

DEVOTION // IN THE PSALMS

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BECOMING A CHRISTIAN

In the Bible, God reveals His truth about how to have eternal life by becoming a believer in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The believer is a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a true child of God, and one who has been saved by God according to God's grace (undeserved favor). "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

How does one become a Christian?

- The Bible, God's word, says that eternal life (salvation) is a free gift of God which cannot be earned or deserved (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9).
- However, we also find in God's word that all people are born sinners and cannot save themselves from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God. God's requirement is perfection and no one is perfect (Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:3-23; Ephesians 2:1-4).
- God tells us in His word that He is holy, meaning that He is perfect and that He is also just, meaning that He gives to sinners what is deserved, and because of His holiness and justice He must punish sinners. But thankfully, the Bible also says that God is loving and merciful and does not take pleasure in punishing sinners (Exodus 34:6-7; Ephesians 2:4-5).
- God has mercy on sinners by not giving them what they deserve. This is only possible because He gave His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the God-man, to be the substitute for sinners bearing the penalty for their sin and satisfying God's justice (John 1:1,14; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 5:8).
- Jesus said that in order for anyone to have eternal life there must be repentance of sins and faith placed in His substitutionary death on the cross to pay for the penalty of one's sins. This faith must be in Jesus Christ alone, not depending on anything else including "good works" (Mark 1:15b; Acts 20:21; Ephesians 2:8-9).

What then is the response to these things if one desires to have eternal life and become a Christian?

1. Pray and ask God to forgive you. The Bible says that you must repent of your sins, being ashamed of them, genuinely regretting and grieving over them, and firmly deciding to make an about-face and turn away from sin and your old lifestyle (Acts 3:19-20).
2. Pray and tell God that you place your faith in Jesus Christ alone to save you. The Bible says that for you to become a Christian, you must place your faith and trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ who died on the cross to become your substitute and who took the penalty for your sin upon Himself once and for all (John 3:36).

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DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

January 9, 2022 | *Delighting in God's Word*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What keeps you from regular devotional times?

Read Psalm 1:1–6.

Pray to yearn for God's Word.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Delighting in God's Word brings sustaining joy.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Christians need regular time in God's Word.

MEDITATE

"But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:2).

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces the main theme of this week's lesson and reflects on its significance for our lives.

Q: *What are some of the most important decisions you make on a regular basis*

Q: *Why would modern people resist the idea that there are only two paths in life?*

Discrimination often carries a negative connotation today, but the word can simply mean to choose by distinguishing what is good and what is bad. Certainly, there is wrongful discrimination, as is often the case when discrimination is based on race, ethnicity, or sex, but we must ultimately make discriminating choices every day and throughout our lives. Psalm 1 demands that we discriminate. It lays two paths before us, the path of righteousness and the path of wickedness. The choice we make will determine the course of our lives.

Psalm 1 could be classified as a wisdom psalm or a *Torah* psalm. Wisdom psalms resemble Israel's wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job) and give broad principles for all of life. *Torah* psalms express the value of the *Torah* or God's instruction. These designations offer general depictions of the content of each psalm. Deciding between them is not essential.

Q: *How do you see yourself choosing between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked in your current context?*

Q: *Why is the way of the wicked so attractive to so many people?*

APPLICATION POINT – We should not be surprised to often see an overlap between wisdom psalms and *Torah* psalms. Devotion to God's instruction will bring wisdom. God's instruction is the primary way we discriminate between good and evil. The more you are in God's Word, the wiser you will be. The wiser you are, the more you will be in God's Word.

❏ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalm 1 begins by describing the blessed one's way of life. He shuns the influence of the wicked and embraces God's Word. This creates a sharp spiritual contrast between the righteous and the wicked that culminates in God's verdict over their lives.

1. THE DISCRIMINATING WAY OF THE BLESSED ONE
2. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED
3. THE DISCRIMINATING WAY OF GOD

GOING DEEPER

+This section will follow the outline given above and examine selected words and phrases in detail to draw contemporary applications.

1. THE DISCRIMINATING WAY OF THE BLESSED ONE

❏ PSALM 1:1-2

Q: *What does it mean to be blessed?*

Q: *What is the opposite of "blessed"?*

The Psalms begin with the word "blessed" in the ESV. Many other translations use the word "happy" in order to capture the emotion of the underlying Hebrew word. This is helpful as long as the spiritual dynamic is maintained. Psalm 1:1 does not intend happiness apart from God but happiness deeply rooted in His will. This happiness is not based purely on circumstance or temperament. The blessed person lives in fellowship with God and is able to appreciate God's glory. A change in circumstances will not change the blessed man's feelings toward God.

Q: *How does “blessed” differ from how many in our culture view the Christian life?*

Q: *If God is concerned for the welfare of humanity, why do so many oppose Him?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is remarkable the Psalter begins with a word meaning “blessed” or “happy.” There were a lot of other choices: God, love, righteousness, perseverance, repentance, etc. These are all important in Scripture and in the Psalms specifically, but the book begins with our happiness in view. Many people believe the Bible to be a book of stringent rules that rob the fun out of life. Taking God’s Word seriously will often earn us labels such as “kill-joy” or “judgmental.” The first word of Psalms, however, reminds us that God is imminently concerned with our joy, both in this life and in the next. True blessedness is available to everyone who seeks God within His Word.

Q: *Do you enjoy any hobbies or activities that began as a way to get to know others?*

Q: *How does sin become normalized in a society?*

The psalmist sets up a progression in verse 1. He warned against walking with the evildoers, then standing, then sitting. This shows a progressing comfort with sin. Think of times when you have joined new social circles. First, you get to know others. Then you begin to learn about their interests. Before long, you are joining in their activities. When I was studying for a year in Ireland, a group of guys in the church I attended were rugby enthusiasts. As an American, I was barely aware rugby existed, but as I hung around these guys, I began to learn about the professional rugby leagues. Before long, I was watching games and rooting for their teams. They invited me to join their local league, and I probably would have if I had not been returning home. Although I knew nothing of rugby when I arrived in Ireland, by the time I left, I was a moderate enthusiast. This is how sin often uses social pressure to normalize activities you would have never dreamed of engaging in. The longer you allow yourself to go down the path of evildoers, the more normal you believe sin to be and the more difficult it is to repent.

Q: *How can you protect yourself from becoming comfortable in sin?*

Q: *How can you maintain a faithful witness while protecting yourself from the sinful influence of our culture?*

APPLICATION POINT – In his novel, *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis wrote, “Indeed the safest road to Hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” Lewis reminds us that the things we would consider to be “minor” sins are more successful at ruining our lives than “spectacular” sins. The problem is that we become comfortable and even accepting of sin in our lives despite its deadly outcome.

Sometimes we need a jolt to show us how far down the gradual path we’ve gone. A few years ago, my wife and I were watching a TV series that was an entertaining endorsement of a wide gamut of beliefs and worldviews we find abhorrent, but we did not recognize it. We thought the problems were relatively minor compared to what else was available. One evening my uncle and aunt visited us while the show was on, and I immediately recognized how depraved the show was that we were subjecting ourselves to on a weekly basis. My wife recognized it too, and we both agreed we needed to guard ourselves more closely against this type of media consumption. This also demonstrates the value of godly community and family in helping us recognize how far down the gradual path we’ve gone and supporting us as we seek repentance.

APPLICATION POINT – As believers in Christ, we are called to share our faith with others, but how can we do this if we need to avoid their influence? I think the key is intimacy. We need to find venues and avenues for sharing our faith with those who need to hear it, but we dare not become intimately involved with those who disregard God.

Q: *How would you define a law in our society?*

Q: *How do we create laws and how is this different from what we see in Scripture?*

Psalm 1:1 describes what the blessed man will flee. Psalm 1:2 describes what he will embrace. The key term here is “law.” Laws in our society are government-enforced rules that you will be penalized for breaking. The

Hebrew word translated here as “law” is *torah*, and it has a wider meaning than we typically associate with “law.” *Torah* means instruction and has in view all the wisdom and guidance God gives for us to live well. *Torah* is a God-endorsed vision of what makes life good and includes all of God’s revelation. The first five books of the Old Testament were known as “the *Torah*,” but the people who heard this psalm would have included the rest of the Old Testament as well. As Christians, we would also include the New Testament.

The blessed man delights in the *Torah* and meditates upon it day and night. These two verbs reveal the blessed man is fixated upon God’s law and recognizes it as the means through which God reveals Himself to humanity. The phrase day and night is a literary device known as a merism. Merisms refer to the whole by referencing two poles. The blessed man is so convinced of the value of God’s Word that his thoughts return to it throughout the day.

🕒: *How can you meditate upon Scripture throughout the day?*

🕒: *How can you avoid taking Scripture out of context as you reflect upon the importance of God’s Word?*

APPLICATION POINT – The blessed man’s meditation upon God’s Word day and night reveals the importance of memorizing Scripture. The psalmist could not have carried Scripture scrolls around with him everywhere he went. He memorized portions of the Bible in order to reflect upon them throughout the day no matter where he was.

This also shows us the importance of familiarizing ourselves with the main story line of the Bible. The Bible contains a creation-fall-cross-redemption storyline. In addition to meditating on individual passages and verses, meditate on the big picture of what God has to say as well.

2. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED

📖 PSALM 1:3-4

Q: *Can you explain the metaphor describing the blessed man in your own words?*

Q: *Does a commitment to God's Word guarantee prospering?*

After describing the blessed man, the psalmist used an illustration to contrast him with the wicked. The illustration chosen for the blessed man is a tree. A similar metaphor appears in Jeremiah 17:7–8. The key to understanding this tree is where it is located. It is found by streams of water. This is important because the tree's source of water is constant. Trees relying upon rainfall may go long stretches without water, but this tree has water as long as the streams are flowing. Relying upon a constant source of water, this tree produces fruit when it is supposed to and retains a healthy appearance year-round. The psalmist then concluded by explaining his analogy. Just as tree produces fruit, the blessed man prospers

Q: *How can we constantly nourish our souls?*

Q: *What is the purpose of the blessed man's prosperity?*

APPLICATION POINT – A healthy devotional life is our source of constant spiritual nourishment. Being grounded in prayer and God's Word ensures the production of regular fruit in our lives and sets us up to prosper in everything we do. Of course, this is a general principle. A daily devotion is not a magic charm that wards off every trial or inconvenience, but time spent in the Bible and prayer helps believers remain more in step with God's will.

Q: *Can you explain the metaphor describing the wicked man in your own words?*

Q: *If the wicked are like chaff, why do they seem to prosper so often?*

The psalmist also gave an analogy for explaining the wicked. He described them as chaff, a commonly used metaphor for the wicked (Psalm 35:5; Isaiah 17:13; Hosea 13:3; Matthew 3:12). Chaff is the part of wheat that must be separated from the kernel. On windy days, this could be done by simply tossing the wheat into the air. The wind would blow away the chaff. On the threshing floor, the wheat could just be run along the ground. Once the chaff was removed, it was burned. In the psalmist's eyes, the wicked are useless and easily discarded.

These analogies allow us to compare the blessed man and the wicked. The tree planted by streams of water will be sustained in times of drought. It has an enduring quality. It is quite the opposite for the chaff, which is short-lived.

APPLICATION POINT – The wicked are here today and gone tomorrow. Since they refuse to delight in God's instruction, nothing they do will matter much in eternity. What kinds of things are you investing your time in? Will the things you do make a difference in eternity? Modern Americans have become far too consumed with media and entertainment. Modern streaming services allow us to binge watch TV series. We can spend an entire weekend watching football. When we visit family during Christmas, I'm not allowed to turn the channel from Hallmark Christmas movies. We spend a lot of time on things that will not matter much instead of investing our lives in things that will have eternal implications. Perhaps the only thing more tragic is when Christians neglect times for reading God's Word and prayer because they are wrapped up in entertainment.

3. THE DISCRIMINATING WAY OF GOD

■ PSALM 1:5–6

🔍: *What is the meaning of "stand" in verse 5? Is it different from verse 1?*

🔍: *How does the sense of knowing in verse 6 differ from how we typically use the word "know"?*

Psalm 1 concludes by explaining how God discriminates among humanity. He will not discriminate based on race, ethnicity, wealth, age, or appearance. God discriminates between the righteous and the wicked. Notice that although the wicked are standing in Psalm 1:1, they will not stand when judgment comes. As with the chaff thrown into the fire, they will quickly perish.

The righteous, however, love God and are eager to live a godly life. They are known by God and will endure on their way. Being known by God goes beyond mere factual knowledge. It entails a communion in which God sympathizes with our needs. For example, Exodus 2:24–25 says God heard the groanings of the Israelites in slavery, and He knew, that is, He had special concern or regard for them, His chosen people.

Q: *How are God’s discriminating choices linked to our discriminating choices?*

Q: *Why would a Christian disparage godliness?*

APPLICATION POINT – The pursuit of godliness is a Christian virtue that affirms that we are known by God. It is surprising that godliness is sometimes disparaged in Christian circles. Some Christians find the pursuit of godliness to be legalistic or a neglect of grace. While the danger of legalism is real, we dare not abandon the pursuit of godliness to avoid the charge of legalism. Where would that leave us? Instead, we must learn to pursue godliness from the grace God has already shown us. Others despise the sort of holier-than-thou appearance of pursuing godliness. This attitude has misdiagnosed the problem. The real problem is not the pursuit of godliness but our pursuit of or comfort with sin.

NEXT STEPS

The psalmist says the blessed man meditates upon God’s law day and night. “Day and night” is a figure of speech meaning “all the time.” It is not a prescription for morning and evening devotions. Yet, for us to reflect constantly upon Scripture, the way we must, we need a regular intake of God’s Word, which will most likely stem from a morning or evening devotional time. Do you know what devotional times work best for you? The most consistent time of daily devotions in my life occurred when I was younger and did them at night. Later in life, I found I enjoyed waking up early for my time in God’s Word. Then my two-year-old son decided to start waking up routinely at 5am too. Again, the best time for me to have a devotional time was in the evening. At the outset of this study of devotion in the Psalms, figure out the best time for your daily encounter God’s Word. Take your personal proclivities and circumstances into account. Try different things out for a week or so. Find out what pattern gives you the most consistent time in God’s Word.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, help me delight in your law. It is the source of life for my soul.

