

DEVOTION // IN THE PSALMS

BOOK
23



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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

February 27, 2022 | Vantage Points for God's Victory

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Why will the coming of the Lord Jesus be both wonderful and terrible?

Read Psalm 46.

Pray this psalm will strengthen your courage as you await the Lord's coming.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is coming to declare Himself king over all the earth.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Embracing or resisting God's will makes all the difference in how you will experience His coming.

MEDITATE

*"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"
(Psalm 46:10).*

GETTING STARTED

+This section discusses the importance of perspective, a key concept underlying Psalm 46

Q: *How can different perspectives change your understanding of a situation?*

Q: *Can you think of a time when you made an error in judgment because of a lack of perspective?*

A few years ago, I took my family to a baseball game. Our seats were near the top of the stands, so we could see the entire game unfold below us, though not in much detail. It was impossible to see the difference between balls and strikes. Even pop flies barely made it up to our level. From so far above the field, the game seemed to be played in slow motion at times. During the final inning, I took my family down to some empty seats behind home plate. It seemed like an entirely different game from that perspective. The difference between balls and strikes was much clearer. The players seemed to move so much faster. Pop flies looked as though they soared into the stratosphere. After the game, families with children were invited to run the bases. My kids quickly realized that what had seemed like a short jaunt was a long way to run. From our original seats, the bases were tiny white specs. When my son and daughter were on the field, they realized they could both stand on a base with plenty of room to spare.

The way we perceive reality depends heavily on our vantage point. In Psalm 46, the coming of God to assume His reign on the earth is described from three different vantage points. Each of them contains important lessons for us as we prepare for the arrival of our great king.

Q: *How are your daily devotions changing the way you read God's Word?*

Q: *Have you encountered any passage that you realize you have previously misunderstood?*

APPLICATION POINT – This year, you are being challenged to start and/or maintain a strong devotional life. One goal of this emphasis is to help you understand God's Word and its implications for your life. As you grow in your knowledge of the Bible, you will inevitably discover that you have wrongly understood and applied it at times in the past. This often proves discouraging for Christians. Some even use it as a reason to avoid studying or reading the Bible regularly. They would rather remain blissfully unaware of their failure to understand God's Word than reexamine the way they have understood and applied certain passages. For much of my life, I applied the first phrase of Psalm 46:10, "Be still, and know that I am God," to times when I felt anxious over the outcome

of a test or an assignment. I have drawn a lot of comfort from that verse over the years. It was not until I was in seminary that a pastor explained to me that this verse had more to do with God's fame among the nations than reassuring me in times of anxiety.

Do not be discouraged if you find yourself in a similar situation as you become a more serious student of God's Word. There are worse things than misapplying Scripture, such as failing to encounter it at all or having no desire to live by biblical principles. Furthermore, as I spent more time studying scholarly literature about the Bible, I learned that even the people who understand it best often learn they have misunderstood what the Bible is saying. Recognizing an error in how you interpret or apply Scripture is a sign of your growth in God's Word, not something to feel embarrassed about. Finally, as someone who is deeply concerned with seeing the gospel spread among the nations, I have a renewed interest in Psalm 46:10. I can be confident that God will be exalted among the nations. This is ultimately His work. I am just a participant in what He is doing. We should be encouraged to learn more about Scripture, even if we have to let go of some thoughts we have cherished in the past.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalm 46 can be divided into three stanzas, each of which concludes with the word "Selah." The key to understanding Psalm 46 is to consolidate what all three stanzas are saying around a single theme. At first, stanza 1 (verses 1–3) does not seem to hold much in common with stanza 3 (verses 8–11), yet both connect with stanza 2 (verses 4–7). Identifying the theme that holds them together will reveal the meaning of Psalm 46. This lesson will present the coming of the Lord to resume His reign on the earth as the key theme linking all three stanzas. Each stanza offers a different vantage point from which to view God's resumption of His reign upon the earth.

1. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG THE NATIONS

2. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE

3. AS A SPECTATOR AT THE END

GOING DEEPER

+This section will examine each stanza in Psalm 46 to understand what its vantage point tells us about the arrival of God's reign on the earth. It is important to understand how He will resume His reign upon the earth. It will be both immediate and gradual. Christians are awaiting a day when God will intervene in history, judge the earth, and be acknowledged as the sovereign. We also know, however, that God's reign was inaugurated when Christ was risen from the dead. We already see the effects of His reign creeping into

the present. Every time someone repents in faith and believes, we see God's extending reign over the earth. Every time the people of God come together to worship Him, we see God's reign extending over the earth. Every time one of God's followers resists the allure of sin and seeks the holiness of God instead, we see God's reign extending over the earth. This is important for understanding Psalm 46 because, even though this psalm describes a time when God will come in the future, we can already see this dynamic at work in the world around us.

1. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG THE NATIONS

■ PSALM 46:1-3

Q: *What kind of natural events are described in this passage?*

Q: *Why would natural disasters be particularly concerning for ancient peoples?*

Psalm 46:1-3 describes the coming judgment of the Lord from the perspective of a spectator among the nations. Psalm 46:2-3 alludes to several cataclysmic events. The “earth giving way” and the “mountains trembling” depict an earthquake. Even in modern cultures that understand plate tectonics and ground faults, earthquakes still cause mass hysteria and concern. You can imagine what would have been the case in ancient Israel. The roaring and foaming of the sea describes a tidal wave or perhaps also an inland flood. These events would be startling on their own, but they are used in the Bible to describe the arrival of the day of the Lord in judgment and the coming of the messiah. For example, in Psalm 18:7, the earth reels and rocks because of God's anger. Similar associations are made in other passages (Isaiah 24:18-23; Jeremiah 4:24; Nahum 1:5). The psalmist portrays the earth being torn apart around him and alludes to the arrival of God in judgment.

Q: *Why do Christians look forward to the day when Jesus returns in judgment?*

Q: *How should Christians understand natural disasters differently than those around us?*

APPLICATION POINT – Scientific discovery has been a gift to the modern age. Our ability to understand and manipulate the natural world for the gain of humanity is greater than ever before. For many people, however, advances in scientific knowledge have coincided with a temptation to be content with naturalistic explanations. They no longer view natural events, such as the earthquakes and floods described in this psalm, as containing any greater meaning than their scientific explanations. Christians see scientific discovery as a gift, but we also know that science is incapable of appreciating the meaning of any event within the larger picture of the world and God's work in it. In this sense, many people today are worse off than those who lived hundreds of years ago. They may be able to explain plate tectonics or the water cycle, but they fail to see God's hand at work in the world around them. And that failure leaves them unable to offer satisfying explanations for the most important questions humanity faces. Christians recognize that natural disasters can be explained scientifically and theologically. They are signs that God will one day return in a much greater display of judgment. We must repent from sin and seek God through Jesus while there is still time.

Q: *Why does the psalmist have confidence despite the various calamities he foresees?*

Q: *If the foreseen calamities stem from God's coming, why does the psalmist look to God as his refuge and strength?*

Although these calamities signal God's coming in judgment, the psalmist knows he does not need to fear because God is his refuge and strength. The word "refuge" indicates protection from outside forces. The psalmist is on God's side, so the coming calamities will not consume him. God will protect him from the judgment He Himself is bringing. The word "strength" implies a dynamic aspect to trusting in God. In our weakness, God gives us the strength we need to take action for Him.

Q: *What kind of fear does Psalm 46:2 have in mind?*

Q: *How does the freedom from fear free us to pursue God's mission on the earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible often encourages the fear of the Lord and discourages other types of fear. In this passage, the psalmist does not need to fear because he trusts in God helping him through the coming

calamities. It is important for Christians to have an accurate understanding of how fear works within a Christian worldview. There is a type of fear that is good because it protects us. You would fear standing too close to the edge of a cliff because you could fall and be badly injured. This fear liberates us to enjoy God's creation within the limits He sets.

There is another type of fear that is harmful because it imprisons us. This is the fear of the unknown. This kind of fear would keep you from climbing the mountain that same cliff was located on because a massive earthquake might strike and send you falling over the cliff. The Bible encourages us to trust in God's provision to avoid this type of debilitating fear. We can trust in God and resign ourselves to accept whatever He allows to occur within His will.

It is important not to mix up these kinds of fear. We should not fling ourselves over a cliff because we trust in God's provision and do not need to fear what will happen to us. That is not trusting in God. It is recklessness. This is an extreme example, but you get the picture. We should never use our faith in God as an excuse to engage in reckless behavior. We need never fear the uncertainties of life because we know we can trust in God's perfect will.

Freedom from fear of the unknown is ultimately found in the gospel. The gospel looks forward to a greater glory than we can ever find in this age alone. So, we have no need to fear the uncertainty of life, because our belief in the gospel assures us a greater life to come.

2. AS A SPECTATOR AMONG GOD'S PEOPLE

■ ■ PSALM 46:4-7

Q: *How is the imagery in the second stanza like that in the first stanza?*

Q: *How does the imagery change from the first stanza to the second?*

The second stanza views the coming of God in judgment from the perspective of a spectator among God's followers. God's followers are, in this instance, identified with a city characterized by God's presence. The psalmist likely had Jerusalem and the temple in mind. This stanza reuses some imagery from the first stanza and anticipates the resolution of the third stanza. Notice how the imagery changes from the first stanza, which emphasized God's

coming in judgment from the perspective of the world. In verse 3, the psalmist describes raging floodwaters ready to sweep away everything in its path. In verse 4, describing God's coming from the perspective of God's people, the psalmist describes a gently flowing river bringing life and abundance to the city. In verse 6, God melts the earth, a disaster similar to the earthquake described in verses 2 and 3, but this judgment is directed toward the nations and kingdoms coming to oppose the city of God. Where the psalmist views himself as being in danger in the first stanza, in the second stanza, he rests securely in the city of God while the earth is torn apart around his enemies. What is terrifying in the first stanza is a source of comfort in the second. This is the difference between those who are among God's people at His coming versus those who are outside God's people. No wonder he has nothing to fear when God arrives in judgment.

❓: *What determines whether one rejoices at God's return or is terrified of His return?*

❓: *Why should Christians find comfort in God's judgment?*

APPLICATION POINT – God is returning to judge the world. Whether we experience His judgment as a comfort or a terror depends upon our relationship with Jesus. If we are in Christ, we will rejoice to see God's judgment restoring justice to a fallen world, and we should praise God for the salvation He provided through the Son. The differences between stanzas one and two provide a warning that must be heeded. God's judgment is coming. Whether we experience His justice as a raging flood or a nourishing river depends on our relationship with Jesus.

❓: *How are the nations distinguished from those in the city of God?*

❓: *Who are the nations raging against?*

Where the people of God take solace in the acts of God, the nations rage and quake at God's judgment. Their rage is directed toward those in the city of God, but the city of God has no need to fear because God and His host of armies protect it. This is why the psalmist can describe God's people as both a prosperous but vulnerable city (Psalm 46:4) and a heavily secured military fortress (Psalm 46:7). God's coming coincides with His actions on

behalf of His own people. The people in God's city have no need to fear His judgment or the raging of the nations. The city of God will not be moved, but the ground under those who rage against God simply melts away.

Q: *In what ways do the nations seem to be raging against the city of God today?*

Q: *What does the psalmist's confidence in God's protection mean for us?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible requires Christians to live between two contrasting perils. As Psalm 46:6 recognizes, Christians are imperiled by the raging of those who do not acknowledge God's reign over the earth. Sometimes the people of God are simply casualties of the nation's quest for power and greed. At other times, Christians are targeted because of their loyalty to God, the true ruler of the universe. Psalm 46 also recognizes that all humanity is imperiled by the judgment of God. God will one day return to put an end to all rebellion against Him. Since the peril of His judgment has eternal consequences, Christians must seek peace with God even if that peace keeps them from joining the raging world's power struggle or makes them the targets of the nations' rage. As Jesus taught, we dare not fear those who can only kill the body but cannot touch the soul instead of the one who can kill both body and soul (Matthew 10:28). Even if your commitment to God seems to be costing you, it is nothing compared to the cost of refusing to follow God.

3. AS A SPECTATOR AT THE END

■ PSALM 46:8–11

Q: *What are the works of the Lord the psalmist commands us to see?*

Q: *How is war brought to an end on the earth?*

The final stanza invites the reader to view the world-scene after God's judgment is realized. It begins with a command to look upon the works of God. Our minds are trained to think of the works of God in terms of salvation on our behalf, but in this case the emphasis is placed on God's destructive judgment of the wicked. The enemies that raged against the city of God in stanza two are decisively defeated. Their instruments of war and oppression are destroyed and dismantled. All of the earth is in full submission to God. The people of God have been vindicated by trusting in His justice.

Q: *How can we responsibly find comfort in God's judgment of the wicked?*

Q: *In what ways do you see yourself and other Christians abandoning God's deliverance to seek protection within their own strength?*

APPLICATION POINT – In Psalm 46, the deliverance of the city of God rested in His judgement. A constant temptation for ancient Israelites, especially among the political elites, was to abandon hope in God during a time of need and depend on the strength of other nations. This urge to abandon God occurs among Christians today. It is challenging to live authentically Christian in today's world, and we often want to do so in our own strength. Some Christians feel safer isolating themselves from the broader culture. Rather than embracing the Bible's missional mandate, they avoid settings where they would have to interact socially with unbelievers. This is abandoning God and seeking deliverance in your own strength. Others hoard wealth and material goods to provide security for themselves in case trusting in God fails them. Again, this is abandoning God and seeking deliverance in your own strength. Others invest in radical diets and fitness programs hoping to preserve every second because they know they do not trust God in the face of death. There is an endless number of ways Christians can abandon God and seek deliverance for themselves. Psalm 46 begs them to simply be still and trust God to provide the deliverance He promised.

