivated by the tendency we all have to spend most of our time thinking more highly of ourselves and our abilities than we ought.

It is true, we are not as big or important as we think we are. But that does not mean our lives are meaningless. We ought to ask ourselves how we can possibly matter in a universe so vast. Psalm 8 attacks this question head on. It humbles us by making us consider our insignificance in the grand scheme of things. It then shows us that our significance is not found in who we are on our own, but who we are because of what God has done.

## Verse 1-2: Who God Is

The Psalmist does not just see the earth’s grandeur, he sees it for what it is - a revelation of the grandeur of God. There is a problem with the punctuation in the original Hebrew which makes these verses look different in various translations. The best translation is something like:

“Your splendor above the heavens is praised by infants and babes. You have established power because of your foes to make the enemy and the vengeful cease.” The point is that the power and majesty of God is so obvious in the universe, even a baby could see it.”

## Verse 3-4: Who Man Is

The Psalmist then moves from considering God to considering himself. When he looks at how big and powerful the world is, he realizes how big God (the heavens are a work of His finger), is but also how small man is. Against such grandeur, man shrinks to insignificance. Man alone in the universe is nothing. When considered against the backdrop of a universe so vast, it is impossible to think that anything we do matters at all. The Psalmist summarizes in two verses the exact sentiments of Carl Sagan. Fortunately, he doesn’t stop where Sagan did.

## Verse 5-8: Who Man is Because of God

I am so glad the Psalm doesn’t end in verse 4. Verse 5 begins with words of contrast “yet you.” Man, by himself is an insignificant animal on an insignificant planet orbiting an insignificant star on the outer edge of an insignificant galaxy. Nobody knows we are here. Nobody cares - “yet you.” Our significance is found not in who we are by ourselves, but in who God has made us to be. Verses 5-8 contain four sentences with God as the subject. They show us what God did for us. They show us the significance God bestows on us.

- o **God Gives Us Value: “You made him a little lower than God”** – According to a recent study, the chemicals in the human body are worth about \$3.50. As matter of fact, a human is not worth very much. But that is not all a man is. We, of all animals, are more than animals. God created us in His image and because of this a human life has value. He made us just a little lower than him. Other animals look down at the earth and their food and feel content; we look up to the heavens and see God. The reason is because He made us to be close to him.
- o **God Gives Us Honor: “You crowned him with glory and majesty”** – We look at the universe and see the glory and majesty of God. The Psalmist says that God has crowned us with the same majesty. When

we consider the universe, we see the greatness of God. If we would learn to look at man this way, we would be equally amazed at what man is able to do and how radically different God made him. Not that man is perfect or even good most of the time, but he is startlingly different and amazing.

- o **God Gives Us Work: “You make him to rule over the works of your hand”** – God made us in his image, He made us amazing, He also made us useful. It’s important to realize that we were made for meaningful labor. Genesis says God created man and put him in a garden that was evidently unfinished. Even before the fall, there was work to do to. This is a part of the image of God and the glory of God on us. He invites us to collaborate with Him.
- o **God Gives Us Responsibility: “You have put all things under his feet”** – God did not just give us work, He gave us responsibility. We are in charge - we have power to do great good or great evil. That is the basic story of human history. People using this power for both purposes. But since our power comes from God, we need to see ourselves as working for Him. We do not just have power and authority over the world, we have responsibility for it. We have to learn to exercise our authority as an act of stewardship.

## APPLICATION

1. See Yourself as God Does: You are neither the center of everything nor the pointless afterthought of a blind universe. You have glory, honor, significance, and a role to play in the world but you are not the source of any of it. Two verses from the New Testament help us manage a proper balance between these two extremes.
2. The Answer to Arrogance is Gratitude to God: To the self-centered side of all of us, Paul has this to say in 1 Corinthians 4:7, “For who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” Everything that you have, you got from somewhere else. Even everything you have earned by your own skill, hard work, and intelligence. You did not do anything to get the brain, brawn, or opportunities you have had in life. You may have been a good steward of what you have been given, but you were given a lot to start with. Therefore, see yourself as a steward, entrusted by God with everything you have, including your body. Glorify God with everything He has given you. Use it all well. But above all be grateful to God for it.
3. The Answer to Isolation is the Love of God: To the side of us that often feels alone and lost in the cosmos and in a sea of billions of people, Jesus himself says in Matthew 10: 29-31, “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.” God is not some disengaged and detached leader. He created this vast universe and He is acquainted with every detail about it. We can draw comfort from the fact that even when we feel most alone, God sees, God knows, God cares. We are not forgotten.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by the size of the universe? When? What were you doing? How did it make you feel?
2. Why do you think we tend to act more important than we are?
3. Have you ever felt insignificant in the overall scheme of things? When? Why? What helped you in those moments?
4. What does it mean that our value comes from God?
5. How can we learn to live in gratitude instead of arrogance? In the knowledge that God sees us instead of feeling abandoned and alone?

# Psalm 19: Declaring the Glory of God

This Psalm starts out by describing the glory of God in nature. The second half of the Psalm describes in detail the importance of the law of God. It seems like such an odd transition that some people do not see the connection, maybe even wondering if it is two different poems. But they are not. This Psalm is not about nature or the law. It is about God and how He speaks to us. The 18th-century Philosopher Immanuel Kant once said, “two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe - the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” We look at the world and see more than that. We see God. We also look within ourselves and see not just how we want to act; we see the law of God telling us how we “should” act. This Psalm combines those two things and shows us what we are supposed to do about it.

The reason these two things move us so much is that they are ways that God reveals himself to us. Through nature and the law, we hear God calling us. And we have a choice to make in how we respond.

## Verse 1- 6: God Revealed in Nature

All creation testifies to us that there is a God. It is a silent testimony to the greatness of God in creation, and the wisdom of God in putting everything where it belongs, and the love of God in assigning to each a task in which He can take joy.

- o A Silent Witness – Day and Night “pour forth speech” yet “there is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard.” The testimony of the heavens is speech without speaking. It is ideas without words. It might seem contradictory, but the point is that it will not intrude on us. It is not like a person shouting to get our attention. God often speaks in quiet whispers. If you do not pay attention, you will miss it. But if you look, if you take notice, you will see the glory of God. Paul says in Romans 1:20, “for his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuses.” If you are looking, you will find proof in nature of the greatness of God.
- o Everything Where It Belongs – The focus of the next section is on the sun. There are two things to notice about it. It has a job to do: “Nothing is hidden from its heat.” And also, it takes joy in doing what it was made to do: “it rejoices like a strong man to run his course.” This also reveals God to us. He creates everything for a purpose and puts each part of His creation where it can do the good it was made to do and where it can take joy in being who it was made to be.

## Verse 7-13: God Revealed in his Word

The one thing that seems unable to find its place and take joy in it is man. That is why the Psalm moves from nature to the word. There is something wrong with man. We are broken and rebellious. We need something more. We need the law of God to heal our brokenness and correct our rebellion. So the Psalms shifts abruptly to discussing the importance of the law of God. Like in Psalm 1, it is worth remembering that “the law of the Lord,” refers to more than just the commandments. It includes them but it is more generally a reference to the will and guidance of God as contained in scripture. The author proceeds in the next few verses to discuss the transformational potential in studying the Law.

- o **Verse 7, 8 - The Law Restores:** Restoring the Soul/Rejoicing the Heart – The law of God is not an arbitrary or external set of rules intended to ruin our lives. It is an owner’s manual written by the maker showing us how to operate the human machine properly. It might seem odd at first, but that is due to our own brokenness and rebellion. The goal of the law is restoration: restoring us to the purpose, fulfillment, and joy we were always made for.
- o **Verse 7, 8 - The Law Illuminates:** Making Wise the Simple/Enlightening the Eyes – Because of our sin, we are blind to the truth. The purpose of the law is to wake us up to the true nature of things. Intelligence does not produce wisdom. The law can take anyone and turn them into a wise person. Wisdom comes from hearing and believing the testimony of God about who we are and how we should live. Law does this by enlightening the eyes.

- o **Verse 11-13 - The Law Protects:** Through the law, God is able to protect us. When we go off course, it warns us (v11). It keeps us on the right path by rewarding us (v11). It shows us those areas of our lives where we keep messing up but do not see it (v12). It frees us from the domination and slavery to sin.

### Verse 12: God Revealed in Me

If that's where the Psalm ended, it would be enough. We have been shown the ways in which God tries to get our attention and guide us down the path we should go. But there is one final verse. It is perhaps the most important – the climax. In this verse, the Psalm asks for his own voice to be added to those things that declare the glory of God. The heavens declare, the law declares, now may my words and my thoughts also declare the glory of God.

The Psalmist desires not just what he says, but also what he thinks about to be pleasing to God. In Matthew 12:34, Jesus says “ For the mouth speaks from the overflow of the heart.” God cares about what we say because it reveals our heart. God hears our heart even when we hide it from others. The Psalmist desires to be pleasing to God not just in a surface way but deep down into the foundations of his soul. The reason for this is because he views God as his rock and redeemer. He knows that there is no stability or security in life apart from God. He also knows that in spite of how we all wander off and seek wrong things, God is our redeemer. He always seeks to draw us back to Himself and restore us to the place He always had for us.

### **APPLICATION**

1. **See God's Glory in Nature** – The Psalm starts with the greatness of God revealed in nature, but He does not end there. For some people, nature is all of God that they want to know. When the sun is shining and the world is beautiful, it feels good to attribute it to a creator. But people who stop here never hear the whole story. Maybe because we do not want to hear - hearing and seeing the glory of God in nature is not supposed to be an end to itself. It is supposed to awaken in us a desire to seek God more.
2. **Hear God's Voice in Scripture** – The next step in seeking God is to search for His voice revealed through scripture. The consistent message of the Psalms is that those who truly desire to find the God revealed in nature will discover the full revelation of what they are seeking in the pages of scripture. But even the pages of scripture themselves are not the endpoint. Those who think knowing scripture is the goal may become Bible scholars but they will never know true transformation. Thinking the Bible is the end is like studying maps without going on a trip or reading cookbooks but never making a meal. Studying scripture shows us who God is, what He has done, and what He desires us to do. If the truth of God only stays in the pages of scripture or between our ears but never makes it into our hands and feet, we fulfill the words of Paul in Romans 1:22, “claiming to be wise, they became fools.” James 1:23-24 paints a picture of what such people are like: 23 because if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like someone looking at his own face; 24 For he looks at himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of person he was.”
3. **Serve God in your own life** – The previous truth of nature and scripture are just dead ends unless it becomes real in our lives. As James 1:25 continues: “ but the one who looks intently into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer who works—this person will be blessed in what he does.” We are invited to seek and serve God, to conform our lives to his word, to please Him in all respects, and to trust that in doing so we will have our souls restored and we, like the sun, will find our place in His creation: a place of service and of joy.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What does it mean to hear the heavens declaring the glory of God? Have you ever heard it? When? Where? What did it show you?
2. What is the connection between nature and the law? How can we seek God in both?
3. How does the law restore and illuminate our lives?
4. How can we make our lives pleasing to God?
5. What does it mean to call God our rock and our redeemer?

# Psalm 23: The Good Shepherd

The best event at the rodeo has got to be Mutton Bustin'. Who doesn't love little kids riding sheep like they are bucking broncos? What is interesting is how to get the sheep to run like crazy. As if a small child clinging to their backs was not enough. Bulls buck because of a leather strap wrapped around their waste. Broncos buck because the cowboy is spurring them in the shoulders. But a sheep runs to go be with another sheep. Normally a cowboy stands at the center of the ring holding a sheep. When the gate opens, the sheep with the kid on its back see the other sheep and runs to stand near it. Sheep are odd animals, they are weak and fragile, they are needy and nervous, and they are problematic and difficult - that is exactly how the Bible describes us. Later in Psalm 100:3, the Psalmist writes: "acknowledge that the Lord is God. He made us, and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." The good news is that God knows what we need and desires to be that for us. Later in the New Testament, in John 10:11, Jesus will tell his followers, "I am the good shepherd." But before Jesus said those words, we had Psalm 23, a psalm of praise to God for the way in which he shepherds his people. As we look closer at this Psalm, look for the way it describes attributes of God we can rely on when we are feeling our most sheepish.

## Verse 1-3a: The Good Shepherd Provides

Because God is a good shepherd He will make sure we have what we need. We will not experience lack. We will not lack nourishment (green pastures). We will not lack rest (He leads me beside quiet waters). We will not lack restoration (He restores my soul). He does this because He knows our nature and knows our needs. Jesus will say something similar to his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:31-33: "31 So don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.

And again, in the next chapter, Matthew 7:11 "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him." We can be free from anxiety because we have a good shepherd who knows our needs and knows how to take care of us.

## Verse 3b: The Good Shepherd Leads

The Good shepherd does not just feed the sheep, He leads them where they need to go. We are never lost - we are never alone. At times the path we are on may be hard or look scary. But we can draw confidence in the fact that He goes before us (He guides me) and He goes with us (for you are with me). These truths are repeated through the Bible. In Hebrews 4:15, Jesus is compared to a high priest who can help us because he went through everything we must go through. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin." Because of that, He can come to the aid of those who seek him. In Hebrews 13:5, God promises "I will never lead or abandon you."

