

# PSALMS

by Ray C. Stedman

**Folk Songs of Faith** is the title of a 19-sermon series from the Psalms. These messages, of which two are missing, (DP#383-395, 398-401), were preached at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California, by Ray C. Stedman in 1969. They are also available in book form. A second series of 5 sermons (DP#169-173) comprises a 1967 series entitled Obtaining God's Help, and is a study of Psalm 77.

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## Folksongs of Faith:

1. [A Song of Foundations \(Psalm 1\), \(DP#383\)](#)
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## Obtaining God's Help: Psalm 77

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## A SONG OF FOUNDATIONS

by Ray C. Stedman

With this message we begin a new series in the Psalms.

We hope to discover together the richness of what many regard as the richest part of Scripture. Charles Spurgeon called the Psalms *the Treasury of David*, and a treasury is a place where riches are kept.

The Psalms are particularly appropriate for our day because they are the folksongs of the Bible. This is a

generation that loves folksongs. These Psalms relate the experiences of believers of the past, reflecting the emotional upsets, problems, and disturbances which saints of old have gone through. They tell how they found their way through and they are wonderful, therefore, for helping us in our emotional pressures. There is no book like the Psalms to meet the need of the heart when it is discouraged and defeated, or when it is elated and encouraged. To express these emotional feelings this book is absolutely without peer. They are helpful simply because they teach us how to find our way through many types of problems. These marvelous folksongs are much like the ballad style of music that we hear so much today, simply recounting experiences that various men and women of the past have gone through.

Most of the Psalms, as you know, were written by David, but not all. Some were written by his choir leaders in Jerusalem, and the names of Asaph, Jeduthun, Ethan, and others appearing in the Psalms are royal choirmasters. One or two were written by Moses, and one or two by King Solomon. There are several Psalms whose authors it is impossible to identify. The whole book is a collection that has been put together by the ancient Hebrews in order that we might understand what the people of God have gone through and how they found their way out.

Many of you may not know that the Psalms divide into five books which are similar in theme to the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The first book of Psalms ends with Psalm 41 and echoes the theme of Genesis, an introduction to human life and a revelation of the needs of the human heart. It is the book of foundations. The second book of Psalms begins with 42 and runs through Psalm 72. This corresponds to the book of Exodus. That is the book of redemption, the story of God's moving in human history to change and redeem people and save them from themselves. The third book begins with Psalm 73 and goes through Psalm 89. It is like the book of Leviticus, the book in which Israel learned how to draw near to God, how to worship him through the provision God made for his people, the tabernacle. Then Psalm 90 to Psalm 106 constitutes the fourth book which goes along with the book of Numbers, the book of wilderness wandering, of testing and failure. Finally, the fifth book covers Psalm 107 to 150 and is like the book of Deuteronomy, the second law, i.e., the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus which sets us free from the law of sin and death. It describes the way by which God finally accomplishes the redemption and sanctification of his people, the changing of human beings into the kind of men and women he originally designed.

In this present series we shall consider first the introductory Psalms to each of the five books.

Now Psalm 1, which we will look at this morning, introduces the whole collection of the Psalms but especially the first book, the book that accords with Genesis. This Psalm is a description of the wicked and the righteous. It describes the God-centered life and the self-centered life. When the Psalm talks about the wicked it is not referring to murderers, rapists, or dope pushers, the kind of people we usually think of as wicked. We often think of some notorious person, such as a gangster or hoodlum, as being wicked. But the Psalmist does not mean that. The term really means the ungodly, the man who has little or no time for God in his life; someone who has ruled God out of his affairs and his thinking even though God is the greatest Being in the universe, the One who makes sense out of life, the One around whom all of life revolves. To eliminate such a Being from your thinking is to be wicked, to be ungodly. But in contrast, the God-centered life is set before us, and the results which come from godliness. That is the simplest division of the Psalm, two balanced parts.

Let us look together at what is said about the God-centered life. David cries out,

**Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;  
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law he meditates day and night. {Psa 1:1-2 RSV}**

That is a description of the God-centered life. Quite appropriately it begins with the word, "Happy." In our version the word is "Blessed," but blessed is one of those code words which only Christians use -- it really means "happy." Here, then, we have the secret of happiness. You may recognize that that is exactly the way

the Lord Jesus began the greatest sermon ever uttered before men, the Sermon on the Mount. It begins with what we call the Beatitudes (another code word which means "the Blessings"). These Beatitudes {Matt 5:1-11} are the secrets of blessing or happiness. "Blessed are the poor in spirit (happy are the poor in spirit), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Happy are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled, etc." So, here in Psalm 1, the Psalmist is giving to us the clue to happiness. "O the blessedness," he says, "O the happiness of the man who lives like this."

Then he gives us a description of this man's life, both negatively and positively. First is the negative: "who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers." He gathers up in three key words the varied aspects of life: who walks, who stands, who sits.

Some of you have read a little book by Watchman Nee called, *Sit, Walk, and Stand*. It is a wonderful description of the life of a believer in Jesus Christ. But here is the Old Testament description of unbelievers, the ungodly, who also walk, stand, and sit.

Notice also the progress of evil. He speaks of the wicked, of sinners, and of the scoffers. What this Psalmist is pointing out to us is that the ungodly are characterized by a totally different way of life. To walk is a reference to the decisions which must be made all day long. We all know how it is. We take steps all day long, making decisions about all kinds of matters. That is walking, taking a series of steps. To stand is a picture of the commitments we make to various causes. We give ourselves to certain things, we take our stand upon certain important matters. To sit is a picture of the settled attitude of the heart, the continuous disposition of life.

Now, says the Psalmist, the man who has found the secret of happiness can be recognized by the fact that he does not walk in the way of the wicked, i.e., he does not make decisions as do the ungodly. He has rejected the philosophy of the ungodly. What is that philosophy? How would you describe the philosophy by which the world runs, the ungodly world? Perhaps it can be put into three simple propositions: "Me first;" "Get it now;" "Nothing bad will happen." Is that not the philosophy of the world? That is the counsel of the ungodly, the wicked. The man who has learned the secret of happiness rejects that. He does not make his decisions on that basis.

Second, he does not stand in the way of sinners. This word for sinners is a most interesting word in the Hebrew. It is a word which means, "to make a loud noise," or "to cause a tumult." It is the idea of provoking a riot, of creating a disturbance, making trouble, etc. The Psalmist says you can recognize the godly man in that he does not make trouble. He does not provoke riots, he is not at work causing disturbances; he is obedient to the laws of life and of the land. He does not "stand in the way of" those who live to cause trouble. That does not mean that he resists them; the word "stand" does not mean "stand against." It means he does not "hang around the vicinity of" those who are going in that way. He has rejected all that.