Q: *What does the exaltation of God have to do with the remainder of Psalm 46?*

Q: *How does the role of the nations in verse 10 contrast with their role in verse 6?*

Psalm 46 concludes by announcing God's intent to be worshipped among the nations. The reader of this psalm could be forgiven for thinking this statement comes out of nowhere. Previously, the nations and kingdoms were raging against God (Psalm 46:6) and were the subjects of divine judgment. How can God now demand to be exalted by them? We have to quickly trace two lines of thought in order to understand God's demand from the nations' praise. First, there will be a day when every member of every nation that has ever existed will acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord (Philippians 2:9–11). This does not equal universalism, the belief that all will be saved. Some will be forced to acknowledge Jesus's lordship even though they refused to do so during this age, and they will remain under God's condemnation for their sins. Even unbelievers are subjected to God's reign. Thus, even the nations that rage against God's rule (v. 6) will one day be subjugated to His rule (v. 10). Second, although God set apart the nation of Israel as His special covenant people in the Old Testament, He clearly maintains an interest in other nations throughout the Bible. Part of God's promise to Abraham was to bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:3). Isaiah anticipated a day when the nations will flood to God's presence and seek to follow His ways (Isaiah 2:1–5). In Revelation 5:9–10, the elders surrounding the throne of God announce people from every tribe and language and people and nation have been ransomed by the blood of Jesus. God yearns for the nation's praise, and a day is coming when He will receive it.

Q: *How does the statement “be still and know that I am God” encourage Christian missions?*

Q: *How is God leading you to participate in spreading the gospel around the world?*

APPLICATION POINT – The pairing of “be still, and know that I am God” with “I will be exalted among the nations/in the earth” creates a wonderful foundation for Christian missions. Christ commands His followers to go to the ends of the earth with the gospel on their lips (Matthew 28:19). Most of the book of Acts shows the apostles carrying out that mandate. The New Testament epistles reveal this mission as an enduring need among the followers of Jesus Christ (Romans 10:14–15). We must heed the Bible's missionary call, but we should never think the mission starts with or depends on our efforts. God is the One who works in the hearts of those who will believe in Him. We are the vessel He most often uses to carry the gospel to those who need it, but we should never think we are the ones who will change hearts. We are to carry the gospel forward and then be still while God works.

NEXT STEPS

God yearns to be worshipped by the nations. For now, there is still time for the nations to cease raging against God and approach Him in repentance and submission. Pray for God to be exalted among the nations. Pray for missionaries who are committed to spreading the gospel where Jesus is not known as Savior and Lord. Pray for God's guidance in how you should participate in missions. The goal of your personal devotions is for you to draw closer to God. The closer you come to God, the clearer His desire to be worshipped by the nations will become. If you want a good test to know whether your daily devotions are having their intended effect, examine your excitement regarding local and international missions. The gospel going forward among the nations should stir your heart if you are seeking God's glory.

PRAY

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

-Father, I thank you that I have no need to fear your judgment against the nations because of the grace I have in Jesus Christ.

-Lord Jesus, I yearn for the day when every knee will bow before you and every tongue will confess you as Lord.

-God, help me never to fear the raging of the nations. Those who oppose you are no match for you.

-Father, exalt yourself among the nations! You are worthy of all praise and glory and honor. Use me to make your glory known.



DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

March 6, 2022 | Why We Praise God

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What most frequently stirs your heart to praise?

Read Psalm 47.

Pray God will use this psalm to elevate your heart to praise.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Praise God for everything He is!

THEOLOGY APPLIED

None of us truly understands the majesty of God and the extent to which He deserves our praise.

MEDITATE

“Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!” (Psalm 47:1).

GETTING STARTED

+Psalm 47 shares several themes with Psalm 46. The strongest point of connection concerns God’s glory among the nations. In Psalm 46, the psalmist calls for it. Psalm 47 reveals why God warrants their praise. He is king over all the earth.

Q: *What causes praise?*

Q: *What would keep you from joining others in praise?*

For several years, I worked in a support role for a company that manufactured multi-million-dollar products. As support personnel, I was often clueless about the company's products and processes. One day, I noticed an engineer so elated she was nearly doing summersaults around the shop floor. When I asked her what the cause for her excitement was, she told me she had just reengineered a process on one of the products the company makes. She said something about synchronizing a welding and milling process so they could be done simultaneously (I still don't understand what exactly she said). After she finished explaining, she looked at me with a funny expression because she could tell I didn't share her excitement. When it dawned on her I had no clue what she was saying, she simply told me her work could cut the cost of making the product by 3-4%. Her achievement would significantly increase the company's profits and fast-track her career. When she put it that way, I was excited for her.

It is hard to feign excitement when you do not understand why you should be excited. In Psalm 47, the psalmist calls for the readers to praise God, but he understands his audience will need to know why. As he calls people to praise God, he quickly outlines reasons we should praise Him. At times, his excitement simply overcomes him. He cannot stop calling for God's praise long enough to explain why we should praise Him. Nevertheless, the psalmist offers a compelling argument for why all the earth should praise the God of Scripture.

Q: *What keeps you from praising God in the manner you should?*

Q: *How does praising God differ from other arenas in which we may show praise?*

APPLICATION POINT – A closer fellowship with God should lead to a deeper praise of Him. As you monitor your progress in your devotional life this year, pay attention to how your praise and worship of God is impacted. During a time when I was seeking to reinvigorate my prayer life, it dawned on me one day that my prayer times had become an expression of praise even when the intent of the specific prayer did not immediately concern praise. I could not pray for the salvation of my children without praising God's worth. I could not pray for the

healing of the sick apart from rejoicing at the thought that God would hear me and respond. I could not pray for my pastor's sermon without overflowing emotion at the thought of God changing lives through His Word. As you consider praise during this lesson, keep in mind that praise is not restricted to singing songs. Praise is something that comes bursting out of your inner being at even the most unexpected times.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Many scholars have tried to divide Psalm 47 into stanzas, but hardly anyone agrees on how. The psalm oscillates between several themes, and it only contains a single poetic term that could indicate structure (selah, verse 4). The central focus of this psalm is a repeated call to praise God. Therefore, the best way to structure this study will be around the reasons the psalmist calls for people to praise God.

1. GOD IS MOST HIGH.
2. GOD IS A WARRIOR.
3. GOD IS KING.
4. GOD IS PROVIDER.

GOING DEEPER

+This section will trace in more detail the reasons Psalm 47 gives for praising God.

1. GOD IS MOST HIGH

■ PSALM 47:1-2

Q: In what ways is God "Most High" in this psalm?

Q: Does the designation "Most High" mean the psalmist believed in other gods?

The psalmist begins his justification for calling others to praise God by addressing Him as “Most High.” The designation “most high” occurs among Israel’s neighbors to address their deities. For them, the phrase likely alluded to a pantheon of gods of which the “most high” is preeminent. But as a monotheistic Israelite, the psalmist used this language to allude to God’s preeminence over the rest of the created order. No created object, no created being is superior to God. He transcends everything else that is real or can be imagined. God intrinsically warrants praise.

The designation “Most High” was frequently used by Israelites when people outside of the covenant people of God were being addressed (Genesis 14:18–22; Numbers 24:16; Isaiah 14:14). This point coincides nicely with the main point of Psalm 47 because the psalmist was addressing all nations, calling them to lay aside their pantheons of gods to worship the one true God.

Q: *What competes with God for the title of “most high” in your life?*

Q: *What kind of “gods” are in our culture’s “pantheon”? What do we praise?*

APPLICATION POINT – More than 2500 years have passed since Psalm 47 was written, but the affirmation of our God as “Most High” is just as important and just as contentious now as it was then. The characters have changed. The pantheons of the ancient Near East are now found in the history books rather than the market down the street, but new wanna-be contenders have emerged to take their place. Perhaps the most pervasive and contentious contender in our culture is the autonomous self. We see ourselves as rulers of our own fate and instinctively rebel against any outside force intruding into our lives, including God. Christians would be foolish to think we are not equally capable of being caught up in this way of thinking. This is one reason Oakwood’s emphasis on daily devotionals is so crucial. At the heart of a consistent devotional life is the recognition that we ultimately are not in control of ourselves or the world around us. God Most High is! Spending part of our day contemplating the glory of God, reading His Word, and communing with Him in prayer is a crucial way we acknowledge God as Most High and as the highest authority in our lives.

2. GOD IS A WARRIOR

■ PSALM 47:3, 5

Q: *How does God fill the role of a warrior in Psalm 47?*

Q: *How did God fill the role of a warrior in Israel's past?*

Thinking of God as a warrior may seem odd to us, but God filled this role at several key points in Israel's history. The first occasion was during the exodus. The Israelites were enslaved to the Egyptians and unable to deliver themselves. God waged war against Egypt (Exodus 7–12) and then rescued His people from being slaughtered by a vengeful Egyptian army (Exodus 14). The exodus narrative concludes with a song in which God is described as a “man of war” (Exodus 15:3). God also filled the role of warrior during the conquest. The first city to be conquered when Israel entered the promised land was Jericho. It was surrounded by massive defensive walls. The city would have been a major obstacle for the people of Israel at such an early point in their campaign. But God toppled the walls of Jericho on His own, and the Israelites won an easy victory at the outset of their conquest (Joshua 6). God filled the role of a warrior when His people were in military need.

As God had filled the role of a warrior in the past, the psalmist anticipated a day in the future when God will again function as a warrior on behalf of His people. He will subdue the nations under His people, and they will no longer be subjected to their rule or abuse (Psalm 47:3). Like a victorious battalion returning from triumph, God will enter into the city of His people with a shout (Psalm 47:5). Celebration will ensue. Our warrior God is worthy of praise.

Q: *How does the picture of God as a warrior differ from the way many people understand God today?*

Q: *How could the concept of God as a warrior appeal to some people in a way that other depictions of God do not?*

APPLICATION POINT – Applying the “God is a warrior” theme demands sensitivity to our place in redemptive history and our role in God's divine mission. This theme cannot be ignored as some who would rather emphasize God's universal benevolence may prefer. Nor does this theme allow for Christians to invoke violence against what they find evil. Unlike the people of Israel in the Old Testament, the church will not inherit a physical land from God during this age, so we should not expect to see God adopting the role of divine warrior in that respect.

Christians do, however, recognize an ongoing battle between good and evil. We believe one day God will intervene in the history of the world and reassume the mantle of divine warrior. He will act decisively to put an end to all evil and all resistance to His reign. Christians should yearn for the day God will appear again as a warrior. In the meantime, it is our responsibility to confront evil with the gospel of Christ. The gospel has the power to transform lives and curb the reign of evil as it is manifested in the world today.

Finally, under very specific conditions, proper authorities may recognize evil has manifested itself in such a way that it must be fought with force. Under such conditions, it is appropriate for Christians to yearn for God to act as a warrior against evil in a manner that is consistent with but not connected to the time when He will finally act decisively to defeat evil. Under such circumstances, it is also appropriate for Christians to take arms against the spread of evil in the world. Such circumstances are typically described as a “just war.”

3. GOD IS KING

■ PSALM 47:2, 6–9

Q: *What is the extent of God's reign?*

Q: *In what ways is God like a king?*

The psalmist shouted praise to God because He is king. Today, most monarchies do not function as an absolute monarchy; the powers of the monarch are limited. For example, in the United Kingdom, Queen Elizabeth is the head of state but appoints a Prime Minister who is approved by the House of Commons to run the government. In some cases, the monarch of a country could theoretically be voted out of that role. In the ancient world, however, monarchies were absolute. Within the kingdom, the king's powers were unlimited. Nothing could restrain the will of the king apart from having his authority usurped. This is the context in which the psalmist declared God to be king. He yearned for the day God's reign would be recognized throughout the whole earth and by every nation.

Unlike typical ancient Near Eastern monarchies, however, the nations under God's reign will not resent His sovereignty but rejoice because of it. God has no need to abuse the resources or subjects under His command. He does not need to prove His worth or dignity by massive building projects. He does not need to expand His realm, because it covers everything that is. God is free to mediate blessings to others.

Q: *In what ways is God already king over the whole earth?*

Q: *How do you resist God's reign over your life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Neither God nor the psalmist offers any alternative to absolute sovereignty. Unlike modern monarchies, God's reign over our hearts cannot be limited by us, nor will He delegate His reign to another. Many people are willing for God to be sovereign over specific parts of their lives but not over everything. They may allow God to be sovereign on Sunday mornings but not during the rest of the week, over finances but not their dating lives, in their private lives but not during work hours. Many secular people treat religion as if God operates in this way, as if His reign can be divided between public and private spheres. God has not left that option open to followers of Christ.

Q: *Why does the psalmist refer to the "God of Abraham"?*

Q: *How is God's reign over the nations depicted in Psalm 46?*

The psalmist stressed that God's reign will be complete. He will reign over the earth's landmasses and the nations within them. The psalmist links the nations of the earth to the God of Abraham. By referring to the "God of Abraham," he draws the reader's attention to the Abrahamic covenant. God declared that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3). When God's reign is extended over the whole earth, the promise made to Abraham will be fulfilled. The peoples of the earth will unite with the descendants of Abraham to worship God (John 12:32; Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:7–9).