Jesus, you are the true blessed man. Help me to love you in all my ways.

Father, make me a tree planted by streams of water. Nourish my soul so my passion for you never dries.

Jesus, the only way I will stand in judgment is by your grace. Help me yearn for godliness because of what you've done for me.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

January 16, 2022 | *Trusting God in an Untrustworthy World*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Who are the people you trust most? Why do you trust them?

Read Psalm 37.

Pray for God to strengthen your trust in Him through this psalm.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Even in a world of uncertainty, we can trust God.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

You can trust a sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient God far more than you will ever be able to trust yourself.

MEDITATE

“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to become acquainted with the main idea of Psalm 37.

Q: *Why is it hard to trust others?*

Q: *What are the dangers of trusting others?*

Most major corporations recognize trust as a key virtue for promoting efficiency and productivity in the workplace. It creates stability and accountability among workers. Some corporations value trust so highly that they pay for employees to go on retreats together in efforts to break down common barriers to trust such as unfamiliarity and suspicion. Sometimes employees are encouraged to participate in trust-building activities like the familiar “falling backwards into the arms of coworkers.” The key to that exercise is complete trust. Trying to brace yourself by bending at the waist as you fall undermines the efforts of those attempting to catch you.

Psalm 37 urges us to trust God, even in a world filled with uncertainty. Far too many Christians are “bracing themselves” while claiming to trust God in their lives. Christians must trust God without reserve even when everything and everyone around us contests God’s trustworthiness. The stakes are much higher than in the business world. A betrayal of trust in the workplace may ruin your reputation or cost you your job. And as important as these things are, if God were somehow to betray your trust, it would cost you everything, because God demands everything. Psalm 37, however, argues that God will never let down those who trust in Him.

Q: *How are you limited in ways God is not?*

Q: *How can an awareness of our own limitations help us trust God?*

APPLICATION POINT – I have a tendency to view myself as a machine. In my mind I am a paragon of will-power, planning, and efficiency. The real me falls woefully short of the lies I feed myself on a regular basis. I feel like I can plan for every contingency, but most of my schemes fail before I even get motivated to start. I think I can accomplish more in an afternoon than I am often capable of doing in a week. I suspect I am not the only Christian who struggles in this way. When I do this, I am trying to replace my need to trust God with my own resourcefulness and skill. This never works out for me or anyone else because we are limited in ways God is not. No matter how efficient I am, I am not omnipotent (all-powerful). But God is. No matter how prepared I am, I

am never omniscient (all-knowing). But God is. No matter how resourceful I am, I will never be omnipresent (unlimited by time and space). But God is. We are limited in ways He is not. It would be foolish, especially for those of us who confess belief and allegiance to Him, not to trust Him, no matter the circumstance or cost.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Psalm 37 is an acrostic in its original Hebrew form. Acrostics begin each line (approximately every two lines in the case of this psalm) with consecutive letters of the alphabet. Several other psalms are also acrostics, most notably Psalm 119.

This is a good time to acknowledge one of the difficulties of studying the Psalms in English. Psalms are poetry, and poetic expression is tied more closely to the original language of composition than any other literary form. You would never know Psalm 37 was an acrostic by reading it in English, and it would be impossible for translators to incorporate an acrostic in their translation. Hebrew has twenty-two letters in its alphabet while English has twenty-six.

What should readers of English Bibles do? First, find reliable aids for reading Hebrew poetry. Many English Bibles will note some of these literary features in the margins. Good resources on the Psalms will often allude to literary features in the original Hebrew text. As needed, these lessons will explain the Hebrew literary features we encounter in the study of the Psalms. Second, do not maximize the implications of this challenge. Although translations are unable to retain every element of the original language, a good modern translation will be able to successfully present the content and meaning of the Psalms. You can still read the Psalms in English with much profit even though some elements of the original composition will be invisible to you.

Acrostics signal completeness or thoroughness. Psalm 37 addresses a wide variety of situations in which one's trust in God might be challenged. In using an acrostic form, the psalmist is saying you can trust God in these situations and every other situation you find in life.

1. DWELLING IN THE LAND
2. LOOKING UNDER THE SURFACE
3. LOOKING BEYOND RIGHT NOW
4. FINDING CONTENTMENT
5. RESTING IN GOD'S PROTECTION
6. WAITING FOR GOD'S SALVATION

+This section will cover the major themes within Psalm 37 and show how they are related to trusting in God.

1. DWELLING IN THE LAND

■ PSALM 37:3, 9, 10–11, 22, 29, 34

Q: *Why was dwelling in the land important to an ancient Israelite?*

Q: *What would it mean for Israel to be displaced from their land?*

The most persistent theme within Psalm 37 is the righteous dwelling in the land. Each of the other major themes is highlighted in specific portions of the psalm, but the righteous dwelling in the land is spread across the entirety of it. To our modern thinking, dwelling in the land may seem an odd emphasis, but for a faithful Israelite serving God under the Mosaic covenant, there could be no surer sign of God's blessing. The story of the promised land begins with God's address to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. God commanded Abraham to leave his homeland and offered him only a vague promise to show him another land. When Abraham arrived in Canaan, God promised to give that land to Abraham's offspring as a reward for their faithfulness to Him. But this promise was not to be fulfilled right away. It would be interrupted for four hundred years during which the Israelites (Abraham's offspring) were enslaved in the land of Egypt (Genesis 15:13). Even after God freed them from their Egyptian bondage, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years because they did not trust God (Numbers 14:33). When they inherited the promised land, they understood it was a sign of God's faithfulness to His promise to their ancestor and of their faithfulness to the covenant He made with them. God's covenant with Israel included provisions for their unfaithfulness to Him. The most severe and final punishment was exile from the promised land (Leviticus 26:14–46). Thus, for an Israelite to dwell within the land, as Psalm 37 alludes to so frequently, meant they were living faithfully to God, and God was faithful to them. All was right with the world.

Q: *How does the concept of dwelling in the land relate to us under the new covenant?*

Q: *How can you live at peace with those around you and maintain a faithful gospel witness?*

APPLICATION POINT – Under the new covenant, we will not fully understand what it means to dwell in the land until Christ returns and establishes His kingdom upon the earth, but our lives today can parallel the hope of ancient Israel in one respect. For an ancient Israelite, dwelling in the land included the notion of stability or shalom. The Hebrew concept of shalom does not exactly correspond to “peace,” but the two words overlap to a large degree. Thus, we should not be surprised that Paul told Christians to seek a quiet and godly life (1 Timothy 2:2). Christians should seek to live in peace among those around us, not stir up strife and dissension or seek to be the center of controversy. We must never compromise our Christian convictions, and as our society continues to secularize, this resolution will inevitably thrust us in the center of controversy. Nevertheless, we should not go looking for trouble but seek only to live out our faith in our own contexts. We want to dwell in the land peacefully.

2. LOOKING UNDER THE SURFACE

PSALM 37:1–2, 7–9, 35–36

Q: *What metaphors did the psalmist use to describe the wicked?*

Q: *Why did the psalmist discuss the fate of the wicked?*

From my front window, I can see a beautiful oak tree. It is tall and full of leaves. A closer examination, however, reveals that the tree is dying. The side opposite my front window is barren. Most of the trunk has become dry and lifeless. One day soon it will need to be cut down to reduce the risk of it falling on my home. The view from my front window, while lovely for now, is deceptive.

My oak tree illustrates the psalmist’s view of the wicked. From our current perspective, it may seem as though the wicked prosper more than the righteous, but the psalmist argues their apparent prosperity will be short-lived.

Their prosperity merely cloaks the spiritual deadness hiding underneath. As time goes by, that deadness will become more and more apparent. Eventually, God will cut them off from prosperity completely. The psalmist was urging his listeners to see past their prosperity to the deadness hidden beneath. The audience is called to trust in God's commitment to judge the wicked and uphold the righteous. Oftentimes, the allure of wickedness can seem irresistible, but the psalmist invites us to view the wicked from a different perspective so we can see the deadness within them and their approaching judgment.

❓ *Why is wickedness often enticing even for Christians?*

❓ *Why does God allow the wicked to prosper even for a short time?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist recognized the allure of wickedness and worried that the righteous might be enticed to join their way of life. He urged them not to envy the wicked, because their prosperity is a mirage. The same danger persists today. Following Jesus demands sacrifice. Compared to a life of self-indulgence, the Christian life may seem to lead only to deprivation, but the prosperity of the wicked is an illusion. Wickedness makes promises it cannot keep. Do not be enticed by the allure of a life lived only for yourself. The wicked may seem to prosper, but their apparent prosperity conceals a life yearning for more. One day, God will hold them accountable for their denial of His rule. You do not want to find yourself among the ranks of the wicked on that day.

3. LOOKING BEYOND RIGHT NOW

📖 **PSALM 37:10–11, 34, 37**

❓ *How did the psalmist encourage his audience to pursue righteousness over wickedness?*

❓ *How does the psalmist's future hope coincide with the judgment of the wicked?*

The psalmist looked to the future judgment of the wicked as one reason to avoid their way of life. The other, more

satisfying reason is that God will one day reward the righteous for their faithfulness to Him. The psalmist emphasized patience. Although the wicked seem to have it all now, it is the meek who will inherit the land (v. 11). The meek recognize their need for God and wait patiently for Him to act on their behalf. The meek realize that anything God provides is better than anything they could provide themselves. The psalmist encouraged his audience to look upon the blameless and upright rather than be envious of the wicked (Psalm 37:37). The blameless have a future. If we wait patiently, the value of righteousness will be revealed.

🕒: *How does hope in the future affect your life now?*

🕒: *Why is patience crucial to the Christian life?*

APPLICATION POINT – None of us is all-powerful, all-knowing, or able to escape the constraints of time and space. We are limited in ways God is not. Our limitations underline our crucial need for patience. Our first impressions, our instincts, our intuitions are all compromised by our limitations. Patience is a God-given virtue that creates more time to evaluate our circumstances and understand how we can bring any part of our lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Patience helps us recognize the tenuous nature of the wicked's prosperity. Patience allows us to see the certainty of God's future provision. When we act impatiently, we assume that our understanding rivals God's. When we respond with patience, we demonstrate our reliance on and need for His wisdom. If you struggle to be patient, take this opportunity to repent and remind yourself to trust in God's provision.

4. FINDING CONTENTMENT

📖 **PSALM 37:16-17, 21-22, 25-26**

🕒: *How does contentment correspond to the psalmist's warning about seeing through the wicked's prosperity?*

🕒: *Does the idea of contentment help us understand the intent of Psalm 37:25?*

The psalmist encouraged his audience to be content with God's provision in this life. One reason we may envy the wicked is discontentment with what God has provided us. The psalmist warns us against this temptation in verse 16 by pointing out that it is better to have little with righteousness than abundance with wickedness. This emphasis parallels the teaching of Jesus at several points in the Gospels (Matthew 5:30; 18:8; Mark 9:42–45). Jesus said if your hand or foot leads you to sin, it would be better to cut it off for the sake of righteousness and to enter the kingdom of God maimed than to enter hell intact. Jesus utilized hyperbole in these instances, not because what He was saying would not be true but because hands and feet are not what lead to sin. The human heart leads to sin. The psalmist applied this principle to money and possessions. His message is that it is far better to enter God's kingdom with few possessions than to sacrifice righteousness for the sake of material gain.

Some people have concluded that the author of this psalm was born into prosperity and shielded from the realities of life because he has never seen the righteous suffer or their children beg for bread (v. 25). This interpretation is understandable, but given what else is said in the psalm, it is not the best explanation. The psalmist highlighted the generosity of the righteous (vv. 21, 26) even though the righteous often has little (v. 16). Thus, even with little, the righteous does not appear forsaken because he is content with what God has given him. He gives generously to his children or, at the very least, has secured their provision before his own. This kind of generosity has generational implications because the children of the righteous become a blessing to others (v. 26).

❓: *How does your outlook on life change in times of hardship?*

❓: *How can you prepare yourself for contentment during times of abundance?*

APPLICATION POINT – Contentment is easy when things are going well, but when we encounter hardship or need, it is often harder to remain content with what God has set before us. The key to fighting discontentment in times of trouble is recognizing the true source of your contentment in times of comfort. If you place confidence in material possessions and physical health during times of comfort, your contentment does not rest in God but in what He has provided you. When those things are taken away, your contentment will be taken away as well. We need to prepare ourselves now for the struggles that will inevitably come by ensuring that our contentment rests in God rather than our circumstances.

A great example of this point is prayer. Many people recognize that they pray more often and more fervently during times of need than they do during times of security. I know I am guilty of this. Prayer is just as relevant during times of security as it is in times of need. The problem is that we find our contentment in God's blessings rather than in God Himself. One way you can emphasize to yourself the need to find contentment in God rather than in His blessings is by maintaining a fervent prayer life, even during times of abundance.

5. RESTING IN GOD'S PROTECTION

☒ PSALM 37:12-15, 23-24, 27-29, 32-33

❓: *How was the psalmist able to make such broad generalities when we, and probably the psalmist himself, know from experience there are exceptions to these statements?*

❓: *What examples can you think of from Scripture that demonstrate God's protection of His people?*

The psalmist trusted in God's protection of the righteous. It is important to remember wisdom literature, which this psalm is an example of, must be qualified in two ways. First, the author frequently speaks in generalities. We should not demand everything the psalmist said to be the case every time. There will be times when the wicked will get the upper hand over the weak or the righteous will endure hardship. The primary example of this is the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. If this is the case, then why do the authors of wisdom literature insist on these generalities? Although there are exceptions, sometimes frequent exceptions, to these general principles, the authors of the Old Testament's wisdom literature recognized that these types of statements are important for inspiring trust among God's people. We are far better off trusting in God's protection and being prepared for exceptions than wondering if God is able to protect the righteous. Second, wisdom literature sometimes depends upon an apocalyptic interruption by God into history. Eventually, God will act within human history to establish a kingdom within which these generalities will always be true.

The psalmist trusted in God's protection from the schemes of the wicked. The wicked frequently plot against the righteous (vv. 7, 12, 32), but God will not allow them to gain the upper hand over them (v. 14-15). In fact, God will work to turn their wicked schemes against them. Verse 24 also shows the psalmist's trust in God's protection from material calamity. Given the themes within this psalm, the kind of fall envisioned in this verse is not moral but economic or material.