Third, he does not sit in the seat of the scornful, i.e., those who blame everyone else for what is wrong and never blame themselves. We all know how easily that kind of attitude comes to our heart. If anything goes wrong it's always somebody else at fault, isn't it? Parents blame the children, the children blame the parents, and they both blame the schools. The schools blame the parents and the government. The government blames the hippies; the hippies blame the establishment. One nation blames another nation. Everyone is blaming everyone else. That is the philosophy of the world, is it not? These are the scornful, the scoffers, the cynics, who cast a baleful eye at life in general and blame others for their problems.

But the godly man has rejected that attitude. On the contrary, his life is characterized by positive things. He is selfless in his motivations, obedient in his actions (obedient to law), and he does not adopt the role of the critic but is cheerful and accepting of whatever comes as from the hand of God.

I love that description of a Christian which says,

A Christian is one who is:

- Completely fearless,

- Continually cheerful, and
- Constantly in trouble.

This is exactly what the Psalmist describes. It is an unusual life, is it not? I think most of us, hearing this, say to ourselves, "Do I meet that description?"

But, that is the negative side. Now look at the positive side. "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." Here is the reason why this man is able to reject the world's philosophy. It is because he has learned to delight in the law of the Lord. Now "the law of the Lord" is, in the Psalms, another name for the Scriptures. It means more than the Law of Moses; it includes the whole revelation of God. The positive thing about this godly person is that he has learned that in the book of God he is given a completely different view of life than that he gets from the world. In the book he is told the truth about life. He has learned to delight in the fact that here is a book that tells him the truth, and shows him a whole new way of life, a new philosophy. And more than that, it reveals a power by which he can fulfill it. If all that was said here were this description of the godly man in the first two verses, most of us would agree that this man thinks too much of himself. He thinks he is better than the rest. He does not act like others because he thinks he is better. But this second verse makes clear that that is not the reason why he lives the way he does. It is because he has discovered the truth about himself out of the law of God.

I was very encouraged a couple of weeks ago in Dallas to hear the story of one of the young men from this church who gave his testimony in a Dallas church. He told how he became a Christian during the Billy Graham Crusade in 1958 at the Cow Palace and then started looking for a church home. He went to several churches but did not feel at home. He had been an unchurched man till that time, and did not like the ones he visited as a Christian. Then one day he came here. The very first Sunday he was here I was speaking and I did something I have never done again, but it struck him most forcibly. I read from First Corinthians 6, these verses:

**Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. {1 Cor 6:9-11 RSV}**

He said he was greatly impressed when, after having read those verses, I said to the congregation, "Now that is a description of the Christians in Corinth and the life they once had led. I would like to ask if there are any here who have had this kind of a background. How many in this congregation have done some of the things listed here?" And I read the list again: immoral, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, greedy, revilers, and robbers. He said that one by one, all over the congregation people began to stand to their feet. More than half the congregation was standing, and he took one look at this great crowd and said, "These are my kind of people." Yes, "Such were some of you. But you are washed, you are sanctified, (made clean), you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ by the Spirit of our God." That is what this man of the first Psalm discovers when he reads the law of God. He learns not only that God demands a certain perfection, but he also learns the process by which that perfection is made possible. It is through the Redeemer whom God will send, whose life he learns to share, by faith. He learns to appropriate the strength of that coming Lord. One of the delightful things about the Psalms is the many times we find this truth expressed, the fact that the Old Testament saint has learned to draw upon the greatness and glory of God in the midst of life.

**The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid? {Psa 27:1 RSV}**

All through these Psalms it is revealed that this is what he has learned. He has learned to meditate on it day and night. That does not mean that he goes around thinking about scripture and repeating them over and over all day long. That is a mechanical understanding of this verse. What it means is that this man has learned that a wonderful new life is made possible by God and is available for any situation. He keeps appropriating it all day and all night, whenever he needs it. Whenever he needs strength he draws upon the Lord for it. He does

not attempt to mobilize his resources or to find some kind of encouragement from outsiders and thus to depend upon external circumstances for peace and rest; he learns to draw only upon the strength of God. That is what makes the difference. This is the secret of the godly life. This is the way any of us can learn to be selfless, obedient, and cheerful under every circumstance.

Now the Psalmist goes on to give us the evaluation of this kind of life,

**He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water,  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers. {Psa 1:3 RSV}**

I remember many years ago when I was first beginning my work here, we held a youth conference in the Sierra Nevada. There a young man came to me and took me aside. We stood together underneath a great Douglas fir and he said, "Pastor, I don't know what is the matter with me. I want to be a good Christian, and I try hard, but somehow I just never seem to make it. I'm always doing the wrong thing. I just can't live like a Christian." I said to him, "Well, there may be several reasons for that, but let me ask you this, first of all: What about your private life with the Lord? How well do you know the Lord? How much do you delight in reading his word and then spending time talking to him? Because, after all, it's not the time spent in reading the word that's important, but it's the time spent in enjoying the presence of God that strengthens you." He hung his head and said, "Well, I admit I don't do very much of that." Just then this very phrase from the Psalms flashed into my mind, "He shall be like a tree planted by rivers of water." I stepped back and said to him, "Look at this tree we're under. What does it remind you of? What are the qualities this tree suggests to you?" He looked at the tremendous Douglas fir, towering up into the heavens above, and said, "Well, the first thing is, it's strong." I said, "Yes. Anything else?" "Well," he said, "it's beautiful." I said, "Exactly! Beauty and strength. Those are the two things you admire about this tree. And those are exactly the two things you want in your own life, aren't they? Beauty and strength?" He said, "Right." "Well," I said, "tell me this: What makes this tree beautiful and strong? Where does it get its beauty and its strength?" He stopped for a moment and looked at the tree, then he said, "Well, from the roots, I guess." I asked him, "Can you see the roots?" "No," he said, "You can't." Then he said, "I get it! That is the hidden part of life, but it is the secret of this tree's beauty and strength, isn't it?"

That is exactly what this Psalmist is saying. The man who is godly has learned, in the hidden inner parts of his life, to draw upon the grace and glory and strength of God. His roots run deep into rich and moist soil, and this is what makes him beautiful and strong. He is like a tree planted by rivers of water. And he is fruitful, "He brings forth fruit in its season." That is probably a reference to the fruit of the Spirit which is described for us in the New Testament. It is the character of God and that is always the same in either the Old or the New Testament: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, etc.

"His leaf does not wither." That means he is always vital, always an exciting kind of person. He is never dull, never dreary, never boring; he is an exciting, vital person because he is in touch with a vital God. Finally, all that he does prospers, i.e., he is effective. What he puts his hand to he accomplishes because he is not doing it in his own strength but in the strength of another, a hidden Other, from whose resources he is continuously drawing. That, you see, is the godly life. That is the secret of happiness. The man who learns to live that way is a happy person. It does not make any difference what his outward circumstances may be, because happiness does not consist in the abundance of things which you possess, as Jesus tells us. This man is happy because he has learned the secret of happiness.

Now, more briefly, in contrast to this he describes the man who has no time for God.