Q: *How does the psalmist's vision coincide with the mission Jesus gave His followers [Matthew 28:18–19]?*

Q: *Through the lens of the New Testament, what demand does the psalmist's vision make on us?*

APPLICATION POINT – One day, the nations will unite with the true people of Abraham to glorify God and embrace His sovereign reign. But that day has not yet arrived, and many nations still rebel against Him. Jesus has made salvation available to all who would receive it, and He has called on His followers to spread the good news of salvation among the nations. His promises to Abraham and the psalmist’s vision remain to be fulfilled. We have been given the task of taking the gospel to the nations. Whether that entails actively going yourself or giving generously so others can go, you cannot treat the vision of this psalm as a recommendation or an add-on. God’s intention to be worshipped throughout all the earth should direct your calling as a believer.

4. GOD IS PROVIDER

■ **PSALM 47:4; AMOS 6:8; MARK 10:29–31**

Q: *What is Israel’s heritage?*

Q: *How is the promised land described in the Old Testament?*

God warrants our praise because He is our provider. God’s provision in the Old Testament centers on the promised land. We have already seen how God functioned as a warrior when Israel was occupying the promised land, but the story of God’s provision goes deeper. As modern society has shifted to an urban and industrialized setting from a rural and agricultural one, the importance God’s promise of land becomes more difficult to see. But ancient peoples recognized that their prosperity was often tied to their land and its fruitfulness. As the psalmist said, God chose Israel’s heritage for them (verse 4), and He chose a fruitful land that would allow Israel to flourish.

Q: *What heritage do we look forward to as Christians?*

Q: *Why is it challenging to trust in God’s provision?*

APPLICATION POINT – Just as God provided a heritage for the nation of Israel in the Old Testament; He will provide a heritage for everyone who confesses Christ as Lord. Jesus alluded to our heritage in Mark 10:29–31. This

passage contains the discussion between Jesus and His disciples after His encounter with the rich young man. The rich young man rejected the heritage found in Jesus because he did not trust that Jesus could provide better than he could himself. Jesus assured His disciples that they would receive more from following Him than they could ever obtain on their own. One remarkable thing about this passage is that Jesus emphasized that His followers will find their heritage in this age as well as the age to come. We do not have to wait until heaven before we realize how God has provided a heritage for us. We are a hundred times better off receiving from Jesus than we would be searching for our own inheritance. Jesus said this despite elsewhere acknowledging that following Him will lead to trouble in this life (John 16:33). No matter what it costs, the heritage we have through Jesus's provision is worth it.

❓: *What is the "pride of Jacob"?*

❓: *How is the phrase "pride of Jacob" used differently in Amos 6:8?*

In Psalm 47:4, the "pride of Jacob" refers to the promised land, the heritage the people of Israel received. Jacob was the patriarch who was renamed "Israel" in Genesis 32:22–32. His children were the forefathers of what would become the twelve tribes of Israel. Psalm 47:4 mentions the pride of Jacob within a context of Israelite faithfulness, and God is said to love the pride of Jacob. The same phrase appears in Amos 6:8 but in the context of Israelite unfaithfulness. There, God said He hated the pride of Jacob. This contrast calls attention to both God's grace in provision and Israel's rebelliousness against God. Even though God had been faithful to provide the promised land as an inheritance, Israel could not keep from abandoning their God.

❓: *How is God's grace evident in our lives even after repenting of sin and confessing Jesus as Lord?*

❓: *How can we train ourselves to enjoy our heritage to an even greater extent in this life?*

APPLICATION POINT – God has also been gracious in providing a heritage for us, even though we did not deserve it at the moment of salvation and do not deserve it still. God's provision always begins with His grace and

always continues in His grace. We should never deceive ourselves into thinking we have somehow warranted God's provision. The key to our growth in holiness and love for God is reflecting upon the grace He has shown us in Jesus Christ. As we reflect more upon His grace, we will appreciate our inheritance even more.

NEXT STEPS

The psalmist gave several reasons for praising God with every ounce of energy we have, but his list is certainly far from exhaustive. During your devotion times, you should periodically be giving yourself time to think and reflect on God, His creation, and your part in it. At some point over the next week, take some time to reflect on additional reasons God deserves your praise. Make a list of the reasons you think of and consider sharing it during your next small group time.

PRAY

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

Father, I praise you because you are the divine warrior who battles on my behalf. I need never worry that your victory is out of reach.

God, I praise you that you are indeed God Most High! Nothing warrants my praise the way you do. Nothing should take my gaze from your glory.

Father, you are the great king over all the earth. You deserve my absolute allegiance.

God, you have provided for me more through Jesus than I will ever deserve. Help me to dwell on your grace more every day.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

March 13, 2022 | Seeing and Hearing God's Reign

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

In your own words, write a definition of the city of God.

Read Psalm 48.

Ask God to open the eyes and ears of your heart to appreciate the city of God.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The city of God is established forever.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

We find joy and comfort in our citizenship in God's city.

MEDITATE

"As we have heard, so have we seen in the city of the Lord of hosts, in the city of our God, which God will establish forever" (Psalm 48:8).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage's main point to your life.

Q: *What are some examples of world-renowned ancient and modern architecture?*

Q: *What makes people appreciate the beauty of these architectural accomplishments?*

One human desire transcending time and most cultures is the urge to build magnificent feats of architecture. In the ancient world, historians made lists cataloguing the Seven Wonders of the World, often included such wonders as the pyramids of Giza, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and the Coliseum in Rome. More recent times have seen the planning and construction of the National Mall in Washington DC, the Louvre in Paris, and the Forbidden City in Beijing. One structure I am acquainted with that most people would not know of is the Lanyon building of the Queen's University Belfast. I lived in Belfast for more than a year and plodded around the campus nearly every day. Even toward the end of my time there, I still found myself gazing up at the Lanyon building and its beautiful gothic architecture, marveling at its intricacy. Its imposing form never escaped my notice.

These architectural feats and many others like them are stunning in their beauty and design, but they all pale in comparison to the beauty and magnificence of the city of God. Psalm 48 is an invitation to consider the wonder of the city of God. The psalmist was envisioning the city of Jerusalem, the capital of ancient Israel. The details of Psalm 48, however, show he was looking beyond it to an eschatological (end time) rendition of the city. We also look forward to the eschatological city of God and await its appearance on earth. In the meantime, we, like the psalmist, can only imagine what that city will be like. We can look at the architectural wonders around us and know they contain just a glimmer of the glory we will one day behold in full.

Q: *Why is the city of God filled with glory?*

Q: *How are your personal devotions helping you experience God's glory?*

APPLICATION POINT – As beautiful as the city of God will be, its true wonder will not be its architectural design, the materials it is constructed of, or its magnificent attention to detail. The true wonder of the city will be the glory of the God who fills it. The psalmist alluded to this throughout Psalm 48. This is an important principle to remember in every facet of our lives. Consider your devotional life, for instance. Even secular people can

appreciate the literary and philosophical beauty of the Bible. Hopefully, you are witnessing this too, but if you do not behold the glory of God as you read through the Bible, you are missing the best part. Secular people may take time to meditate, but their meditations fall far short of the glory we behold in prayer. As you focus on your devotional life this year, never forget the goal is to witness the glory of God at work in your life. No matter how helpful your personal devotions are, they will not provide the spiritual benefit you need apart from Him.

▣ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ Psalm 48 could be described as a “pivot psalm.” The pivot point is verse 8, which alludes to hearing and seeing the enduring glory of the city of God, as the psalm invites the reader to encounter the city of God through seeing and hearing.

1. SEEING

2. HEARING

GOING DEEPER

+ *This section will examine how the psalmist glorifies God through seeing and hearing of the wonder of His city.*

1. SEEING

▣ PSALM 48:3–5, 12–13A

Q: *Why did the nations assemble against the city of God?*

Q: *What defeated the assembly of nations in Psalm 48?*

The Psalms frequently depict the nations gathering to oppose God, His people, and His city. Such is the case in Psalm 48, but astonishingly, their opposition is foiled at the mere sight of the city of God (Psalm 48:5). Before a single arrow was shot, before a single blow was struck, this hostile mob of nations fell in trepidation. Simply seeing the glory of God resting upon His city was cause enough to give up. They did not concede God’s lordship, but they

recognized the battle was over before it even began.

Q: *In what ways does the certainty of God's ultimate victory encourage you in the Christian life?*

Q: *Do you struggle with a presumption of failure?*

APPLICATION POINT – Some people, such as myself, have a natural inclination to expect failure. We assume our efforts will not succeed, our team is outmatched, and our side will not win. I remember starting an intermural football season in college hoping my team would just be competitive. We won every game by at least twenty points, including the championship (which I thought we were sure to lose). The first time I submitted an article to an academic journal, I started by apologizing for taking the editor's time. I figured they would shortly send a memo declining my article. Instead, the editor thanked me for choosing his journal and accepted my article for publication. I share these examples to show there have been times I should have had at least a little optimism about what I was doing but didn't. I don't know why I lack confidence and expect to fail, regardless of the situation. I don't think it is a psychological ploy to lower my expectations in case of failure. It is a genuine outlook that seems to be engrained within me. To all my fellow pessimists, when it comes to God's battle against those who oppose Him, we never have to worry that God will not be up to the task! God's enemies flee at the mere sight of His presence. As long as we are found in Him (Ephesians 1:3–14), our salvation is secure, our eternity is certain, and our victory is won. We have no need to despair!

Q: *Why did the psalmist invite the reader to take a tour of the city of God?*

Q: *What city did the author have in mind when he described the city of God?*

In Psalm 48:12–13a, the psalmist invites us to take a tour of God's magnificent city. He wanted us to see firsthand what stopped the hostile nations in their tracks. The city's buildings and design were imposing. Once we behold the marvelous city and all its features, we will understand God's glory because the city is an expression of it.

It is important to remember that while the psalmist may have had Jerusalem in mind as he described the city of God, he ultimately knew that the city of God transcends Jerusalem. The eschatological nature of the city is quite

apparent in how he described the nations amassing to oppose it and how they turned away at the mere sight of it. This point is crucial for understanding Psalm 48 because, however grand Jerusalem might have been in the day of the psalmist, the city had been destroyed in the past. Imagine the horrors the psalmist would have suffered when this happened if his words had been strictly tied to Jerusalem. Where Jerusalem was a fallible city, the city of God will never suffer defeat.

Q: *How does eschatology (study of the end times) give us hope for the present?*

Q: *Why should the glory of the city of God give us confidence in the Christian life?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist’s point is wonderful, but since the city he was referring to is an eschatological city, we may legitimately wonder how effective his point is. How can we take confidence in being told to behold an eschatological city that remains in the future for us? The key is to look to the Scriptures. Paul described our present state as looking in a dim mirror, but we will see clearly when the future God has planned becomes a reality (1 Corinthians 13:12). When we see the beauty of modern architecture, we know it pales in comparison to what we will see in the future. We can take confidence in knowing the major figures of the Bible also had to trust in the beauty of the eschatological city they could not yet see. Abraham forsook his worldly country to seek a city whose designer and builder was God (Hebrews 11:8–10). When we seek the glories of the city of God instead of all this world has to offer, we can have confidence that we are following in the steps of Abraham. Finally, the Bible concludes by offering a description of the eschatological city of God (Revelation 21). John’s marvelous depiction of the city of God in human words will pale in comparison when we see the real thing. The Scriptures encourage us to look forward to seeing the city of God.

2. HEARING

■ **PSALM 48:1–2, 6–7, 9–11, 13B–14**

Q: *Who will delight in the city of God?*

Q: *What is the relationship between the city of God and His holy mountain?*

Psalm 48 begins with a report for us to hear concerning the beauty of the city of God. After calling attention to the city of God, the psalmist described a mountain. We are meant to identify the city of God with the mountain. The psalmist combined these images. Just as the city is associated with God, so is the mountain. That is why it is holy. The psalmist's message parallels Isaiah 2:1–5, which describes the nations steaming to the mountain of God, the highest of mountains. In Psalm 48:2, the city of God is described as a mountain that is beautiful in its elevation and is the joy of all the earth.

One final point to take from the beginning of this psalm concerns the reference to the far north. Mount Zion, where the temple was situated with Jerusalem, was in the southern part of the kingdom of Israel. Thus, this reference obviously does not refer to Zion specifically. The far north is frequently described as the throne room of those who oppose God (Isaiah 14:12–13; Ezekiel 38:6; 39:2). Thus, by alluding to Mount Zion in the far north, the psalmist was suggesting that Mount Zion's sphere of influence will one day cover even those who are hostile toward God. It is another way of saying their defeat is certain. The kings who assembled themselves against God would not succeed.

Q: *What implications does the word “holy” have for us when used to describe God’s mountain?*

Q: *How does the certain defeat of those who oppose God give us confidence today?*

APPLICATION POINT – The mountain of God is described as holy. It is the place where God’s people will dwell with Him. This mountain’s holiness comes from God, not us. Even our best attempts at holiness fall far short of what could be adequately described as holy. Isaiah 64:6 says our righteous deeds are like polluted garments to God. We could never attain a righteousness of our own through a personal commitment to holiness. Apart from Jesus Christ, no one would be allowed to set foot on God’s holy mountain. Nevertheless, God’s holy mountain does demand a commitment to personal holiness. The New Testament clearly indicates that the followers of Christ must prioritize a holy lifestyle (1 Thessalonians 4:1–7; 1 Peter 1:16). We must take sin seriously and flee its destructive reach. How do we do this? One way we can pursue holiness is modeled for us in this psalm. We can become captivated by the holiness of the city of God and the One who dwells there.

Notice that for the psalmist, the place of holiness coincides with the place of joy. Anyone can find joy on God’s holy mountain. Despite the world’s promises, sin offers no harbor for joy in this life. Furthermore, the joy found in holiness is not bound by culture or dependent on personal preference. All the earth will find joy on God’s holy mountain.