❓: *Why is trusting in God's protection crucial for believers?*

❓: *In what ways are you failing to trust in God's protection?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psychologists identify security as one of the main needs for a person to function and flourish in society. A sense of endangerment supersedes most other matters in a person’s emotional and psychological outlook. We have an innate tendency toward self-preservation. We admire acts of heroism, such as when someone puts themselves at risk for the sake of others, but when we feel endangered our typical reaction is to protect ourselves. This is not a negative reaction. Humanity would not survive very long if we did not feel the need to protect ourselves from danger. This is why the security found in God’s protection is crucial for believers. Trusting in God’s protection allows Christians to participate in God’s mission without fear. We can give sacrificially to others and in support of the gospel because we trust in God’s protection. We can share the gospel with others because we believe God will preserve us even if they respond in anger or disdain. Without trust in God’s protection, it would be far more difficult for us to participate in God’s mission.

6. WAITING FOR GOD’S SALVATION

■ PSALM 37:18–20, 39–40

- ❓ *How does the conclusion of this psalm bring into perspective some of the interpretive challenges addressed earlier?*
- ❓ *Why is it important for Psalm 37 to conclude with a declaration of God’s salvation?*

As noted above, Psalm 37 focuses on generalities, as does most wisdom literature. At its conclusion, we see why the psalmist felt confident to trust in the generalities he made about God. No matter what happens in life, the psalmist knew his future was secure (v. 37). God will intervene to secure the salvation of the righteous (v. 40). The certainty of this salvation brings the whole psalm into perspective. Of course, there will be times of trouble (v. 39), but what do they ultimately matter if we know our future is secure? Of course, the wicked often seem to have the upper hand, but what does it matter if we know their end is destruction? We can trust God throughout the course of our lives because we know that whatever challenges we face will one day pale in comparison to the salvation He has provided for those who trust Him.

Q: *If we refuse to trust God, who will we turn to for our salvation?*

Q: *How does the salvation to which the psalmist alludes correspond to our salvation in Jesus Christ?*

APPLICATION POINT – Our salvation rests in God’s hands. When we refuse to trust God, we effectively replace Him as our Savior with whatever we put our trust in. This is an appropriate place to remind ourselves that salvation cannot be found apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Placing our trust in money, material things, power, prestige, or pride in our own accomplishments might feel good for a while, but trusting in these things will ultimately lead to our destruction rather than to the salvation the psalmist anticipates.

NEXT STEPS


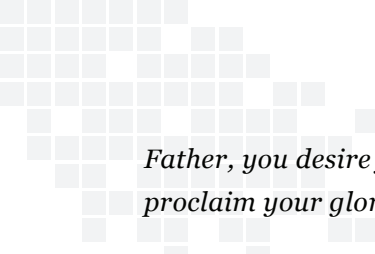
Trusting God is easier to write about and study in a lesson than it is to actually put into practice. After studying Psalm 37, there is no way to get around asking—In what ways are you failing to trust God? You have nothing to gain by lying to yourself. Once you have identified these areas, create a list of the steps you need to take to let go of the control you don’t even really have over these situations and embrace God’s provisions. Your next step of faith begins with the first step on your list.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.

God, you are my great Provider, Sustainer, Protector and Savior. Help me to trust you in all my ways.

Lord Jesus, I could never match you as Savior of my soul. Help me to stop trusting in anything else, including myself, and rely fully on you.



Father, you desire for your glory to fill the earth. Help me to rest in your protection so that I may fearlessly proclaim your glory in every place.

God, make me content in what you have provided me. You are abundantly gracious. To want more than what you have provided is a failure to trust in your goodness.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

January 23, 2022 | Seeking Faith in Times of Doubt

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What caused the strongest doubt you have faced concerning Christianity?

Read Psalm 73.

Pray that this psalm will guide you through the doubts that surface during the Christian life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Never doubt God's commitment to justice or to those who trust Him.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

God wants us to trust in Him no matter the cost.

MEDITATE

"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25).

GETTING STARTED

+This section will introduce the main point of this week's lesson.

Q: *What creeds or commonly accepted Christian truths have you previously doubted?*

Q: *What major Christian figures can you think of who struggled with doubts?*

Many Christians are familiar with the evangelist Billy Graham, who gained widespread recognition and eventually international acclaim as an evangelist, beginning in the 1940s. He organized massive evangelistic crusades. Through his preaching, television, and radio ministries, it is estimated that his lifetime audience topped two billion. Without a doubt, he was one of the most influential Christians in modern history. Fewer people recognize the name Charles Templeton. Templeton was also a prominent evangelist during the 1940s. He and Graham frequently preached at the same crusades. Templeton's ministry, however, ended when he struggled with a series of doubts during the 1950s. He eventually renounced his belief in God. Both Graham and Templeton struggled with doubt at various times. The difference is that Graham persevered through his doubts while Templeton decided to abandon the faith.

Psalm 73 takes readers on a rapid, disorienting ride. The psalm begins with a simple affirmation of truth, "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (Psalm 73:1). The simplicity of this statement and its location at the outset of this psalm suggest to many scholars that it was a sort of creed in ancient Israel, embodying a deeply held belief common in all parts of their society. Think, perhaps, of the statement "God bless America." For many American Christians, this simple phrase expresses the dual commitment they feel to their God and their country. After presenting this creed, the psalmist then challenges the creed with his personal experiences and torment. Given what he has encountered in life, the psalmist is no longer sure of its validity. He is no longer certain God is good to Israel or to those pure in heart. He wonders whether God is even good at all. Like Templeton and Graham, the psalmist struggled with doubt. How will his story end?

Q: *How have you handled doubts about your faith?*

Q: *If you expressed your doubts to others, who encouraged you the most to work through your doubts?*

APPLICATION POINT – As we will see in Psalm 73, the times of strongest doubt are often followed by the times of sweetest comfort. If the psalmist had given in to his doubts, he would have never known the joy of being

reassured of God’s goodness and His commitment to justice. In the Christian life, struggling with doubt is not a betrayal of the faith or a denial of everything you have previously confessed. As with the psalmist, doubt provides an opportunity to persevere in faith and build an ever more stable foundation on which the truth of the gospel may rest. Do not deny your doubts. Instead, use them as an opportunity to dive deeper into your faith.

II UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Psalm 73 is arranged thematically into what is called an extended chiasm or palindrome. A palindrome is a sequence of letters, numbers, words, or ideas that follows the same sequence backwards as it does forwards. A good example is the word “racecar.” If you tried to spell it backwards, you would follow the same sequence of letters used to spell it forward. Biblical poetry often employs this pattern thematically. You encounter the same order of themes reading a psalm from beginning to end as you do from end to beginning.

This type of structure accomplishes two things. It emphasizes the parallel nature of the corresponding parts, and it emphasizes the centrality of the idea at the center of the structure. The structure of Psalm 73 could be depicted as following:

- A. Experience and Belief (vv. 1–3)
- B. Prosperity of the Wicked (vv. 4–12)
- C. Personal Reaction (vv. 13–17)
- D. Affirmation of God’s Justice (vv. 18–20)
- C. Evaluation of the Psalmist’s Reaction (vv. 21–22)
- B. The Desire of the Godly (vv. 23–26)
- A. Experience and Hope (vv. 27–28)

The idea at the center of Psalm 73 is the affirmation of God’s justice. He will hold the wicked accountable for their evil deeds. Each corresponding part is related. For “B” and “C”, the parallels are antithetical, meaning they make opposing points. This structure also helps us visualize the movement within Psalm 73. When we reach the conclusion of the psalm, the psalmist has come a long way in his understanding of God’s justice and the nature of the wicked.

1. THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED
2. DEALING WITH DOUBT
3. THE DESIRES OF THE GODLY

+In addition to the chiasmic arrangement noted above, Psalm 73 follows a clear progression. The psalmist first laments the prosperity of the wicked. He then acknowledges his own doubts before reaffirming his faith in God's justice. The psalm concludes with a reflection on the desires of the godly.

1. THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED

■ PSALM 73:1-12

Q: *Why is the psalmist envious?*

Q: *How do verses 4-12 differ from conventional wisdom and assumptions concerning how God works in the world?*

The psalmist was obviously troubled because of the wicked. Their rejection of God and His law are obvious. They boast about their refusal to fear God. They use their power to abuse others. In verse 6, the psalmist even compares their evil to adornments. As a woman would adorn her neck with a necklace, the wicked boast about their evil for everyone to see. Their evil deeds are not hidden from any place in all of God's creation (v. 9). What troubles the psalmist, however, is not the evil deeds but that the wicked are apparently not held accountable for them. Even though their wickedness is evident for all to see, they seem to prosper. They encounter no hardships until death, which visits them in the same way it does every other person, good or evil. Their lives, evident in the strength of their bodies, are characterized by abundance without even a hint of need.

The prosperity of the wicked creates an existential crisis for the psalmist. If the wicked are not held accountable for their evil deeds, why should anyone commit themselves to righteousness? If the wicked prosper despite their denial of God's rule over their lives, why should the righteous trust God? The psalmist actually admits feeling envious of the prosperity of the wicked. He wishes he had found the prosperity the wicked have through their unrighteous deeds.

Q: *Have you ever been tempted to envy the unrighteous?*

Q: *In what ways do you see the wicked bragging about their unrighteousness today?*

APPLICATION POINT – The issue addressed by the psalmist is legitimate. For centuries, people have questioned, if God is good and all-powerful, why the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer. The Old Testament books of Job and Habakkuk center on this and similar questions. It remains an issue of debate today. What was not legitimate was the psalmist's reaction to this issue, which he recognizes himself within the psalm. When we become envious of the wicked, the sorrow created by the prosperity of the wicked does not center itself on God but upon ourselves. Our disappointment for missing out overrides our concern for what God says is right. This warrants repentance just as much as the wickedness of the prospering evil doers.

Q: *How does the wording of modern translations differ in verse 10?*

Q: *Who is denying God's existence in verse 11?*

One thing everyone discussing Psalm 73 agrees on is that the Hebrew words underlying verse 10 are extremely difficult to understand and translate. The intricacies of the Hebrew language and its metaphors have not been preserved well enough for us to make much sense of the words present. If you look at multiple modern translations, you will find wide divergence in the translation of this verse. This happens occasionally in the Old Testament and even once or twice in the New Testament.

The ESV's translation retains some of the vagueness apparent in the original Hebrew but appears to introduce a new set of characters into this psalm. There are those, with whom the psalmist himself is nearly numbered, who see the prosperity of the wicked and turn their backs on God in pursuit of the approval of the wicked. The wicked successfully deceive the masses, even many who would count themselves among God's faithful. People are drawn to the rich. Power corrupts those who wield it and those who wish to have a piece of it.

The difficulties in understanding verse 10 also make the referent of verse 11 challenging to identify. Who is asking these questions? The wicked or those who are deceived into following them? Given the psalmist's own statements in verse 13, the context may slightly point to those who are deceived. The deception of the wicked is so powerful it can leave those who once followed God questioning His very existence.

Q: *In what ways have you been tempted to compromise your beliefs to gain social acceptance?*

Q: *Is it possible to maintain social acceptance and remain faithful to biblical convictions?*

APPLICATION POINT – The appeal of cultural savviness and the allure of the in-crowd can quickly take you places you never intended to go. Consider the slide of many within the Christian entertainment industry. The past decade has seen many within these circles compromise clear teachings of Scripture in order to gain a wider public appeal. The same thing occurs in the average work place and local hangout, just with much less publicity. The real tragedy is that the perceived gains of these false promises are short-lived. Those who despise God will never approve of anyone who retains any meaningful commitment to the God of the Bible. The most they will allow is for God to be shunned from the public arena and relegated to the most private sphere of a person's life. They can do this with only a mocking sneer. Do not look for the approval of the wicked. It will only come at the cost of your faith.

2. DEALING WITH DOUBT

■ PSALM 73:13–22

Q: *Why does the psalmist claim his purity was in vain?*

Q: *Aside from the prosperity of the wicked, why else does the psalmist doubt the value of his faith?*

Psalm 73:13 is one of the most challenging verses of Scripture. We are simply not used to the biblical authors thinking or writing in these terms, but this is the type of raw, uncensored emotion we often encounter within the Psalms. The logic behind the psalmist's arguments is not hard to comprehend. If the wicked do whatever they want and prosper, then purity in search of God's will is a waste of time. In the psalmist's case, the search for purity is more than a waste of time because it exposes him to the ridicule and rebuke of others (v. 14). In his mind, he sacrificed for

purity and is worse off for it. The failure of such logic is not hard to see, and we can see that this outlook was short-lived for the psalmist. Such a passage confronts us with the reality of doubt among believers in a less-than-perfect world. Even the writers of Scripture were not immune to despair.

❓: *Why is the psalmist wrong?*

❓: *Have you suffered from similar doubts of faith?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist sought a clean heart and innocent hands. This is part of what Jesus means when He tells His followers to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). We want to seek purity from sin and obedience to God’s will. The danger the psalmist fell into, and into which we are all in danger of falling, is religious self-entitlement. In our me-centered reality, we can make the mistake of seeing our holiness as a wage we give to God in return for His blessings. Such an outlook is clearly opposed to the gospel. The gospel teaches us that our holiness is what we are free to pursue because of what Christ has done for us. Our holiness is not a hindrance to our enjoyment but the key to finding our greatest joy, living for the glory of God. Make sure you entrench this gospel-perspective of holiness in your life to flee from the error into which the psalmist nearly falls. This danger is real even in your devotional life. If you are earnestly reading God’s Word and spending time in prayer, it is challenging not to feel like a super-Christian and as though your efforts warrant some kind of acknowledgement from others. Reading Scripture and prayer are rewards in themselves.

❓: *What restrains the psalmist’s thoughts and actions?*

❓: *What causes the change in the psalmist’s thinking?*

One remarkable thing about Psalm 73 is the role of community in restraining the psalmist’s doubts and challenging his evaluation of the wicked. Community may be a bland resolution compared to divine intervention or a miraculous occurrence, but it shows us the powerful influence the people of God wield in the psalmist’s life. The psalmist is so discouraged and full of doubts that he wants to shout from the rooftops, but he cannot because of the duty he feels to the people of God (v. 15). Publicizing his doubts could potentially lead future generations away from faith. No matter how much he is currently doubting his faith, the psalmist does

not want to lead others down his path. His community restrains him from acting on his impulses.