**The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff which the wind drives away. {Psa 1:4 RSV}**

It takes two verses to describe the secret of the godly life; it only takes two words to describe the life of the ungodly: "not so." They are not like the godly man. They believe in the philosophy of the world, the counsel

of the ungodly (Me first; Get it now; Nothing bad will happen). They live on that basis and make their decisions on that basis. They are involved in small or large acts of rebellion. They are in violation of the fundamental laws of life, yet they blame everyone else for their troubles. "The ungodly are not so (not like the godly) but, (and here is the evaluation of their life), are like the chaff which the wind drives away."

I do not think you city folks understand chaff. In Montana every fall we had harvesters who came around with a thrashing rig. The bundles of wheat would be thrown into this machine. The straw would be blown out onto the stack and the wheat would come dribbling out to be poured into trucks or wagons and taken away to the granary. But floating around in the air everywhere was chaff. It was the awfulest stuff you ever saw. It stuck to the skin wherever you sweat; on the back of your neck and down your shirt. It created frightful itching. It was universally regarded as the most worthless stuff there ever was. In reading Psalm one I was struck by the fact that clear back in David's day, a thousand years before Christ, the only thing they could think of to do with it was to blow it away, "the chaff which the wind blows away." And still, two thousand years after Christ, the only thing we can do with chaff is to blow it away. That's what the thrashing rig tries to do. It attempts to blow it up onto the straw stack and get it out of the way for it is worthless. And that is God's evaluation of the life which has no room for God. It is like chaff. Oh, it may be very impressive in the eyes of the world. Such a man may have a beautiful home, drive several big cars, have many luxuries, and be regarded as a wheel and thus go around in circles. But in God's evaluation, his life is worthless. He has never fulfilled a single thing for which God put him here in this world. His life is so much wasted time as far as God is concerned, worthless, like the chaff which the wind drives away.

As a result, there are two things said of him. "He shall not stand in the judgment." That means the daily judgment of God, the evaluation that God makes constantly of our lives. This man has no standing in that at all. His life is regarded as worthless. Everything he does is so much wasted labor. Nor will he be "in the congregation of the righteous." That is a reference to the final judgment. When all the redeemed are gathered together this man will be absent. He may even have been religious. I rather think he was. But, you remember, Jesus said that "Many-many-shall say in that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? And did we not do many mighty works and cast out demons in your name?'" {cf, Matt 7:22 RSV}. And he shall say, "Depart from me; I never knew you," {cf, Matt 7:23 RSV}. I *never* knew you. This man shall not stand in the congregation of the righteous, because he has never put God at the center of his life.

Then the Psalm concludes with this tremendous word of explanation. Why does all this happen in this way? Why is it that though outwardly a man's life may be very impressive, inwardly it may be nothing but a hollow shell, empty and worthless? The answer is, "The Lord knows the way of the righteous," {Psa 1:6a RSV}. The Lord knows that path, he is watching over that man, guiding him, guarding him, and keeping him (or her). "But the way of the wicked [the ungodly] will perish," {Psa 1:6b RSV}. That means it will dribble out into nothing. "His lamp shall go out in obscurity," says the prophet, a very tremendous phrase. I do not think this has ever been demonstrated more strikingly than in the days of the New Testament. There came a time when the Apostle Paul stood as a prisoner before Nero Caesar. Nero was at that time a most dissolute, vain, cruel, inhuman, implacable monster. He is regarded now by historians as one of the most vile and contemptible rulers ever to sit upon a throne. He even commanded that the body of his own mother be ripped apart that he might see the womb that had borne him. He once saw a handsome young man in his court and he ordered him castrated and used him as a woman the rest of his life. Yet his name was known all over the empire. He was Caesar. The whole of the Roman world bowed to his will. The life of that mighty empire revolved around this man, Nero Caesar. Then there stood before him this obscure little Jew, Paul the Apostle, from a despised Roman province. No one knew him. He had scarcely been heard of except in a few isolated places where he had caused certain trouble. He was a prisoner in chains, standing before this mighty emperor. Yet, as it has been well pointed out, the amazing thing is that today we name our sons Paul, and our dogs, Nero.

... the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the ungodly shall perish. {Psa 1:6 RSV}

### Prayer:

Father, we cannot read these words without asking ourselves the question: Have we discovered the secret of happiness? Are we allowing this marvelous provision for producing

godlikeness to be at work in us? Or does a great deal of our life still consist of ungodliness so that we are like the chaff which the wind drives away. Are great areas of our life worthless and wasted because we are living on the principles and precepts of the world around us?

Lord, we thank you for having come to teach us the way of godliness, and to show us how your life can be manifest in us. As we come to this Communion table we come, Lord Jesus, to remind ourselves anew of the way of the cross, the way of a new life, the way of constantly judging the evil of the flesh and constantly appropriating the goodness of the Spirit, the fullness of power that he gives. Father, we pray that you will help us to lay hold more fully of this life, that our lives, in the day of judgment, will find value; that we shall stand in the congregation of the righteous; that we may live the remaining years of our life, our Father, under your eye, in your loving fatherly care, for you know the way of the righteous, and that the way of the wicked will perish. This we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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## **A SONG OF CONFIDENCE**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

The book of Psalms falls into five different divisions, five books. It is our purpose in this present series to study the introductory psalm to each of these books. These five books of The Psalms correspond to the five opening books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These five books of Moses spell out the pattern of God's working with men. If you have the first five books of the Bible clearly in mind as to their message you will know the repeated theme which God emphasizes over and over again throughout the Bible. That is also true for the books of The Psalms.

The book of Genesis is the book of foundations. There we have the explanation of the origin of the universe, the origin of humanity, the beginning of sin, the problem of evil in human life, and the beginning of redemption. It lays the foundations of life, and that is also what we have in the first book of Psalms. It is fittingly introduced by the first psalm which sets forth for us the only two ways of life: the godly versus the ungodly. The godly life is the secret of happiness, while the ungodly life tries to look happy, but, inside, is hollow and empty.

Now we come to the second book of The Psalms which begins with Psalm 42. This corresponds with the book of Exodus, the story of redemption. It tells of God calling Israel out of Egypt, redeeming them by the blood of the Passover lamb. It is the story, in other words, of the work of God on behalf of man. It is most fittingly introduced by the forty-second Psalm, which is an expression of the confidence of man in God in a time of trouble. Since we all have troubles, this is a very appropriate psalm for anyone, at any stage of life.

Also, we need only to read Psalm 43 to see that it belongs with Psalm 42. Once these were probably one Psalm but they were divided somehow into two, although they clearly belong together.

As I have pointed out from time to time, tradition tells us that a certain Dutchman who was carrying the manuscript of the New Testament to the printers on horseback is the one who is responsible for the chapter divisions in our King James New Testament. Men have felt that every time the horse stumbled his pen made a mark which the printers took to mean "chapter division here". They are almost that haphazard. Though we

have less trouble with chapter divisions in the Old Testament, still some Jew must have had a similar problem. Here is a division which is not warranted, and we must handle Psalms 42 and 43 as one.

Now the key to this Psalm is found in the repeated refrain which is found in verses 5, 11 and 43:5.

**Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God. {Psa 42:5, 42:11, 43:5}**

If you refer to the inscription with which this psalm opens, you will find that it is addressed to the Choirmaster, and is called a Maskil of the Sons of Korah. These inscriptions are part of the inspired record; they belong with the psalm and indicate something vital about it. Maskil is the Hebrew word for teaching. This Psalm is intended to teach something to us. What? Judging by the repeated refrain, it is intended to teach us how to handle our blue moods, the times when we get up in the morning and say, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?"

We all know that there are some mornings when we spring out of bed, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and say, "Good morning, God." There are other mornings when we only manage to pry open our eyelids, sit dejectedly on the side of the bed and say, "Good God, it's morning."

These are the mornings that are in view here. The answer to each blue mood is, "Hope thou in God;" i.e., wait for God. He is working out his purposes and if you hang on you will yet praise him.

Just a word further on the inscriptions. The Sons of Korah were a family of singers in Israel who passed along their musical office from generation to generation, and were noted as an outstanding family of musicians. Several of the Psalms come from them. The experience which this psalm reflects was unquestionably David's, but it was put to music by the Korah Family Singers, and dedicated to the Chief Musician, or the Royal Choirmaster. Most of us believe that the blues songs began with *The St. Louis Blues*, but actually they began in Jerusalem with *The King David Blues*. Here is one of *The King David Blues*. It is designed to teach us a very important lesson: How to handle our blue moods, those times when you say to yourself, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" Some scholars feel that the occasion which is reflected in this psalm was when David was excluded from the temple at the time of Absalom's rebellion. Late in David's reign Absalom took over the kingdom temporarily and David was driven into exile outside Jerusalem. It was probably on this occasion that he wrote this psalm. There is no mention of this in the psalm, but it clearly reflects a time of depression and frustration. But David does not accept that blue mood, that depression of spirit, as inevitable. He does something about it. The whole purpose of this psalm is to help us learn how to handle these times in our own lives. None of us need think that because we are Christians we shall escape times of depression; they will come. But when they come, we need to do something about them. I am afraid most Christians simply succumb to them. They just go along making everybody around them miserable because they are passing through times of depression. They are in a bad mood, and they wait for it to pass but do nothing about it.

Lest you think that some of the great saints have never had this kind of trouble, let me share with you a quotation from an outstanding theologian and preacher of the 19th century, Dr. John Henry Jowett. He once wrote to a friend,

**I wish you wouldn't think I'm such a saint. You seem to imagine that I have no ups-and-downs but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and equanimity. By no means. I am often perfectly wretched, and everything appears most murky. I often feel as though my religious life had only just begun and that I am in the kindergarten age. But I can usually trace these miserable seasons to some personal cause, and the first thing to do is to attend to that cause and get it into the sunshine again.**

That is what this Psalm attempts to teach us: how to get into the sunshine again. It is a teaching psalm designed for that very purpose. As we look at it you will note that it traces three stages of the Psalmist's experience, and



at the end of each stage there comes the refrain that describes what brought him through, "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

Now the first stage is one of intense longing and desire.

**As a hart longs for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul for thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come  
and behold the face of God? {Psa 42:1-2 RSV}**

How beautifully he puts that! As the deer running through the woods longs for water, so his soul is thirsting after God. He has reached the place in his experience where he knows only God can meet his need. He longs to come into a relationship of freshness and revitalizing fellowship that will mean his soul thirst will be quenched. We learn why he so thirsts in the question he asks at the close of Verse 2, "When shall I come and behold the face of God?"

In other words, he is experiencing a sense of God's delay. There is no doubt in his heart but that there is help for him in God. He expects to find it. He knows God has met his need in the past and he expects him to meet it again. But, for some reason, that help is delayed and this is hard for him to bear. I am sure you have found it is hard for you to bear. When God immediately answers your prayer and buoys your dejected spirit up and you find yourself strengthened when you turn to him, it is wonderful. This is the common, usual experience of most Christians. But there will also be times when God apparently does nothing. There will be times when he lets you wait. Those times of delay are the times that threaten and test our faith. That is what David is experiencing here. It was made worse by the present taunts of his enemies and the thoughts of past experiences of joy.

**My tears have been my food  
day and night,  
while men say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?" {Psa 42:3 RSV}**

That is, "I cannot sleep or eat because of my sorrow, my longing for God."

**These things I remember,  
as I pour out my soul:  
how I went with the throng,  
and led them in procession to the house of God,  
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival. {Psa 42:4 RSV}**

He is recalling, here, the past. The Hebrew is, "I will remember." It is a strong expression of determination. He is determined to remember how God has helped him in the past. That is one of the greatest things to do when you begin to experience depression of spirit. Think back to what God has done for you in the past. Remember!

Some people have a habit of remembering only the bad things. They date everything by these. "That was the day the garage caught on fire." "Oh, yes, I remember. That was the day when the baby fell in the garbage can." Everything is dated from these unhappy circumstances. "I remember that week! That was the week when the boss came to work with a hangover."

But here the Psalmist is showing us that memory can be an important aid by remembering the positive experiences of God's blessing. "I will remember," he says, "the times when God caused my heart to exult with joy, and shut the mouth of all my taunting enemies by answering in such a way that everyone could see that it was God's hand at work."

Two weeks ago I was in Tyler, Texas. I was accompanied on my speaking schedule by Mr. Ed Murphy, of Overseas Crusades. I have known Ed for a number of years, but I had never heard the full story of his Christian experience till he told it there. It was very thrilling. He had been raised in a Roman Catholic family in the New England area. He was fourteen years old before he even saw a Protestant, and when he saw his first one he expected to see horns sprouting from his head, and a tail waving around behind. Through a remarkable experience, where God put him in a lonely lumber camp with a Christian boy, he came to know the Lord Jesus Christ. This lad gave Ed a New Testament, and, through the reading of that New Testament, Ed Murphy's soul was captured for Christ.

Some time afterward he determined to obey God's call to go to a mission field, and he enrolled in Biola University. When his Catholic family heard that he was planning to go to Bible School, they called him in, and told him that if he went there he could never be their son again. His mother was particularly opposed to it, and told him that if he went he was never to come home again. But Ed felt led of God, and so he went to Bible School. When he drew near to the close of the first year he had a job lined up for the summer to meet his expenses, but he was lacking sixty dollars to pay the final bills for the current semester. Before he took his final exam, it was required that he pay this money. He tried every way he knew to raise the money, but he couldn't. Finally, in desperation, he wrote his mother saying, "Mother, I know you don't like what I'm doing, but I feel led of God to do it. I have now come to a difficult time. I lack sixty dollars of my school expenses, but I have to pay it before I take my final exam. You've helped me in other matters in the past, and I just wondered if, perhaps, you might relent and help me again. I'll pay you back this summer."