## Verse 4: The Good Shepherd Protects

Slow and tasty, sheep are easy targets for predators. It is therefore important that the shepherd protect his sheep. In 1 Samuel 17:34-37, we learn that David became proficient with a sling by defending his father's sheep from lions and bears. In the same way, the good shepherd protects His sheep. The Psalmist refers to two instruments of protection: "Your rod and Your staff they comfort me." The rod was a bat used to ward off attackers. The staff was a typical shepherd crook used to round up sheep, and discipline unruly ones. God promises to protect us from outside attacks and from ourselves. When he disciplines us, which He occasionally must do, He does so out of a desire to protect us from harming ourselves or others. Hebrews 12:7, 11 says: 7 Endure suffering as discipline: God is dealing with you as sons. For what son is there that a father does not discipline? 11 No discipline seems enjoyable at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

## Verse 5-6: The Good Shepherd Blesses

The final series of images in this Psalm drop the shepherd metaphor but continue the theme of a God who acts like a shepherd. The final verses paint the picture of a God who does more than protect or feed, he blesses. Maybe the shepherd image is dropped because in real life shepherds nourish, guide, and protect sheep so that they can shear and eat them. No shepherd really tries to bless his sheep. But our good shepherd does.

- o Verse 5a - He blesses us with victory: (He prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies) This is a victory celebration. Paul says in Romans 8:37 that in Christ we are “more than conquerors.” The resurrection of Jesus is proof that evil will not have the last word. As Revelation 1:18 says, Jesus has “the keys of death and Hades.” Death is swallowed up in life.
- o Verse 5b - He blesses us with honor: (You have anointed my head with oil) Anointing with oil was a symbol of respect. Just as we saw in Psalm 8 how God bestows glory on us, here too we see God bestowing honor on us. We may act like sheep, but we are not “just” sheep to him. God is not constantly rubbing our noses in our inadequacies or failures. He treats us like the father treats the prodigal son in the parable in Luke 15:22-24 – 22 “But the father told his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let’s celebrate with a feast, 24 because this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ So they began to celebrate.” We are not our weakness or our failure. We are who God says we are. And he crowns us with honor and anoints our heads with oil.
- o Verse 6 - He blesses us with devotion: The Psalm concludes with the promise that God will never abandon us. (mercy and lovingkindness will follow) Both words refer to the loyalty and devotion God has for His children. Even when they forsake He does not forsake them. He is, as the English Poet Frances Thompson once called him, the great “Hound of Heaven” pursuing us even when we flee from Him. God’s devotion will follow us all the days of our lives. He will never give up pursuing us. Our sin and selfishness cannot exhaust God’s mercy or weary His devotion.

## **APPLICATION**

1. Knowing Leads to Trusting: None of us follow perfectly. As Isaiah 53:6 says, “We all went astray like sheep, we all have turned to our own way.” We do this because we think we know what will make us happy. And once we wander off course and get lost, we think that we will be in trouble so we stay gone longer than we want. But the more we know about the character of the Good Shepherd, the more we will trust Him. Trust that His ways are best. Trust that He loves us. Trust that even when we wander, He wants us to come home.
2. Trusting Leads to Following: The more we trust, the better we will follow. Following is another word for obedience. In the words of the old hymn, “trust and obey, for there is no other way to be happy in Jesus, than to trust and obey.”
3. Following Leads to Knowing: The more we follow the Good Shepherd, the more we will know about Him. And the cycle will keep repeating itself. The more we know and trust and follow, the easier it will be to know, trust and follow. This three-step process goes by a single word - “faith.”

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. In what ways is calling people sheep a fitting analogy?
2. Which attribute of the Good Shepherd is most important to you right now? Why?
3. Which attribute is hardest for you to believe or accept? Why?
4. How might God protect us from ourselves? How is this a comfort?
5. What are your thoughts on God’s devotion to us? Can you think of other examples of God’s faithfulness and devotion?

# Psalm 73: Dealing with Doubt

“You just gotta have faith!” This phrase has been uttered by countless well-meaning people in response to genuine questions addressed to them. And it’s true; sometimes learning to trust is the key to getting through rough patches in our faith. But it is equally true that one of the ways to achieve a greater ability to rely on God is to have your sincere genuine questions answered.

Sometimes we don’t answer people’s questions because we feel like they are attacking what we believe. Sometimes we don’t have an answer because the question never occurred to us or we never thought it was that big a deal. Sometimes, we simply don’t know the answer.

This kind of avoidance has created a culture within the church where people don’t feel like they can ask questions about their faith and get meaningful answers. Instead of being eager to learn more about their faith, many people walk around feeling nervous or guilty when they hit upon a question that they need an answer to but can’t seem to find.

Many people feel that even simply to have questions about their faith is somehow wrong and a danger. I have had numerous encounters with people over coffee or a meal where they express concern that they are losing their faith. When I ask why, they tell me of some question they have that they can’t seem to get beyond. My answer is always the same. I tell them, “You aren’t losing your faith, you are gaining it.”

Christianity is an evidence giving religion. The Book of Acts is full of stories about early Christians going from place to place giving evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, arguing and defending belief, and answering people’s questions.

Getting answers to sincerely held questions is central to growing one’s faith. Faith isn’t a light switch that is either on or off. It is more like a muscle; it gets stronger the more you use it. All of us are somewhere between complete faith and complete doubt. Like the father in Mark 9:24, we cry out “I do believe; help my unbelief.”

Psalm 73 is a prime example of the importance of dealing with doubts. It should be noted that this isn’t a random congregant who is struggling with his faith. It is a teacher and leader. He recounts a time when his faith was put to the test and how he dealt with it. By looking at this Psalm, we gain a window into how to grow our faith by voicing our concerns and letting God answer.

## Share your story v1-2

This Psalm isn’t simply about doubt. It’s about having your doubt answered. It was written to show how the psalmist addressed his doubt and how God answered him. But it starts at the end. “God is good to Israel.” This is the conclusion the psalmist comes to by the end of the psalm. “But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.” This psalm is a story about how even leaders have doubts, concerns, and frustrations.

Before we look at the process the psalmist took to avoid the pitfalls of his faith, it is worth noting the importance of sharing the paths we have walked and the truth we have discovered after hard searching. Everyone has times when they think God is unfair, or being righteous is pointless, or your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling. These times become harder if we think we are alone and are the only ones to ever ask these questions or walk these paths. Sharing our stories gives people the confidence to ask their questions. It also shows them the paths we took to find answers. This psalm is a testimony of the importance of sharing our story for the purpose of helping others.



### Face Your Frustration v3-14

The psalmist then proceeds to reveal what was causing him problems: the prosperity of the wicked. He was beyond bewildered, and frustrated by the fact that righteousness didn't seem to matter. It was the wicked who were prosperous, healthy, and successful.

He spends almost 10 verses describing how successful and happy the wicked are before concluding in exasperation: "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. (v13)" He is angry that righteousness doesn't seem to have a reward. What was the point of being good if the wicked reap all the benefits and the righteous are "stricken all day long and chastened every morning. (v14)"

The psalmist's complaint might seem unfair or extreme but it won't do any good trying to censor yourself before God or moderate your complaint. Get it all out there. I saw a show on a nature channel one time about the sea cucumber, which has an amazing defense mechanism. When attacked, the sea cucumber can regurgitate its internal organs. The predator eats what it wants, then swims off. The sea cucumber then regrows its innards. It might sound oddly graphic, but it paints a picture of how God wants us to approach him. Psalm 63:8 says, "Trust in the Lord at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him." It's hard to deal with a problem that you are unwilling to put on the table. The psalmist lays it all out there, and because it's all out there, God can deal with it.

### Beware of Broadcasting v15

This psalm is a testimony of the importance of asking questions and seeking answers. But there is an area where we must be careful. Sometimes we can transform our doubt from the humble searching after truth into a stubborn arrogant refusal to be satisfied by any answer. That is when someone moves from having doubts to being a skeptic. A skeptic is someone who is a profession questioner of everything. Because he sees through everything, he ends up seeing nothing. The skeptic takes pleasure in making people uncomfortable and wrecking people's faith.

The psalmist says that though he has doubts, he hasn't become a skeptic: "If I had said, "I will speak thus,"

Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children (v15)." He isn't saying that it would've been wrong to speak about his doubts and ask his questions. He is saying that it would've been wrong for him to teach his doubts. If, based on the frustrations he had previously voiced, he would have been wrong to walk into the Temple and say, "Righteousness is pointless, go live however you want, you'll be better off."

We should heed his warning. We should always be free about voicing our doubts. We should also have doubts about our doubts. It is when we become certain about our doubts and start teaching them like they are facts that we get into trouble.

### The Role of Reason v16

The next step the psalmist takes is to use his reason and wrestle with it a while. Verse 16 says, "When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight." Though he ultimately realizes that reasoning won't get him the satisfying answer he is looking for, he does use his reason to sort through some of his problems.

This is an important stage in addressing your doubt. God gave us brains and he expects us to use them. We need to learn to think clearly and deeply about difficult issues. We also need to learn how to find the good answers other believers have discovered. Hebrews 12:1 says that "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." There is more than a chance, there is a strong likelihood, that the questions I am asking have been asked before. Discovering the answers other followers of Jesus have found can strengthen and deepen your faith.

But reason isn't the only thing. Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal once said that there are two dangerously extreme ditches we can fall into "To exclude reason; to admit nothing but reason." If there is a reasonable answer to what we are seeking, we should accept it. We need to realize that reason won't always satisfy our questions. That is what the psalmist says, even though he was reasoning within himself about his issue, still "it was troublesome" to him. When we find ourselves at the limits of our reason, we need to realize that it's okay to be, as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:8, "perplexed, but not despairing." There is more to life than reason. We have to learn, like the psalmist did, to take the next step.

### Worship Transforms v17-28

"Until I came into the sanctuary of God, then I perceived... (v17)" Despite his voicing his concerns and wrestling with them, the psalmist was still stuck. The transformation happened when he goes to the Temple to worship. When we take the focus off ourselves, or other people or our problems and place the focus on God, all other things find their proper place and significance. Like a wheel with spokes, the key to getting everything in place is to make sure all the spokes are connected to the hub. Once that happens, they all line up with each other. Worship helps us understand our reality better because it considers how all things find their proper place in relationship to who God is. The psalmist was jealous of others, frustrated with God, and regretful about himself until he started worshipping

God. Worship reframes the way we see God, ourselves, and others. The rest of the psalm contains the new perspective he gained while worshipping.

Worship gives us a new way of seeing:

- The End of the Wicked 18-20 –The first thing the psalmist saw was the destiny of the people he had been envying. We covet a person’s wealth, or freedom, or possessions, or health, but sometimes we fail to take their whole life, past, present, and future, into account. When we compare ourselves to others, we normally compare what it is going wrong with our lives with something that is going right in someone else’s. We wouldn’t want their whole life, good and bad, we want the good stuff in our life mixed with the good stuff of other people’s lives. But worship helped the psalmist see the lives of the wicked from God’s eternal perspective. He saw that their end was destruction. Not just that God would judge their sin, but also that their life ultimately ends in destroying itself. It is an empty and pointless life that leaves no mark when it is gone, “like a dream when one awakes.” Proverbs 24:1-2 says, “Do not be envious of evil men, nor desire to be with them; For their minds devise violence, and their lips talk of trouble.” Don’t envy the successes of evil people, in order to obtain that you would have to do what they did.
- The Effect of Envy v21-22 – The psalmist also realizes what envy has done to himself. Pierced, embittered, senseless, ignorant, this is what envy makes us. I’ve heard it described as drinking poison and expecting your enemy to get sick,
- The Goodness of God v23-28 – In the end, the psalmist realizes the profound goodness of God. He also realizes the nature of that goodness. Sometimes we want the goodness of God to be that He gives us whatever we want then leaves us alone to enjoy it. But verse 28 very succinctly defines what specifically the goodness of God is. “The nearness of God is my good.” The overwhelming goodness, joy, purpose, and fulfillment God has for us is not something that can be enjoyed apart from Him because it flows from Him. That is what John 15:5 means: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Back in Psalm 73, the verses preceding 28 describe how exactly God is near and what benefit we derive from it.
  - God Holds Us v23 – despite our jealousy and bitterness, God is still present with us. He promises never to leave us or forsake us. That means even when we are being difficult or stubborn, He never lets us go.
  - God Guides Us v24 – Not only is He with us, He guides us. He has a path marked out for us. He has a race for each of us to run. And He doesn’t let us wander aimlessly trying to find it. He counsels and guides us.
  - God Receives Us v24 – He is there at the beginning. He is there along the way. He will be there at the end. Drawing close to God now means staying close to God forever. That is what heaven really is. Heaven isn’t getting whatever you want as if it were a spiritual lottery or amusement park. Heaven is being near God always, and experiencing everything that living in the light of His presence means.