His doubts are such a burden that he has given up hope of working through them. It is too emotionally draining (v. 16). At least until he went into the sanctuary of God (v. 17). It is in the sanctuary that the psalmist finds the strength to work through the doubts he faces and discern the outcome of the wicked. What did the psalmist find in the sanctuary? Among other things, he encounters the people of God, a community who have not given up hope in purity despite personal hardship. He finds a community committed to pursuing God even when it appears futile. Perhaps he even finds a community of former doubters who are able to guide him through his struggles.

Q: *How has the community of faith helped you through past struggles in your faith?*

Q: *Why are so many of us resistant to the concept of community?*

APPLICATION POINT – Community is a crucial element of the Christian faith. There is no such thing as a Lone-Ranger Christian. A strong commitment to the church in the form of a local body of believers is essential to maintaining healthy growth in the Christian life. This entails more than mere church attendance. In fact, it entails more than many churches offer their members. The psalmist’s commitment to the community of faith kept him from marching deeper into denial. How will merely warming a seat during a church service accomplish this for you? If you want to protect yourself from doubt the way the psalmist did and cultivate spiritual growth, you need to create spiritual dependence on other members of your church and allow them to depend on you. This spiritual dependence is made up of discipleship, fellowship, and accountability. These things only happen intentionally. If you don’t recognize these things in your life, take the steps necessary to create them within your community of faith.

Q: *What kind of activities would the psalmist have witnessed at the sanctuary?*

Q: *What processes do you think the psalmist needed in order to discern the end of the wicked?*

In addition to community, the psalmist's move to the sanctuary also offered a valuable change in perspective. The sanctuary was a place of religious devotion and prayer. The psalmist was able to see the priests go through their daily rituals. He was able to hear prayers offered to God. Perhaps he was even encouraged to offer his own prayer that mirrored themes we see in this psalm. This change in perspective gave him the vantage point from which to question his own doubts. The wicked may profit for a time, but there are still many who remain deeply committed to pursuing God in their lives. Purity is not worthless. God's faithfulness is not as distant as it sometimes seems.

🕒: *How can you create opportunities for different perspectives in your own life?*

🕒: *How can rituals reinforce your faith?*

APPLICATION POINT – One way you can create perspective in your life is by including journaling as part of your devotional times. Writing down your thoughts has at least two benefits. Expressing your thoughts in written words helps you understand what you actually think about a subject. Although we rarely recognize it, the ideas we keep in our heads typically function on a generic level, but these generalities do not always work out in reality. Generalities hide inconsistencies. They are content with vague explanations. When you force yourself to articulate what you think in written form, you often recognize these generalities and are challenged to think through them as you write. This is why when people intend to jot down a simple idea or set of instructions, they sometimes fill up six sticky notes before realizing they should have reached for a sheet of paper. Writing encourages you to fill in the details and discover what you really think. Furthermore, when you write down your thoughts, it gives you a chance to return to them at a later time. Thoughts are often fleeting. No matter how strongly you hold to an idea or intensely you feel an emotion, your thoughts are inevitably transient because you continually change. You gather new information on a minute-by-minute basis. You encounter new situations. All of this builds upon and often overshadows what was there before. When you write down your thoughts, feelings, and struggles in a journal, you give yourself an opportunity to revisit these moments in the future, which can provide you with valuable perspective, perhaps at a time when you are deeply in need of it. But it will only be available to you if you do the work now.

3. THE DESIRES OF THE GODLY

🗄️ PSALM 73:23–28

Q: *How do the desires of the godly contrast with the ambition of the wicked?*

Q: *How is verse 26 related to Daniel 3:16-18?*

Psalm 73 concludes with one of the most moving declarations concerning finding fulfillment in God in all of Scripture. The contrast with the psalmist's earlier disposition makes these statements all the more incredible. Whereas the wicked question God's ability to know and intervene in their wicked schemes (v. 11), the psalmist questions where else he could possibly go to find fulfillment (v. 25). Regardless of what happens, he will trust God to sustain him through any situation, and he knows God will ultimately hold the wicked accountable for their evil deeds.

Q: *Which statement from these verses do you find most comforting?*

Q: *Why is a strong devotional life important?*

APPLICATION POINT – As Oakwood emphasizes the importance of a strong devotional life, a legitimate question to ask is, “Why is this important?” If someone confesses Jesus as Savior and Lord, why does it matter if he reads his Bible and prays? Isn't the main thing to be forgiven of our sin? Verse 24 provides a simple but needed response. The psalmist says God guides him with His counsel. The psalmist knows it is impossible for him to remain faithful to God apart from His guidance. The same is true for us. We cannot live for Jesus if we are cut off from His counsel, which is found in God's Word. We cannot live for Jesus if we refuse to acknowledge His immediate presence in prayer. Your devotional life cannot save you from your sins, but it is essential for maintaining your relationship with Jesus.

NEXT STEPS

During your devotional times, your time with God's Word does not have to be entirely devoted to reading. It may also be helpful to devote some time to Scripture memory. Psalm 73:23–26 is an excellent passage with which to begin. These statements are helpful for both instilling and challenging faith. If you find yourself in a time of despair, these verses offer reassurance. Furthermore, these verses will prove challenging to repeat if your heart is not right with God. Imagine allowing the words “There is nothing on earth I desire besides you” flow over your lips when you know your heart is coveting the treasure of the world. Memorizing Scripture will allow you to carry the blessings found during your times with God throughout the entire day.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, forgive me for my doubts. I struggle to maintain belief when I see those prosper who pay you no regard. Help me rely on the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

Father, forgive me for the times I have compromised my faith in order to gain public acceptance. Your approval is far greater than any I can find on earth. Help me stand stronger in the future.

Jesus, thank you for the gospel. You have provided the hope I need when faith is hard. I know it is better to suffer for your sake than to prosper because of wickedness.

God, hold the wicked accountable for their refusal to acknowledge you. If they repent, I will rejoice, but if not, I will rejoice in Your justice.



DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

January 30, 2022 | *The Freedom and Gifts of Righteousness*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Why is righteousness important?

Read Psalm 112.

Pray that God would give you a longing for righteousness, first for righteousness' sake and second for its blessings.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

A commitment to God's law brings freedom to find an enduring heritage.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Righteousness is the key to finding what matters most in life.

MEDITATE

*"Praise the Lord! Blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in his commandments!"
(Psalm 112:1).*

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to contrast how our culture depicts righteous behavior versus how the Bible depict righteous behavior.

Q: *How do you define freedom?*

Q: *What are some ways people misunderstand freedom?*

My children hate to clean up. They can make a complete mess in a matter of minutes, but when I tell them to clean it up, they agonize over how long it will take. Imagine a father who gave up requiring cleanliness and allowed his daughter to leave her room a mess. She may feel an overwhelming sense of joy and freedom at this new way of life at first. She can leave her toys flung all over the den. She can allow her clothes to pile up in her room. She can have unending play, never interrupted by the dogmatic demand to “clean up that mess.” But when her friends invite her over for a dress-up party, she cannot find her princess dress under the mounds of clothes and costumes littering her room. By the time she locates her dress and its accessories, her friends have moved on to other games. Or perhaps Daddy is going to play golf after work one afternoon and invites her to come along, but she cannot find her golf club because it is lost in the yard, so she cannot go. When she runs to her room in sorrow and jumps on her unmade bed, she snaps the window on her toy car because she didn’t see it tangled in her covers. Her “freedom” is actually a burden. She cannot do any of the things she enjoys because of her misguided sense of freedom.

Psalm 112 tells a similar story. Although the wicked may think their wickedness creates opportunities for them, the psalmist recognizes that their wickedness will only lead to destruction. The righteous man, however, sees the freedom that righteousness provides. The more he confines himself to God’s will, the freer he is to pursue what really matters in life.

Q: *Do you view righteousness as a burden or as a gift?*

Q: *How do you see people trying to free themselves from the constraining demands of God?*

APPLICATION POINT – The prevailing view of righteousness in our culture closely parallels the daughter in the example above. People see the righteous demands of God as a burden they long to be free from. They think if they could only cast aside the bonds of a hopelessly outdated morality, they would be free to enjoy all of life’s possibilities. What they are resisting, however, is the only chance they have for joy.

One of the most alarming trends in this vein is the attack on the traditional family. The dynamic of family has transcended time and culture. Anywhere you go at any time in humanity's past, you find moms and dads living together with children, sometimes with extended family members included. There are unique exceptions, of course, but they did not occur because of a misguided understanding of freedom. Today, however, many people see the traditional family as a burden imposed on them from outside. Some people want to be free from any ties to others. They do not want spouses or children or any of the sacrifices traditional family demands. Others want to release the traditional family from the structures that have characterized it at every point in the past. Why does the family have to begin with a husband and a wife? Why can't two women start a family? Why do we even have to stop at two? Why can't three or more people commit to one another in some sort of non-monogamous family? These longings to release humanity from the constraints of the traditional family have led some cultural elites to substitute the phrase "care unit" for "family." None of this is going to lead to greater happiness. Like the daughter who refused to clean up her room, this type of freedom only leads to disappointment, hurt, and longing. Anytime we seek to free ourselves from the righteousness of God, we will only find ourselves in bondage.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Psalm 112 is another acrostic. In this case, every half verse begins with a consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The final two verses are divided into thirds to begin with the final six consecutive letters. The use of acrostics suggests completeness or comprehensiveness. The psalmist is encouraging complete conformity to the righteous way of God.

Psalm 112 parallels Psalm 111 in several significant ways. Both contain ten verses. Both are acrostics with the same patterning. Psalm 111 focuses on the ways of God. Psalm 112 focuses on the ways of the righteous person. Additionally, these psalms share multiple themes and words. These parallels suggest that the arrangement of these psalms is not coincidental. The sequence of Psalms 111 and 112 invites us to see the character of the righteous person as an imitation of the character of God. Such imitation language corresponds to Paul's frequent use of imitation language (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1).

As with Psalm 37, the acrostic structure of Psalm 112 will influence how we study it. Rather than seeing a progression in thought, we see the psalmist moving between themes as necessary to complete his literary form. Thus, we will look at the major themes as they appear across the psalm.

1. CONTRAST BETWEEN THE EVIL AND RIGHTEOUS
2. BLESSINGS IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSITY
3. BENEFITS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS
-FREEDOM TO BE GENEROUS

- FREEDOM FROM FEAR
- AN ENDURING LEGACY: CHILDREN
- AN ENDURING LEGACY: REMEMBRANCE

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine the main themes of Psalm 112 in further detail and draw personal applications from them.

1. CONTRAST BETWEEN THE EVIL AND RIGHTEOUS

❏ PSALM 112:1, 10

Q: *What contrast is contained in the description of the righteous?*

Q: *What does “fear the Lord” mean?*

Psalm 112 begins by describing the blessedness of the righteous man (Psalm 112:1) and concludes by describing the frenzied ravings of the wicked man (Psalm 112:10). These function as antithetical “bookends” to the message of Psalm 112. This literary device provides the background against which the rest of the psalm can be understood. Think of it as a dart board. If you throw a dart at a plain wall, you have no frame of reference for whether the throw was good or not. When you throw a dart at a dart board, the graduated concentric circles interpret the throw for you. Hitting the innermost rings is a good throw. Hitting the outer rings or missing the whole board is a poor throw. This is what literary bookends do for psalms and narratives. They create the framework for understanding the rest of the psalm. Psalm 112 is about the contrast between the righteous and the wicked.

The psalmist describes the righteous man in two contrasting ways. He fears the Lord, but he also delights in the Lord’s commandments. In fear, we can sense the righteous man is uncomfortably aware of every sin in his life, every imperfection, every failure. God, on the other hand, is complete perfection. How could he possibly find himself in the Lord’s presence? In delight, we can sense the righteous man has completely forgotten himself and has become enamored with the perfection of God’s will as presented in His commands. The righteous man lives between these

two emotions and is never sure which impulse will take over at any given moment.

The psalmist describes the wicked by contrasting him with the righteous. Where the righteous man is enamored with God's commandments, the wicked becomes enraged when he sees the righteous seeking God through obedience to His commandments. Throughout this psalm, the psalmist highlights the enduring quality of the righteous man's character. The wicked man, however, will perish.

Q: *Can you describe a time when you have been enamored by God's presence?*

Q: *Why doesn't the wicked man give in to righteousness when its blessings are so apparent?*

APPLICATION POINT –I remember my mom remarking how she was always uncomfortable when entering the auditorium of our church growing up. She attended Catholic churches until she was in her mid-twenties. She said there was always a sense of reverence when her family entered the sanctuary for mass. The auditorium of our Baptist church was quite different. People chatted, sometimes boisterously, among themselves. Kids ran up and down the aisles before somersaulting into their seats. The sound crew was busy working out the last-minute kinks in the system. Even the lighting encouraged social interaction. None of this communicated a fear of God in my mother's mind. I'm not sure if she was correct in analyzing the reasons behind the two experiences, but I do believe she was correct to point out that many people lack any sense of fear or reverence toward God. Reverence demonstrates an awareness of the enormity of God. Since the psalmist claims that the righteous person fears God, perhaps, on some occasions, it would do us good to discover ways we can show we fear God through revering Him.

2. BLESSINGS IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSITY

■ PSALM 112:4, 7, 8

Q: *Where else do we see imagery of light and darkness in Scripture?*

Q: *What other biblical stories portray steadfast hope in the midst of adversity?*

Although the psalmist highlights the value of righteousness, he still maintains a realistic outlook on life. The righteous person is not free from adversity. In fact, righteousness often invites adversity into the believer's life. In Psalm 112, the psalmist acknowledges adversity but says the righteous person will overcome it. In Psalm 112:4, we see light dawning in the darkness that has overshadowed the upright. This light-darkness language is metaphorical. The darkness represents adversity that the righteous person overcomes with his faith in God. In Psalm 112:7 the righteous person receives bad news just like the rest of humanity, but his steady trust in God remains unshaken. The psalmist mentions the adversaries of the righteous in Psalm 112:8. Although these adversaries plot against the righteous man, he is eventually triumphant over them. A life of righteousness does not guarantee a perfect life, but the righteous person refuses to fear even in adversity and trusts God to overcome evil.