Q: *Why is the “woman in labor” metaphor so effective at describing the anguish of those who plot against God?*

Q: *What metaphors could you create to describe the anguish of those who plot against God?*

Where songs of joy come from the city of God, cries of terror will come from the camps of those who plot against God’s city. The psalmist compared the anguish of the enemies of God with the anguish of a woman in labor. This is a common metaphor in the Old Testament used to describe those who are suffering God’s judgment (Isaiah 21:3; Jeremiah 4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 49:24). The metaphor’s remarkable effectiveness stems from its ability to communicate across time and culture. The cries of anguish would ring in the ears of everyone who has ever been present for the birth of a child.

Q: *Why does the Old Testament focus on the pain of labor instead of the joy of a newborn baby?*

Q: *How does the resurrection bring joy to a hopeless world?*

APPLICATION POINT – When the Old Testament used a woman in labor to describe God’s judgment of the wicked, the authors did not describe the scene after birth. The emphasis is on the pain of labor. Remarkably, Jesus used this same metaphor to describe the agony the disciples would suffer at His death (John 16:16–24). But He did not follow the Old Testament pattern of confining the metaphor to the time of labor. Instead, He brought it to completion with the joy a woman experiences at the birth of the child (John 16:21). When He rose from the dead, the anguish the disciples felt at His death was replaced by the joy of His resurrection. This is the power of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. Before, there was only sorrow and no hope for those under the condemnation of sin. Now, there is joy to be found at the end of sorrow. The wrath of God was fully satisfied in Jesus. Everyone who hopes in His death and resurrection can find forgiveness of sin and the unspeakable joy of a new life with God.

Q: *What is the most common reason given for offering God praise?*

Q: *In Psalm 48, what was God's weapon against those who plotted against Him?*

Those who trust in God will hear His praises echoing all the way to the ends of the earth. The cause of God's praise may perhaps take us by surprise. We might expect the deliverance of His people to be the source of His worldwide praise, but if it is, it is pushed to the background in this instance. The psalmist identified God's judgments as the cause of His worldwide praise. God will hold those who oppose Him accountable for their rebellion against Him, and this is a reason to praise Him. Another surprise for the reader concerns God's instrument of judgment. We might expect to find some sort of a weapon or rod in God's right hand, but the psalmist says His right hand is filled with righteousness (Psalm 48:10). God's righteousness demands the judgment of those who refuse to yield to His rule, and His judgment will be acknowledged as good and just by the praise of His people.

Q: *Why should you be suspicious of antiauthoritarians?*

Q: *How have you seen power exercised well and exercised poorly?*

APPLICATION POINT – We recoil against the idea of power. In the minds of many, the existence of power signals corruption, and the exercise of power can only accomplish oppressive and evil purposes. Power and corruption often do go hand in hand, but to suggest the solution is to overthrow all authority structures in favor of the absence of all authority is ludicrous and even more dangerous. This psalm reminds us that the exercise of power does not always stem from corruption. The key is righteousness. God righteously exercises His power in judgment and receives our praise as a result. The righteous exercise of power is good for human flourishing. This is an important principle for Christians in powerful positions to recognize. God has put you in the position you are in to display His glory in how you exercise authority. Righteous character results in a good exercise of power. Whether you are in a supervisor-employee relationship, parent-child relationship, or any other position in which you are given authority, you have the responsibility to exercise it in a manner that is consistent with the righteous character of God. This is another reason we must seek holiness in character through the grace found in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Q: *What is the goal of our witnessing the splendor of the city of God?*

Q: *Given the psalmist's commitment to tell the coming generations, why did Israel continue to slide into idolatry and rebellion?*

Psalm 48 is intended to create an enduring message that will be heard in the next generation and beyond. As the audience marveled at God's glory, justice, righteous character, judgment, and grace, they were charged to pass along what they saw and heard to the generation that followed (Psalm 48:13). This ensured that the earth would retain an enduring witness to the glory and goodness of God.

Q: *What steps can you take to pass along your faith to the next generation?*

Q: *Why is it important to pass the faith along to the next generation?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psalm 48 invites us to see and hear the glories of who God is and what He has done so that we may help those who come after us see and hear God as well. Parents have to recognize what a responsibility this psalm places upon them. You cannot just hope your children will witness your faith and know to follow your lead. You are called to intentionally pass your faith along. This means showing your children how to live as a follower of Christ and verbalizing the message of the gospel and how it influences every part of your life. Church members are called to pass along the faith to the children and youth in the church. Studies have shown that mere church attendance has almost zero influence on whether teenagers will attend church and confess their faith into their twenties and beyond. We cannot assume that young people will believe in Christ just because they are coming to church. They are just as likely not to. Similar studies have shown that youth who formed relationships with three to four adults in a church were more than twice as likely to remain in church throughout young adulthood. The key to passing along our faith to the next generation is investing in the lives of young people. If we are going to be obedient to Psalm 48:13, we have to actively pass along our faith.

NEXT STEPS

Psalm 48 invites us to see and hear of the glory of the city of God. The city's glory comes from God Himself. This week, consider one way in which you could help others do each of these things. How can you help others see the glory of God? This may require an act of service or a public display of your commitment to God. How can you help others hear the glory of God? Tell someone how your faith in God has influenced your life and ask how He could make a difference in their life.

PRAY

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

God, the mere sight of you leads the nations to terror. Help me treat you with an authentic reverence that will show the world your glory.

Jesus, apart from you, I would have no hope of being a citizen in God's holy city. Thank you for the sacrifice you made on my behalf.

Father, help me to hear and see the beauty of your glory in your Word and in my life.

God, help me pass along the good news of the gospel of Jesus to the next generation.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

March 20, 2022 | Having the Final Word

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Who do you think are the five most influential characters in the Bible? Why?

Read Psalm 89.

Ask God to help you recognize the lasting importance of David's enduring throne.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The psalmist awaits a figure who will fulfill the promises God made to David.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Redemption and freedom from the disastrous effects of sin are found in Jesus Christ, the one who fulfills the promises God made to David.

MEDITATE

"Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said: 'I have granted help to one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people'" (Psalm 89:19).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to introduce yourself to a key concept underlying Psalm 89.

Q: *Why is the final word often the most important?*

Q: *Why are final words often expressions of hope?*

The “final word” is often synonymous with victory. Contestants in a political debate covet the final word of the debate because they understand that the last thing the audience hears is often what stays with them. The same concept is observed when couples fight. I overheard my college roommate having an argument with his girlfriend over the phone. He said something I could tell he thought would bring an end to the discussion. But his girlfriend apparently had something ready to counter his “last word.” Although their conversation was over for all practical purposes, they spent the next thirty minutes trading barbs because neither was willing to let the other gain the upper hand by having the last word. It can be like a thrilling, back-and-forth football game. Although talent and strategy are important, the deciding factor in these games is usually who has possession of the ball at the end of the game, so we often use the phrase “final word” to signal victory even in contests that do not involve words.

In Psalm 89, we find the psalmist in the midst of a harrowing inner debate. He knows God made a covenant with David and promised him an enduring throne, yet he has witnessed the collapse of the Davidic dynasty. Had God’s promises failed? Furthermore, the prosperity of the Davidic throne overflowed into the prosperity of the nation. The fall of David’s descendants left little hope for the psalmist and the rest of his people. Would the final word of God’s promises and the Davidic dynasty be “failure”? The psalmist does not fully resolve the answer to this question, but he leaves us with plenty of clues to guide us in how he was thinking.

Q: *How is our situation like the psalmist’s?*

Q: *What promises from God are we waiting to see fulfilled?*

APPLICATION POINT – We share much common ground with the psalmist because we are also depending upon the promises of God. We live with the promise of Jesus’s return (Acts 1:11), the promise of the Holy Spirit’s active ministry (John 15:26), and the promise of God’s final victory (Revelation 20–22). No matter how fervently we believe in God’s promises, if you are like me, sometimes it is hard to reconcile His promises with what we see going on around us. This was certainly the case for the psalmist, so Psalm 89 is the message we need to encourage us to fight through the times when we feel left in the dark about what God is doing in the world.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalm 89 can be divided into three sections. The first section (Psalm 89:1–16) praises God’s majesty in and mastery over everything He has made. The second section (Psalm 89:17–37) reflects on the promises God made to David concerning his offspring, otherwise known as the Davidic covenant. The final section (Psalm 89:38–52) reveals the failure of the Davidic line and wonders aloud when and if God will reengage His promises to David for the sake of Israel. The first two sections feed into the last. Given all that is said in sections one and two, how could what transpires in section three happen?

1. HOW THESE SECTIONS ARE REFERRED TO WITHIN THE BOOK OF PSALMS
2. PRIORITIZING PRAISE
3. THE DAVIDIC COVENANT
4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE PROMISES OF GOD

GOING DEEPER

+This lesson will cover each major section of Psalm 89. Additional attention will be given to the Davidic covenant because of its importance in this psalm and the rest of the Bible. But first we will look at a peculiar but unmistakable feature of the book of Psalms.

1. HOW ARE THESE SECTIONS REFERRED TO WITHIN THE BOOK OF PSALMS?

■ **BOOK 1 (PSALMS 1–41), BOOK 2 (PSALMS 42–72), BOOK 3 (PSALMS 73–89), BOOK 4 (PSALMS 90–106), BOOK 5 (PSALMS 107–150)**

Q: *What are the books mentioned throughout the Psalter, i.e., the Book of Psalms?*

Q: *What do these books show us about the Psalms?*

Before going into the lesson, it will be helpful to explain something you probably noticed as you read Psalm 89 in your Bible. Between Psalms 89 and 90, most editions of the Bible include the words “Book Four.” As in Hebrew manuscripts, our modern Bibles preserve the tradition of dividing the book of Psalms into five smaller books. The origin of this tradition was not preserved, so we cannot be certain of the reasoning behind it. It seems likely that these books point to the historical development of the book of Psalms. Psalm 72:20, occurring at the end of Book Two, reads “The psalms of David are ended” even though there are several additional psalms attributed to David in the book of Psalms (e.g., Psalms 86, 103). Thus, it is believed Psalm 72:20 is a remnant from when Book Two of the Psalms circulated on its own or from a time before the remaining Davidic psalms were added. When the book of Psalms reached the form we see today, this note was simply retained in the text. Jewish scribes would never consider omitting any words when copying their Scriptures.

The five books within the Psalms seem to follow a general progression. Book One is made up nearly entirely of Davidic psalms. Books One and Two mostly pertain to his life, both before and after he was anointed king. Book Three contains multiple laments. It is frequently tied to the time of the exile when the kingdom collapsed. Book Four is also somewhat melancholy but not entirely. Book Five has a more positive outlook as the people are encouraged to consider what God would do for them in the future.

Q: *Why is it important to understand how we got the Bible?*

Q: *Why is it a good thing that God included humans in the production of the Bible?*

APPLICATION POINT –It is important for us to realize that the Bible did not drop down out of heaven or appear out of thin air. The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments were written by real historical people. Their books often address specific historical situations. Their writing styles and emphases are often evident in their works. As is the case for Psalms, some books are collections of previously written materials. Sometimes, it appears that later scribes included editorial explanations. This is important because it concerns our doctrine of Scripture and how we interpret it. We should know what we believe about the Bible. The traditional Christian belief is that the writing and canonization of Scripture was accomplished under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What we believe about the Bible influences how we interpret what it says. For example, Paul and James used the word “justified” in different ways. This is why Paul said we are justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28) while James says we are justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24). Paul used “justify” to refer to our legal standing before God. But James, used it to refer to the verification of our faith in Christ. My doctrine of Scripture allows me to recognize that these two men used the same word in two different ways. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand how these two verses do not contradict each other.

Several years ago, I was teaching a seminary course on the Psalms. One student emailed me to express his irritation regarding the exegesis (explanation of a text of Scripture) paper assignment. Among other things, he told me he believed the Bible did not need to be interpreted because God dictated the words of Scripture directly to the human authors, thus cutting them out of the production of the Bible except as mindless instruments. Although this student's position caught me off guard, I was able to point him to Psalm 72:20 and use this verse to illustrate that the production of Scripture was more complicated than he was allowing for. He still would not concede the point even though he had no explanation for the problem I highlighted. I remain deeply concerned for him and his faith. What we believe about the Bible, including how it came to be, matters because it influences how we understand what the Bible says and ultimately how we are to live in response to what it says. We do not protect God's Word by refusing to think deeply about it. We only endanger our faith.

2. PRIORITIZING PRAISE

■ PSALM 89:1-16

Q: *How did the psalmist convey the extent of God's power?*

Q: *How could you find out the meaning of "Rahab" in verse 10?*

Psalm 89 is a remarkable psalm, but perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is the way it begins. In a psalm that plumbs the depth of the Davidic covenant and then turns on a dime to question God's faithfulness, you would not expect the psalmist to spend the first sixteen verses heaping praises upon God. It just does not seem to be what this psalm is about. Nevertheless, the psalmist prioritizes praise. Psalm 89:3-4 gives a preview of the Davidic covenant and the reason for this praise. The psalmist's praise for God spans both heaven and earth. None of the holy ones can compare with God (Psalm 89:7). On earth, He calms the seas and scatters His enemies with ease (Psalm 89:9-10). Both heaven and earth belong to Him (Psalm 89:11).