## Conclusion

The central truth of this psalm is found in v28: “the nearness of God is my good.” But the best conclusion to be drawn from the psalm is found in v26: “My flesh and my heart may fail,

But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Your mind may deceive you. Your body may fail you. You and I are not always good judges of what will bring us joy in the end. But God is ultimately utterly dependable. He will give you strength when yours fails you. He will provide you with an inheritance (portion) when it feels like you are destitute. So do what the psalmist says he did in v28: “I have made the Lord God my refuge.”

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are some bad ways we deal with doubt? How can we be better about helping each other overcome our doubt?
2. Have you ever felt tempted to envy evil people?
3. How does worship help reorient us?
4. What does it mean that God is “the strength of our heart and our portion forever?” How can we live this truth out?
5. What does it mean that “the nearness of God is our good?”

# Psalm 84: There and Back Again

Have you ever been somewhere that you had a hard time leaving? Maybe it was grandma's house as a kid. Or summer vacation. Sometimes the first day of school was exciting. Other times, I would sit in class thinking to myself, "I am at the farthest point from next summer." Perhaps it was an amazing vacation. We have all had those times when it's the last night of a truly magical trip and we are sitting there in a bitter sweet moment celebrating the joy we have experienced, but sad that we have to go back to the real world.

When it comes to vacations, most people are either beach or mountain people. Though I love the sound of the ocean, I am a mountain person. I love the cool air and I could sit next to a gurgling mountain stream all day. The road home is a hard one though. To be honest, I mope a little bit. The drive from Colorado to Texas is a long one. I am always a little silent on the first part of our drive. My wife knows what I am thinking, "Why can't we live there? Why can't I stay where it is cool and beautiful? Why do I have to go back to where it is hot and humid?"

Vacation might sound like an odd way to start a study on a psalm, but it's the closest many of us have felt to the sentiment expressed in Psalm 84. Instead of vacation, the psalmist is talking about a pilgrimage he has taken; instead of a mountain stream, he is talking about going to the temple of God.

Many of us don't think of worship as joy. Truth be told, a lot of the time we go to church with a vague sense of obligation. We feel like we are supposed to go but will use whatever excuse we can find not to go. If there is literally anything else that we could do instead, many times we find reasons to do it. We don't expect it to be transformative. We don't expect to be changed. Sometimes we excuse our unwillingness with statements like "God is everywhere" and "I don't have to go to church to worship God." Both true, but also a little bit of a copout.

Psalm 84 encourages us to re-center our lives on seeking God, and to learn to worship Him in everyday life by first worshipping Him corporately. It is told from the perspective of a pilgrim, who has come to Jerusalem during a festival, and now is contemplating the road home. He has met God in his temple and this encounter has transformed his whole life.

## V1-4 Longing to Stay

Sometimes this Psalm is read as an expression of a desire to be able to go to the temple. But it is actually a longing to remain in the presence of God. Look at verse 2. There are 3 verbs, the first two (longed, yearned) are past tense. The third verb (sing) is present tense. The psalmist is saying, "I had previously been very eager to come to the temple. Now I am here, and it is more amazing than I imagined."

- How Lovely v1 – The opening words are often misunderstood. "How lovely" sounds like charming, or quaint. But the phrase more accurately means "How beloved." The psalmist is saying, "Oh, how much I love this place. It is dear to my heart. It is important to me to be there."
- Longed/Yearned v2 – Because the psalmist loves the temple, he is eager to be there. He doesn't just go when it is convenient. In Hebrew, the words "longed" and "yearned" carry with them the ideas of "to crave" and "to exhaust." The psalmist has desired strongly to come to the temple. He has also worked very hard to be here. But it has been worth it.

- The Living God v2 – It is important to realize that the psalmist isn't focused on the temple but on the God who inhabits it. To focus only on the building would be either escapism – thinking you could run away from your situation (like we do on vacation) – or superstition, as if the place itself had power or magic. The psalmist is focused on not just being in a place, but meeting a person. He has come to meet the living God that promises to be present there.
- How Blessed v3-4 – The psalmist sees birds nesting in the porches and eaves of the temple. He imagines how amazing it would be to be like them and to remain there forever. He concludes this section with a blessing on those who are able to remain. It is time for him to go, but we wish he could stay.

### V5-8 Headed Back Home

He cannot stay, so he turns his face towards the road ahead of him which leads away from the temple. As he leaves, he thinks about what he is leaving and what is in front of him.

- How Blessed v5 – The Hebrew literally says, “in whose heart are the highways.” The psalmist realizes as he leaves that he isn't leaving the presence of God. His body is full of the strength of God. His mind is full of the remembrance of his time in the Temple.
- Valley of Baca v6 – The journey home leads through the valley of Baca, which has a couple of meanings. It could be a reference to a shrub that only lives in very dry conditions; or it could mean “weeping.” There is a chance that the author means both. The journey away from the temple can be sad as well as spiritually dry. In the midst of this dryness, the presence of God that has gone with him from the temple helps him to do two things: dig and look. “To make it a spring v6” – In many desert regions, there is water below the surface. All you need to transform a wilderness is to dig deep enough and make a spring. A follower of God is able to dig blessing out of harsh circumstances. Another thing that transforms deserts is rain, which represents the unlooked-for blessings of God. In the same way that God pours down rain on a desert, so too He pours his presence into our hearts if we will look for it. The follower of God digs for God's blessing and looks for God's unexpected external blessing. Through this, God turns the valley of weeping to the valley of blessing.
- Strength to Strength v7 – The phrase literally means “from stronghold to stronghold” and paints the picture of touring the fortifications of a walled city. The psalmist says that even while journeying with God in a desolate wilderness, he feels protected by God as if he were in a stronghold because he remembers the past faithfulness of God.

### 9-12 Longing to Go Back

The psalmist ended the previous section with “hear my prayer.” This next section contains the contents of that prayer.

- Look Upon the Face v9 – He desires for God to look on upon his face. He doesn't just mean, “Hey God, watch me.” He means, “I am looking to you, please look back.” Never, no matter where I am, never let me leave your attention. There is a Latin phrase that was common among medieval Christians: coram Deo. It means “before the face of God.” We are the object of divine attention. God looks to us with favor as we appeal to him. We can trust that He does hear our prayers.
- Better is One Day v10 – The psalmist appeals to go back to the house of the Lord. He values being in the manifest presence of the Lord so much that he is willing to risk everything to be there for the shortest amount of time (one day) and in the lowest possible way (stand on the threshold).
- How Blessed v11-12 – This psalm concludes with a statement of radical trust in God. He realizes that God hasn't prohibited him from coming and living in the temple because God hates him. God doesn't withhold

good things from his children. God has work for him to do, and in the midst of his service, God gives grace and glory. So the psalmist ends not with longing to stay in the temple, or a lament that he has to leave, but a declaration of confident trust in God.

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### **Application**

Gather for His Strength – God’s presence and activity are not confined to any one place, whether it be a temple or a church, or whatever, but God’s inspiration flows from the places where he is more obviously found. That is why gathering for corporate worship is important. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus told his disciples, “For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.” That is why in Hebrews 10:25, we are told not to forsake the assembly of believers. We need worship. It reboots our lives and keeps us pointed in the right direction and running on the right fuel.

Go in His Strength – Staying in the Temple isn’t an option. God has placed in front of us races that we need to run. We will only ever run them well if we run them in His strength. This is powerfully presented in the three beatitudes offered in this psalm. Three times, the psalmist calls someone “Blessed:” blessed are those who dwell in your House...ever praising you (v4); blessed is the man whose strength is in You (v5); blessed is the man who trusts in You (v12). A life of praise leads to a life of strength traveling the highways of life, and results in a life of confident trust in God no matter what.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever longed to be in God’s presence? Have you ever felt a lack of desire to go to God? How do you handle either?
2. How do dry or difficult seasons make you feel about yourself or towards God? How can we learn to dig for and look for God’s blessings in the midst of such times?
3. How can we learn to long for his presence in gathered worship and still believe He is with us wherever we go?
4. What does it mean to journey in life going “from strength to strength?”

# Psalm 95: A Call to Worship

Hypocrite. It is one of those words that is often used and more often used incorrectly.

People think that hypocrite means “someone who fails to keep a standard that they have set.” But of course, if that is true, we are all hypocrites. None of us is perfect. There are only two real options: to lower the standards, expectations, and even definitions of what is right so that they conforms to how we behave, which is the path the world has chosen; or to admit that there is an objective standard that we didn’t create and that we aren’t able to keep, which is the path of the church. That’s why when I overhear someone saying, “That church is full of a bunch of hypocrites,” my normal response is, “Come on and join ‘us, one more isn’t going to do much difference.”

Sometimes people think being a hypocrite means doing something you don’t want to do. We think that to pretend to like something when we really don’t is to act hypocritically. And I guess if it comes to matters of preference, then, yes, pretending to enjoy something that you find distasteful is dishonest and hypocritical.

But even in matters of preference, we understand that sometimes things don’t taste good the first time we try them. Ever said, or heard someone say, “It’s an acquired taste.” There are certain things that we learn to like over time. The question to ask is “why” are you trying to learn to like something. If it’s to impress or mislead others, then it’s wrong. But if it is because you believe something is good for you, then it’s actually a good thing to force yourself to do what you don’t want to do. Exercise is in this category. Someone who is out of shape will normally not find exercising pleasing at first. But over time, they will come to enjoy and even crave the thing they once hated.

For some reason, though, when we come to spiritual matters, we are less comfortable encouraging ourselves to do things we don’t feel like doing. When a person says, “I didn’t go to church today because my heart isn’t in it and I didn’t want to be a hypocrite.” We wouldn’t call someone hypocrite for going to the gym even they didn’t want to be there. We would encourage them by saying it’s worth it. In fact, you probably have the experience of not wanting to do something, like going to the gym, forcing yourself, then in the process or by the end being glad you had gone.

Spiritual matters are often like exercise. The things God commands us to do are for our good and are things that once we have been trained in righteousness, we will desire to do. This is the point of obedience. Doing what you are supposed to do, even when you don’t feel like it will ultimately help us “acquire a taste” for righteousness.

Worship is the same way. When you don’t feel like worshiping is the time you need to worship most. When we are being stubborn, selfish, stiff-necked, strong-willed, hard hearted people, the cure is to force ourselves to worship, to put the focus on God and see how He can change our hearts in the light of his presence.

Psalm 95 is an invitation to this kind of worship. It is a call to worship God with your whole self – heart, mind, strength – and in the midst of it, to meet God and be transformed by Him from the outside in.

## A Call to Worship 1-7a

The first half of this psalm is a Call to come worship God with two kinds of worship. The first section (v1-5) is a call to boisterous celebration of all that God has done. The second section (v6-7) is a call to reverent contemplation of who God is. It's interesting that multiple "modes" of worship are included. In our modern church, we tend towards worship services that make us comfortable. We use words like traditional, contemporary, charismatic, and conservative. We argue about which is the right way and get upset. But the truth is worship is supposed to stretch us. This psalm shows us that loud and quiet, joyful and reverent can stand side by side, need to stand side by side. We can't just worship how we want. We need to learn to worship God in all the ways He asks us to. Not because He needs or wants to be worshipped in a specific way, but because He knows what we need in order to enter fully into the life He has for us.

### Worship through Rejoicing (v1-5)

- Come On v 1 – The verb that starts this psalm "come" is more accurately translated "come on." It's an invitation to join a procession or parade of people on their way to the temple. They are dancing, singing, and boisterously celebrating the great things that God has done. It reminds us that worship isn't something we just do by ourselves. We are invited to worship together. But more than that, we are invited to come before the presence of God
- Come before His Presence v 2 – We are invited to meet him face to face. An objection is almost immediately apparent: but isn't God everywhere? Yes, this is a different point driven home by numerous other psalms like Psalm 139 which asks, "Where can I go from your presence?" The point of saying "come before his presence" is not about finding a place where God can see us. But rather getting to a place where we can see God. It is about the direction we are pointed in. God is always with you, always looking towards you. Coming before His presence is learning to look back at Him, to orient ourselves towards God.
- Let Us Shout v1-2 –The first mode of worship is described as singing for joy and shouting joyfully. We are invited to be loud before God. I can hear people object. I worship quietly within my own heart. I don't need all that jumping around and hand raising. People do have different levels of self-expression that they feel comfortable with. But we are being asked to go beyond our comfort zone. Why? We need to learn to praise him out loud, not just inside, to glorify God publicly, and with our whole being.
- Choose Joy "Shout Joyfully" v2 – We aren't just invited to shout, but to shout joyfully. Someone might respond, "I don't feel particularly joyful right now, do you know what is going on in my life?" But that is the point. Rarely in life are joy and sorrow not intermingled. In times of great joy, there is still sorrow or pain. But in times of pain, there are also reasons for joy. The goal isn't to pick which ever emotion happens to be dominant or in the majority and go with it. The point is to choose to focus on your reasons for joy, in every circumstance. No matter what the circumstance, find some small reason to be joyful and praise God for that. See if the joy doesn't grow.
- The Lord is a Great God v3-5 – The rest of this section ends with a series of verses declaring great things about God. To give us reasons to orient ourselves towards God and choose to focus on joy, the psalmist describes God as "a great King over all gods." This psalm isn't saying that there are a lot of gods and that our God happens to be the greatest of them, but that our God is stronger than everything people exalt as powerful. Humans have always been good at making idols out of power, or pleasure, or wealth. God rules over all because He made everything.