Q: *How does your reaction to adversity compare with an unbeliever's?*

Q: *How could you respond to adversity more faithfully in the future?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psalm 112 offers believers a sobering reminder. We are not entitled to a life free from adversity. Adversity will come eventually, and our response to it reflects the depth of our Christian conviction. If adversity blinds us to God's blessings, our joy is not centered where it should be. The key to sustaining faith through adversity is anchoring your life in the perfect will of God now.

3. BENEFITS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

■ **PSALM 112:3, 5, 9**

Q: *Would you typically connect righteousness with wealth?*

Q: *How would you reconcile these verses with passages such as Luke 16:19-31?*

Righteousness gives us the freedom to be generous with others. A person who delights in the will of God does not need material resources to find purpose or contentment. Instead, he may use wealth as a tool to bless others in need. The parallels between Psalms 111 and 112 illuminate this point. Psalm 112:3-4 closely parallel Psalm 111:3-4. Psalm 111:3 describes God's splendor and majesty. These are innate qualities of His being. Psalm 112:3 says the righteous man's house is full of wealth and riches. This need not be taken as a universal truth but as a general principle (Luke 16:19-31). As with God's splendor and majesty, the righteous man is known for his wealth and riches because he blesses others through them. The wealth and riches of the righteous man (Psalm 112:3) are linked to his generosity (Psalm 112:9) by the repetition of the phrase "his righteousness endures forever."

Q: *How does your generosity reflect your commitment to seeking righteousness?*

Q: *Why is there a connection between righteousness and wealth and riches?*

APPLICATION – One connection between righteousness and wealth is the Christian commitment to excellence. This idea stems from passages such as 1 Corinthians 10:31. Christians recognize that the manner in which they complete their work, like everything else about them, reflects the perfection of the God they serve. In America, this commitment to excellence and hard work became known in some locations as the Protestant work ethic. Many popular ideologies among modernized cultures, such as pragmatism, undercut this commitment to excellence. Today, people seem content to do just enough to get by. I have observed this shift in the classes I teach. When I first started teaching, only several years ago, students seemed offended if their work received a C and challenged me vigorously on these matters. This did not improve their work, but at least I knew they cared. Today, I rarely get any pushback from students who are unhappy with their grades. Many students openly acknowledge doing just enough to get a passing grade. In addition to crushing the soul of their teacher, it reflects the changing mindset towards the quality of the work we produce. We are failing to recognize the connection between excellence, righteousness, and the God we serve.

PSALM 112:1, 7, 8

Q: *Is fear a positive or a negative feeling?*

Q: *Is a righteous person fearful?*

Psalm 112 contains an interesting dynamic pertaining to fear. The righteous person fears God (Psalm 112:1). In fearing God, he finds freedom from all other types of fear. He is not afraid of the adversity he will encounter in his life (Psalm 112:7). He handles each situation as it comes with the confidence of someone who is secure in the righteousness of God. He is not afraid of his adversaries (Psalm 112:8). He is confident that God will address the wickedness of those who oppose righteousness. Their disdain for him is only due to their disdain for God (John 15:18). The key to becoming free from fear is fear itself. Fearing God sets every other fear into perspective.

Q: *Are you more controlled by the fear of God or the fear of man?*

Q: *What is your biggest fear?*

APPLICATION POINT – There is a poster hanging outside a cubical at work that lists the various types of phobias people have. It numbers well into the hundreds. I'd like to count them one day, but I'm afraid doing so may somehow contribute to the list. I've researched to find out the number of fears recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, but they seem too fearful to give a definitive number. They are willing to separate phobias into three broad categories. Phobias range from fairly common ones, such as arachnophobia (fear of spiders) and claustrophobia (fear of small spaces), to seemingly bizarre ones, such as hylophobia (fear of forests) and bovinophobia (fear of cows or cattle). Psalm 112 shows that this endless number of fears and phobias can be replaced by a singular fear of God. If you fear the Lord, you do not have to fear anything else. When we remove God from the center of our lives, other fears tend to multiply.

Q: *How does this verse relate to Genesis 22:18?*

Q: *Why are the blessings of righteousness passed along to children?*

The first gift of righteousness pertains to the patterns it will instill in your children. Fearing the Lord and delighting in His commandments have generational implications. The psalmist is echoing the promise God made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2). God promised to make Abraham into a great nation and to make him a blessing to others. In Genesis 22:18, we gain a clearer understanding of what God had in mind. God would bless all the nations through Abraham's descendants. This promise was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:1–17), who blessed the nations by dying on the cross and rising again, but the implications continue to be carried on through successive generations who fear God and delight in His commandments. The commitment of a righteous person to God has implications for long after they are gone.

Q: *If you are an empty-nester or do not have children, how can you still apply the implications of this verse to yourself?*

Q: *How are you trying to instill your love for God in your children?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psalm 112:2 demands that we stop to reflect on how this generational blessing takes place. Many parents today are hesitant to force their beliefs on their children for fear it will turn them away from the faith. Their concern is no doubt fed by the observation of many rebellious youth who have despised their parent's instruction. They hope their commitment to God may be transmitted passively to their children. This hope is reinforced by modern parenting advice that emphasizes providing choices for your children to encourage critical thinking and individuality. These concerns are well-intended but fail to recognize the importance God instilled within the family for training children to fear Him and keep His commandments. Our society is committed to an unrealistic and unhealthy view of self-autonomy. Their concern is to liberate children from the oppressive expectations of their parents, especially those parents who are committed to anything like biblical Christianity, so they may be free to become whoever and whatever they want to be. Our ears have been trained to think that this type of "freedom" language is an unquestioned good, but the Bible provides us a much different view of raising children. Ephesians 6:4 commands fathers to resist provoking their children but instead to raise them up in discipline and instruction of the Lord. Parents must actively pass along their faith to their children. This takes discipline and a conscious effort on the part of Christian parents. Children may refuse this instruction, but that is no excuse for parents to fall short

of the expectations given to us in Scripture. Christians who fear God and delight in His commandments will actively pass this faith to their children. This is the vision underlying Psalm 112:2.

■ PSALM 112:3, 6, 9

Q: *Why does righteousness stand forever?*

Q: *Can a righteous person ever be unconcerned with righteousness?*

Psalm 111:8 announces that God's precepts are established forever and ever. Thus, when a person pursues righteousness, he is seeking something that endures. This makes his character dependable. A righteous person maintains his character even in the midst of adversity because his character is grounded in God rather than himself. Psalm 112 also says that righteousness will be remembered. Being firmly established in God's commands creates a legacy that will be remembered long after the righteous person is gone. Family and friends will reflect on his or her commitment to God's precepts and be encouraged to do the same. Even after he passes from memory, he remains a part of how righteousness has been carried from one generation to the next. Christians today know their faith because people 200, 300, 400 years ago carried on the legacy of those from whom they received the faith. The righteous person will be remembered forever because he is part of something far greater than himself.

Q: *What do you hope to be remembered for after you are gone?*

Q: *How have others sought to create a legacy?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the dangers of the digital age is that we have nothing of substance to pass along to those who will come after us. If you enjoy reading biographies, you know that historians reconstruct the lives of the people they write about, at least in part, by reading letters they penned and journals they wrote. It is hard to see emails serving this function for the current generation. There is no way to go back to a time before we digitized so much of our lives. Once technology is created, it demands to be used. But we can refuse to allow it to take over every part of our existence. Consider keeping some part of your devotional routine physical. Take notes in a physical Bible that could be handed down to someone else. Keep a journal with pen and paper. Make sure convenience does not completely exclude you from recording a legacy for others to receive.

NEXT STEPS

This is a great lesson to encounter so early during Oakwood's emphasis on creating a strong devotional life because it reminds us of why a strong devotional life is important. If the only thing that can be said after this emphasis is over is that you read your Bible and pray more, then it has not achieved its goal. The goal of a strong devotional life is to transform your character to become more like Jesus Christ. As you continue to think about instilling strong devotional habits, make sure you never divorce your devotional life from the development of righteous character. What you do in private with God has implications for who you are in the world when everyone is watching.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, thank you for the freedom I have in Jesus Christ. I am able to pursue joy unencumbered by the demands and expectations of the world.

Lord Jesus, you suffered and died for me. Give me the strength to pursue righteousness in the midst of adversity.

Father, keep me from living in fear. Although difficulties can come, nothing that happens to me can take away my faith in you.

Lord, make me central in how the gospel will be carried over into the next generation.



DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

February 6, 2022 | Godly Investments

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What spiritual practices have you adopted that you hope will have implications long after you are gone?

Read Psalms 127 and 128.

Ask God to help you invest your life to yield generational blessings.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God's plan for your life has implications that extend beyond you to the coming generations.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Your greatest joy is linked to seeing the coming generations multiply in godliness.

MEDITATE

"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain" (Psalm 127:1).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to consider the importance of investing your life in godliness.

Q: *Why is “investing” generally considered to be a wise course of action?*

Q: *In addition to financial resources, what other resources might be invested for gain?*

The concept of financial investment can be traced back for centuries. Stock exchanges in the United States are almost as old as the country itself. Today, it is widely recognized that investing part of your financial capital will secure a better future for yourself and for those who love and depend on you. Even though companies fail, recessions occur routinely, and the financial market can crash unexpectedly, few financial experts recommend stuffing your savings under your mattress. Over a long enough period of time, it is better to give up a little now in order to see greater gains in the future.

Regardless of your views on financial investments, the same concept—sacrifice now to create a greater gain in the future—can be seen at work in how the Bible describes living for the sake of the coming generations. Trusting in God’s provision and following His will over your own inclinations will create blessings that extend far beyond your own lifetime. The concepts are not completely identical. Gains from financial investments are not strictly realized until they are cashed out whereas righteous behavior is likely to secure benefits both now and in the future. The benefits you reap now will not diminish the return recognized by those who come after you. Thus, investing your life in righteousness yields dividends now and in the future.

Q: *Is there ever a time that would be unwise to invest your life spiritually?*

Q: *In what other ways are spiritual investments unlike financial investments?*

APPLICATION POINT – Another key distinction must be noted at the outset of this lesson. The idea of investing for future generations is not unheard of within the wider society. The common phrase you might hear is, “I want to make the world a better place.” But Christians intend far more than this vague cliché. Where non-Christians may seek to make the world a better place by decreasing their carbon footprint, picking up litter on the highway, or even just extending goodwill to one another, Christians recognize that the only lasting difference carried forward to future generations rests within the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel has the power to transform hearts and change lives. The gospel has the power to reconcile people to God and encourage godliness in every area of life.

Christians may determine that it is their responsibility to join in the efforts listed above, but we must always recognize that our responsibility to the coming generations extends beyond those matters to the gospel.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalms 127 and 128 share a concern for investing in the future generations. Psalm 127 emphasizes the importance of trusting in God for the sake of those who will come after you. Psalm 128 emphasizes that the blessings that stem from fearing God extend to future generations.

1. INVESTING BY TRUSTING GOD

2. INVESTING BY FEARING GOD

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine these psalms and consider how each emphasizes the importance of investing in future generations.

1. INVESTING BY TRUSTING GOD

■ PSALM 127

Q: *Why is our labor in vain apart from God?*

Q: *How can the psalmist's point be extended to other parts of life and labor?*

Psalm 127 urges readers to keep God central in their lives and to acknowledge their need for Him in every circumstance. No matter how hard the builder works or how alert the watchman remains, their work can be easily undermined. Poor planning may leave the work of a good builder undone. It does not matter how well two-thirds of the house is built if the rest is never completed. Even if the builder completes his task, it can be undone by an earthquake or some other unpreventable natural disaster. The watchman may save a few hundred people who otherwise would be captured by an advancing army, but if the army is big enough, he may only delay the inevitable. All of humankind's striving is pointless apart from God's oversight. There are not enough hours in the day, even if

you spent all of them awake, to plan for every contingency.

❓: *Why is it challenging to accept that some circumstances are beyond our control?*

❓: *How is the psalmist's point liberating for us?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the most important lessons we can learn in life is that some things are beyond our control. No matter how thoroughly we prepare, disaster can strike at any moment and derail our efforts. Or we could learn the situation contains more variables than we could have possibly recognized. Sometimes, things do not go the way we planned because of circumstances beyond our control. This can be devastating for many of us, but this fact is crucial to the message of Psalm 127. We dare not ever conceive of our lives apart from God. Once we recognize we are completely dependent on Him, we can also recognize the blessings that come from learning to trust in Him. If we keep God at the center of our lives, we do not have to work ourselves to the point of physical and mental exhaustion. We are not left wondering if we have done enough. Keeping God at the center allows us to rest in His provision.

❓: *What is the relationship between verses 1-2 and verses 3-5?*

❓: *Why does the author describe the blessings of children with a war metaphor?*

For us, the psalmist abruptly transitions from discussing God's provision and our limitations (Psalm 127:1-2) to praising children (Psalm 127:3-5). Perhaps this transition would have been more intuitive for the original audience. We think the decision to have kids or not is a personal choice and/or a scientific matter. We call it "family planning." If children are not wanted during a certain period, the use of contraceptives can reliably achieve that result. On the other hand, many couples are able to overcome struggles with infertility with various medical techniques. It was probably far easier for ancient Israelites to recognize that the size and timing of the family ultimately rests in God's hands. Thus, for them, the move from accepting God's control over all of life's circumstances to a house full of children would seem more intuitive.

The psalmist employs an unexpected metaphor to describe the blessings of children. The language is unmistakably warlike, comparing children to arrows. To understand the author's point, we have to consider

what an arrow does for a warrior and what metaphorical connection he envisions between this and children. In a battle, arrows could be shot indiscriminately into a group of enemy soldiers. They could also be shot with precision, targeting a specific warrior. Children are similarly versatile. As we grow older, our opportunities to influence those around us change and often begin to diminish. Children, if trained in godliness, are able to sustain our legacy over many generations. They are a versatile approach to continuing our influence even when we begin to decline.