Most of the psalmist's words of praise are easily understood. The mention of Rahab, however, is a bit harder to understand from our context. The Rahab we are most familiar with was a friend to the Israelites. Her story is told in Joshua 2. She is not the Rahab being referred to in Psalm 89:10. The Rahab in this verse is a dragon-like sea monster associated with the nation of Egypt (Job 26:12; Psalm 74:12-14; 87:4; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9). Thus, "Rahab" may be a way of reflecting upon God's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt. By identifying the Egyptians with a mythical sea monster, the psalmist was adding an eschatological (relating to end times), good-versus-evil dynamic to the exodus story.

Q: *Why is it challenging to keep praising God in the midst of challenges?*

Q: *How do you see God's world-encompassing power at work today?*

APPLICATION POINT – In Psalm 89, the psalmist displayed a faith that could be shaken but not shattered. Despite everything he wrote in the final part of this psalm, he began with an unrestrained praise of God. This is a wonderful example for us to emulate. It is one we must emulate. As with the psalmist, there will be times when you will not understand how your situation could possibly fit into God's promises. And as with the psalmist, if we do not base everything in the praise of God, we will be lost when times of struggle come. We see this same outlook in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they refused to worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar at the risk of being burned alive (Daniel 3:17–18). They believed God could rescue them if He chose, but even if He did not, they would only worship Him, no matter what sorrow might come. This is the faith we need during times when we wonder if God's promises are true. No matter what may befall us, God is true, He is worthy of my praise, and He will be exalted in my life.

3. THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

■ **2 SAMUEL 7:1–17; PSALM 89:17–37**

Q: *What is a covenant?*

Q: *How is Psalm 89 linked to the Old Testament's narrative books?*

Psalm 89 revolves around the promises God made to David in 2 Samuel 7:1–17. Although 2 Samuel never uses the word “covenant” to describe God's promises, Psalm 89 identifies God's commitment to David as a covenant (Psalm 89:3). It summarizes the ministry of two prophets to describe God's commitment to David and his descendants. Psalm 89:20–23 describes David's anointing by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 16:1–13). David would become king over Israel and seek God with a genuine heart. Psalm 89:3–4 and 28–37 describe the message of the prophet Nathan. Nathan was the prophet who served as God's mouthpiece to announce the covenant He was making with David. The centerpiece of this covenant was the creation of an everlasting dynasty for David and his offspring. His lineage would rule over Israel. The middle section of Psalm 89 is a celebration of God's commitment to David.

Q: *What does God's willingness to make a covenant with David show us about His nature?*

Q: *Did David do anything to warrant God's grace in his life?*

APPLICATION – David was by no means perfect. In fact, most of the space devoted to David in the Bible addresses his failures and shortcomings. His anger nearly led him to murder a foolish but innocent man (1 Samuel 25). Only the man's noble wife kept David from carrying out his intentions. He took the wife of a devoted soldier for himself and had the soldier clandestinely murdered on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11:1–12:23). He failed to discipline his children (2 Samuel 13), and a civil war erupted within his kingdom as a result (2 Samuel 14–18). In a moment of hubris, he called for a census to be taken to put a number on his greatness, incurring God's swift judgment. David was not perfect, and the Bible does not hide his flaws. Nevertheless, the overall tenor of the Bible's portrayal of David is positive. He is one of the positive standards by which subsequent kings were evaluated (1 Kings 15:1–5). Despite David's failures, God maintains His covenant commitment to him. God's unswerving commitment to David highlights His grace in David's life. Apart from God's grace, which has been shown to us most fully in Jesus Christ, the one in whom the Davidic covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment, we would never find the favor from God we so desperately need.

Q: *What connections are there between the Davidic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant? [See Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22.]*

Q: *How does the Davidic covenant have implications beyond David and his family?*

A full appreciation of the Davidic covenant cannot be obtained if we limit our understanding of it just to 2 Samuel 7:1–13. A careful reading of the promises God proclaimed to David through Nathan reveals several links to the covenant God made with Abraham. In 2 Samuel 7:9, God promised to give David a great name, exactly what He promised Abraham in Genesis 12:2. Furthermore, in 2 Samuel 7:12, God promised to raise up David's offspring after his death and to establish his throne. In Genesis 15:4, God promised Abraham an offspring who would receive his inheritance. The connection is even more certain when we recognize God promised that kings would come from Sarah, Abraham's barren wife (Genesis 17:16). The links between these covenants suggest that God was fulfilling His covenant with Abraham by means of the Davidic covenant. These two covenants stem from the same stream of God's blessings.

The importance of the link between these two covenants comes into clearer focus when we consider how the Abrahamic blessings are meant to address the curses of sin introduced in Genesis 3. When humanity disobeyed God's command, He issued a series of judgments. These judgments included (1) hostility between men and women and difficulty with childbearing; (2) the forfeiture of the garden and difficulty producing crops; (3) and an estrangement from God. In Genesis 12:1–3, God promised Abraham (1) offspring, which suggests that the enmity between men and women can be resolved and the difficulties bearing children are not detrimental; (2) land, which suggests a return to a garden-like tranquility and an end to humanity's toiling with the earth; (3) and blessing, which reverses the estrangement between God and humanity. Since the Davidic covenant is linked to the Abrahamic covenant, we can see that the Davidic covenant points the way forward to the way God would address humanity's sin problem. There is little reason to wonder why the psalmist placed so much hope in God's covenant with David in Psalm 89.

Q: *How can you read the Bible more broadly during your devotional times?*

Q: *How can reading the Bible in smaller units hamper your understanding of God's Word?*

APPLICATION POINT – The links between the biblical passages above show the importance of reading the Bible broadly. This is important to remember for your devotional life. Many devotional approaches to Scripture focus on short units and fail to provide the broad perspective needed to understand how the various parts of the Bible fit together. Sometimes this is what we need from our devotional times. We are in a rush and only have time for a short reading from God's Word. Or we are struggling with specific situations and need the Bible to address them clearly and concisely. While this approach to God's Word is what we sometimes need, we do ourselves a great disservice if we never read the Bible broadly to gain a sense of the overall message of Scripture and make the type of connections discussed above. The Bible tells the grand story of how God has provided the redemption we need in Jesus Christ. Once we become familiar with the grand narrative of Scripture and recognize the part we play within it, many of the challenges we face in life come into clearer perspective. If you have always read the Bible in short units, challenge yourself to read through the entire Bible. It will be hard. Some days you will not receive the spiritual edification you were hoping to find. But doing so will help you learn a new way to appreciate what God has said to us.

Q: *Does the fall of Jerusalem and the failure of the kingdom mean the Davidic covenant has failed?*

Q: *Does the Davidic covenant pertain to one of David's children or an entire lineage?*

The most difficult aspect of interpreting Psalm 89 is the same difficulty the psalmist faced. How can we reconcile the everlasting nature of the Davidic covenant with the fall of Jerusalem and the suspension of the Davidic throne (Psalm 89:38–51)? The Davidic covenant contains a provision for what would happen if David's descendants refused to follow God. God would discipline them (2 Samuel 7:14). The wording of this provision even anticipates that it will need to be enacted. This same provision is retained in Psalm 89:30–32. This provision overlaps with another difficulty in understanding the Davidic covenant. The promises to David, as they appear in 2 Samuel 7:1–13, are addressed to a singular descendant. But the enduring nature of God's promises, especially those pertaining to the enduring nature of David's dynasty, compels us to see 2 Samuel 7:12–16 as pertaining to the entirety of David's lineage rather than just a singular descendant. The promises in the Davidic covenant can be applied to a specific descendant as well as David's entire royal lineage.

When the Davidic lineage rejected God, they were disciplined by God. Their rejection of God and His resulting discipline eventually led to the fall of the kingdom and the suppression of David's dynasty, as witnessed by the psalmist. The nature of the Davidic covenant, however, preserves hope in even the most challenging situations. Although David's throne was suppressed, the eternal nature of God's promises anticipates a time when a future ruler from David's line will emerge and reclaim the fallen throne. The psalmist hinted at this in the way he recounted the Davidic covenant. In Psalm 89:29, the psalmist anticipated a singular offspring from David whose throne will be as of the days of heaven. In the next verse, which is the beginning of the discipline provision, the psalmist switched from a singular offspring to a plural. "If his children forsake my law ..." Thus, the psalmist seems to be alluding to his hope that a future member of David's line would assume an eternal throne even if the Davidic line faltered, which it currently had. Christians realize the hope of this future offspring is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Q: *Why is it important to mature in our understanding of Scripture?*

Q: *How can we read the Bible humbly?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible is full of passages that are difficult to understand. As you encounter God’s Word in your devotions, read humbly. Try to understand the meaning of what you read and apply it to your life, but recognize that you will inevitably miss some details, such as the psalmist’s switch from a singular in Psalm 89:29 to the plural in Psalm 89:30. Do not become discouraged if you discover a better way to read God’s Word. Furthermore, do not persist in a misunderstanding just because you were previously committed to it. Everyone needs to continually grow in their understanding of God’s Word, from pastors down to the smallest children. As you read the Bible, read for understanding but do so humbly.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE PROMISES OF GOD?

■ PSALM 89:38–52

Q: *Why was the psalmist doubting God’s promises to David?*

Q: *How did the psalmist use Exodus 32:12 and Numbers 14:13–16 in verses 50–51?*

Despite his veiled hope, the psalmist remained dismayed at the prospects of the Davidic dynasty. The destruction of Jerusalem was beyond anything he ever anticipated. The psalmist truly wondered if God would ever resume His plan for David’s offspring. This is clearly seen in the series of questions he posed to God. The concern was that David’s line might collapse beyond recovery. In a last-ditch effort to plead their case, the psalmist called attention to how the surrounding nations were mocking God’s people. God had previously paused His judgment against them for the sake of His reputation among the nations (Exodus 32:12; Numbers 14:13–16). Perhaps the same argument that worked for Moses would work again.

Q: *How should we respond when we do not understand God’s purposes for what is unfolding in the world?*

Q: *Can we question God’s purposes without falling into sin?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist was reflecting on a clear word from the Lord and wondering how it would be vindicated in the present. As far as we know, he himself never heard a word from God. He simply had to persevere in a faith that was uncertain. Again, his situation was quite close to our own sometimes. In darkening times, we want to hear a word of validation from God, but our duty is to persevere in our faith. Like the psalmist, we need to recognize that while God has spoken clearly in the past, such as with the Davidic covenant, there are often epochs of world history between the occasions when God speaks. We read the Bible and think God was so much more active in the past, but if we were to create a timeline of world history, we would see long stretches, even during biblical times, during which God kept silent and expected His people to persevere in the faith already revealed to them. This is what we are to do in our time. God has spoken finally and authoritatively in Jesus Christ, as revealed in the pages of Scripture. Our duty, like the psalmist's, is to trust what God has said even when we struggle to see His faithfulness in our own times.

NEXT STEPS

Psalm 89 revolves around the Davidic covenant. The psalmist recognized this covenant as a key point in Scripture and yearned to understand his present circumstances in light of what he knew from God's Word. While every word in our Bibles is inspired, there do seem to be some key places in God's revelation that set the stage for everything else we encounter. As you continue in your devotional times, be attentive to these key texts and follow the psalmist's example in tracing their implications throughout the rest of Scripture and life.

PRAY

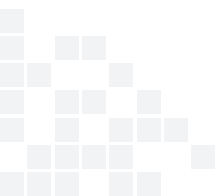
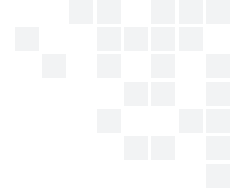
+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, help me to always begin by praising you no matter what situation I find myself in or what struggle I face.

Father, thank you for your covenantal promises. I have hope today because you committed yourself to me and others in a covenant relationship.

Lord Jesus, you are the heir of David's throne. You will reign forever. Nothing and no one will ever overcome you.

God, help me to persevere in the faith you have called me to even when I struggle to understand your faithfulness.



DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

March 27, 2022 | Knowing God to Praise Him

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What causes you to praise God?

Read Psalms 98, 99, and 100.

Ask God to give you a better understanding of what He has done so you can praise Him more.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Praise God for who He is and what He has done.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Failure to praise God is a symptom of not knowing Him.

MEDITATE

“Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name! For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” (Psalm 100:4–5).

GETTING STARTED

+This section illustrates a key distinction in how we know and relate to others, a distinction to keep in mind as we consider the link between knowing God and praising Him.

Q: *How is knowing family different from knowing coworkers?*

Q: *What would separate knowledge of God from praise of God?*

Most Americans who work outside of the home spend nearly as much time with coworkers as they do their families, if time spent sleeping is not included. Of the sixteen to eighteen hours we spend awake, eight to ten are typically dedicated to work. The daily commute swallows up another hour or more for many of us. We spend a lot of time around our coworkers and get to know them rather well. I know the school my boss's daughter attends. I know my supervisor's political opinions. I know the health challenges another coworker is facing. In many ways, there is a lot of overlap in the things I know about the people I work with and what I know of my own family. But no matter how well I know my coworkers, it pales in comparison to how well I know my family. No matter how much time I spend with coworkers or the details I know about them, I know my family better. The difference is that I know my coworkers casually, but I know my family intimately.

Psalms 98–100 invite us to praise God because of what we know of Him. The key thing for us to realize is that the psalmists believe knowing God will lead us to praise Him. When we consider God's character and what He has done for us, our hearts will respond in praise, but for this to be the case, we need to remember the difference between knowing coworkers and knowing family. For our knowledge of God to lead to praise, it must be intimate instead of casual. Knowing facts about God is good, but it will not lead to praise on its own. For knowledge to lead to praise, an intimate, invested knowledge is needed, similar to how we know family.