## Worship through Reverence

- Come In v6 – If the first “Come” in v1 was an invitation to “Come along,” this “come” means “Come inside.” The procession has made it to the temple, and it’s time to enter. The idea is that while the procession was a public and intended for onlookers, this worship is meant to be a family affair, no spectators, only worshipers are invited to participate. The worship inside moves from rejoicing to reverence.
- Get Low v6 – All three words for worship used in verse 6 refer to putting our bodies down on the ground. The word means more than just get down on one knee. It means to prostrate yourself on the ground. Perhaps you remember the old hymn that sang, “Let angels prostrate fall.” It means laying face down with your arms and legs stretched out. It was a sign of devotion, and dependence. While before we were invited to be loud before God, here we are encouraged to be quiet before God in awed prostration.
- Choose Humility – Earlier, we talked about choosing joy despite the sorrow. Here the choice is between humility and pride. Joy comes from choosing to see your circumstances in the light of God. Humility comes from choosing to see yourself in the light of God. It doesn’t come easy to us either. That is why we are given a physical act to do. We are bodies as well as spirits. What we do with our bodies can help guide our spirits into the right frame of mind. Hug someone, you find it easier to love them. Hit them, you will find it easier to hate. Kneel before God, and you will find it easier to humble yourself.
- The Lord is Our Shepherd v7 – The subject of the earlier joyful celebration was the relationship of God to the whole world. The focus of our reverent humility is the nature of our relationship to Him. He is our shepherd. We are the sheep that belong to him. This refers both to the loving devotion and care of a shepherd for his sheep as shown in Psalm 23. It also means that we are not equals with God, as Psalm 100 reveals: “Know that the LORD Himself is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.” God is our shepherd. That means we are sheep. Whatever we have, we have because of His devotion to us. Such thoughts should move us to humble ourselves in response.

## Worship Through Obedience v7-11

After a double call to worship God, the psalm ends with almost a warning. The first two sections encouraged worshipers to bring their bodies before God and bow low. The goal is that what we do with our bodies can transform us from the outside in. This final section reminds us to make sure we put our heart on the altar as well. If worship doesn’t lead us towards obedience it is pointless. You can go through all the motions of worship and still resist the tug of God on your heart. As Jesus said in Matthew 15:8-9, quoting Isaiah 29:13-14, “This people honors Me with their lips. But their heart is far away from me. But in vain do they worship Me.” This psalm ends with some things to avoid if we desire to keep our worship from being pointless.

- Don’t Delay Obedience “Today” v7 – The psalmist starts this final section with the word “Today.” Right now. This moment. We delay what we think is unimportant. But right now, is all that we ever have. The past is fixed and unalterable. The future is fuzzy and indeterminate. The present is where we live. Don’t put off your obedience until tomorrow. It will never get here.



- Don't Avoid God "If You Hear His Voice" v7 – Do you really want to hear God's voice? To hear means to obey. Are you willing to obey? If you want to hear what God says, then decide for yourself whether you feel like doing it, then you don't really want to hear God's voice. God speaks. His voice is loving, but it is also a voice of command. He calls us into relationship. He calls us to obedience.
- Don't Resist God– "Don't Harden Your Heart" v8 – When God calls you, there are only two options: Receive or Resist. The Biblical term for resisting God is "hardening your heart." You don't want to hear so you resist. Eventually you build up your tolerance to the voice of God to the point where you become deaf to it. He is still speaking. But you are incapable of hearing. It takes time for this to happen and it takes time to undo. Softening your heart begins when you receive God's word and start obeying it.
- Don't Test God v8-10 – The next few verses give a historical example of what happens when we harden our hearts and don't obey the voice of God. The story comes from Exodus 17:7, when the people of Israel thought they knew better than God what God should be doing. They had failed the first two points of this psalm. They couldn't focus on the joy of God's miraculous provision. They refused to submit to His wisdom as their shepherd. They ended up grumbling, complaining, and finding fault with God. That is what it means to "test God." Testing God doesn't mean wanting to obey but needing more information, or help, or grace to make sure you see clearly what God is calling you to. Testing God is refusing to budge unless God does everything you tell him to do.
- Don't Miss God's Blessing - "Enter into my rest" v11 – Though the last half of the psalm seems negative, it is important to realize the reason. God calls you to rejoice and to humble yourself to hear and obey, not because He wants to oppress you, but because he wants to bless you. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Obedience isn't the goal. Rest is the goal. Hebrews 4:9-11 says, "There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience."

The psalm ends with rest, because that is what God wishes to give those who follow Him. He calls us through worship into a life of following Him, a life that ends in fulfillment and rest.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever done something you didn't feel like doing and as you were doing it your attitude changed?
2. What type of worship do you feel most comfortable engaging in? What kind of worship is outside your comfort zone? How might God want to use it to stretch you?
3. Why is being joyful sometimes hard? How can we learn to choose joy in every circumstance?
4. What does it mean to be humble? How does worship help us be humble?
5. What does it mean to harden your heart? Have you ever experienced heart hardening? How can we keep our hearts soft?
6. What does it mean that God's end for us is rest? How can we be diligent to enter that rest?

# Psalm 103: A Call (To Yourself) to Worship

Have you ever known somebody who could find something to complain about anywhere? No matter what anyone ever does, it's never good enough. They always see the bad in everything. How do you get that way? How do you get out of that mindset?

We all find it hard to be positive from time to time. There seems to be so much bad in the world. Sometimes it's all you can see. Often the bad seems more real than the good. We make matters worse when we choose to dwell on it. What starts as a bad attitude over a bad event turns into a bad outlook and soon, we are negative people who have the ability to find the bad in anything.

There is an old Cherokee story called "The Wolves Within." A grandfather tells his grandson, "A fight going on inside me. It is a terrible fight between two wolves. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith." The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, "Which wolf wins?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

This story is a reminder that we all have the capacity for good and evil inside us. The choices we make about what to focus on in the world and in ourselves help shape the kind of person we become.

But suppose we find ourselves stuck in a negative rut. We can end up there after a series of unfortunate events. Sometimes, people have more negative dispositions. Whatever the cause, what is the solution? We don't want to be naïve people who close our eyes to the harsh facts of life. How do we keep from being overwhelmed by all the evil we see before us in the world and inside us in our soul?

The biblical answer is found in places like Colossians 3:2 – "Set your mind on things above." – or in Philippians 4:8 – "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things." We aren't supposed to pretend bad things don't exist. We also aren't supposed to dwell on them. Dwell on God and the good He is doing and we will see instances of Him doing it more.

That is where Psalm 103 comes in. It starts off with an invitation to praise God that the psalmist directs at himself: "Bless the Lord, O My Soul." We aren't told the context of this psalm, but one can imagine the circumstances that made it necessary. Perhaps the psalmist found himself overwhelmed by his sin and his circumstances. Perhaps he felt defeated by life and wondered if anything good was ever going to happen for him or if he was going to be stuck where he was for the rest of his life. It's a familiar story that we tell ourselves all too frequently. This psalm is a sermon directed at ourselves, telling ourselves to start focusing on God and the good He has done and is doing, to bless Him.

## Calling Yourself to Worship 1-2

- Bless the Lord v1 – The psalm starts with a call to worship God. The word translated in some English versions as "bless" is the word for worship. As was noted in Psalm 95, the Hebrew word for worship means to get low before God, to kneel, to humble yourself before Him. It is a physical as well as spiritual act.
- O my soul v1 – The psalmist reveals that his call isn't directed at a group of people, but himself. He is attempting to rouse himself from distraction and disappointment to praise God.

- All That Is Within Me v1 – Worship is an invitation to lay our whole self before God. The psalmist tells every part of him to praise God: body, mind, soul. Sometimes we think we must turn our minds off when we worship. Other times we forget to bring our bodies. Sometimes we don't bring our whole self when we worship. Other times we are thinking or feeling something that we are ashamed of or don't feel like we should say to God. Sometimes we have things in our hearts that we don't want God to mess with. Whatever the reason, the psalmist reminds us that worship doesn't work unless we bring our whole self. Psalm 62:8 reminds us: "Pour out your heart before Him." Whatever is in you, pour it out before Him. See if it isn't transformed in the light of his presence.
- Forget Not His Benefits v2 – The key to worshipping God when you don't feel like it is to remember. A person with amnesia has a hard time trusting people in the present. We often have spiritual amnesia. We forget what God has done, so we don't realize how much reason we have to worship and trust Him. The cure for spiritual amnesia is to remember. The rest of the Psalm is an invitation to remember different aspects of who God is and how He deals with people.

### Remember God's Plan v3-5

The first thing we are encouraged to remember is God's "benefits." God doesn't deal with us as we deserve. The psalmist lists several positive dealings that God has with us. This is more than a list. It is a sequence. It tells the story of God's plan of redemption. These are the steps He takes in rescuing us from sin. The first thing we are encouraged to remember is how great God's plan of redemption is in our lives.

- Pardons Your Iniquities v3 – The story starts with God forgiving our sins. What is sad is that for many people, that is all they think God does or wants to do in their lives. They think God pardons our sins then leaves us to figure out our lives from there. Others want God's blessing without God's forgiveness. The path of God's plan goes through forgiveness, but it doesn't stop there.
- Heals Your Diseases v3 – This doesn't mean that every disease is a result of sin (though the Bible does say that it sometimes is). Nor does it mean that every follower of God will be healed (though God does heal and many are). In context, what this means is that God doesn't just forgive your sin, He heals us of the effects of sin. It is a process that will be completed in glory. But God is in the process of rescuing us from the power and presence of sin in our lives.
- Redeems Your Life v4 – This passage makes clear what the previous statement hinted at: He is rescuing our lives from the pit our sin has put us in, a pit that we deserve to stay in. We aren't basically good people who occasionally do wrong. We are rebels against God. We are enslaved to sin. God doesn't leave us in chains. He redeems us, literally, buys us back, out of servitude to sin. Colossians 1:13-14 says. "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."
- Crowns You with Lovingkindness v4 – We have been restored to our places in God's kingdom. We aren't branded as rebels and forced to like second class citizens. He crowns our life with Lovingkindness, God's devotion and loyalty; and compassion, understanding, sympathy, positive emotion directed towards us.
- Satisfies You...With Good Things v5 – Sin didn't wreck God's plan or ruin our chances for a meaningful, fulfilled life. God isn't surprised or startled by our failures. His promise is that sin won't have the last word on things. That is the meaning of Romans 8:28, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." God will renew us and complete our lives.

### Remember God's Character

After considering God's plan, the psalmist reminds himself of attributes of God's character. So often we fall into problems and sin when we believe bad ideas about who God is. Reasons to trust and reasons to praise come when we take a moment to realize who God really is.

- God is Righteous v6 – It sounds like a churchy word. It just means that God loves right. It is mainly demonstrated by His desire to defend those who can't defend themselves (those who are oppressed). The psalmist emphasizes that God does righteous deeds, which means that God always does the right thing. In the midst of the difficult situations of life, we can trust that God is righteous; He comes to the aid of those who need it, and will do what is best in each situation.
- God is Personal v7 – It is easy to skip over verse 7, but it reveals an important aspect of God's nature. It says, "He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel." It shows us that God is more than some spiritual force. God is personal. He calls us into a relationship with Him. He discloses Himself to us and shows us how to live.
- God is Forgiving v8-12 – What follows is an extended passage about the forgiveness of God. It's longer because forgiveness is easy to misunderstand. Forgiveness doesn't mean God doesn't care about our sin. Forgiveness means that God has made a way for us to be free from our sin. Sin upsets God. God gets angry. But it's the anger of a parent upset at a child's failure. It is not God's dominant emotion and it doesn't last (v9). Compassion is caring that prevails over anger. His love and devotion prevails because it is vast as the heavens are above the earth (v11). He removes our sin "as far as the east is from the west (v12)."
- God is Compassionate v13-18 – The Psalmist next describes God's compassion on us. He is like a father who is devoted to us (v13). He knows we are weak and needy. He knows what He made us out of, He is mindful that we are "only dust. (v14)" Sometimes we think that God imposes unreasonable standards and treats us unfairly when we inevitably fail his impossible tests. But that is not true. He, more than anybody, knows that we are "only human." We are weak, frail and quickly fade away (v15- 16). God's devotion to us will never end. He will give us all the righteousness we need to experience the joy He intended for us (v17- 18).