❓: *How does the portrayal of children in this psalm challenge today's common assumptions?*

❓: *What common concerns make people weigh the value of having children in today's world?*

APPLICATION POINT – Declining birth rates across Western civilization reveal that many people do not share the psalmist's sentiment. This can be a challenging subject to address because so many other issues are intertwined with childlessness. The general outlook towards children today falls well short of the ideal presented in Scripture. Many Christians have, probably unwittingly, adopted the common cultural mindset toward having children.

Several decades ago, there was a growing concern among intellectual elites that the earth was heading toward irreparable over-population. They predicted large increases in starvation, poverty, and neglect. The decades since have revealed their fears to be unfounded, not because the increase in population did not come but because our means of production proved to be more capable of handling the growth than the prognosticators feared. Today, a similar concern revolves around ecological issues. Some people worry that an expanding human population will have ever more devastating effects on the environment. Others take what they perceive to be the high ground, declaring they could not conceive of bringing a child into a world facing such an ecological crisis. It does not take hysteria to sound the alarm against having children. Many couples today are choosing not to have children because of the financial cost they will demand. Others simply recognize that children would be more of an imposition on their lifestyle than they are willing to accept.

These common mindsets against having children all view children as a problem, whether ecological, financial, or otherwise. The Bible, however, presents children as a blessing, not a problem. If anything, raising godly children is the solution to many of the problems facing our world. We can thus see the metaphor of the psalmist take full effect. Children are like arrows that can be drawn back and released into the world with tremendous gospel effectiveness. This does not demand that every Christian couple have as many children as possible. It does

demand that we reshape our outlook on having children and the value they have for us and for society. Children are an investment for the future, not a problem.

Q: *Does the outlook of this psalm reflect the life of Solomon?*

Q: *What does the Bible tell us about Solomon's children?*

■ 1 KINGS 9:19, 11:1–13

Psalm 127 concludes with a cautionary tale. It begins with a superscription containing the words “of Solomon.” Many conservative scholars believe this is an assertion of authorship, just as the words “of David” often identify him as the author of a particular psalm. If this is indeed the case, Psalm 127 contains a tragedy in that its author failed to live out the message he penned. Solomon can best be described as half-hearted. At times, he exhibited unparalleled wisdom and devotion to God. His final analysis in the book of 1 Kings, however, severely maligns his character. Instead of trusting God to establish the infrastructure of his kingdom, Solomon invested in extensive building projects through the conscription of slave laborers (1 Kings 9:15–22). Rather than watching over Solomon's kingdom, God determined to hand most of it over to a political rival soon after Solomon's death (1 Kings 11:9–40; 1 Kings 12:16–24). Solomon had over seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines (1 Kings 11:3), but the Bible only mentions three of his children. Two daughters, Basemath and Taphath, are mentioned passingly in 1 Kings 4:11 and 15. His son Rehoboam succeeded him as king only to see the kingdom quickly disintegrate. This hardly seems like a strong heritage or “arrows in the hand of a warrior.” Thus, the author of Psalm 127 tragically failed to live out the message of his psalm. He was the author of inspired Scripture, but the message of his own words failed to penetrate his heart.

Q: *Why do we often struggle to live according to the principles we know are right?*

Q: *How does your time in God's Word impact your daily life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Solomon’s tragedy contains an unmistakable warning for you. You have God’s inspired Word. You are encouraged by your pastors to engage with it daily, and, no doubt, many of you do. Reading and studying the Bible is vital for your spiritual health and the health of your church, but if your engagement with it goes no further than mere exposure, you are heading for a tragedy like we see in the life of Solomon. You must learn to be subject to God’s Word and apply its precepts to your life. If engaging with Scripture during a sermon or devotional time does not lead to spiritual growth through application to your life, the Bible is not having the full effect God intends. Checking a box on a Scripture-reading plan is good, but our engagement with God’s Word cannot stop there.

2. INVESTING BY FEARING GOD

■ PSALM 128

Q: *What cultural differences can diminish the importance we see in Psalm 128:2?*

Q: *How is Psalm 128:2 related to Genesis 3:17–19?*

Psalm 128 highlights the benefits of fearing God. As this psalm makes clear, fearing God is best demonstrated by walking in His ways. The commitment to follow God’s ways has benefits that resonate throughout all parts of life. Thus, fearing God can be seen as an investment.

The psalmist begins by describing how those who fear God will eat the fruit of their own labor. For an ancient Israelite, this entailed freedom within the land God had given them. They were not under the control of a ruthless foreign power who exploited them. Their toil no longer served to profit a cruel master. The fear of God leads to freedom to reap the rewards and enjoy the benefits of one’s own labor.

Another dynamic of this promise pertains to the curse upon the land in Genesis 3:17–19. After the original human couple sinned, God cursed the land so that it would be difficult to harvest a reliable crop. Psalm 128:2 shows that a commitment to walk in God’s ways and in fear of Him represent a reversal of His curse on the ground, at least to a minor extent. This curse was ultimately reversed by the work of Jesus on our behalf (Romans 8:19–21).

Q: *How does the gospel transform the way you think about the struggles you face at work?*

Q: *How can this passage transform your view of work even at a job you do not enjoy?*

APPLICATION POINT – We do not typically think of blessings in terms of work. Work for us often seems like a drudgery we would rather do without instead of a vehicle of God’s blessing. The Bible, however, gives a much different portrayal of work. From the very beginning, humanity was expected to work in God’s creation (Genesis 2:15). The gift of the promised land, a sure symbol of God’s blessing in ancient Israel, entailed a responsibility to work. Land apart from labor would do little good. We were created for work, and one of life’s greatest blessings is to see God multiply the fruits of our labor. If we walk in God’s ways, we will see how God blesses our labor to provide for our families and reflect His own glory. God-glorifying work is a worthwhile investment.

Q: *What does the image of a fruitful vine communicate?*

Q: *In what ways are children like olive shoots?*

Walking in God’s ways has benefits that extend to your family as well. The psalmist described the wife of one who fears God as a fruitful vine. He wrote this psalm from a male perspective, but it is easy to see how this blessing could be reciprocal. A fruitful wife will support a fruitful husband and vice versa. The children of those who walk in God’s ways are like olive shoots. This comparison underscores how children are an investment for future generations. Olive trees sometimes remain barren for nearly forty years before producing a crop. An ancient Israelite would not plant an olive tree for himself but for those who came after him. In the same way, the children of those who fear God are blessings for future generations.

Q: *What kind of enduring legacy do you want to establish for your children?*

Q: *What steps will you take to create that legacy?*

APPLICATION POINT – The most enduring memory I have of my father is of him sitting in his chair in the living room an hour or so before he left for work to read his Bible and pray. He was a shift worker, so sometimes he read in the afternoons and other times early in the mornings. He was the most faithful man I have ever known in spending daily time with God, and he did it in front of the entire family. Years after he passed on, my brother and I still remark how we remember Dad reading the Bible and praying before leaving for work. It is an enduring legacy that has carried on in his children, and I hope will carry into the future. Sometimes it will be appropriate for you to seek private opportunities to pray and read Scripture (Matthew 6:6), but it is also important for parents to model a strong devotional life for their children. Children need to understand that Christianity is not reserved for Sundays, and one of the best ways parents can show this is by demonstrating for their children the importance of daily time in God’s Word and prayer. A month ago, my wife remarked that she was happy to know I spent regular time in God’s Word, but she was concerned that our children did not understand because I always read from my iPad. There is nothing wrong with reading God’s Word digitally, but we now do so many things on these devices that it is harder for children to recognize when parents are reading Scripture. I realized I need to read a physical Bible to have the effect I intended for my children.

Q: *What is a “Psalm of Ascent”?*

Q: *When would an ancient Israelite ascend to Jerusalem?*

Psalm 128 begins with personal and family blessings, and it concludes by widening the circle to include the blessings this man will find in his community. Walking in God’s ways allows him to seek the prosperity and longevity of the nation. The superscription of Psalm 128 says it is a Psalm of Ascent. Many scholars believe this notation means the psalm was commonly sung among Israelite pilgrims as they ascended to Jerusalem for the annual feasts. As families drew nearer to Jerusalem, they encountered more and more pilgrims along the way. It was an opportunity for them to reflect on the ways in which God had blessed them and rejoice with one another in God’s provision. The person who had faithfully walked in God’s ways had a lot to share. Those walking with him would recognize how God had blessed him and how his blessings would resonate among the rest of his people.

Q: *How can we emulate the kinds of conversations that would have taken place as Israelites ascended to Jerusalem?*

Q: *Why is community important for Christians?*

APPLICATION POINT – Today, we do not have an opportunity to take a pilgrimage to a holy city for festivals. Most people drive to church, and the walk from the parking lot to the sanctuary does not provide much opportunity for conversation. We need to protect our conversation at church to ensure that we experience the blessings of community fellowship. Move beyond banal discussion about the weather, politics, and sports while you are with other believers. Take time to ask others what God is showing them in their times in His Word. Pray for one another and encourage one another. Community blessings will not occur if we hold one another at arm's length.

NEXT STEPS

Your devotional life is one of the primary investments you can make to see the rest of God's blessings discussed in these psalms come to fruition. Many of you will be at a crucial point if you began your personal devotions when Oakwood began emphasizing this need. At 4–5 weeks in, you are forming good habits, but you are also at a point when many well-intentioned Christians fall off. Take the steps you need to persevere. Seek the support of someone else in the congregation. If another person is in the same situation, commit to checking in with each other during this week. The blessings described in these psalms for those who will follow in God's ways are well worth the effort.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, help me to fear you and walk in your ways. Your way is filled with blessings, but more importantly, it leads to you.

God, help me to invest in the future, especially by investing in children who will live long past me.

Father, help me live according to conviction. Take my wayward heart and replace it with a heart that is able to stand upon your Word.

God, help me to create a legacy founded on your Word, relevant for the community around me, and focused on the coming generations.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

February 13, 2022 | *Trusting God When All Seems Lost*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Why does the Bible contain laments?

Read Psalm 13.

Pray this lesson will help you learn how to lament well.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

We must trust in God's faithfulness even during times of lamentation.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Strengthen your faith now to prepare yourself to handle times that will be challenging to your faith.

MEDITATE

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1).

GETTING STARTED

+This section considers why this psalm ends in hope rather than remain in lament.

Q: *Why do schools and businesses conduct fire drills?*

Q: *In what areas of life do you “prepare for the worst and hope for the best”?*

Several years ago, the company I work for decided all employees should undergo active shooter training. At the time, I worked at a desk in the lobby of the building, and the trainer identified my post as a likely first contact position. He gave everyone who worked at that post detailed instructions on what to do should the situation ever arise so we would be protected as much as possible and could alert others to the threat. Everyone at the company was instructed on what to do in this scenario and how best to help law enforcement officers when they arrived on the scene. I pray I never have to put those instructions into action, but I am incredibly thankful to have been prepared for what to do if it happens.

In Psalm 13, the psalmist is faced with a situation he hoped never to encounter. His faith is being challenged, and it seemed as though God has abandoned him. But he is prepared. When adversity arose, he drew upon what he knew to be true about God, and his faith is strong enough to preserve him through the horrendous challenges he faces. His preparation did not keep the trial from coming, but he knew what to do when the situation arose.

Q: *How can you prepare yourself to face spiritual challenges?*

Q: *How can trials be opportunities to build your faith?*

APPLICATION POINT – Everyone endures trials in life. It does not matter if you are rich or poor, young or old, confident or self-conscious, saved or unsaved. Christians understand that the trials we face are also trials of faith. Will we persevere during times when it is difficult to maintain our faith in God? The best thing you can do is to strengthen your faith now so you are prepared when trials come. For faithful Christians, trials are times when they can build upon their faith, but it is impossible to build in difficult times if the foundation is missing. The inevitability of trials is one reason that practicing spiritual disciplines is important. When we seek consistent spiritual growth through following spiritual disciplines, we entrench the faith we need to draw closer to God during trials, as the psalmist does in Psalm 13.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+A German Old Testament scholar, Franz Delitzsch (1813–1890), compared Psalm 13 to throwing a rock into a pond. The waves are strongest at the epicenter, but they soon smooth out across the rest of the pond. We see doubt and lament in control at the beginning of Psalm 13, but as the psalm progresses, we see the psalmist’s demeanor smooth out as he reflects on God.

1. HAS GOD FORGOTTEN ME?
2. HOW CAN GOD RESCUE ME?
3. HOW IS GOD SO GOOD TO ME?

GOING DEEPER

+This section will move through each stanza of Psalm 13 and draw lessons we can learn from this lament.

1. HAS GOD FORGOTTEN ME?

■ PSALM 13:1-2

Q: *How would you describe the psalmist’s mood in verses 1-2?*

Q: *How does he create this mood?*

At the beginning of Psalm 13, we find the psalmist at the height of his despair. His words evoke almost a sense of panic. As with most psalms, the specifics of the situation are left for the reader to imagine, but what he does express is the feeling of being abandoned by God. The language found in verse 1 is challenging to understand theologically, but once Hebrew idioms are understood, they underline the sense of neglect the psalmist feels. He questions whether God has forgotten him, but if God is all-knowing (Psalm 147:5; 1 John 3:20), then his assertion is impossible. At another point in the Psalms, David, the author of this psalm, acknowledges that God knows everything about him before even he himself knows (Psalm 139:1–4). So the implied assertion that God has forgotten him

should not be understood literally. The same should be understood for the reference to God hiding His face. This is anthropomorphic language intended to communicate a point different from the literal meaning of the words. We need not be overly specific concerning the psalmist's precise meaning, but the general idea is that he feels God has withheld His help in the situation. Such abandonment in a time of need would lead any of us to feel the despair expressed by the psalmist in verse 1.

Q: *Is it appropriate for Christians to lament?*

Q: *How does the psalmist limit his lament when he addresses God?*

APPLICATION POINT – In Philippians 4:4–6, Paul states, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Is Paul prohibiting Christians from expressing the kind of lament we see in Psalm 13? Probably not. Even Paul expressed feelings of deep-seated anguish at times (Romans 9:2). If this is the case, then how can Christians lament in a manner consistent with Philippians 4:4–6? We should follow the example set by Psalm 13. Although the psalmist feels deep despair, notice that he tempers his accusations by voicing them as questions. He does feel despair, but he is careful not to let his despair spiral out of control. This is something Christians must keep in mind when we are suffering through trials. It is good to acknowledge loss and hurt, but we must do it in a way that also acknowledges God's holiness and Jesus's reign over all things.