His mother wrote back, "Son, when you left this house to go to a Protestant Bible college, I told you that you were never to come back again. I wanted nothing to do with you as long as you continued in the Protestant faith. You told me at that time that your God would take care of you, but now that you come to a time of trouble you run back to me. If your God is really the God you say he is, then let him take care of you. I will be in Los Angeles this next weekend. You tell me that if you haven't received this money you will have to drop out of school. I'll be at this address, and if you want to come home with me, come there, and I'll know that you've dropped all this foolishness."

It was a great time of testing for Ed. He prayed about it, asked God again to supply, but the day came on which he had to take the exams and there was no money. So he packed his bags, called his mother, and told her he would meet her to go home with her. Just as he was going out the door with his bags the Dean of Education stopped him, and asked him to come into the office for a moment. Ed went in, and the Dean said, "How much was it that I said you owed the school?" Ed said, "Sixty dollars." The Dean said, "Well, it's strange. Just as you were going down the hall I was reading this slip with your name on it which says you have forty dollars to your credit." Ed said, "There must be some mistake. I don't know anything about that. I only know I owe the sixty dollars." So the Dean called to check it out, and it turned out that someone that very morning, quite anonymously, had sent in one hundred dollars, credited to the account of Ed Murphy.

When he went to meet his mother she said, "Well, son, you've given up your Protestant faith, have you?" He said, "No, mother, I haven't." She said, "But you can't go back to school." He said, "Yes, I can. God has supplied, and given me not only the sixty dollars but forty dollars in addition." His mother did not say a word. She turned around, went out the door, and went home. But two weeks later she wrote to him, "Ed, I want to know this kind of a God." That incident has been a source of strength to Ed Murphy through the years. Whenever he is discouraged he has learned to look back to the time when God dealt with him in this remarkable way.

And that is what this Psalmist is doing. He is looking back and remembering the time when God had so remarkably delivered him that his soul was filled with exultation and joy. He is obviously hoping that this will relieve his fears now, but it does not. So he reminds himself in the refrain,

**Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall yet praise him,  
my help and my God. {Psa 42:5 RSV}**

But his trial is not over. He has reached a second stage and he tries another tactic. He says,

**My soul is cast down within me,  
therefore I remember thee  
from the land of Jordan and of Hermon,  
from Mount Mizar.  
Deep calls to deep  
at the thunder of thy cataracts;  
all thy waves and thy billows  
have gone over me.  
By day the Lord commands his steadfast love;  
and at night his song is within me,  
a prayer to the God of my life. {Psa 42:6-8 RSV}**

He is still despondent. His remembering of the past has not worked. Usually it does. Usually this is enough to deliver us from this nagging fear that God is not going to do anything at all. But now it does not, and so he tries to help by remembering something else: an experience that he had when he was in the northern part of Israel near Mount Hermon, at the head of the Jordan River, on a little peak of the range where Mount Hermon is located, called Mount Mizar (which, incidentally, means "little mountain"). On that occasion he could hear the waterfalls of that mountainous region, the thundering cataracts. He became aware of how they seemed to be calling to one another, "deep calling unto deep," and it reminded him that the deeps in God call out to the deeps in man.

One of the amazing things about nature is the silent voices that call to one another across vast spaces. The moon calls to the deeps in the sea, raising the tides. Twice a day the waters rise in tides across the earth, because of the moon calling to the ocean. You know how the sun and the rain call to the deeps in a seed, causing it to stir with life and to spring up and grow. There are vast distances that call to the deeps in wild birds, causing them to wing their way across trackless wastes to lay their eggs; there are voices that call to certain fish, sending them across the seas to spawn. In this way the Psalmist is reminded that God also calls to man. There are deeps in God that correspond with deeps in man, and he calls to them. The Psalmist specifically names two here: the deeps of the love of God, and the joy of God, calling out to the corresponding deeps of prayer in the believer.

**By day the Lord commands his steadfast love;  
and at night his song is with me,  
a prayer to the God of my life. {Psa 42:8 RSV}**

The love and joy of God call out from him a prayer to the God of his life. This helps him. He is remembering that the nature of God is linked up to the nature of the believer and that relationship never changes. Even though he does not feel anything, they are there; these silent deeps in God calling out to the deeps in man. This usually steadies him strengthens him and helps him. It is an excellent way to dispel the blues. Remember that what God has said about you and therefore what is true about you, does not change. There are deep ties that are never broken between God and man, the believer and his God.

But this time it does not work for the Psalmist. He expresses his reaction in Verses 9-10:

**I say to God, my rock:  
"Why hast thou forgotten me?  
Why go I mourning  
because of the oppression of the enemy?"  
As with a deadly wound in my body,  
my adversaries taunt me,  
while they say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?" {Psa 42:9-10 RSV}**

He is still deeply troubled. The two usual means for dispelling depression have not helped him this time. He has not been able to shake his sense of God's untimely delay, and now it has grown into a nagging, torturing doubt, "Why hast thou forgotten me?"

A few weeks ago on a Sunday morning after the service I left for home. My little seven year old daughter, Laurie, was in children's church, and I thought she was with her mother. Her mother thought she was with me, so we went home and left her. Of course, as soon as we reached home we missed her, and I came right back. I found her waiting for me, two tears standing in her eyes and with the utmost reproach in her voice she said, "Daddy, you forgot me!" What a horrible feeling it is to be forgotten! It did not hurt her that she was a little late; it was just that she thought we had all forgotten her.

That is the feeling expressed here, and what a terrible feeling it is. David says, "My enemies taunt me with this, and it is like a deadly wound in my body, like a dagger in the heart." Actually the Hebrew is even stronger, "As with murder in my bones, my adversaries taunt me continually, saying, 'Where is your God?'" Faith can only reply,

**Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God. {Psa 42:11 RSV}**

Then we reach the third phase of his experience. The Psalmist cries out now in desperation,

**Vindicate me, O God,  
and defend my cause against an ungodly people;  
from deceitful and unjust men  
deliver me! {Psa 43:1 RSV}**

We all know something of this problem. Men have betrayed him, mistreated him; it is a gross injustice. How common that is. How many times do we feel that those whom we trusted have betrayed us, have deceived us, taken advantage of us. He cries out,

**For thou art the God in whom I take refuge;  
why hast thou cast me off?  
Why go I mourning  
because of the oppression of the enemy? {Psa 43:2 RSV}**

This time his question reveals he has reached the place of despair. "Why have you abandoned me? Why have you cast me off? I've taken refuge in you, God, and yet you do nothing, absolutely nothing. You have abandoned me, cast me away. I feel utterly forsaken."

Have you ever felt like this, that God has abandoned you? It is the greatest test of faith, when the God to whom you cry apparently does nothing. But now he realizes, at last, the way out.

**Oh send out thy light and thy truth;  
let them lead me,  
let them bring me to thy holy hill  
and to thy dwelling!  
Then I will go to the altar of God,  
to God my exceeding joy;  
and I will praise thee with the lyre,  
O God, my God. {Psa 43:3-4 RSV}**

What a word of triumph! Now he understands that what God is doing is driving him step by step to the ultimate refuge of any believer in any time of testing: the word of God. It is the truth of God coupled with the light. The truth is God's word; the light is your understanding of it. What he is crying out for is an understanding of the word as he reads it; light, breaking out of these marvelous promises, to encourage and strengthen his heart. He says, "If you will do that, God, then my heart will be filled with joy and with gladness, and I will praise you with the harp; for you, O God, are my God, my personal God." What a revelation that is.