#### Remember God's Position v19-22

The psalm started with the psalmist and expanded outward first to see God's plan of redemption, then to see God's character. It ends with a picture of God enthroned in heaven ruling over all his creation. The same God who calls us each by name and who rescues us from the wrecks we make of our little lives is the same God who has His "throne in the heavens" and "His sovereignty rules over all (v19)." So the psalmist once again calls himself to worship the Lord, but this time, He does it within the context of his role in God's creation. He sees the world for what it is: "the place of [God's] dominion (v22)." And in the end, he realizes who he really is: not alone or forsaken, or excluded, but a member in the great chorus of creation, full of angels, and armies, and "all the works of His. (v22)

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever found yourself in a persistently negative frame of mind? How can praising God help us to stop feeding the negative side of our soul?
2. Which of the things the Psalmist remembers about God do you most easily forget?
3. Have you ever felt that God was angry at you? How can we learn to trust in God's forgiveness?
4. Have you ever felt that God was impossible to please? How can we learn to trust in God's compassion?
5. How does seeing God as sovereign over all His creation move us to worship and trust Him?

# Psalm 127: God's Design for Work and Family

There is a tension in our lives between Home and Work. We struggle to keep them in balance. If we don't focus enough on work, we worry we will never achieve anything meaningful with our lives and we will never earn enough money to enjoy our lives or provide for our families. Conversely, if we don't focus on our family enough, we are left with spouses and children and friends who feel abandoned or alone, who look elsewhere for support, encouragement, direction, and guidance. Sometimes we feel like we must pick. Do we want a successful career or do we want a healthy family? Do we want to be career-oriented or family-oriented?

The good news is that we are not the first people to struggle with this. It is a perennial human question. The even better news is that in Psalm 127, we are given a window into how to approach work and home which reveal God's design for both.

Though it seems like the Psalm is made up of two disconnected sections, in reality they are actually two halves of a Psalm that is trying to show us the Biblical way of approaching work and family.

## Biblical View of Work v1 – Unless the Lord Builds the House...

We live in a world that says, "With enough hard work, anything is possible." I remember hearing a motivational speaker say something like "if your mind can conceive it, and your heart can believe it, then you can achieve it." So we work and work and work. And when we don't achieve the goals we set or don't reach the life we were shooting for, we beat ourselves up or look for new ways of motivating or pushing ourselves. Ultimately, we ended up exhausted, or depressed, or both,

It's important to realize that this is not a biblical approach to work.

Work isn't evil -- God calls us to work. God gives us meaningful work to do. Even before the Fall, God placed Adam and Eve in a garden and gave them work to do.

The Biblical view of work is that "unless the lord builds the house, those who labor, labor in vain," not that it is useless to work, but that it is useless to do work that God did not intend for you. If God doesn't intend something for you, you won't achieve it, no matter how hard you work.

God knows what He made us for and He has placed us where He wants us, both for His glory and our good. As Jesus said to Paul on the Damascus road, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads (Acts 26:14)." As Jesus told John in Revelation 3:7, "Write to the angel of the church in Philadelphia: "The Holy One, the True One, the One who has the key of David, who opens and no one will close, and closes and no one opens says..." If God wants a door open, you won't be able to close it. If God wants a door closed, you won't be able to keep it open no matter how hard you try.

How do I find the work God has for me? Well, the first, best thing is to get close to God.

Jesus told his followers in John 15:5, "I am the vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him produces much fruit, because you can do nothing without me."

In Psalm 32:8-9. God says, "I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel. Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding, that must be controlled with bit and bridle or else it will not come near you."

He will lead us no matter what. But we have a choice about how. He will either lead us like a father leads a child, or like a farmer leads a mule.

## Biblical View of Provision – He Gives...While They Sleep

In the same way that we live in a world that tells us there is no limit to what we can achieve if we just work hard enough, we also live in a world that bombards us with the myth of radical independence and self sufficiency. We are told it's up to us and only us to provide what we need. We see it as weakness to rely on others or to voice need. We think if we just work hard enough we won't have to ask for help.

This view has some truth to it. We aren't supposed to live mooching off the hard work of others. As Paul tells the Thessalonians in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "In fact, when we were with you, this is what we commanded you: 'If anyone isn't willing to work, he should not eat.'"

The Biblical View of provision is found in v 2: "he gives such things to his loved ones while they sleep." You aren't the source of everything. God is. And He desires for us to learn cheerful dependence on Him.

Jesus told his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, "Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more than food and the body more than clothing?... But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you (Matthew 6:25; 33)."

But that doesn't mean that we will never experience need. In fact, sometimes God moves us into periods of need so that we can learn the joy of dependence on Him and others, and so that others can have the blessing of being used by God to provide. In 2 Corinthians 8:13:15, Paul tells the Corinthians that sometimes God gives more to some, and less to others, not to show favoritism, but so that we all have the privilege of giving and receiving: "It is not that there should be relief for others and hardship for you, but it is a question of equality. At the present time your surplus is available for their need, so that their abundance may in turn meet your need, in order that there may be equality. As it is written: The person who had much did not have too much, and the person who had little did not have too little."

### Biblical View of Family – children are a gift

The third section of this psalm moves us from the world of work into the home. In the same way that we misunderstood our role in work, often times we don't see what the family is really for as well.

I remember the first time I heard the term "bedroom community." I had no idea what it meant. The person who explained it to me said, "It means that this is where people sleep, but the rest of life happens somewhere else." As I thought about it, I realized that many of us view our homes and families as bedroom communities. It's the place where we go to sleep and maybe eat a meal. But the rest of life, what many of us consider "our real life," happens someplace else.

For a lot of interesting cultural reasons – some intentional, some accidental – the home is no longer the center of people's lives. We spend less and less time there. So we have less and less in common with the other people who are there. And when we are there, we aren't even sure what to do, so we stare at screens or find other ways to kill time. Think about how often you are in the same house as other people; now think of how often you are under the same roof, but not WITH them. Even when we are together, we are separate.

Hopefully you see how this feeds the first two mistakes about work and provision. With no idea of the point of the home anymore, we spend more and more time investing in our work, working longer and longer hours, and justifying it by saying we are trying to provide.

The problem is that eventually we begin to see family like an inconvenience, or an encumbrance, something that is getting in the way of us realizing our full potential or enjoying our life to the greatest extent. Our houses are loud and messy. Our schedules are full of things that we wonder why we signed up for. And all the while, we are wondering, when can I get back to "my real life."

That is not the biblical view. The biblical view is “children are a gift of the Lord.” Though the psalmist refers specifically to children, what he is trying to draw attention to is the centrality of the family. We aren’t the first generation to view children as inconveniences or obstacles. We aren’t the first people who wished our kids were quieter and our house was cleaner.

This Psalm exists because all people everywhere have a hard time understanding the relationship between work and family.

The Biblical view is that family is the real world. The home is the center. Family is a heritage, a legacy, a reward, a blessing.

But there is another image the Psalmist uses to understand what the home is supposed to be about. He calls children “arrows.” If you think about arrows, what they are for, and how to use one, you can get a picture of what home life is supposed to be about.

Arrows Require:

- o Sharpening – Before an arrow can be used, it has to be formed and shaped. And its point needs to be sharpened. The home is a primary place that God uses to sharpen us. The Christianese term for this is “discipleship,” which means growing into greater conformity with who God is and who He created us to be. Proverbs 27:17 says “Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens another.”
- o Aiming – Even a sharp arrow is useless unless it is aimed, pointed in the right direction. We live in a society that is so eager for everyone to be happy that we never want to tell anyone else what to do. And since we desire everyone to be free to do whatever they want, we end up leaving people feeling directionless. It’s called the paradox of choice. Too many options leads to paralysis. Like trying to pick a movie on Netflix or a restaurant for dinner, too many options makes it harder. So many people wander through life not sure of which path to pick. The goal of the home is to have people who can point us in the right direction – to point us towards Jesus and to help us discover who God made us to be.
- o Launching – Even a sharp arrow pointed in the right direction is useless unless it is launched. God has given us the family as a place to do that, to send each of us out in to the world to achieve the tasks for which we have been intended, to run the race that is set before us. Seeing the home as the center, as mission control, as NASA headquarters for life, allows us to get our work right too.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What are some bad ideas that our society has about work?
2. Why do we sometimes have a hard time accepting help from other people?
3. How does our society misunderstand what the home is for?
4. How can the home be a place that sharpens us?
5. How can the home be a place that points us in the right direction?

# Psalm 139: To Know God and Be Known

I have little interest in celebrities. The events that make celebrities famous can sometimes be interesting spectacles to watch, whether they are royal weddings, sporting events, movie or whatever. But to be consumed by the need to know as much about them as possible, to read magazines and articles about them, to follow them online and care about every minute detail of their life, none of that interests me in the slightest. I have no real interest in following them around like I'm in a fan club learning as much about them as possible.

I think the reason I never want to "know" more about who these people are, is because no matter how much I "know" about a celebrity, I will never "be known" by them. The "knowing" is a one-way street.

We all at our core desire both to know others and to be known by them. That is what a relationship is. Seeking and being sought. Knowing and being known. Accepting and being accepted. Loving and being loved. Pouring into someone else, having them pour into you.

We sometimes treat God in the same way. We approach seeking God like He is a celebrity and we are trying to gain information about this distant and disinterested spiritual celebrity in the chance of perhaps gaining His attention or His approval.

Sometimes we focus on the immensity of God because we are worried about putting God in a box. The truth is that all the great and powerful attributes of God sometimes lead us to forget His personal nature. We spend time focusing on the fact that He is the all-powerful, all-knowing, creator of the universe and therefore so much bigger than it. All these are true, but can leave us with a sense that God is a distant and disinterested ruler, and that scripture is a spiritual version of a celebrity magazine, giving people the ability to learn about God without expecting God to return the favor.

The message of scripture is that God calls us into relationship. A chief attribute of being in relationship with God is, just like human relationships, knowing and being known. Galatians 4:9 says, "Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God."

Jesus Himself says in Matthew 10:29-31, "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows."

God is intimately acquainted with every detail of his creation. He knows when the littlest bird dies. And you are more important to Him than the birds. He knows you. And He invites you to know Him in return.

Psalm 139 praises God for His amazing power, but it does so by showing how that power is used by God to know us. The result is a psalm of praise for who God is, a psalm of love for being cared for by Him, and a psalm of devotion to God in response to His devotion to us. The whole psalm could be summarized by v17: "How precious are your thoughts to me, O God." The word "to" should be translated more accurately as "towards," "of," or "about." The idea is that God has amazing thoughts directed towards us, about us. The whole psalm is a meditation on how deeply we are known by God. This same idea is repeated in Jeremiah 12:3: "But You know me, O Lord; You see me; And You examine my heart's attitude toward You."



## God knows You Because He Sees You v1-6

The first section of the psalm focuses on God's omniscience, which means "all-knowing." While we might generalize it and say that it means "God knows everything," the psalmist focuses the discussion of God's omniscience on being seen and fully known by God. God has searched and known him. The next few verses reveal what exactly God sees and knows about us.

As we read, it is important not to misread in a way that makes God sound like a creepy Santa Claus. "He sees you when you're sleeping, He knows when you're awake," and all that. The psalmist intends all the things he says about God to be taken as positive, good things.

- God Sees your actions v2-3 "you know when I sit and when I rise" – The first thing God knows is where we are and what we are up to. Again, he means this in a good way. You haven't escaped the notice of God. You haven't been forgotten. He sees your actions even when no one else does. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus describes God the Father as "your Father who sees what is done in secret (Math. 6:4)."
- God Sees Your Thoughts v2-3 "You understand my thoughts from afar" – Sometimes our relationships breakdown because we don't always know what others are thinking. Have you ever heard someone say in exasperation, "Well, I'm not a mind reader?" God sees not just our actions, but our intentions as well.
- God Sees Your Future v4 "Even before...you know it completely" – God knows not just where you are, but where you are going. Sometimes we wonder whether God knowing our future means God determines our future. But "seeing" is a good way to understand this. God is not bound by time. He is the great "I am." All time is "now" to him. He doesn't "fore" see the future. He just sees it, as if it were now, because it is now to Him.
- God Sees and Protects v5 "You have enclosed me...laid your hand upon me" – Like I said, it's possible to read all of this as if God is either a creepy Santa or a totalitarian government spy. But the psalmist realizes that God's knowledge of us is for our good. The word "enclose" means "to strengthen and surround like a wall." He doesn't just watch, He places His hand upon us to protect and defend us.

## God Knows You Because He is Near You 7-12

Any good relationship requires proximity. Relationships are difficult when distance is a factor. That is why the next of God's attributes discussed by the psalmist is His omnipresence. God doesn't see you because He has a master control room somewhere with a monster telescope. He sees you because He is near you. Over the next few verses, the psalmist discusses some things that follow from the fact that God is near you.

- God is near you everywhere v7-9 – It is not that God is near you in certain places. God is near you everywhere. He is present everywhere within His creation. He isn't the universe. Nor is the universe inside Him. He doesn't fill the universe. He is completely present at every point in it. This is hard to understand or explain without stumbling into error or confusion. That's why no one has found a better way to say it than this psalm. Wherever I go, "You are there."
- God is near you to lead you v10 – He lays hold of us and leads us. No matter where we are, God is near. The reason He stays close is not to criticize you or spy on you even trip you up. God is near to you so that He can lead you.
- God is near you to comfort you v11-12 – You might be scared of the dark, but God isn't. You might be plagued by uncertainty, doubt, fear because you don't know where you are, where to go from here, or what will happen. But God isn't. He can see in the dark and He promises that He is close. Philippians 4:5b-6 says it best: "The Lord is near. 6 Be anxious for nothing."