Q: *How do we find intimate knowledge of God?*

Q: *How does the gospel help us know God intimately?*

APPLICATION POINT – The way many of us pursue knowledge of God will never lead to the intimate praise anticipated by the psalmist. We approach God as though He were a coworker. We know Him casually, because He is there. Our knowledge doesn't demand much effort or commitment on our part. Or we approach Him as though knowing Him simply gives us a leg up in some kind of trivia game between ourselves and anyone else who participates with us. We want to know God to impress others. Or we feel obligated to know Him because we are in His debt. We may come to know basic facts about God in these ways, but we will never learn to praise Him in

this way. The knowledge that leads to the praise is rooted in the gospel. When our outlook on life and our passions have been transformed by the gospel, the knowledge of God becomes intimate for us, like the way we know family. The gospel transforms casual knowledge into intimate knowledge.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalms 98–100 each describe a call to praise based on who God is and what He has done for us. This lesson will consider the perspective offered by each psalm.

1. PSALM 98: PRAISE THE LORD FOR SALVATION

2. PSALM 99: PRAISE THE HOLY GOD

3. PSALM 100: PRAISE THE CREATOR GOD

GOING DEEPER

+*Psalm 98 calls for praise because the psalmist knows God as Savior. Psalm 99 calls for praise because God is holy. Psalm 100 calls us to praise God as creator.*

1. PSALM 98: PRAISE THE LORD FOR SALVATION

■ PSALM 98

Q: *Why does the psalmist call for a new song in praise of God?*

Q: *What kind of salvation is the psalmist envisioning?*

The psalmist begins Psalm 98 by calling for a song in praise of God, but not any song will do. He calls for a new song in response to the marvelous things God has done. God's marvelous deeds are centered on an act of salvation He has worked on behalf of His people. At first, we may be tempted to think the psalmist is referring to some kind of localized salvation. Perhaps he faced a military threat or a natural disaster, and God granted deliverance to him and those around him. The details of this psalm, however, extend beyond any isolated instance of salvation. The

psalmist declares that God's salvation has been accomplished in the sight of all the nations. Not only have the nations seen this salvation but they have evidently participated in it to some extent, because the psalmist calls them to join him in praising God. Finally, the psalmist calls for a new song to praise God with. A new song is needed because nothing compares to the salvation God has now brought. Not even the exodus from Egypt, the archetypal act of deliverance in Israel's history, can compare. Just as Moses led Israel in a new song after crossing the Red Sea (Exodus 15), the people of God must now compose a new song to acknowledge what God has accomplished for them. Praise on this scale must be in response to an eschatological (related to end times) act of salvation. The psalmist is anticipating God's future and final act of deliverance from all evil. Every resistance to God's reign will be rooted out and dispelled. The only thing remaining for the people of God is to sing His praise.

As Christians, we recognize that God's final act of deliverance began with Jesus Christ. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus decisively defeated sin and provided salvation for all who repent of sin and place their faith in Him. When Jesus returns, any remaining resistance to His reign will be conquered, and God's salvation will be recognized among all the earth.

❖: *What does the psalmist mean by saying God remembered His steadfast love?*

❖: *Why would we be tempted to wonder if God has forgotten His commitment to us?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist proclaims that God remembered His steadfast love, but we know, as the psalmist did, that God cannot forget something so fundamental to His will. In times of waiting, it can often seem as though God has forgotten His commitment to us, but to say He has remembered His steadfast love is merely an accommodation of our perspective of what God is doing in the world. We may feel as though God has forgotten us as we wait for Jesus to return, but we can know that God will one day “remember” us and complete our salvation from everything that threatens us.

❖: *With how many instruments, including the human voice, does the psalmist call on his audience to praise God?*

❖: *In what ways does the use of instruments enhance our worship?*

The psalmist calls his audience to praise God with their voices and at least three different instruments. This list of instruments is likely not intended to be exhaustive. Harps, drums, and anything else at their disposal would be appropriate as well. The use of these instruments demonstrates the value human resourcefulness adds to worship. God has given us the gift of creativity, and the psalmist is calling others to utilize it in worship. Humanity created these instruments out of the raw materials God provided (Genesis 4:21). They learned to tune and blend their sounds into a pleasing melody. When all this creativity is funneled into the praise of God, His glory resounds to an increasing degree. God's people should offer praise with all the resources He has provided as long as they can do it in a manner consistent with God's holy character.

❓: *Could the use of instruments ever detract from worship?*

❓: *How can you use your talents to worship God?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist calls his audience to worship God with all their resourcefulness. This is an appropriate occasion to remind ourselves that worship is not limited to a service or even to singing or musical activities. Paul referred to our devotion to God and pursuit of holiness as an act of spiritual worship (Romans 12:1). We worship God when we live out the implications of the gospel. Furthermore, to the degree that worshipping God and bringing Him glory overlap, everything we do becomes an act of worship (1 Corinthians 10:31). While musical worship is important, music is not the only way to worship God. You can use whatever talents God has given you to express His praise.

❓: *Who praises God in verses 7-8?*

❓: *How do verses 7-8 exhibit the extent of God's praise?*

After calling on humanity, with all their resourcefulness, to praise God, the psalmist turns to nature. With the psalmist's skillful wit, creation takes on human qualities and joins in the chorus of God's praise. Every square inch of land and sea is needed to create the praise that God is due. As king over humanity and all the earth, God is due praise from both arenas.

Q: *What keeps nature from fully displaying the glory of God today?*

Q: *Will God receive more praise from nature or from you?*

APPLICATION POINT – I want to invite you to join a competition. Nature displays God’s glory in incredible ways. Whether creation’s praise comes from the rays of the sun reflecting against the clouds on a perfect morning, the panoramic view from a mountain peak to the valleys below, or the intricacies of wildlife, creation sings a wonderful cantata of praise to God. Are you going to let nature outdo your praise? It is a seemingly silly contest, but the psalmist’s remarks lead me to believe he sees humanity and nature as a dynamic duo in praising God. I’m not sure if the praise I give and witness on a typical Sunday morning really measures up to what the psalmist envisions. When the Pharisees called for Jesus to rebuke the multitudes who were praising Him, Jesus declared that if they were silent, the rocks would cry out in their place (Luke 19:40). I’m afraid many Christians today have surrendered in the contest to give God praise and not because the Pharisees or anyone else has threatened them. They simply do not want to put forth the effort to praise God as He deserves. The next time you find yourself in a corporate worship service, praise God like you intend to put nature to shame.

2. PSALM 99: PRAISE THE HOLY GOD

■ PSALM 99

Q: *What descriptor is found in the beginning, middle, and end of Psalm 99?*

Q: *What do the cherubim show us about the God who sits upon them?*

The message of Psalm 99 rests on the foundation of God’s holiness. God’s holiness is what sets Him apart. An object is called holy if it is set apart for God’s use. Thus, holiness is the quality of God that most distinguishes Him from everything else. The psalmist acknowledges God’s holiness in verses 3, 5, and 9. At every point, he feels pressed to tie his praise of God to God’s holiness.

His acknowledgement of God's holiness extends beyond the mere appearance of the word. God sits upon the cherubim. Cherubim are a specific type of angel with a specific function. They are protectors of God's holiness. In Genesis 3:24, they protect the way to the tree of life at the entrance of the garden. They adorn the ark of the covenant, which typically rested in the innermost room of God's sanctuary, the holy of holies. In fact, by referencing God's throne (Psalm 99:1) and His footstool (Psalm 99:5), the psalmist is likely alluding to the ark of the covenant. Therefore, their appearance in a psalm focused on God's holiness is no accident.

❖: *What are the implications of God's holiness for us?*

❖: *How are God's justice, equity, and righteousness related to His holiness?*

APPLICATION POINT – In addition to God's holiness, the psalmist acknowledges God's justice, equity, and righteousness. God's holiness means His commitment to these qualities sets Him apart from His creation. We may be concerned for justice, equity, and righteousness, but not to the degree that God is. Because of sin, we may compromise these things at times. Even when our intentions are pure, we can only marginally achieve any of these three qualities. Not so with God. Because of His holiness, He is able to achieve perfect justice, perfect equity, and perfect righteousness.

God's holiness means His reign can be perfectly just, impartial, and righteous. When the American colonies revolted against the British rule, they did so under the conviction that the rule of the British monarch lacked justice and equity. No one can ever make this claim against God without pretense. God's rule is perfect because He is holy. While the psalmists allude to many nations who rebel and rage against God's rule, those nations do so without warrant. In the same way, if we rebel against God's rule, we do it in opposition to true justice, equity, and righteousness. God's holiness demands our submission to His rule.

❖: *What is the dilemma of God's holiness?*

❖: *Who were Moses, Aaron, and Samuel?*

God's holiness presents us with a dilemma. How can any fallen human being escape the punishment of a holy God? We have all rebelled against God's authority. The psalmist felt this dilemma as much as we do, which is why he also acknowledges God as forgiving (Psalm 99:8). Psalm 99 mentions three key figures from Israel's past (Psalm 99:6). Moses and Aaron led the Israelite exodus from Egypt. Moses continued in his leadership role and sometimes assumed the role of a prophet (Numbers 12:6–8; Deuteronomy 34:10). Aaron became Israel's chief priest (Leviticus 8). Samuel was Israel's final judge (1 Samuel 7:15) and also served as a priest. The psalmist's purpose in mentioning these three figures is unclear. In Psalm 99:8, the psalmist says God was a forgiving God to "them." The nearest antecedent to the pronoun "them" is Moses, Aaron, and Samuel, but many people believe, based on the intermediary nature of their ministries, the psalmist is referring to the forgiveness received by the people of Israel in Psalm 99:8. If this is the case, the psalmist is highlighting the need for a mediator to dispense God's forgiveness. If it is Moses, Aaron, and Samuel who received forgiveness, the psalmist is underlining the universal need for forgiveness, because even Israel's greatest leaders were far from perfect. Either interpretation fits well in the context of the message of Psalm 99 and illustrates the importance of forgiveness from a holy God.

❓: *How is forgiveness mediated to us?*

❓: *How is the tension between God's holiness and His forgiveness of sin ultimately resolved?*

APPLICATION POINT – Even though God is holy, He forgives sin. This is good news for all of us. Apart from His forgiveness, we would have no hope. Furthermore, we never need to do anything to earn His forgiveness because it cannot be earned in the first place. Forgiveness is a free gift from God. Ultimately, His forgiveness is centered on Jesus Christ. He maintains His holiness and forgives our sin because of the ministry of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Our sin was counted to Him. His righteousness was counted to us. Although we are undeserving, God will pronounce everyone who places their faith in Christ Jesus "not guilty."

3. PSALM 100: PRAISE THE CREATOR GOD

❏ PSALM 100

❓: *What new theme does the psalmist use as a reason to praise God in Psalm 100?*

Q: *What common metaphor appears in Psalm 100 and how is it related to praise?*

In Psalm 100, the psalmist introduces the theme of creation. God created all of humanity. As our creator, He rightly rules over us, and we are accountable to Him. The psalmist extends this line of thought by comparing us to the sheep of the shepherd. We are guided by His direction, and He protects us. As our creator and owner, God deserves our praise.

Q: *What benefits do we have because we belong to God?*

Q: *Why is it good to be held accountable?*

APPLICATION POINT – It is a privilege to belong to God. God is committed to us. He cares for us. He sustains us in times of need. He holds us accountable to His righteous standards. Today, it is popular to think a commitment to God inhibits happiness by restraining our desires. Nothing could be further from the truth. Those who belong to God are able to seek happiness within the confines of His perfect will.

NEXT STEPS

Psalms 98–100 focus on the praise of God. Worship extends beyond the times of formal praise in a church setting. Nevertheless, our times of formal praise are a major component of our worship lives, and for many of us, these times can become stale. It is easy for our minds to wander, to sing the words without thinking about them, or to give no voice to the words at all. One problem may simply be a lack of familiarity; we are not drawn to church worship because we are not familiar with the songs used during worship. Many of us do not encounter these songs apart from Sundays. Even on the car ride home after church, many of us transition back to our preferred style of music. If this is the case for you, challenge yourself to become familiar with the songs Oakwood regularly sings so you can sing them with meaning along with the congregation. Commit one day to listening to worship music as you commute to and from work. Doing so may reinvigorate your praise of the God who is worthy of all our praise.

PRAY

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

God, you are the God of my salvation. You are the beginning and the end. Remember your steadfast love for me.

Lord Jesus, you make forgiveness possible. You died so that I may live. You have taken away all my sin so that I may praise the holy God.

Father, help me to praise you with a whole heart. Help me not to divide my attention when I am seeking to give you praise.

God, you are my creator and sustainer. I belong to you and so does all my praise.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

April 3, 2022 | Our Highest Praise

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

What makes a person worthy of national recognition?

Read Psalm 113.

Pray this lesson will help you glimpse the extent to which God deserves our praise.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God deserves our highest praise.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

God's praise has implications for every area of our lives

MEDITATE

*"Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?"
(Psalm 113:5-6).*

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces Psalm 113 by viewing the substantial influence it has had in a young woman's life.

Q: *What biblical passages have personal significance for you?*

Q: *What is it about these passages that speaks so directly to you?*

While all of God's Word is important, many Christians can identify specific biblical passages that hold special significance for them. Second Samuel 23:8–37 probably does not mean much to you, but for me, it was the passage being preached when I recognized that God was calling me to salvation. It recounts the exploits of David's mighty men. It is hardly the "Romans road to salvation," but it influenced my life in a significant way. Numbers 12 holds a similar importance for me. It was the passage from which I preached my first sermon.