There comes a time in all of our lives when we discover for ourselves that the ultimate refuge of any believer is

in the word of God, what God has said. I remember such a time in my early ministry. I had just begun my work at Peninsula Bible Church when there came to me a young man who was having severe marital problems. He was in his twenties, and his wife had just divorced him. He was left with a boy about five years of age. He came to me for help, and I tried to help him as best I could, and, through the circumstances, led him to Christ. For a few weeks there was a real change in this young man's life. He gained firm hold on God. But, as often happens, there came a time of testing of his faith, and he was plunged into despair. One Sunday morning he called me up just before church and asked me over the phone for help and prayer. I counseled with him and we prayed together. I told him that as soon as the church service was over I would come to see him. When the service ended I did go over to see him. I went up to the house and knocked but there was no answer. I knew he should be there, so I knocked again, but still no answer. Finally I tried the door, saw it was open, and went in. He was nowhere to be found until I went into the bedroom. There I found him lying in a spreading pool of blood, dead by his own hand.

It was a shock, a most terrible shock. I called the police, and made arrangements, and then went home. The rest of that day I was shaken, unnerved, and did not know what to do. I was experiencing a combination of the emotions of fear, anger, sorrow, and grief. I was upset, and did not know whether I wanted to continue in the ministry; it seemed so senseless and useless. I tried every way to find help. I prayed, but it did not seem to relieve me. I talked with others, tried to keep busy, but nothing worked. Finally, that night, fearing that I would lie sleepless all night long, my wife and I together took our Bibles and began to read. I do not to this day know what we read, but I remember that every word came like balm, like healing salve, to my heart. I have thought since of that marvelous phrase in Psalm 107, "He sent his word, and healed them," {Psa 107:20a RSV}. In that time of deep, dark despair and frustration, the reading of the word healed my heart.

That is what this Psalmist is saying. When you can't shake the blues, and you have a depression of spirit that nothing seems to relieve; when you have tried to remember the past, and tried to recall the unshakable, unchangeable relationships that exist between you and God, but nothing helps; then there is nothing left but to rest upon his word, his truth, and to allow that to heal the heart. So the Psalmist closes again with the refrain that catches up the whole meaning of this song,

**Why are you cast down, O my soul,  
and why are you disquieted within me?  
Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,  
my help and my God." {Psa 43:5 RSV}**

Yes, hope in God, for he is working out his purposes. That is what the New Testament means when it says, "Having done all, stand," {cf, Eph 6:13}. Stand upon his word.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, how grateful we are for this remarkable psalm and its help to our hearts in times of depression. Help us, Lord, to lay hold of it and use it in our life, knowing this was written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the age have come. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman  
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## **A SONG OF CONFESSION**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

When you first became a Christian were you troubled by a feeling which many have that to become a child of God ought to make life easier for you because you were the object of a heavenly Father's love and care, but instead you found things became worse? You finally found yourself frustrated and depressed, especially when, by contrast, you saw that the ungodly around you were often enjoying life to the full. There are many Christians who struggle with such a problem. It is this very problem that is brought before us in Psalm 73.

This is the introductory psalm to the third book of the Psalms. It corresponds to the book of Leviticus in the Pentateuch. You remember Leviticus? That is where you ground to a halt after you had determined to read the Bible through! Usually that happens because we fail to understand the symbolism of the book of Leviticus. We get tied up with the detail of the book, which tells us of the building of the tabernacle, and of Israel's sacrifices to God. It consists, by and large, of rules and regulations, and thus is difficult for us to read unless we understand that these are all pictures. They are pictures of God's provision to dwell among his people, the means by which he could become available to them personally.

The key to the book of Leviticus is the tabernacle, the sanctuary, which is a detailed picture of the person of Jesus Christ and his work. As such, it is also a picture of man, as God intended man to be. I hÅ

The problem is stated for us in the opening three verses.

**Truly God is good to the upright,  
to those who are pure in heart.  
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,  
my steps had well nigh slipped.  
For I was envious of the arrogant,  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. {Psa 73:1-3 RSV}**

What was bothering this man was the apparent contradiction between what he had been taught in the Scripture -- that God was good to the upright and to those who were pure in heart -- and his experience in life. He was envious, he said, of the arrogant, and disturbed by the prosperity of the wicked. That prosperity seemed to him to be a direct contradiction to what he had been taught about God. He had been told that if you are "upright and pure in heart," that is, you had learned to lay hold of the righteousness which God provides and were cleansed by his grace, then God would be good to you, take care of you, and watch over you. But instead this man was finding his own situation to be difficult and very discouraging, but the wicked around him, the ungodly (and that is always the meaning of "wicked" in the psalms), were seeming to prosper and everything was going well with them. This bothered him greatly. He could not reconcile this. It troubled him so terribly that it created a deep resentment and envy in his heart. This in turn became such a threat to his faith that ultimately he found himself threatened with a complete loss of faith. His feet had almost slipped, he had almost stumbled, he had come to the place where he was almost ready to renounce his faith.

Here is one of the great values of the psalms to us. As we have seen before, these wonderful folksongs of faith reflect our own experience. They are an enactment of what most of us are going through, have gone through, or will go through, in the walk of faith. There have been many Christians troubled like this. They have felt the seeming logic of the argument of the infidel or atheist. They say, "How can your God be both a God of love and power? If he's a God of love then presumably he cares for what happens to people in their troubles and their difficulties. But if he cares, why doesn't he do something about it? He must not be a God of power, though he may be a God of love. Or, they say, "If he's a God of power as you Christians say he is, and can do all things, then he cannot be a God of love or he would do something to correct injustices." New Christians are oftentimes tremendously affected by this argument and become discouraged and frightened as they face the seeming logic of it. How can God be both a God of love and of power, and yet allow his own to suffer so terribly at times while the unrighteous seem to prosper and everything goes well with them? That was the problem this man was facing.

He gives us more detail on this in the next verses. In Verses 4-9 he beautifully describes the impression that the ungodly make in their seemingly untroubled lives:

**For they have no pangs;  
their bodies are sound and sleek.  
They are not in trouble as other men are;  
they are not stricken like other men.  
Therefore pride is their necklace;  
violence covers them as a garment.  
Their eyes swell out with fatness,  
their hearts overflow with follies.  
They scoff and speak with malice;  
loftily they threaten oppression.  
They set their mouths against the heavens,  
and their tongue struts through the earth. {Psa 73:4-9 RSV}**

What a marvelous description that is. That perfectly describes what we call "a man of the world" the man who never seems to have any troubles. He is well fed, well clothed, even expensively dressed; pride is like an ornament to his life. His carriage, his bearing, is one of self-assurance and authority. He appears never to have any difficulty. If he is crossed he is very quick to retaliate. He is given to self-indulgence in food and pleasure. As the writer says, "Their eyes swell out with fatness, their hearts overflow with follies." They boast in their abilities and throw their weight around by threats and ostentatious displays of influence and connections in the "right" places.