## God Knows You Because He Made You 13-18

In discussions of the attributes of God, there are three big ones: omniscience (God is all-knowing), omnipresence (God is everywhere), and omnipotence (God is all powerful). In keeping with the highly personal focus of this psalm, the psalmist directs his discussion of God's omnipotence towards the subject of God's creation of us. In the same way that an architect knows every square inch of a building because he built it and knows what he built it for, so too, God is the architect of our lives. He knows us because He made us, and He knows what He made us for.

- God made you on purpose v13 – No matter what anyone may tell you, you aren't an accident. Sometimes we treat people like they aren't wanted. The circumstances that lead to a person coming into the world are sometimes tragic and difficult, but no one is an accident. God formed each of us, on purpose.
- God made you unique v14-15 – All of us look at ourselves in the mirror and see things we don't like but are powerless to change. You were born that way and there is nothing you can do about it. But in the same way that God created you on purpose, He also "skillfully wrought" you, which means He is a master craftsman and you are His handiwork. Does this mean God causes birth-defects and things like that? That's a hard question that requires a longer answer than is possible here. The short answer is No; those are a product of the corruption of nature caused by sin. But it does mean that those things won't get in the way of the plan that God has for each person. And that is where the psalmist goes next.
- God made you for a plan v16-17 – Before you lived a single day in your life, all of them were written in your book. God made you for a reason. He has a plan. Ephesians 2:10 says, "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." He created you the way He wanted you, and He laid in front of you the works He wants you to do.

## Responding to God's Knowledge v 19-24

Relationships are two-way streets. You can know a lot of things about God, including that He knows you, and still not know God. James 2:19 says You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder." Knowing God begins to happen when one responds to Him. That's why the psalm ends with the psalmist showing how he responds to who God is.

- Pray v19-20 – The first thing the psalmist does is pray. The content of the prayer is pretty violent, but don't let it distract you from seeing that he is talking to God. There are a lot of reasons why people don't pray. One of the main things that keeps me from praying as often as I should is something that the psalmist described earlier: God already knows what I am thinking. This must be a common objection because in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses my chief problem, and then just says do it: "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him. Pray, then, in this way." (Matt. 6:7-9) What follows is the Lord's Prayer. Jesus says both that God already knows what we need and that we should still pray. Why? Because in a relationship, communication is central. Even when you know what a friend or spouse needs, you still talk. Why, because you like hearing their voice.
- Obey v21-22 – The psalmist also expresses the fact that he loves God and hates those who hate God. Though it is again a bit violent, it is important to realize what the psalmist is saying: he is committed to obeying God. Obedience is essential to our relationship with God. Relationships between equals require collaboration and compromise. Our relationship with God is a little different. He loves us tremendously, but He is also stronger, wiser, and bigger than us. We'd be foolish not to trust Him and obey what He says. Obedience is about loyalty. Whose side are you on? The psalmist clearly declares that his allegiance is to God.

- Submit v23-24 – The final thing the psalmist says is perhaps the most profound as well as the most obvious. The first words of v23 are the same as the first words of the psalm. The psalmist began with: “Lord, You have searched me and known me.” He now pleads with God: “Search me, Lord, and Know my Heart.” The psalmist is submitting to God. There are only two choices: we can submit to God or resist Him. The choice is obvious, but the choice is ours, and we have to make it. It is pointless to resist God. So submit to Him, desire Him to do what He is already doing. Let Him search you, know you, love you. He desires to free you from your anxious thoughts, to purify you from the unrighteousness that destroys, and to lead you on the path that leads to life.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is the difference between knowing about God and knowing God?
2. What does it mean to know God and be known by Him?
3. How does our understanding of the attributes of God change when we consider them in the context of our relationship with Him?
4. Which attribute do you derive the most comfort from? Omniscience? Omnipresence? Omnipotence?
5. What makes prayer, obedience, and submission so difficult?

# Psalm 32: Seek Forgiveness, Find Life

At the center of Christianity is the promise of forgiveness. Though the idea is central to the Christian message, many people have bad ideas about what forgiveness actually means.

Some people believe forgiveness is just God overlooking our sins. God is basically saying, “That’s Ok! It’s no big deal!” The problem with this view is that when we think God doesn’t consider our sin a big deal, we don’t either.

Another misunderstanding views forgiveness as the spiritual equivalent of someone else paying off your maxed-out credit card. You have accumulated a debt that you cannot pay, so God does it for you. Though true, this view is incomplete. People with this truncated view of forgiveness will view God as the rich uncle always swooping in to pay off your bad debt every single time you run it up. Again, it is true. But forgiveness means more than this. We don’t just need our bill paid, we need our spending habits changed.

That leads us to a third misunderstanding about forgiveness. Motivated by the inadequacies of the previous definitions, this one views forgiveness as God’s boot camp. God forgives your debt then drills the error out of you. This view has the merit of being focused not just on cancelled debt but also on training in righteousness. However it also makes God out to be an angry drill instructor: mad we keep messing up, constantly yelling in our faces that we need to get our act together, making us run laps and do pushups and generally ruining our lives until he breaks us down to the point where we will finally do what he says.

The first view above misunderstands the nature of sin thinking it doesn’t need to be removed. The second view misunderstands the scope of forgiveness by failing to realize that forgiveness means the removal not just of the stain of sin but also of the power of sin in our lives. The third view misunderstands the character of God. God is love, even when (perhaps especially when) he is pulling us out of sin.

One result of believing any of these bad definitions of forgiveness is that we end up hiding. We try to hide our sin from others and from God, the spiritual bully. We hide it because we think we can handle it. We hide it because it’s no big deal. We hide it because we are worried that God will do worse to us when he finds out.

The Bible talks about forgiveness in a couple of dimensions:

1. Justification: The removal of the PENALTY of sin
2. Sanctification: The removal of the POWER of sin
3. Glorification: The removal of the PRESENCE of sin

What would it look like to recover the Biblical view of forgiveness? Psalm 32 is a celebration of God who loves us enough to rescue us from the destructive power of sin and who longs for us to run towards Him not away from Him when we stumble and fall.

## **The Joy of Forgiveness v1-2 –**

What are words that you would use to define “blessed?” Happy, Joyful, maybe even lucky or fortunate? Now what would cause you to say that someone is any of those things? We sometimes think a person is blessed if he is rich, successful, or healthy. This Psalm says blessedness comes from experiencing forgiveness. Why?

Look at the words used for evil in these verses:

- Transgression (v1) – rebellion against God
- Sin (v1) – turning aside from the right path
- Iniquity (v2) – a distortion or deviation from the will of God.

Now look at the words that describe what God does to those things:

- Forgiven (v1) – comes from a Hebrew word which means “carried” like a burden being carried for you or “lifted” like a burden lifted off your shoulders.
- Covered (v1) – hidden
- Not imputed (v2) – not to count or to add to a ledger

As Isaiah 53:6 says, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way." Sin is a burden. Sin is a stain. Sin is a debt. Everyone of us is burdened by sin. Everyone of us is stained by sin. Everyone of us is enslaved to sin. That is why forgiveness is a source of joy. Forgiveness lifts the burden for us. Forgiveness covers the stain. Forgiveness cancels our debt. Or to be more accurate: God does these things for us when he forgives us.

Why does God do this? Out of his deep love for us. He desires to forgive because he desires us to be free from the burden, stain, and debt of sin. He accomplished this finally through Jesus. I John 4:9 says "By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him."

So the first verse of this Psalm could be rewritten: "How blessed is he who experiences the Love of God!"

### **The Danger of Hidden Sin v3-4**

The psalmist knows firsthand the freedom of forgiveness because he has felt the oppression of trying to conceal his sin. This next section refers to a time when he refused to acknowledge his sin before God. The result was that his sin ate him up.

Sometimes we fail to fully realize why God hates sin. Sometimes we think that God's laws are some arbitrary or overly strict rules imposed on us for no good reason. When we think of sin this way, we try to hide it because we think it's no big deal but don't want others or God to find out because they will overreact for some bizarre reason.

Hopefully we all realize that it is silly to think we would be able to hide something from God. We deceive ourselves by thinking anything we do escapes God's notice. But more importantly, we need to realize God doesn't hate sin because He hates us. He doesn't hate sin for random or arbitrary reasons. He hates sin because He loves us. Romans 6:23 says "the wages of sin is death." Death is what sin pays. When we engage in sin, we receive death. Death is not the arbitrary or external punishment of God on sin. Death is the internal and consistent consequence of sin. Death is sin's logical conclusion. That is why God hates it. That is why God pours his wrath out on it. That is why He wants to separate us from it.

Refusing to acknowledge our sin is also a refusal to acknowledge what sin is. It hardens us, makes it harder for us to yield to God, and ultimately, we begin to experience the death God desires to free us from.

### **The Freedom of Confession v5-7**

We hide because we think we are in trouble. We run from the One who is eager and able to deliver us from the destruction that we have created and perpetuated. We run because we like our sin. But we also run from God because we are worried about what He might do to us in His anger.

The psalmist finally stops running. What he finds is forgiveness and a God who wants him to be free from the burden of sin. Instead of anger he finds love. Instead of burden he finds rest. Instead of destruction he finds deliverance. He realizes that God is a hiding place, a safe place to run in times of trouble. God preserves us. God delivers us...even from ourselves...especially from ourselves.

It is worth noting that hiding from God is a pointless activity. He knows us better than we know ourselves. That is why in the New Testament the Greek word for confession means "to agree." When we confess our sins, we aren't telling God anything he doesn't already know. We are simply agreeing with him about what it is. When we do that, we are finally in a place to see Him transform us by removing it from our lives.

## **The Promise of Guidance v8-11**

Sometimes we treat forgiveness as if it is the sum total of the Gospel Message. We treat it like the end of Christianity. Forgiveness isn't the end. It's the beginning. Sure, it is the end of the old life of rebellion. But it is the beginning of a new life finding joy in following God. God doesn't just save you FROM sin. He saves you FOR something else. He is more than a guy snatching you from the burning wreck you have made of your life. He has a place for you in His kingdom, a place where you will find all the joy, purpose and fulfillment you were trying to find on your own.

That is why this psalm doesn't end in verse 7. Deliverance from sin is the point that real life begins. Verse 8: "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go." God got you off of the path you were on that was headed for destruction. God will guide you towards the path that He always had for you.

God does more for us than point us in the right direction. He goes with us and guides us as we go. There are two pictures of divine guidance offered in the next few verses. God promises to lead us. Sometimes he leads us like a father leads a son: "I will instruct you...teach you... counsel you...with my eye upon you." Other times he must lead us like a farmer leads a mule: "whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check."

The life of following God will be one of frequent stumbles and falls. It is good to know that He never leaves us or forsakes us. It is good to know that even when we are being stubborn and difficult like mules, He still leads us. That is what v10 means: "the lovingkindness of the Lord shall surround him." God will remain faithful and devoted to us, leading us towards righteousness, even when we are being rebellious little mules.

## **Conclusion**

Why do people run from the law in TV shows, movies, and in real life? Normally it's because the only other choice is to turn yourself in and go to prison. In our spiritual life, we act the same way. We run from God fearing what He will do to us. This psalm teaches us that we should run to God not from Him. What we fear God will do to us, sin is already doing to us. God wants to save us from sin's destruction and point us towards the gladness and joy that He made us for and that are found in following Him. In short: seek forgiveness, find life.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What are some bad or incomplete views we have of forgiveness?
2. Why do we run from God or attempt to hide our sin from Him?
3. Have you ever experienced the joy of forgiveness?
4. What does it mean that forgiveness is the beginning not the end of following God?
5. How does God lead us? How can we tell when He is leading us?

# Psalm 40: What Are You Waiting For?

“What are you waiting for?” This phrase is normally used as a motivational phrase to get us off our backsides and get to work. But sometimes we don’t know what to do, or maybe there is nothing to be done. We are just stuck. It could be anything from a health crisis, to a family emergency, to a vocational dead-end, or a financial obstacle. Such moments can leave us confused, alone, anxious, and desperate. Sometimes we get frustrated wondering where God is and wondering if he is ever going to show up, and if he is, what is taking him so long. It is important to realize in those moments that we are not alone, that God sees and cares, and is at work even when we can’t see it. We live in a go-get-em, do it yourself culture that promises us everything instantaneously. We find waiting for anything difficult. We find waiting for God especially difficult. But God has a right time for things, and His timing is perfect. Learning to wait on God is an essential component to following God.

Psalm 40 shows us what waiting on God looks like and how we can learn to do it better. Psalm 40 isn’t a lecture about why we should wait on God. It is a psalm of praise to God thanking Him for deliverance. It shows us what the psalmist did and what God did for him.