Q: *Who are the characters introduced in verses 1–2?*

Q: *What is the role of the enemy in this psalm?*

Although the nature of the psalmist's crisis is not obvious, the cast of characters he introduces is instructive. In verse 2, the psalmist introduces his enemy into the equation. We are not sure of the extent to which the enemy may have been involved in the origin of this situation, but his glee at the thought of the psalmist's suffering only makes things worse. The psalmist begins, however, by addressing God. He recognizes that his situation can ultimately be traced back to God, regardless of whether He was an active or passive participant. The enemy's role is always secondary.

Q: *How is the psalmist's order instructive for how we view our own trials and struggles?*

Q: *How does acknowledging God's providence limit the animosity we feel toward others, even when they are the direct cause of the struggles we face?*

APPLICATION POINT – As is obvious throughout the Psalms, trials leading to laments are an inevitable part of life. No matter how well you protect yourself, you will eventually have to deal with loss and suffering in some form. For most of us, struggles are a daily reality. Something somewhere is not going the way we would like. Our struggles can often be traced directly to a specific set of circumstances or a specific individual, such as the psalmist's enemy. For us to lament well, it is important to acknowledge God's providence over all of life, as the psalmist implicitly does. No matter how unforeseen to us, God is not taken by surprise by anything we struggle with. No matter how threatening the situation is, nothing is beyond His power to intervene. When we suffer trials that lead us to lamentation, we must first begin with God, as the psalmist does. We will only be able to process our lament when we fully appreciate our struggle in relationship to God and all His attributes. This provides the framework for how to lament well and how to sort out the various feelings we encounter during seasons of lament. Beginning with God also gives clarity to instances when our lament is caused by another person. If someone sins against you, that person has also sinned against God. The pain you feel is part of the greater pain God feels at the presence of sin in our world. The other person needs to be reconciled with you, but more importantly, he or she needs to be reconciled with God.

2. HOW CAN GOD RESCUE ME?

■ PSALM 13:3-4

Q: *What commonalities do you see between these verses and the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6:24-26?*

Q: *How do the psalmist's requests counteract his words of despair in verse 1?*

Because the psalmist rightly orders his lament by beginning with God, he can then look to God when seeking a resolution to the challenge he faces. The psalmist has a threefold petition for God, which bears multiple

connections with the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:24–26. He pleads for God to consider or look upon him. For God to look upon an individual is a sign of His grace. He needs to know that God is still capable of showing him grace. His plea for an answer means he wants God to intervene in the situation for his favor and bring hope where there has only been despair. The request for God to light up his eyes means the psalmist is asking for God’s blessings again. Not only is he seeking a resolution to his suffering, he is also seeking a blessing from God.

❓: *Why do you hesitate to seek God’s help in every situation you face?*

❓: *How can we tangibly seek God’s help?*

APPLICATION POINT – Perhaps the most beautiful aspect of this psalm is that the author realizes the answer to his pain lies beyond himself. Pop-psychology would tell him to look within for the answers his soul is searching for. If he were to take his cues from Hollywood, he would shrug off God’s neglect and rise above it through sheer will power and self-determination to vanquish his enemy. But the psalmist does not have time for any of this nonsense, because he knows the solution to his plight must lie with God. There is no challenge you face, big or small, that you do not need God’s help with. What does this look like day to day? It certainly is not less than what we see from the psalmist. We need to be devoted to seeking God’s help through prayer on a regular basis. We also need to take advantage of the network of support found in our local church. From its inception, the church has been a community that cares for one another and carries one another’s burdens (Acts 2:42–47). God’s solution to your laments may be tied to the body of believers you worship with on a weekly basis. It is okay to look for help from your church when you are in the midst of lamentation.

❓: *What reason does the psalmist give for God to help him?*

❓: *How is the psalmist’s point similar to what is found in Exodus 32:12?*

After requesting God’s favor, the psalmist gives reasons God should act, highlighting the urgency of his situation. God must act quickly to save him and address his enemy’s injustice. At first glance, the psalmist’s reasoning seems self-centered, but considered in conjunction with God’s steadfast love (verse 5) and as part of a larger biblical theme, we can see that he is concerned for God’s name as much as his own preservation. The words “steadfast love” most commonly refer to God’s covenantal love for His people. God’s covenant includes promises that He will act on their behalf. If His covenantal people are suffering and He fails to act, God will be proven unfaithful to

His covenant. God's own glory is at stake.

The psalmist's appeal corresponds to Moses's appeals on behalf of the people of Israel in the desert. In Exodus 32, the people had committed idolatry by creating a golden calf and worshipping it. Moses was on Mt. Sinai at the time, and God threatened to consume the people and begin anew people with Moses. Moses intervened, however, and contended that if God did so, He would be jeopardizing His reputation in Egypt, the nation from whom God had just freed the Israelites from slavery. God agreed to relent from completely destroying the people because of His concern for His own great name. A similar situation occurs in Numbers 14:13–19.

❓: *Why is God's concern for His own reputation important for us?*

❓: *Is God's concern for His own reputation selfish?*

APPLICATION POINT – Some people may be tempted to think God's concern for His own reputation is self-centered. They are not completely wrong. The difference between God's self-centeredness and our self-centeredness is that we are not the center of the universe or the core truth of all reality. It is therefore wrong for us to act self-centeredly, and it would be wrong for God not to. God can have no higher priority than Himself and His own glory. If He did, He would be committing idolatry, and we know that is what God will never do.

God's commitment to His own reputation is not without consequence for us. It demands that certain qualities be true of Him that greatly benefit us. For example, since God is concerned for His own reputation, we can count on Him being consistent in character. God will not just arbitrarily decided to conduct Himself by a different set of rules from one day to the next or expect us to. We can also count on His justice, something very relevant for the psalmist on this occasion. We need never wonder whether God is concerned with injustice in the world. Finally, His concern for His own reputation on the earth demonstrates that He is invested in what happens in His creation. God is separate from creation, but He is not unconcerned with it or with us as His creatures.

2. HOW IS GOD SO GOOD TO ME?

❏ PSALM 13:5–6

Q: *What causes the change in mood in this psalm?*

Q: *How do verses 5–6 make it difficult to classify Psalm 13 as a lament?*

One of the most important points in Psalm 13 is made silently. Although made silently, it is not made discreetly. Verses 5–6 transition from the foreboding refrains of the first part of the psalm to a concluding refrain filled with joy and anticipation. What accounts for the psalmist's sudden change in disposition? His situation has not improved, at least as far as we are aware. The best explanation is the psalm itself. In verses 3–4, the psalmist offers a prayer to God. This prayer seems to have rejuvenated his mind and allowed him to transition from despair to hope.

Q: *During your devotional times, do you enjoy Scripture reading or prayer more?*

Q: *If we are familiar with the benefits of prayer, why do we still often struggle to pray?*

APPLICATION POINT: Today, many people question why we should bother with prayer. Most people would not voice this sentiment, but it is the only thing to infer from the widespread neglect of prayer among Christians. There are countless reasons we should practice prayer, and Psalm 13 offers another. Prayer helps to reinforce in our hearts what we know to be true in our minds. It can help pull us out of despair and hopelessness and remind us that God is concerned when we encounter struggles and trials. Prayer is a wonderful gift from God in times of abundance and in times of need. Make sure you are including adequate time for prayer during your devotional times. It is easy to become preoccupied with reading Scripture because it is easy to mark progress. Moving the ribbon in your Bible over a few pages or checking of a box on a reading plan gives you a sense of accomplishment. It is often more challenging to get this kind of reinforcement for prayer. You may want to begin your prayer times by making a list of things to pray about and cross them off as you move forward. This can help you gain that needed reinforcement during prayer.

Q: *Are the psalmist's actions in these verses proactive or reactive?*

Q: *Why is the psalmist so confident in God's salvation?*

Salvation, as generally in the Old Testament, refers to both physical and spiritual deliverance from danger. One could hardly guess that this psalm, which begins with a cry of despair, would end with a song of salvation. Although the psalmist has yet to see it, he trusts that God will bring him salvation. And he knows once he sees God's salvation, his heart will erupt in song. He will sing because God has dealt bountifully with him. The Hebrew word underlying "bountiful" is one of those for which no exact equivalent exists in English. The basic idea is complete or full giving. God's salvation will exceed what the psalmist can even anticipate. With a God this generous, no wonder the psalmist is on the verge of bursting forth in song even in a time of lamentation.

Q: *How can you train yourself to anticipate God's salvation in times of need?*

Q: *How could you incorporate song into your devotional times?*

APPLICATION POINT – When most people think of daily devotions, they typically think of reading Scripture, praying, and perhaps journaling. Some people may memorize Scripture as a part of their daily intake of God's Word. The Psalms should encourage us to consider adding times of song to our devotional times. Songs are an effective medium for learning theology and instilling biblical truths into our hearts. Furthermore, songs are the primary way we express our worship today. So, it is entirely appropriate for you to include a time of song in your devotional times. You don't need to do this on every occasion. Some of you, like me, could not carry a tune if it had handles. I have memorized the words of several hymns that have special meaning for me, such as "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" and "Be Thou my Vision." Sometimes I merely recite the words of these great hymns during devotional times or even at other times during the day. In this way, my musical ineptitude does not keep me from worshipping God in song. If you live in a crowded house or dormitory, you may find others would appreciate it if you take this approach. Worshipping God in song may feel strange during your devotional times at first, but singing is something that has endured since the beginning of the Christian church.

NEXT STEPS

One of the best ways to prepare yourself to face challenges and trials in your faith is by journaling. When you write down your feelings and experiences, you can look back at them later when you need to be reminded of how God has worked in your life. If you struggle to find the time to regularly journal, consider making a list of five times you realize God has been faithful to you in the past. It does not have to be a detailed explanation, just a sentence or maybe even less. Keep it on your nightstand or desk and refer to it when you recognize your faith is being challenged. Add to it when you recognize God has been faithful to preserve you again.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, help me lament well. I know struggles will come, and I do not want to deny what my heart feels. But I want to glorify you in my laments.

Lord Jesus, you also lamented as you hung on the cross for my sin. Thank you for the hope you have provided, even during lamentation.

God, thank you for being concerned for your own reputation. I could not get by apart from your consistency and your commitment to justice.

Father, thank you for your steadfast love. Your love makes even times of lamentation sweet.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

February 20, 2022 | Seeking Justice—Finding Praise

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What situations could arise in the coming months and years that would challenge your faith?

Read Psalm 9.

Pray this study will encourage you to depend on God when you encounter trials in your faith.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

When we are suffering because of the actions of others, we can count on God's justice.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

We can praise God even while enduring trials of every kind because of our faith in God's justice (James 1:2).

MEDITATE

"Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion! Tell among the peoples his deeds! For He who avenges blood is mindful of them; he does not forget the cry of the afflicted" (Psalm 9:11–12).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to relate to the psalmist's outlook in times of trouble.

Q: *How do you encourage yourself to persevere when your faith is tested?*

Q: *Why is it important to remember God's faithfulness to you in the past?*

“Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” This perhaps overly pessimistic line is frequently put forward as a reason we should be students of history. Failure to be a student of the past has led to some of the most pivotal moments in human history. Consider, for instance, the parallels often noted between the invasion of Russia by Napoleon in 1812 and Hitler in 1941. Napoleon’s invasion began on June 23; Hitler’s began on June 22. Both believed they would occupy Moscow before winter. Both underestimated the amount of territory their invasions would cover. Both underestimated the number of battalions needed to succeed as well as the level of resistance they would face. Both campaigns were stalled in December. The failure and tremendous casualties of both campaigns led to more significant defeats in Western Europe. Had Hitler learned from and avoided the mistakes of Napoleon, the course of WWII might have looked very different. War historians have also noted broader parallels between the British (19th century), Russian (20th century), and NATO (21st century) invasions of Afghanistan.

The book of Psalms has a more optimistic outlook of learning from the past. The psalmists frequently invite the reader to look to the past for examples of God’s faithfulness. Celebrating the past faithfulness of the Lord will renew the readers’ strength to endure in the present. If God was faithful in the past, He will be faithful again in the present. We only need to be reminded of His past faithfulness. In Psalm 9, the psalmist faced hostility from his enemies. In the midst of his struggle, he remembered instances of God’s past faithfulness and anticipated the ways in which God would prove Himself faithful again.

Q: *What specific events from your past can you draw on for strength when your faith is challenged?*

Q: *How can you use the experiences of other Christians to strengthen your faith in preparation for times when your faith is challenged?*

APPLICATION POINT – As you read Psalm 9, you will recognize that the psalmist was confident God would preserve him because of His faithfulness in the past. The psalmist had specific instances from his own experience

in mind. You have already been encouraged to keep a spiritual journal to refer to in times of trial. The psalmist was likely also aware of God's faithfulness to heroes from Israel's past. He would have at least been familiar with the patriarchs, Moses, and Joshua. We can share his appreciation for the faithful heroes found in Scripture (Hebrews 11). We can add to these the stories of faithful Christians who lived in the centuries between biblical times and us. One of the best ways to strengthen your faith is to read biographies of Christians from the past. Many Christians missionaries over the past several centuries, such as William Carey or Adoniram Judson, endured incredible sorrow for the sake of spreading the gospel to areas where it was unknown. Their biographies can be a tremendous source of encouragement when our faith is being challenged. Other examples include George Muller, who started orphanages that cared for thousands of children despite his own personal poverty, or Gresham Machen, who helped preserve biblical Christianity when liberal Protestant theology threatened to overshadow its fundamental beliefs. There are many stories of faithful Christians of the past who can encourage us in the present if we will only explore their lives.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+The structure of Psalm 9 is difficult to ascertain. The psalmist seems to meander from one point to the next before returning to a previous point. The psalm does not have tightly developed stanzas or other structuring features. Nevertheless, the main themes of Psalm 9 can be loosely organized into three movements in the first half which are then repeated in the second half.