Then he goes on to list the results that follow this kind of life:

**Therefore the people turn and praise them;  
and find no fault in them.  
And they [the ungodly] say, "How can God know?  
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"  
Behold, these are the wicked;  
always at ease, they increase in riches.  
All in vain have I kept my heart clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.  
For all the day long I have been stricken,  
and chastened every morning. {Psa 73:10-14 RSV}**

This is his problem. He has noticed the fact that before these ungodly men and women, who may even be gangsters, hoodlums, or murderers, people bow and scrape and treat them with utmost respect. Because they are so well treated the wicked say, "How can God know?" i.e., there is no divine judgment. They say, look at how good life is to us, how all the breaks come our way. If there is a God, he doesn't care about the way we live. They become so used to living without reference to God that they actually forget that he is there. They treat him as though he were nonexistent.

When I was in Portland this last week, a Christian man told me about his experience on the golf course just the day before. He was with some non-Christian business men and one of them said to him, "You know, something strange happened to me the other day. A man came up to me and said, 'Are you a Jehovah's Witness?' Why would he ask me a thing like that; why, I hadn't even seen the accident!" He was utterly unaware of who Jehovah was, and was completely puzzled by the question. That is what bothers this man in the psalm.

He says, how can people live like this? How can they be so unconcerned about God and give him no place whatsoever in their lives, and yet everything goes so well with them. They have no problems, no troubles; everything goes so well, and yet here am I, "washing my hands in innocence," keeping my heart clean, but all the day long I have been stricken and chastened every morning. God puts me through trials, discouragements, and depressions every day, and I don't understand why.

Have you ever felt that way? Which of us has not? But the comparison hurts him. He is almost ready to give up, "My feet had almost stumbled, my steps had well nigh slipped." There is a record in the New Testament of a young man who accompanied the Apostle Paul, whose name was Demas. He surely must have felt this way

and eventually the logic of it got to him and he did give up. His feet did stumble, he slipped back. Paul has to record of him, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world," {2 Tim 4:10 KJV}. There are many who feel this way. They say, "What's the use of being a Christian? There's no advantage to it. You read the Bible, go to church, and try to obey the Lord and seek fellowship with him, but what happens? Everything goes wrong. Nothing good happens at all." It is all made worse by the fact that those who have no concern for God at all seem to have few difficulties.

That is the problem. This psalm was given to us to tell us how this man solved his problem, so that when we get into similar difficulties we can solve it the same way. That is the purpose of the psalm. We must now trace briefly how he solved his problem in seven steps. Each step is important.

The first step is in Verses 15-16.

**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
I would have been untrue to the generation of thy children.  
But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task. {Psa 73:15-16 RSV}**

Here he is, filled with doubts and despair and almost ready to give up, but something stops him. What stopped him was the feeling, "If I utter my doubts, i.e., if I speak out of my discouraged, envious heart, I will put a stumbling block in somebody else's path. If I did that I would be untrue to the generation of God's children. So, rather than discourage them with my doubts, I'd rather not say anything at all." Surely this is quite a low motivation, but it is something, at least. It stopped this man for a moment, at least. He was unwilling to overthrow or even threaten the faith of others by expressing doubts that he was not at all sure of himself. Rather than spread his unbelief, he decided to keep his mouth shut and not to threaten someone else.

Now that may be all that will hold you in times of doubt and unbelief, but be grateful for anything that will stop you in your downward-sliding path. This man said that at least he didn't want to share his doubts with others, "lest I offend them." He felt, "After all, I may be wrong in this. My faith may be right, but until I get this thing settled I'm not going to say anything about it to anyone else." That is a wise decision but he admits it did not help him much. "It seemed a wearisome thing," he says. When he tried to reason it all out it was painful to him. He had much difficulty with it. But, at least, it temporarily stopped his downward slide.

The second step followed immediately, Verse 17:

**until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I perceived their end. {Psa 73:17 RSV}**

By going into the sanctuary he means he came before the presence of God. He actually went into the temple where God had made provision to meet with his people. When he did that, he began to see things from God's point of view. Now this is the most vital part of this psalm, in many ways. This is where he began to change. He began to shift from natural thinking to spiritual thinking. The problem was that he had been thinking like a natural man, i.e., within the limits of this life only, considering only the visible things of earth. Thus he had gotten himself worked up into a terrible state of frenzy. Now, in the sanctuary, he begins to think from God's point of view. The wonderful thing about it is that there he began to understand. The word "perceived" is really "understood." That is the great thing about the Scriptures. It means that when you come to church, or read the Scriptures, you are not coming merely to find something to soothe you a bit; you are coming that you might have your eyes opened, that you might see things as they really are, and thus begin to understand life. There are many people who are content to use the Bible only to soothe their feelings when they get upset. They like the beauty of it, the language of it. But it is not provided for that. It is provided that we might understand what is happening to us, in every aspect of life. That is what happened to this man. He came into the sanctuary and there he began to think from God's point of view; spiritual thinking rather than natural thinking.

The trouble with so-called "natural" thinking is that it is always centered on us. Self is always the center of the natural man and he is forever reacting according to his feelings. Natural thinking is to be always governed by your feelings, your moods, the way you emotionally react to your circumstances. When that happens to you,



your range of vision is narrowed down to only those factors that are troubling you. You cannot think beyond them. When our feelings govern us they always limit us, make us prejudiced. That is what prejudice is, a narrow limited range of vision that has only one fact in view. That is what was troubling this man.

He begins to see it when he comes into the sanctuary, into the presence of God, because there he begins thinking spiritually. Spiritual thinking is centered on God and the mind is in control and not the feelings. Then you are not being governed by emotions, but by thoughts relating to facts. Thus your vision is broadened and you can see other things besides the one thing that is disturbing your emotions. You see the whole range and scope of your problem. It is made possible only when you "enter the sanctuary."

How do we enter the sanctuary today? According to the New Testament, we ourselves are the sanctuary. God lives in us. To draw near to him is to enter the sanctuary. As we expose ourselves to his truth in the Scripture, or by fellowship with other Christians are caused to face truth we have forgotten, or by prayer directly to God, we enter the sanctuary, and, thus, change our thinking from natural to spiritual thinking.

The third step follows, in Verses 18-20. What did he learn in the sanctuary? He says, "I perceived their end."

**Truly thou dost set them in slippery places;  
thou dost make them fall to ruin.  
How they are destroyed in a moment,  
swept away utterly by terrors!  
They are like a dream when one awakes,  
on awaking you despise their phantoms. {Psa 73:18-20 RSV}**

Here he begins to see the additional facts that he could not see before. He had forgotten the end of the ungodly. This obviously refers to the end of their life, but it is not limited entirely to that. It includes also the end of the processes by which they are living. We come to many ends in our experience of life. What this man had failed to take into consideration was what was happening within these people of whom he was so envious, in their inner life, where all things ultimately end. When he became aware of those it changed his whole way of thinking.