**Realize What Waiting Looks Like v1-3 –** The psalm starts out by recounting how God has already acted in the life of the writer. He is looking back on a time when he was looking for God to act and He did. The psalmist shows us both what he himself did, and what God did for Him.

- What Man does
  - Cry Out (v1) – Though the first words of the psalm are “I waited,” it is not the first thing that he did. Before he waited, he cried out to God. We aren’t told what the issue was, but we know that he saw God as the source of help. Before we wait on God, we must tell God what is in our hearts. This idea is repeated in Psalm 62:8 which says, “Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out you hearts before Him; God is a refuge for us.” God knows our needs. God knows our predicament. But God is personal, and He invites us to interact with him.
  - Wait Patiently (v1)– There is the word... “wait.” None of us like it. We imagine sitting at a bus stop, or at an airport gate, or in front of a school, or at home looking for something or someone to show up. Waiting conjures up ideas that someone is “late,” “preoccupied” or “disinterested.” What to do while waiting brings to mind ideas of “being bored,” “killing time,” or “distracting ourselves.” “Waiting patiently” doesn’t seem to be in our vocabulary. We need to realize, though, that waiting doesn’t mean doing nothing. It means doing what we can do with what we have where we are and realizing that, though we can’t always see it, God coordinates everything, works all things towards their proper fulfillment and knows the right time for everything to happen.
- What God does
  - He hears (v1) – We can trust that when we pour out our hearts to God, God hears us. We don’t have to work hard to get His attention, earn His favor, or merit an audience with a distant or disengaged God. He takes special notice of each of us and is acquainted with the details of our lives. In Matthew 10:30, Jesus says, “But the very hairs of your head are all numbered.”
  - He rescues (v2a) –We will find ourselves stuck in life. Though the deliverance might not look like what we imagine or desire, He promises that sin won’t have the last word in our lives. He will lift us up out of the pit.
  - He establishes (v2b)– More than just remove us from the bad situation, he promises to place our feet on secure footing. God does more than save us FROM evil. He saves us FOR the good that He has for us.
  - He restores (v3) – Perhaps an unnoticed or overlooked verse. Not only does God promise to rescue us from evil and also to establish us in his kingdom, but He also promises to restore us. The phrase the psalmist uses is: “He put a new song in my heart.” God changed the tune the psalmist was singing. When we see God act, we will be so convinced that His plan and His timing are perfect, we will be overwhelmed with love and

admiration for God. Our sorrow, our frustration, our bitterness, our anxiety, our sadness will be turned to praise.

**Realize Your Options Besides God v4** – After revealing the great things that God has done for him, the Psalmist shows us we do have other options besides waiting on God. They might not be great options in the long run, but they are other options besides trusting God and His timing.

- Trusting Others (The Proud) – The first alternative to waiting God is labeled “the proud.” These are people who are confident in their ability to get stuff done. They always seem to have limitless energy and motivation. They seem successful and you wish you could be like them. They think they know what your problem is. They promise that if you would just trust them and do what they say, you would find your way out of the mess you are in. Sadly, these people are normally either selling something or ultimately end up not being able to provide what they promise.
- Trusting Yourself (The Sinful) – When the first group doesn’t work, this is where we fall into sin. When we have been unable to get ourselves out of the bad situation we are in, sometimes we become so desperate that we will try anything. We justify our sinful behavior by telling ourselves that the sin will be small compared to the great victory we will win. Maybe we respond angrily that we wouldn’t have been forced to do what we did if God had shown up and fulfilled his promises. Either way – whether out of anxiety or anger – we need to realize that this is how most people fall into sin. Most people don’t sin because they like evil. They choose sin because they think they have no other options and that by allowing a little sin, they can accomplish some greater good. Ultimately though, this is how sin ensnares us. As the famous quote goes: “Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay, and cost you more than you want to pay.”

**Realize who God is v 5-12** – In opposition to the proud or the path of sin, this psalm shows us a picture of who God is and why He is worthy of trust.

- A God Who Does Great Things v5 - When we find ourselves stuck in life, we will renew our confidence to wait on God if we will remember the great things God has done for us and for others. We all are very forgetful of the good others do for us. We all kind of live in a perpetual state of “what have you done for me lately?” Sometimes, though, simply reminding ourselves of the past instances of God’s faithfulness will renew our confidence in him to act in the present. This is what praise is and why we are encouraged to start our prayers with it
- A God Who Delights in Relationship v6-8 – Not only has God done great things, He also delights in being in relationship with us. The psalmist says “Sacrifice...you have not desired; My ears you have opened.” God doesn’t want us to go through the motions of religious ceremonies. He isn’t some distant and angry God who needs to be appeased and attracted with the perfect bribe. He is a personal and relational God who wants to “open our ears” to hear His word and be in relationship with Him. Of course, hearing means following. As James 1:22 says, we are supposed to be “doers of the word, and not merely hearer who delude” ourselves. That is why the next few verses mention taking joy in doing the will of God and treasuring His word contained in the Scriptures.
- A God Who Calls Us to Witness v9-10 – When God does great things for us, he calls us to proclaim it. There is an old hymn that says “Oh come to the Father through Jesus the Son and give Him the glory, great things He has done.” We said before that remembering what God has done is a great way to renew your confidence in Him. If remembering is telling yourself, witnessing is telling others. This is what “giving God glory” means. God is whole and complete in himself. He is immutable, which means He never changes. That also means that we add nothing to God by giving Him glory. So what’s the point? Giving glory to God means giving Him the credit for the great things He has done. Giving God glory isn’t the Christian version of bragging. It is showing other people what happens when you trust God with your life. It is giving other people evidence that God does what He promises and is worth waiting on.
- A God Who Never Wearies v11-12 – Right here in the middle of the psalm, the psalmist reveals that he is in trouble again and needs help. He even says that his problems are a result of his own sin: “my iniquities have overtaken me.” He draws near with confidence to a God who is compassionate and faithful. He isn’t trying to excuse his sinful behavior and take advantage of a gullible God. He is confessing his sin and relying on a God



who never tires of showing us compassion and mercy. The word “lovingkindness” is an important one. The word in Hebrew is perhaps best translated as “covenant loyalty.” He is loyal and devoted to us. He never tires in delivering us from our sin. As a pastor friend of mine once said “God has more mercy than you have mess.”

**Realize who you are v12-17** – The psalmist concludes with a picture of who he is. Unless we see ourselves correctly, we will have a hard time seeing others or God correctly either. Probably one of the most important statements in the Bible of the nature of man is contained in v17: “Since I am afflicted and needy...” It might sound very “un-American” or “unmanly” or un-whatever. But it is a truth that we all must acknowledge about ourselves. We are afflicted and needy, which means that we are pressed on all sides by things that are beyond our ability to handle. Life is hard and we often don’t have what it takes to deal with it. The good news is that we are invited into relationship with a God who does have what it takes and loves us very much. True fulfillment begins when we have come to the end of our rope and acknowledge our inadequacies and realize that we need to wait on God. So we head back to verse 1 and start all over again.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Why is it hard to wait on God? What are some bad ways we deal with not wanting to wait on God?
2. Do you have an experience of waiting on God and seeing his perfect timing revealed?
3. How can reminding ourselves of the good things God has done fill us with confidence to trust Him?
4. What does “giving God glory” mean? Why is it important? Who is it for?
5. What does it mean that God never wearies in showing us mercy?

# Psalm 51: Create in Me a Clean Heart

In the Early 1900's, the London Times asked educated people from around England to write essays on the subject of "What's Wrong with the World?" One person they contacted was Christian writer and thinker G.K. Chesterton, an author known for his deep thinking and sharp wit. In response to the Times request, instead of an extensive dissertation on the evils of the world and what he suggested they do about it, Chesterton simply responded:

Dear Sir,

I am.

Yours, G.K. Chesterton

What Chesterton realized is that everyone wants to change the world, but no one wants to change themselves. Everyone thinks they know what the problem is. But no one thinks that they are part of it. We write long articles about what other people need to do differently but we want ourselves to be exempted.

The same is true of evil. The problem of evil in the world is real and profound. We see all the terrible things that happen or that people do to other people and we wonder, "Where is God?" and "Why doesn't He step in and stop it?" But the evil we are always referring to is somebody else's evil. We never mean, "Why didn't God stop me when I lied to my friend, or yelled at my spouse, or stole that little bit of money from my company?" We always have good reasons that justify or at least excuse the evil we do. It's all that stuff that everyone else does that is the problem and that needs to be dealt with.

Chesterton invites us to start the criticism at home. Most of us don't because we don't like what we see when we start looking at our own lives. We have to face the fact that we don't just do sinful things; we are sinful people, broken to our core. If that was the whole story, it would be a depressing and crushing thought.

Fortunately, that is not the end. We serve a God who knows our sinfulness and desires to free us from it. But often when we come to him for forgiveness, we want him to rescue us from the consequences of our sin, rather than from the sinfulness inside of us that is the cause of our sinful acts. Only brokenness over our sin will move us from looking to excuse our sinful acts to desiring a cure for our sinful nature.

Psalm 51 is written from such a state of brokenness. The heading says it was written after Nathan the prophet had confronted David about the Bathsheba affair. It reflects the Biblical process of repentance and longing for God to fix what is broken inside. It shows us that before we can be used by God to transform the world, we first have to experience that transformation ourselves.

## **Appeal to God for Help v1-2**

During the War of 1812, American Navy Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry defeated a British naval squadron on Lake Erie. After the victory, Perry sent his commander a brief note: "We have met the enemy, and they are ours." This phrase was parodied in a 1970's cartoon *Pogo*, who quipped "we have met the enemy, and they are us." The Psalms are full of appeals for to God to help in fighting against a foe stronger than ourselves. In Psalm 51 the enemy is ourselves. Psalm 51 is an appeal to God to fight the sin that is at war in ourselves.

**The Basis of Our Appeal** – Our appeal is based not on our goodness but because of who God is. Three attributes are specifically mentioned:

1. Mercy: The psalm starts with a plea for God to be “merciful” or “gracious” (depending on your translation). They are words with similar meanings. Mercy means “not getting a bad thing you do deserve.” Grace means “getting a good thing you don’t deserve.” The reason they are often confused or used interchangeably is because receiving mercy is an act of grace.
2. Lovingkindness: As we have said earlier in the Psalms study, this word is better translated “covenant faithfulness” and refers to God’s devotion or commitment to us, even when we are not devoted to him.
3. Compassion: The word here refers to the feeling of a mother for a baby. It means God understands our circumstance. Not that God approves or condones our actions, but simply that God has sympathy on our weakness and brokenness.

**The Nature of Our Appeal** – What is asked for is not deliverance from external evil, but rescue from the sin inside. In the same way that 3 attributes of God are mentioned, the author’s sin is described using 3 terms. We sometimes just think they are interchangeable words to refer to things God doesn’t like. By looking at what each word really means, we can gain a window into what sin really is.

1. Transgression – This word literally means rebellion, and refers to “willful, self-assertive defiance of God.” It refers to sin not committed by accident or ignorance but by willing choice of what we want over against what God wants.
2. Iniquity – This second word has at its root the idea of being bent or twisted. It refers to how we sometimes sin by distorting things to make it what we want or our tendency to wander off the course God has for us. It is sometimes translated as “waywardness.”
3. Sin – This last word is the one most commonly used through the Old Testament and is analogous to a similar Greek word in the New Testament, both of which mean “failure hit the target.” The word means settling for less than what God has set as the standard. It is best defined by Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

### **Confession of Sin v3-5**

After asking for God’s help, psalmist admits why he needs it.

- **Sinful Acts v3** – The psalmist starts by admitting his sinful acts. Often, when we have done wrong, we try to pretend it didn’t happen or that it didn’t matter. But sin has a way of consuming us. That is the definition of guilt: awareness that we have done something that we shouldn’t have. This might sound strange, but guilt is a gift. Not because God wants us to feel bad all the time, but because guilt is the way we know we are on dangerous ground. It is the soul’s equivalent of pain. Without pain we wouldn’t realize that the water is too hot, that our hand is too close to the fire, or that we have hurt ourselves. Though some people misuse guilt to beat themselves or others up, when we recognize guilt in our lives, we should do what the psalmist does: go to God with it.
- **Against God v4** – Sometimes people think, “Why can’t God mind His own business?” Or we wonder why God cares so much about what we do with our lives. When we go to God with our guilt, we realize that He is right to be offended by our actions. When the psalmist says, “Against You, You only, I have sinned,” he isn’t saying that no one else has a right to be angry at what he did. Surely Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba has cause to be angry at David. What he is saying is that because God’s law has been broken, God has a right to be angry and involved.
- **Confession of Sinful Self v5** – “Brought forth in iniquity” and “in sin my mother conceived me” don’t mean he was created through a sinful act, but that his sin is a product of the sinful person he has always been. He is also a sinful person, because he comes from a long line of sinful people. Sometimes we like to pretend our actions are single occurrences and exceptions to our normal behavior. Perhaps sometimes this is the case. But more

often, our actions provide a window into our souls. We do what is in our hearts. We sin not on accident but because we are sinful. This is what the psalmist acknowledges.