In 1998, Rosaria Butterfield attended a meeting at the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Syracuse, New York. She had been attending for some time and several of the women had taken a special interest in her. At the time, she was a committed feminist and identified as a lesbian. That morning the church sang a song during worship that stemmed from the words of Psalm 113. She was fine with the opening lines declaring God's praise, but the conclusion of the psalm offended her to the core. Although she wanted to discredit the message of Psalm 113, some part of her recognized it was true. As she wrestled with its implications, she eventually saw that the words of this psalm perfectly encapsulated God's message of grace for her. She repented of sin and confessed her belief in Christ.

A few years later, Psalm 113 changed her life again. A promising academic, Rosaria had earned a PhD in English literature and held a tenured post at Syracuse University, but she recognized that this psalm esteemed family and children. The man she had become interested in wanted to be a church planter. So, based on the message of Psalm 113, she resigned her teaching position and became a church planter's wife. She homeschooled their adopted children and taught high school English at their homeschool co-op. God used Psalm 113 to make a powerful difference in Rosaria's life. God can use Psalm 113 to speak powerfully to you as well.

Q: *What implications does God's praise have for your life?*

Q: *Why would someone be open to praising God but not obeying Him?*

APPLICATION POINT – One of the most remarkable things about Rosaria's story is that she was not opposed to praising God. That made sense to her. But when the psalmist fleshed out the implications of God's praise to a specific matter of her life, she recoiled. I suspect most of us find ourselves in similar situations. We may not mind

praising God as long as our praise does not make deep inroads into our lives. We do not mind praising God as long as His praise makes no demand on our finances. We do not mind praising God as long as His praise does not require us to deny what our culture says is okay. But that kind of praise is no more than lip service, and it is far less than the praise Psalm 113 envisions. If you want to truly praise God, you must embrace every implication His praise will have for your life.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalms 113–118 are known as the *Hallel*, which means praise. These psalms were sung when Israel celebrated Passover, a commemoration of God delivering them from Egyptian bondage. They were sung to praise Him for His deliverance.

1. PRAISING GOD'S NAME

2. PRAISING THE EXALTED GOD

3. PRAISING THE GOD WHO REVERSES THE PLIGHT OF THE NEEDY

GOING DEEPER

+Psalm 113 contains three easily identifiable stanzas. Stanza one (verses 1–3) emphasizes the praise of God's name. Stanza two (verses 4–6) emphasizes the highness of God. Stanza three (verses 7–9) describes how this exalted God reverses the plight of the needy.

1. PRAISING GOD'S NAME

■ PSALM 113:1–3

Q: How did the psalmist describe the extent of God's praise?

Q: What does "from the rising of the sun to its setting" mean?

The psalmist viewed God's praise as inexhaustible. He called his audience to praise God from the moment of their deliverance to evermore. He provided no limit or qualification concerning the end of our praise, nor did he allude to any interruption or pause in it. The people of God will praise Him forever.

This psalmist illustrated the inexhaustible nature of God's praise by calling attention to the sun. Before clocks and other accurate time-keeping measures were widely available, people organized activities around the position of the sun in the sky—sunrise, noon, mid-afternoon, and evening. The psalmist declared that no matter where the sun was positioned in the sky, it was always an appropriate time to praise God. Since the rising and the setting sun mark an entire day of sunlight, the psalmist was effectively saying we should be ready to praise God all the time, even during the hours of darkness not strictly included in the psalmist's figure of speech.

Q: *How can you extend your praise of God beyond times of corporate worship?*

Q: *Do you ever feel discouraged by the expectations of the psalmists?*

APPLICATION POINT – When a significant figure dies or on special days of remembrance in our country, we lower our flags to half-staff as an expression of mourning and respect. Regardless of the occasion, however, the flags are not kept at half-mast for more than a few days. No matter how significant the person or momentous the occasion, the country cannot remain in a continued state of observance. Such is not the case with God. God is deserving of our praise every minute of every hour of every day. If God's praise ceases, it is because of our limitations as worshippers, not His worthiness. Thus, we require God's grace even in terms of praise. We fall infinitely short of giving God the praise He is due.

Q: *Why did the psalmist focus on God's name?*

Q: *In what other contexts in the Old Testament is the name of God important?*

The psalmist emphasized the centrality of God's name when we worship Him. God's name is commonly associated with His redeeming acts in the Old Testament. For example, after God announced His intention to free the Israelites

from Egyptian bondage and to use Moses to do it, Moses inquired about His name (Exodus 3:13). He believed the knowledge of God's name would be crucial in winning the support of the people. Later, after an initial set back, God utilized His name to create continuity between the Israelites and the patriarchs (Exodus 6:3). Just as God was faithful to the patriarchs, He would be faithful to the Israelites. The psalmist drew attention to God's name because God's name is a sure indication that He will act on His people's behalf.

Q: *How are you maintaining the reputation of God's name?*

Q: *How does praising God's name add a more personal dynamic to our worship?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians are often regarded as hypocrites. Some of this animosity is unfounded both logically and theologically, nevertheless, it is a problem when unbelievers think the followers of God cannot be trusted. We are called to praise God's name, but when we act hypocritically or in any unworthy manner, we make His name a subject of scorn. The deeper problem is that even though Christians claim redemption in Jesus Christ, we have not yet been fully absolved of a sinful nature, so we cannot help but to discredit the name of God on a daily basis. The psalmist's call to praise God's name is a reminder of our need for His grace throughout the course of our lives.

2. PRAISING THE EXALTED GOD

PSALMS 113:4–6

Q: *Why is God repeatedly described as "high" or "above" in these verses?*

Q: *Why would highness be linked to praise?*

Psalm 113:4–6, just three verses, contain four references to God being high above the created order. The "highness" language used here is fairly intuitive for us. Just as in the day of the psalmist, a lofted or elevated position connotes honor in our society. Nevertheless, it is helpful for us to consider why this is the case. One reason highness corresponds to honor is simply due to visibility. People or objects perched on a stand are more

visible. The Grand Canyon is over a mile deep in some locations, but you do not have to be very far from the rim before this magnificent canyon is out of sight. Pike's Peak in Colorado, on the other hand, rises about as far above its surroundings as the Grand Canyon dips below, but it is visible from over a hundred miles away. By elevating what we intend to praise, it comes into the view of more people and therefore receives more honor.

Q: *In what ways can we exalt God before others?*

Q: *Why should we be thankful that God intends to be exalted in the earth?*

APPLICATION POINT – Psalm 113:4 declares that God is high above all nations. His praise and glory among the nations is a frequent theme in the book of Psalms. It is remarkable that God desires to be seen and praised by fallen humanity. His desire to be praised constitutes an invitation to seek Him in repentance. God did not owe us this grace. He would have been perfectly just in abandoning humanity and being content in the fellowship among the other persons of His triune nature. His decision to be highly exalted on earth coincides with His decision to offer salvation to humanity. If God did not desire praise, we would have no hope.

Q: *How does God's highness contrast to our lowness?*

Q: *How do Genesis 11:1-9 and Isaiah 14:12-15 show humanity's resistance to God's highness?*

The psalmist's vision of God as high above all else can be easily contrasted with the desire from humanity to highly exalt themselves. This urge is on display for all to see in the tower of Babel narrative in Genesis 11:1-9. The builders wanted to construct a tower with its tops in the heavens and make a name for themselves (Genesis 11:4). The correlation between their ambitions and Psalm 113 is easy to see. What Psalm 113 ascribes to God the architects of Babel wanted for themselves. God, however, is unmatched. He came down to see the city and the tower the architects believed would rival Him, and although their tower was no match for God, He would not tolerate any attempt to confiscate His glory. With a simple command, He confused the language of those who would usurp His glory. While the builders of Babel likened themselves to God, God easily undid their scheme by undermining their common language, one of the most basic aspects of their daily life.

Likewise, the king of Babylon, described in Isaiah 14:12–15, intended to ascend to the heavens and take his place as God’s rival. The language Isaiah used to describe this king is so sinister that many church fathers concluded he was describing Satan’s fall from heaven. Although this ruler fancied himself as God’s equal, he fell to the furthest reaches of the earth. He was no match for the exalted God of Psalm 113.

Q: *In what ways do you try to make much of yourself and try to rival God?*

Q: *Why is it always futile to seek our own glory instead of God’s?*

APPLICATION POINT – Pride and arrogance are difficult sins to pin down. It is hard to imagine that even the smuggest and most egotistical people today would dare align themselves with the ambitions of the builders of Babel or the king of Babylon. At least they would not admit to it aloud. Very few of us aspire to political office or to become the CEO of a major corporation. These aspirations are not inherently prideful or sinful; in fact, they can be noble endeavors. But most people I know would rather live their lives in a simpler, more private setting. Given this outlook, many people might conclude that the pride that consumed the builders of Babel and the king of Babylon is not something they struggle with. But we may be surprised to see how much of a grip pride has on us. We do not have to aspire to their exploits to be just as consumed by the same sin. This is why many of us are so offended when we feel slighted in even the most menial way. If a vehicle cuts me off in traffic, I am enraged for the better part of an hour. I remember the faces and smirks of drivers I had an altercation with years ago. These moments are burned into my memory. But if someone does an act of kindness for me, it does not tend to stay with me as long. What does this say about my struggle with pride? Even though I might not see myself as trying to unseat God from His throne, I may be sitting there more firmly settled than I think. Pride holds a deeper and tighter grip on our hearts than most of us realize.

2. PRAISING THE GOD WHO REVERSES THE PLIGHT OF THE NEEDY

■ PSALMS 113:7–9

Q: *How is God’s reversal of human fortunes related to His praise?*

Q: *How do the verbs “raises” and “lifts” fit in the flow of thought in this psalm?*

The psalmist changes course during the final stanza. He still offered praise to God but did it by drawing attention to how God intervened among His creatures rather than ascribing praise directly to Him. The focus in this stanza is how God intervenes to reverse the fortunes of those in need. From His exalted perch, God lifts those in need out of their lowly situation and raises them to a position of prominence. Barrenness was a social stigma in the ancient Near East. For a married woman to have no children made her a disgrace to her husband and an outcast in society. By His intervention, God is able to make the barren woman a joyful mother. God’s intervention among those in need demonstrates why He was worthy of the praise offered by the psalmist.

Q: *Does God continue to intervene in our lives today such that He may be exalted?*

Q: *Why does the psalmist offer God praise by drawing attention to His actions in the last stanza?*

APPLICATION POINT: Psalm 113 declares the glory of the exalted God. One marvelous aspect of our exalted God is that He refuses to stand aloof in all His marvelous grandeur. Earlier in this passage, the psalmist saw His glory against the backdrop of the nations. The implication is that God would be exalted among the nations. In the last stanza, we again see God’s highness in relation to His creatures, but the psalmist did not restrain himself to a generic application of God’s grandeur. He noted specific situations in which God would work. The key for us is to recognize that these specific situations do not exhaust the ways in which God will demonstrate His exaltedness to His people. No matter what need you are dealing with, God can use your situation to draw attention to Himself and win the praise of others. We merely need to trust Him.

Q: *How does Psalm 113:7-9 correspond to 1 Samuel 2:5, 8?*

Q: *How does Psalm 113 illustrate Hannah’s situation in 1 Samuel 1?*

The third stanza of Psalm 113 contains a hidden clue to illustrate its message for the readers. Psalm 113:7–8 quotes 1 Samuel 2:8 and alludes to 1 Samuel 2:5. This reuse of earlier biblical material may not have been as “hidden” for the original readers as it is for us. They knew their Scriptures very well and their ears were trained to pick up on this kind of allusion. These verses from 1 Samuel 2 are part of Hannah’s song. Her story is told in 1 Samuel 1. Her husband, Elkanah, had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah was barren. Peninnah used Hannah’s barrenness to ridicule her and win their husband’s favor. Heartbroken, Hannah asked God for a child when her family was visiting the sanctuary at the time of a yearly sacrifice. God heard her request and granted her a child. Hannah’s response in song is recorded in 1 Samuel 2. It bears a striking resemblance to Mary’s Magnificat in Luke 1:46–55. Just as God heard Hannah’s prayer and reversed her fortunes by giving her a son, the psalmist believed God could act in a similar way for His people if they only believed in Him.

Q: *How does Psalm 113 allude to other Old Testament passages?*

Q: *Why is it helpful to view the psalms against the backdrop of a narrative?*

APPLICATION POINT – I’ve related my struggle to understand the psalms. I’m simply not geared toward enjoying poetic language and extensive metaphors. But I have learned some practices I think help me to appreciate Psalms in my own way. One of these practices has been to appreciate how they illustrate and develop the Old Testament’s narrative sections, as Psalm 113:7–9 does. Psalms are not isolated units distinct from the rest of Scripture. They frequently reference major events in Israel’s past, such as the exodus from Egypt or the exile, or anticipate God’s action on Israel’s behalf in the future. Recognizing these narrative links helps me understand them in light of the larger Old Testament narrative. I can appreciate how Psalms contributes to the larger storyline linking the Old Testament together.

NEXT STEPS

The psalmist calls us to praise God's name. In the Old Testament, the patriarchs and others referred to God in ways that highlighted some quality of His character or some deed He had accomplished on their behalf. They were effectively naming God in a way that carried a special significance for them. For example, in Genesis 16:13, Hagar referred to God as El-Roi, or the God who sees. Take a few moments and follow their examples. What are some ways you could refer to God that would hold special significance to you? The goal of this exercise is to encourage you to think about God's nature and what He has accomplished on your behalf. Doing so will help you praise His name.

PRAY

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

Father, open my heart to receive your Word like I never have before.

God, you are indeed high and worthy to be praised. Forgive me for making much of myself and not enough of you.