1. PRAISE GOD FOR HIS WONDERFUL DEEDS, PAST AND PRESENT.
2. GOD WILL JUDGE THE WICKED WHO OPPOSE HIM.
3. HOPE IN GOD'S JUSTICE.

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each of the three thematic movements in Psalm 9.

1. PRAISE GOD FOR HIS WONDERFUL DEEDS, PAST AND PRESENT.

■ PSALM 9:1-2, 11-14

- Q: *How many different ways does the psalmist describe his praise of God in verses 1-2?*
- Q: *What wonderful deeds could the psalmist have had in mind?*

As will be more and more evident as Psalm 9 progresses, the psalmist was suffering from the torment of his enemies. He was seeking God's deliverance and began to reflect on the mighty ways God had worked on behalf of His people in the past. Although the psalmist did not identify specific events, the exodus from Egypt was paramount in Israel's history. The people of God were enslaved, abused, and exploited by the Egyptians (Exodus 1:8–14). They turned to God for help, and He resolved to deliver them from slavery (Exodus 2:23–25) and secure the inheritance He had promised their forefathers (Exodus 3:15–17). This event served as a paradigm for how God would come to Israel's rescue in the future. The conquering of the promised land as recorded in Joshua is another example of how God had worked miraculously in Israel's past.

Such reflection on God's past deliverance led to immediate and exhaustive praise on the part of the psalmist. The initial two verses seem so disjointed from the rest of the psalm that it almost appears as if the author forgot the occasion driving him to compose it once he began thinking of God's past deliverance. He expressed his thanksgiving in as many ways possible.

- Q: *What keeps us from showing the kind of thanksgiving evident in verses 1-2?*
- Q: *Why is thanksgiving an appropriate response to God's work in the world?*

APPLICATION POINT – For many of us, the idea of praising God for His wonderful deeds seems foreign and trite. The secular worldview has infected our thinking more than we understand or would dare admit. For many of us, even though we believe in God and His active presence in the world, our default assumption is that the world is continuing along its way with little purpose or direction aside from what we give it. For some of us, maybe this tendency is driven by a desire to not over-spiritualize what we take to be everyday occurrences. Such a mindset would have been foreign to the mind of the psalmist. He was inviting us to view the world from a much different angle. He saw God at the center of every event he encountered, and thus, he could offer God praise for every good thing. Thanksgiving was real for the psalmist because God's activity in his world was real to him.

Q: *Why did the psalmist call for corporate praise even in the midst of his time of need?*

Q: *What gave the psalmist confidence that God would act on his behalf?*

The psalmist was confident God would intervene in his present time of distress because He sits enthroned in Zion. “Zion” can refer to the city of Jerusalem, to the city of God, or to the mountain on which Israel’s temple stood. The attribution of Psalm 9 to David in the superscription can be problematic because Israel’s temple was built after David’s death by his son Solomon. There is ample evidence to suggest David could anticipate the construction of the temple at this location. While David was prohibited from building the temple himself (1 Kings 5:3; 1 Chronicles 22:6–10), he selected the location and also made preparations for its construction (1 Chronicles 22). The temple symbolized God’s presence in Israel and His rule over creation. It is the manifestation of His heavenly rule encroaching on earth.

The psalmist called for communal praise because he was anticipating that God would act in his current time of need. Although he did not give the specific circumstances regarding his time of need, he created a remarkable contrast between the place of his plight and the place of his praise. He felt as if he were in the gates of death. “The gates of death” is a poetic euphemism. Euphemisms are milder words or expressions used to replace harsh realities. Think of how we use the phrase “pass away” to refer to death. We might use the expression “on death’s doorstep” to describe what the psalmist was feeling. He was basically saying to God, “I’m dying here!” Even though he was concerned for his life, he remained confident that God would intercede on his behalf. Although he voiced his plea from the gates of death, he anticipated the moment he would voice his praise from the gates of the “daughter of Zion,” a way of referring to Jerusalem.

Q: *In what ways are we trained to look elsewhere for deliverance during times of need?*

Q: *How does the church function as a means by which God provides deliverance?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is crucial for us to realize that the psalmist looked to Zion when he found himself in a time of need. David could have looked to his military to defend himself against his enemy. He could have looked

to his storehouses during an enemy siege. While he certainly relied on these things, he recognized that his security ultimately rested in God, and that's where he pointed his audience. Although Israel's kings were supposed to be just rulers, David recognized that his listeners needed to turn to God even before they sought intervention from the king. We must maintain this sequence of priorities in our times of need. Our ultimate deliverer is God. This is true of our need for salvation, and it is just as true of every other need that arises throughout the course of our lives. Christians are not forbidden to receive government aid in times of need or crisis. We should certainly seek assistance from trained medical professionals during times of sickness or emergency, but we must always remember that God is our ultimate deliverer. Apart from Him, the efforts of all others will be in vain.

2. GOD WILL JUDGE THE WICKED WHO OPPOSE HIM.

PSALM 9:3-6, 15-18

Q: *What does the phrase "my just cause" indicate about the psalmist's predicament?*

Q: *Why does the psalmist want the memory of the wicked blotted out forever?*

The psalmist described his need using a courtroom scene in verses 3–4. Given that the enemies are identified with the nations, this courtroom functions as an extended metaphor rather than an actual event. In the metaphor he created, the psalmist has undertaken some kind of action he believed was just (v. 4), but his enemies were using it as an excuse to condemn him and seek his destruction. When they brought the psalmist before God, who functions as the judge (v. 3), God vindicated him (v. 4) and turned their accusation back on them (v. 3). The enemies thought they had the upper hand, but their schemes were undermined by God's commitment to righteousness.

In verse 6, the psalmist asked God to destroy even the memory of the wicked. The concept of forgiveness may illustrate what the psalmist has in mind. If you have ever been offended or hurt by someone, you know that even if you forgive the person, you still remember what they did. Their actions are seared into your memory. The psalmist wanted to be completely free of the burden of his enemy, so he yearned for God to take away even the memory of their accusation.

- Q: *How did the psalmist's experience differ from Jesus's experience at His trial?*
- Q: *Why is it important for us to put the evil deeds of the wicked out of our minds forever?*

APPLICATION POINT – For Christians, the psalmist's courtroom scene must evoke memories of Jesus. Like the psalmist, Jesus lived a just life on earth but was taken to court and tried by His enemies. Unlike with the psalmist, God did not intervene on Jesus's behalf. The only man who could be described as truly righteous died on behalf of unrighteous sinners like us. Because of our sin, we should all have been justly condemned. Instead, the deliverance Jesus deserved did not come. He suffered God's wrath as though He were guilty so we would not have to. The righteousness that belongs to Jesus has been applied to us so that God may intervene on our behalf and declare us "not guilty."

- Q: *What causes the reversal of fortunes between the wicked (v. 6) and the poor/ needy (v. 18)?*
- Q: *How is the fate of the poor and needy (v. 18) contrasted with that of the wicked in verse 6?*

As in the court scene the psalmist described in verses 3–4, the plot of the wicked was turned against them and resulted in their own destruction. They fell into their own pit and were caught in their own net (vv. 15–16). When God intervened in judgment, the wicked were caught in a comedy of errors of their own making. God did not unfairly side against them. His determination to uphold righteousness means their own unrighteous deeds led to their undoing.

The judgment of the wicked coincides with the deliverance of the poor and needy. The decision to contrast the wicked with poor and needy adds another dynamic to the plot of the wicked. Their evil deeds included the exploitation of others who were powerless to stop them. At God's intervention, however, the outlook of the poor and needy completely changed. Where the wicked will be quickly forgotten (v. 6), God's deliverance means He has remembered the poor and needy.

Q: *How do you see the world working toward its own destruction?*

Q: *How have some of your own plans undermined your happiness?*

APPLICATION POINT – Perhaps the most amusing aspect of Psalm 9 is how it describes the wicked falling into their own traps. This brings up memories of the Road Runner cartoons I enjoyed as a kid. No matter how brilliant the coyote’s scheme was, it always backfired and worked to his own detriment. This is also the most tragic element of Psalm 9 because of how frequently we see this scenario play out in real life. Most people recognize that major issues confront our society, but we seem obsessed with investing in one bad idea after another to resolve them. Once an idea proves unfruitful, it is vilified, and a worse idea takes its place. The situation is even worse on the personal level. The father worries about providing for his family, but then works so many jobs or such long hours that he becomes estranged from his household. The mother wants so badly for her children to succeed that she pushes them until they resent her. The teenager (or executive) wants so badly to be accepted that he compromises his beliefs and integrity.

The common denominator in all these scenarios is the failure to accept sin as our worst enemy and the gospel as our only solution. We should never expect our society to turn around apart from widespread acceptance of the gospel. We should never expect to find order and purpose in our lives if we fail to place reconciliation with God through the blood of Jesus Christ at the center of everything we do. Until we embrace the gospel as the solution to our greatest need, we will always find ourselves in the same trap as the wicked in Psalm 9. Our best laid plans can undermine the joy we are seeking.

Q: *What is the purpose of the words “higgaion” and “selah” (vv. 16, 20)?*

Q: *Why is it important for Bible translations to retain these words?*

As you read through the Psalms, you will notice a variety of foreign words retained in the English translation. The superscriptions are filled with words that are unfamiliar to us, such as *maskil* (Psalm 32) or *shiggaion* (Psalm 7). Some words occur within the psalms themselves, as is the case in Psalm 9 with *higgaion* and *selah*. These words stand out to us on our first encounter, but it is fairly easy to see that they are musical terms of some sort. These

words offer an important reminder to us that the Psalms are poetic in nature, and many were used in public worship. Due to their technical nature, the meaning of these terms was not often preserved. Although it is difficult to say for certain, *Selah* is probably a signal to change musical instruments or for the musical accompaniment to begin again. The word *higgaion* seems to stem from the same root as the word often translated as “murmur” or “meditate.” Most scholars surmise it means to slow down.

❓: *Do you find it challenging to read the psalms?*

❓: *How do our normal reading tendencies fight against us when reading poetry?*

APPLICATION POINT – While many Christians find the Psalms to be an unending source of encouragement for their faith, many others struggle with the poetic and non-narrative format. They find it challenging to apply poetic expression to their lives. I have counted myself in this latter category for much of my life. For those of us who are uninspired by the psalms, one of the main reasons is that our reading habits work against us appreciating the intricacies of the psalms. We are trained to read quickly through texts in order to be as productive as possible. Even better, to skim through material to pick out the main point. The Psalms can never be appreciated when read in this manner. The pervasive use of metaphor and the non-narrative framework mean we can never “get in a groove” when reading the Psalms. We need to follow the instructions of the psalmist where he included a note to *haggaion*. We need to slow down to appreciate the style of writing used in the Psalms. As one who has struggled to appreciate the Psalms in the past, I can verify there is much spiritual edification to be gained from them if you will slow down and appreciate them for what they are. You cannot speedread the Psalms.

3. HOPE IN GOD’S JUSTICE.

❏ PSALM 9:7–10, 19–20

❓: *How does God’s reign compare to the reign of wicked nations?*

❓: *Why was the psalmist able to put such trust in God?*

The psalmist's only hope was in God's righteous judgment. This hope for God to intervene is grounded in the psalmist's belief that God remains on His throne even when it does not look like it. God's kingship is vital to the Christian faith. We recognize the rule of modern nations over their territory, but we also recognize that their claim to authority is contingent upon God's rule over the whole earth. Where wicked nations will eventually be blotted from memory (v. 5), God sits upon His throne forever (v. 7). His reign means He is able to establish righteousness.

The psalmist called the Lord a stronghold for the oppressed in times of trouble. This is one of the most prevalent themes in the Psalter (Psalm 46:7, 11; 59:16-17; 62:2, 7). Another frequent image used in the Psalms to allude to God's protection is finding shelter under His wings (Psalm 17:8; 36:7; 57:1; 61:4; 63:7; 91:4). The oppressed (v. 9) and the afflicted (v. 12) can depend on His protection. These words are the Old Testament equivalent of the "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3).

❓: *How can we rely on God's protection today?*

❓: *Why might God's judgment, if it is temporary, be a good thing for the nations?*

APPLICATION POINT – Many people, even Christians, struggle to understand God's judgment of the unrighteousness. Our culture often views God as a benevolent grandfather-type who would never disapprove of or punish anything His children want to do. Such a perception of God demands a very selective reading of Scripture. Psalm 9 certainly would not be included on the docket. What many people fail to recognize about God's judgment is that it can lead people to repentance and faith on earth. Christians believe God will decisively judge between the wicked and the righteous at the end of this age, and that time of judgment will not include an opportunity to repent afterward. But until then, God's judgment offers a clear picture for our world of who truly reigns over the cosmos. When faced with God's judgment, people have a clear choice. They can harden their hearts and continue in their rebellion against His authority, or they can heed the warning His judgment provides and repent of their sin. For now, regardless of what the wicked choose, His judgment offers an opportunity for repentance. Christians can rejoice in God's deliverance, but we cannot relish the judgment of the wicked while an opportunity remains for them to repent. We need to pray for them to repent (Matthew 5:44).

NEXT STEPS

Psalm 9 encourages readers to look to the past to gain confidence in God's willingness to act in current times of need. This lesson started by recommending you read biographies of significant figures from Christianity's past. You should study their lives to find examples of God's faithfulness you can use to encourage yourself in times of need. It is likely, however, that you can also find encouragement a little closer to home. Take some time to talk with members of your church, especially older members, to hear their stories of God's faithfulness. It is great to read biographies of heroes of the faith from generations past, and you should. But if you take the time, you will also find examples of God's faithfulness in your own church. Listening to their stories has added bonuses. Christian biographies can sometimes make us believe these figures were some sort of super Christian, but speaking to the people in your church will help you realize that God is concerned with average Christians just as much as the ones others have written books about. Furthermore, when we receive the wisdom of those in our church, we can continue to go to them in the future for encouragement. This week, have an intentional conversation with someone from whose stories will encourage you to persevere in your faith.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

Father, help me to look to your past faithfulness to find strength for my current need.

God, help me during my time of affliction. I know I can trust in your enduring grace. You are on your throne. Your rule stretches from heaven to earth.

Jesus, may the nations recognize their need for you in the midst of judgment before it is too late.

God, help me to read your Word with patience in order to seek understanding.





DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS



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