### **Desire to Be What God Wants v7-12**

The psalmist brings his guilt before God and earnestly desires for God to make him new again. If sin is the desire to be who you want to be apart from who God is, what the psalmist is expressing here is a desire to be who God wants him to be. This process begins with purification and ends with complete restoration.

- Purification v7-8 – More than having his debt cancelled, the psalmist wants to be purified in the innermost part of his being. Hyssop is a type of plant used for sprinkling water or blood in an area to make it ritually pure or clean again. The longing is not just to be good enough but completely clean from all spot or blemish. True repentance longs not to be excused or accepted despite the impurity, but longs to be purified.
- Healing v9 – Next the psalmist longs for joy to return. He trusts that what God has done to him, even in inflicting pain on him, is for his good and will ultimately lead to his joy. Like a surgeon who must cause pain and perhaps even break bones in order to heal, God only ever hurts in order to help. That is why the psalmist prays “let the bones which you have broken rejoice.” Hebrews 12:5-11 deals with God disciplining us as sons out of love. It concludes with, “11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”
- Recreation v10 – The penitent prayer continues. Give me a new heart, a clean heart, help me start over. And give me a spirit that won’t give up. The psalmist realizes that he has been scarred by sin and that he is weak in the face of it. He longs for God to do for him what he cannot do himself. Remake him in his innermost being.
- Restoration v11-12 – He finally expresses his desire to maintain fellowship with God. The psalmist longs to be close to God, and to be restored to full fellowship. He longs for God’s presence to be with him. He reveals that there are at least two things that flow from being full of God’s spirit: 1) joy and 2) support. We will be glad and we will be strong, not in ourselves, but in the power of Him who dwells in us.

### **Desire to Do What God Wants 13-19**

So many times, we try to do stuff for God before we become who He wants us to be. See the story of Mary and Martha in Luke 10:39. This doesn’t mean that God doesn’t have work for us to do. It means that the first work God has for us is to seek Him and become the people He desires us to be. Then, and only then, will we be useful instruments in His hands. After getting right with God, the psalmist provides a list of things that people with renewed spirits can be used by God to accomplish.

- Teach v13 – You can’t give what you don’t have. You can’t teach what you don’t know. We can’t teach others about God until we know Him. Once the psalmist has learned first-hand about the love and mercy and goodness of God, he is in a place where he can show other people the way to God.
- Worship v14-17 – Worship is not trying to earn God’s favor or get God’s attention. Worship is not trying to put ourselves in a religious frame of mind. It is declaring to God who He is and what He is worth. Not because He needs it, but because we do. We need to remind ourselves of the goodness of God. We need to remind ourselves to stay in relationship with God. We need to show His goodness to each other. But we will not be able to declare the goodness of God until we have seen it for ourselves. Jesus said in Matthew 12:34, “the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” If you want new stuff to come out of your mouth, put new stuff in your heart. Or more accurately, God will do it. The psalmist asks God to “open my lips.” As Psalm 40 said, “He put a new song in my heart, a song of praise to my God.” The only way our worship means anything is if it is in response and gratitude to what He has done for us. Once we have walked the path of Psalm 51, we are able to offer God the humble testimony of our broken and changed hearts. Worship will not become an event but a life that we lead.

- Expand v18-19 – The last two verses of this psalm have perplexed some scholars. They seem disconnected and tacked on. What does building the city walls of Jerusalem have to do with what has come before? But hopefully by now the connection is obvious. We all want to do great things for God. We want to expand His kingdom. But we can't build His kingdom until we are a part of it. God will do great things through us only after he has done great things in us. He has work for us all to do in His kingdom. The first work is that we submit ourselves humbly to Him.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do we try to hide our sins? What attribute of God do we have the hardest time believing? Why?
2. What is the difference between wanting to have our sins excused and wanting to be cleansed from them?
3. What is the difference between confessing sinful actions and confessing a sinful self?
4. Have you ever seen or experienced someone failing, like David, while trying to do great things for God because they failed to focus on their relationship with God first?
5. Have you ever experienced the discipline of God and learned to praise Him for it and see His goodness after the fact?

# Psalm 63: Seek God and Be Satisfied

"I don't think those sour gummy worms that I ate for dinner were the superfood I thought they were." I don't think I've heard my wife laugh louder to anything I've said. Her expression said what her voice eventually replied, "Well, duh." I tried to explain to her the chain of reasoning that led to my fateful choice. Because of a busy schedule of classes and meetings, I hadn't eaten all day. As I got in my car to come home, I realized that my car needed gas. As I sat at the fuel pump, my mind fixated on the idea of going inside and getting something to drink and maybe a snack. I knew dinner was waiting for me at home, but a commute through rush hour traffic separated me from sustenance. A snack, that was all I was going to get. Nothing big, just something to keep me from blacking out or developing road rage on the way home. That's when I went inside the store and saw them: Sour Gummy Worms. They looked so good and in my delirium I couldn't imagine anything tasting better in the whole entire universe. So I claimed my prize and returned to the road. To my enduring shame, I ended up eating the entire bag on my ride home. And as I turned into my driveway, the vague rumblings of a tummy ache appeared on the horizon.

This story has always stood as a metaphor to me for man's search for meaning and significance. We feel like we are lacking something. We recognize within ourselves a longing and a hunger for something that we can't quite describe. So we go searching. We try thing after thing hoping it will satisfy us. But the truth is nothing ever does. Food, sex, pleasure, work, possession, while good things, are not the things that will give shape, purpose, direction, and meaning to our lives. Some people – in fact most of us – conclude that the problem is not in the thing but in the fact that we don't currently possess them in significant enough quantities. So we gorge ourselves on the good things of life hoping it will slake our thirst, but it doesn't. We are like a man stranded in a desert who sees a mirage in the distance. He runs to it and thinks he is refreshing himself with water, but is just filling his body with hot sand.

Ravi Zaccharias described the emptiness that overtakes us when this happens: "The loneliest moment in life is when you experience that which you thought would deliver the ultimate, and it has let you down." The Christian pastor and philosopher St. Augustine described this phenomenon 16 centuries earlier when he wrote: "O Lord, You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." Even before that, Psalm 63 stands as a declaration that we are designed to find meaning and satisfaction in seeking and serving God.

## **My Soul Seeks v1**

The psalm begins with a declaration of need. He knows he is missing something, and he knows what that something is.

Acknowledging our need is hard enough. We are stubborn, independent people. We don't want to admit that we need others. We try to pretend we can do it all on our own. But the truth of the Psalms is that we are "afflicted and needy." We are awfully small and not as strong as we think we are.

But knowing what will fulfill the need is harder still. We stuff ourselves full of gummy worms because we don't realize what will really satisfy us. This psalm is a signpost to all its readers that the longing and hunger we have inside of us is only ever fulfilled in seeking and finding God.

- We were made to Seek God: Paul tells the Athenians in Acts 17:24, 26-27, “24 The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 26 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, 27 that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us.”
- We must seek him earnestly: This psalmist says that he won't just seek God but will do so earnestly. Seeking earnestly means doing so with our whole heart. In Jeremiah 29:13, God tells the Israelites: “13 You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.” The word for “search” is related to the Hebrew word for “morning,” and refers to something you are so eager to find that you wake up early and go looking for it. Seeking is not something we do half-heartedly or haphazardly, but earnestly, desperately, and with singleness of mind. Psalm 42:1-2 describes the search for God like a deer in a desert searching for water: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, So my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” We are supposed to search for God like we are in a desert and dying of thirst not like we are in a mall killing time by trying on clothes. The only way we will ever seek God earnestly is if we are truly aware of our need for Him.

### **My Soul is Satisfied v2-5**

The great hope of seeking God is that we won't turn up empty. After Jeremiah 29:13 where God tells the Israelites to seek Him with their whole heart, He says, “I will be found by you.” God says something similar to King Asa in 2 Chronicles 15:2, “the Lord is with you when you are with Him. And if you seek Him, He will let you find Him.’ And God fulfilled his promise. 2 Chronicles 15:15 says, “All Judah rejoiced concerning the oath, for they had sworn with their whole heart and had sought Him earnestly, and He let them find Him.” In Matthew 7:7- 8, Jesus told his followers “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

Where to Look v2—In v2, the psalmist says he found God. But how do we find God? Suppose we desired to seek God and were eager to do it earnestly, where would we start? The psalmist went looking in a place where God said He would be. He says he saw God in his sanctuary (ie the temple). Yes, God is everywhere. We serve a God who promises to never leave us or forsake us. He is living, personal, and close. The last words Jesus speaks in Matthew 28:20 are “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” We have the ability to experience the presence of God wherever we are. But when we have lost our way and feel far away from God, we should start looking for him in the places where He promises to be. For the people of Ancient Israel, one important place was the Temple. God also gave them his Law to show Himself to them. Though the Temple no longer exists, we still have Scripture. 2 Timothy 3:16 says “All scripture is inspired by God.” The last phrase literary translates, “God-breathed.”

What Finding Looks Like v2b5 – The psalmist went to the sanctuary and had an encounter with God. We aren't told what he experienced, but we are told the effects that it had on him:

- God's Showed himself v2b-3a – During the experience, God revealed something of who He was. The psalmist saw God's power and glory, as well as his lovingkindness. This word has come up a lot in the Psalms. Remember, it means God's covenant loyalty. The psalmist was overwhelmed by how strong God is and how devoted God is to those who seek Him.
- God Stirred Worship v3b-4 – In response to who God showed Himself to be, the psalmist says he was moved to praise God. Worship isn't something we do to get ourselves in a religious frame of mind. Worship is always a response to who God is and what He has done. Worship is also more than singing. It is declaring the worthiness of God. Real worship reorients our lives. The psalmist says “Your lovingkindness is better (more important, more powerful) than life.” He is so moved by God that all his other issues are swallowed up. He realizes that God is more powerful than his problems. When he says, “I will lift up my hands in Your name,” he means more than, “I will raise my hands when I sing in church.” He is saying that throughout his life, in the midst of every problem and predicament, he will turn to God with his empty hands in expectation of seeing how God will fill them.

- **God Satisfied His Soul v5** – At almost the exact middle of the psalm, the psalmist declares that his soul is satisfied. The encounter with God has filled him to overflowing. His heart is full and his mouth overflows with praise. There is an 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.” I think something like that is going on. Not that life’s concerns cease to matter, but they find their appropriate place and scope in the shadow of God’s glory and power. When we see God, we will see who we are in the light of his presence, and it will move us to worship and to trust Him.

**My Soul Remembers v6-7** – God is present with us every day. He shows up in little ways, if we will learn to look for him. If God whispers to us during our everyday lives, God seems to be almost shouting to us during the profound, overwhelming experiences of His grandeur like the one described at the beginning of this Psalm. But these are also not the normal events of everyday life. Since they are often infrequent, we sometimes pretend that they aren’t important. We label them “mountaintop experiences”, or a “camp high,” then return to what we call “real life.” The truth is, though, the purpose of these experiences of God is to give us what we need to trust God in the hard, barren, dry places of life. This is what faith is. Faith isn’t believing what you know isn’t true. Faith is continuing to believe something that you know to be true, even after the experience which convinced you has passed. Faith is believing in the valley what you saw to be true on the mountaintop.

But it is our constant struggle that we forget. So the psalmist recounts how he consciously brings to mind the goodness of God.

- **He remembers Who God is:** When I remember You (v6)... When hard times hit, it helps to remember what worked in the past. Sometimes we get so caught up in ourselves and our problems, we forget God. Simply remembering can sometimes be enough to lift our eyes off ourselves and back on a God we can trust.
- **He Meditates on God (v6):** To meditate means to chew on something. The psalmist says he mediated which means he thought deeply and continually about who God is and about how what He knew about God might apply to his current situation.
- **He Reminds Himself of God’s Help:** “For you have been my help (v7).” Sometimes we lose confidence in God because we forget that He has worked in our lives before. We need to do what the Psalmist did. He remembered that God had previously been a help to him. Remembering how God has acted in our lives up to this point can help restore our confidence that He is still at work to help and to guide.

Remembering God is essential when hard times happen. Such remembrance, meditation, and gratitude will prove pivotal when we encounter hard times in life and it looks like God is nowhere to be found. The psalmist describes being threatened by an attack from enemies (v9). In the midst of this, He “clings” to God and trusts God to “uphold” him (v8). Both his experience and remembrance of God give him the strength to cling to God and depend on him to get him through this circumstance as well.

It is worth noting that almost exactly half of the poem is focused on the problems of life and the importance of depending on God in the midst of them. God does not promise us an unending series of overwhelming experiences of Him. He gives us what we need to keep trusting and obeying and heading in the direction He pointed us. We need to remember so that we can keep our eyes on Him as the source of true satisfaction and fulfillment in life.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Have you ever stuffed yourself with something that didn’t satisfy?
2. What are the signs that the things we are seeking in life are leaving us unfulfilled?
3. What does it mean to seek God? How do we do it? Where do we start?
4. What does it mean to be satisfied by God?
5. What does it mean to cling to God in the hard times? How do we do it?