Father, I join the psalmist in celebrating what you have accomplished for your people. You have saved us for yourself so you might receive our praise.

God, I praise you for the great reversals you have accomplished throughout history. You make the proud stumble and exalt the weak. You fill the poor and leave the rich in need in accordance with Your justice. You fill empty hearts with joy and bring down those who oppose you.

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

April 10, 2022 | *The Battle for Our Hearts*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Is faith in God becoming more challenging?

Read Psalm 115.

Ask God to open your eyes to see Him at work in your life and in the world.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Our faith in God must persevere during the times we cannot see Him at work.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Although the world will question God's presence and power, we must see through their taunts and trust in Him.

MEDITATE

"But we will bless the Lord from this time forth and forevermore. Praise the Lord!" (Psalm 115:18).

GETTING STARTED

+This section introduces the lesson by considering a dilemma often used by philosophers to challenge our belief in God.

Q: *What are some things you depend on but cannot perceive through senses?*

Q: *Has the digital age made you trust more or less in things you cannot see and feel for yourself?*

There is a parable discussed among philosophers known as “the invisible gardener.” Its most popular form can be traced back to atheist Anthony Flew. Flew posed the parable like this:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, “Some gardener must tend this plot.” The other disagrees, “There is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well’s *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the Skeptic despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”

This parable points at the difficulty of believing in God. Why do we believe in God if we cannot verify our beliefs about Him? In Psalm 115, the psalmist faced a similar crisis. His adversaries, who had the upper hand, did not believe in his God or, at the very least, did not believe his God could compare to their own. Despite their accusations and evidence to prove otherwise, the psalmist remained resolute in his faith. Though he was currently down, he anticipated a day when his God would intervene and reveal Himself to be the true God over heaven and earth. Psalm 115 challenges us to do the same.

Q: *How do you maintain your faith while you are waiting for God to act?*

Q: *How do you maintain your faith when you are facing challenges in life?*

APPLICATION POINT – Christians today face a similar dilemma as the psalmist. We believe in a God who has acted decisively in the world, but when skeptics challenge our beliefs, we cannot take them to God and show Him to them. God is not like that. What we can do is argue that God is the best explanation for what we can see. Thinking about the parable of the invisible gardener, we must realize that the skeptic had the same problem as the believer. He could no more verify his beliefs about the garden than the believer could. Interestingly, Anthony Flew himself came to see this later in life. Although he denied the God of Christianity, he eventually became a deist and urged the British government to teach intelligent design in state schools. We can and must do more than this. Psalm 115 calls us to persevere in our faith while we wait for God to act on our behalf once again.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ Psalm 115 begins by acknowledging that God has more at stake in this struggle than the psalmist. After recognizing God's commitment to His own glory, the psalmist confronted the empty claims his enemies had made and declared his intent to stand firm on God's promises.

1. GOD'S CONCERN FOR HIS OWN GLORY
2. CONFRONTING THE ENEMIES' MESSAGE
3. STANDING ON GOD'S PROMISES

GOING DEEPER

+This section will expand on the points noted above and offer applications drawn from the psalmist's message.

1. GOD'S CONCERN FOR HIS OWN GLORY

■ PSALM 115:1

Q: Why was the psalmist first concerned for the glory of God's name?

Q: Why is God's glory foundational for His steadfast love?

Although the psalmist was facing a faith crisis, he did not begin by defending himself or even by identifying the problem he faced. He began with God and His glory because he knew that God takes prominence before himself. The psalmist's words are amazing. He did not ask for deliverance or vindication. He only asked God to glorify His own name. The psalmist knew the key to his victory was for God to glorify himself. If God would glorify Himself, the psalmist would be rescued because he rested in God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

❓: *Why is it good for us that God remains most concerned for His own glory?*

❓: *How can we show a deep concern for God's glory when we make requests of Him in prayer?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist's words may at first seem counterintuitive for us, but they are a good reminder that God does not revolve around us. God is first committed to Himself and to showing the world His greatness. This is good for us. A God who is committed to His own glory is a God who is worthy of our worship. This is a good reminder when we face crises and challenges. If the center of our lives remains stable and separate from us, we have a clear path forward in putting our world back together. If we are at the center of our lives, there is nothing to hold us together when disaster strikes.

2. CONFRONTING THE ENEMIES' MESSAGE

❏ PSALM 115:2–8

❓: *What is the intent of the question posed by the nations relayed by the psalmist?*

❓: *How does the psalmist's answer apply specifically to the challenge he was facing?*

As we have seen many times before, the nations fill two roles in the psalms. At times, they serve as a mechanism to multiply God's glory in the earth and at others, as in this psalm, the nations are those who have revolted against

God's authority. They are enemies of God and of the psalmist. The psalmist's words allude to a struggle in which the nations had apparently won the upper hand and now celebrated by taunting the psalmist. Their question is more of a challenge to the power of the psalmist's God than an inquiry. If the psalmist's God was so great, how had they gained the victory? The psalmist's response was that his God is precisely where He has always been. He resides in the heavens and does exactly as He pleases. The psalmist's response contains an implicit threat to the smugness of the nations. God is where He has always been and when He decides your victory is over, He will swiftly bring your downfall.

❓: *How can you avoid being caught up in moments of despair?*

❓: *Why is it wrong to assume your struggles are a sign of God's impotence?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist's determination to trust that God would have the final word is a reminder to us not to draw too firm a conclusion about what God is doing based on any occurrence in our lives. Some Christians are particularly susceptible to this mindset politically. If their side wins, they take it as a sign of God's favor on the nation. If their side loses, they wonder how God could allow the forces of evil to trample over them. Both outlooks could use a dose of reality from Psalm 115. We also see this mindset at work on a personal level. If life is going well, we think God must be happy with us. When we encounter hardships or trials, we wonder why God is angry with us. Psalm 115 encourages us to take a broader perspective. No matter what you struggle with in life, God remains where He has always been. Do not confuse your present situation, good or bad, with God's outlook on you.

❓: *Why are idols relevant to the psalmist's situation?*

❓: *How do idol worshipers become like the idols they worship?*

After responding to the taunts of the nations, the psalmist unleashed a taunt of his own. In asking "Where is your God?", the nations apparently took comfort in pointing to their idols of silver and gold. They always knew where their gods were. The psalmist rightly drew attention to how pathetic this was. Their gods were the work of their own hands, made in the image of created things, but they had none of the functionality of those things. Their

ears did not hear nor did their eyes see. Although the nations may have gained a temporary advantage over the psalmist, it is ludicrous to suggest they did so by the power of their idols. Their idols were empty and offered no hope of a future. The psalmist recognized a grave truth about the worship of idols. Those who worship empty idols are destined to become like them. Even though they have eyes, ears, mouths, and feet, they are dead on the inside, and they have no hope for the future.

Q: *Where have you seen idolatry practiced?*

Q: *How have Christians traditionally broadened the Old Testament's teaching on idolatry?*

APPLICATION POINT – An idol is anything we come to rely upon for blessing or guidance apart from God. This practice is explicitly condemned throughout the Bible. When the Bible discusses idolatry, it typically has in mind stone representations of a god. Usually, idolators believed in a higher entity that was represented by the idol, but in practice, the image always took over and became the essence of the deity. Idolatry is still practiced today throughout Africa, India, and in other locations. I have been to India and seen rows of idols lining the shelves of shops. People buy their gods from the store and set them in a place of honor in their homes. They show their devotion to their idol gods by treating them with reverence. As a Christian in these contexts, the whole practice feels so heavy. The message of Psalm 115 takes on a reality I have never experienced in America. These people depend on the idols that sit on their shelves. The God of the Bible has infinitely more to offer them.

It has become common, especially in Westernized contexts where the worship of idols is not common, to expand the Bible's teaching on idolatry to include habits that diminish our dependence and appreciation of God. We often refer to money, reputation, power, or sex as idols because people pursue these things with an energy that should be reserved for God. This expanded definition of idolatry does not speak to all the Bible has in mind when discussing idolatry. Part of the wickedness of biblical idolatry is the portrayal of God in material form, which is a degradation of His nature. Nevertheless, this expansion of idolatry is consistent with the Bible's teaching on the wickedness of idol worship and may even be alluded to in the Bible itself (Romans 1:21–23; 1 John 5:21).

3. STANDING ON GOD'S PROMISES

■ PSALMS 115:9–18

Q: *What three groups of people did the psalmist address in these verses?*

Q: *How does the psalmist's message affirm that God is better than idols?*

In response to the claims of idolatrous nations, the psalmist called on the people of God to trust in Him over empty and lifeless images. The God of the Bible is far greater. The idols of the nations could not speak, but God can reveal truth to His people. The idols of the nations could not move, but God can defend His people. A temporary defeat did not change this fact. God was their shield, and He was the source of their blessing.

The psalmist addressed Israel, the house of Aaron, and those who fear the Lord. This threefold address is meant to include everyone who worshipped the God of Israel. The house of Aaron refers to Aaron, Moses's brother, who was Israel's first high priest. His family or "house" was associated with Israel's priesthood, who served as mediators between Israel and God. They could not falter in their role as Israel's ministers. "Those who fear God" should include all Israelites but also included non-Israelites who worshipped Israel's God. Although God was primarily associated with Israel in the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of people from outside the people of Israel who worshipped Israel's God. Several of them, such as Ruth and Rahab, have major roles in the Old Testament's story.

Q: *How does God show Himself to be better than our idols today?*

Q: *Why is it crucial for church members to be free from idolatry?*

APPLICATION POINT – Israel's only hope was to remain firmly committed to their God. This was the only hope for the nations who taunted them as well. Today, the church finds itself in a similar situation. We live in a society that opposes God's rule, and their opposition to God takes the form of an idolatrous commitment against God's mandates for His creation. The world yearns for the church to join its rebellion against God and even attempts to coerce it into doing so. They taunt our commitment to God as old-fashioned, oppressive, and on the wrong side of history. Their only hope is for the church to remain committed to God by standing firm on biblical principles. As was the case for ancient Israel, the church is called to maintain the proper worship of God even if it must become countercultural to do so.

Q: *In what sense has God given the earth to the children of men?*

Q: *What is our role as stewards of God's creation?*

After creating the world and humanity, God instructed the first human couple to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it (Genesis 1:28). God has made humanity His vice-regents over His creation. We are called to rule with God's authority and transform the world into a theater of His glory. Psalm 115:16 alludes to this creation mandate. It is a reminder of what was at stake in Israel's struggle. The psalmist knew that while his struggles were tragic, they were only a part of a greater struggle encompassing the entire earth. Idolatry is a degradation of God's creation. It makes creation a parody of what God intended.

Q: *What is our role in carrying God's creation mandate forward?*

Q: *How will God's creation mandate be fulfilled?*

APPLICATION POINT – God never intended for the earth to become a playground for idolatry. The people of God are called not only to resist the allure of idolatry but to call others back so that the world may be transformed into a theater for God's glory. While the struggle will continue, the ultimate victory will be God's. After God intervenes in history and rids His creation of evil, heaven and earth will become one grand display of God's glory (Revelation 21:1–4). While the heavens are now His, one day God's glory will be known throughout the earth as it is in heaven. The people of God seek that vision by resisting idolatry and challenging the world's resistance to His rule.

Q: *What was the psalmist referring to when he described the dead who go down in silence?*

Q: *What was the psalmist's hope for the future?*

The psalmist had responded to the religious taunts of his enemies. Though they might have the upper hand at the moment, their victory was hollow because their gods were nothing. Then he made a taunt of his own. The fate of idolators was to become like the idols they worshipped, lifeless shells of what they were intended to be. They would not be able to join Israel in the praise of God. Their cries against the God of the whole earth would eventually fall silent. The psalmist, on the other hand, looked forward to an eternity praising God. The psalmist's hope and God's greatest gift to His creation is His praise.

Q: *Why do we value having a voice in the various arenas we find ourselves in?*

Q: *Why is God's praise our greatest hope?*

APPLICATION POINT – People hate feeling marginalized. One of the worst feelings in the world is to see something out of order and have no recourse to restore it. It is even worse when the disorder and disfunction lie within us. But that is the fate of unbelievers in the world. We do not escape the margins of life by abandoning the commandments of God but by embracing the saving grace of Jesus Christ. While we may at times find ourselves at the cruel mercy of a world that is hostile to the God we serve, we can have confidence in knowing that one day eternity will begin, their rebellion will be over, and our voices will sing the eternal praises of God. Like the psalmist, we find our hope in the eternal praise of God, not the momentary comforts of the world.

NEXT STEPS

The psalmist looked forward to a time when God's praises would resound unimpeded throughout the world, but he was struggling during a momentary victory by enemies. Many scholars believe Psalm 115 was intended to function as a reader-response hymn. The reader would read parts of the psalm and then the others would respond to him with a refrain. This hints at the importance of community when the enemies of God seem to have the upper hand. Our commitment to God is stronger through mutual encouragement. Take the themes of Psalm 115 and similar psalms and construct a reader response hymn addressing the current needs of your church. Take some time when your group gathers to encourage one another in the faith by reading through some of these exercises.

PRAY

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

Father, you have more at stake in this world than I ever will. Help me to rest in your commitment to glorifying yourself in this world.

Lord Jesus, thank you for the hope I have in you. Apart from you, I would have only an eternity of marginalization and despair. In your grace, I look forward to the eternal praise of the Father.

God, help me to take the steps needed to rid my heart of idols. Help me identify the idols in my life. Help me repent of idolatry and embrace you as the unhindered object of my praise.

Father, help me to stand on the promises of your Word. I have a surer hope than anything my current circumstances may or may not reveal.



DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS



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