He discovered, first of all, that without God men cannot have inner strength. God has set them, he says, "in slippery places," and makes them "fall to ruin." This is always true of the ungodly. They seem to be getting along fine, outwardly, but inwardly it is quite a different story. This explains why we so frequently read of some prominent person, whom everyone is acclaiming, who suddenly and unexpectedly commits suicide. Movie stars have done this frequently. Why is this? It is because inside they had been set in slippery places. There was nothing to hold onto. Though outwardly they maintained a facade of happiness, inwardly they began to fall apart and at last they come to an end. They can no longer stand life; they can no longer stand themselves. We see this happening so frequently today; those who have maintained an outward facade of prosperity and carefree living are inwardly torn up, despairing, and suddenly come to an end.

Then this man learned that without God the ungodly are plagued by fears and terrors, "how they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!" I have had people who were non-Christians tell me that though outwardly they seemed to be composed and at ease, inwardly they were often gripped by terrible fears. They have learned to hide these, learned how to keep them from showing on their faces, but to a private counselor they freely admit how terribly frightened they are, especially afraid to face the fact of death.

Many of you know that William Randolph Hearst, who built the great Hearst castle near Morro Bay, and searched the world for beautiful objets d'art to fill it with, had a standing rule that no guest in his home could ever mention the word death. Each night he was afraid to go to sleep because he was tormented by the fear of death. Let us remember this about the ungodly rich.

This psalmist had not faced all the facts about the ones who troubled him, as many people do not face the same facts as they look at the apparent prosperity of the ungodly today.

Then he learned that the ultimate end of these people was to be forgotten. "They are like a dream when one

awakes, and on awaking you despise their phantoms." We all know how this is. We have a bad dream, frightening and terrible. Perhaps you are being pursued by a monster, or you are running down the street naked. It is a terrible dream and seems so real; you are upset by it, your emotions are so stirred that it actually wakes you up. You lie there palpitating, sweating, but in a few moments it is all gone. As soon as you awake you forget the dream; it is only a vague memory. That, says the Psalmist, is like the ungodly, those men and women who persist in rejecting God's love and grace. What happens to them? They make a splash for the moment of their life, but after they are gone they are soon forgotten.

Many of us in our forties or fifties remember how the world stood in awe of that terrible man, Hitler. He had the whole world frightened and hanging on his every word. But already he is almost forgotten. Young people hardly know whom you mean when you mention him. He is but a name out of the past, and the fearsomeness of his character and his threat to the world is forgotten, gone like a dream in the night.

Thus this man began to take note of certain other facts. He had now come to the place where he had cleared up his thinking about the ungodly, and about God. He sees that God is ruling over the affairs of men and that the ungodly are not in such an envious spot as he thought, after all. In fact, who would want to change places with them in view of their end?

I remember once reading the story of our Lord's parable of the rich man and Lazarus to some young people. I read them how Lazarus lay at the gate, the dogs licking his sores, while the rich man ate in splendor in his house. I said to them, "Which would you rather be, the rich man or Lazarus?" They said, "Oh, we would rather be the rich man." Then I read on to where they both died and the rich man was in torment but Lazarus was carried to the bosom of Abraham. I said to them, "Now which would you rather be?" They said, "Oh, we'd much rather be Lazarus; we don't want to be the rich man." That is what this man saw.

But he did not stop there. Notice what he did next. This fourth step is very important.

**When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,  
I was stupid and ignorant,  
I was like a beast toward thee. {Psa 73:21-22 RSV}**

He did not stop with correcting his thinking; he went on to re-evaluate himself and his problem and to see just how he got into this mess, any how. He honestly faced himself. Now this is a difficult thing to do. We do not like to do this. We do not mind working our way through our problem, but the minute we get relief we want to stop right there. We do not go on to face up to what led us to this, what made us act like this. That is why we keep going through the same problems over and over again. This man probably never went through this experience again because he worked it through so thoroughly here that he never had to face it again.

I often think of the story of the woman who had been teaching school for twenty-five years. A job opened that she wanted, and she applied for it. But another person got the position who had only been a teacher for one year. The older teacher was incensed and went to the principal. "I don't understand," she said, "why you would give this job to an inexperienced person when I've had twenty-five years' experience!" But the principal said to her, "No, I'm sorry. You haven't had twenty-five years of experience; you've had one year's experience twenty-five times." That is so often what happens to us. We go through the same problems, the same difficulties, year after year after year. It is because we never stop to ask, "What made me act this way?"; to confess before God the condition that led us into this position of unbelief. But that is what this man does.

He saw three things that led him to doubt. He saw that he was stupid, i.e., it is now apparent to him that he had worked this all up himself. There was not any real problem, but he had simply allowed his feelings to get hold of him to the point that he had worked himself up into a frenzy. The minute his feelings were corrected by the facts, the problem disappeared. There was no real problem at all; it was all within him. His distress was not caused by the outside circumstances; it was something he had produced himself. This is so often what happens to us. We work ourselves all up into a self-induced frenzy.

Not long ago I was in this very state myself. I suddenly realized that I had allowed my feelings to grasp me to

the point that they had worked me up into a frantic state of mind. I had to realize, like this man, how stupid it was to build mountains out of mole hills, to make big issues out of trivial things.

The second thing he learned was that he was ignorant. There were things that he obviously did not know but he could have known. He was ignorant of his own need, and that God was doing something very helpful to him by these pressures and trials he was putting him through. He was ignorant of the fact that God loved him, and he was beginning to distrust God, because he did not realize that behind the trials that believers go through is a Father's loving heart. As Hebrews tells us, if God did not love us he would not chasten us. It is because he loves us that he chastens us. He was ignorant of the record of the Scriptures that tells us these things.

Finally, he realized that he was like an animal, reacting instinctively, concerned only with himself and resenting any kind of discipline; loving to be petted and taken care of but not liking any kind of discipline at all, as an animal does. So he repents, thinks again, and as he bows before God he says, "How stupid I was, how ignorant I've been, how like an animal I've been before thee."

When he reaches that place, look what happens next, the fifth step.

**Nevertheless I am continually with thee;  
thou dost hold my right hand.  
Thou dost guide me with thy counsel,  
and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory. {Psa 73:24-25 RSV}**

The minute he came to this low place before God there comes an instant reassurance. He realizes that God still loves him, God has not cast him aside. All the marvel of the grace of God is poured into that one word, "Nevertheless." Suddenly there comes to his understanding the fact that though he is confessing his stupidity and his ignorance before God, God has not cast him away; he is still with him, he still loves him, he still holds him and supports him. The wonder of that breaks afresh upon the Psalmist's heart, and he cries out in astonishment, "Nevertheless, I am continually with thee."

Yesterday at Multnomah School of the Bible I had an interview with a certain young lady. She had come to me after I had spoken on the subject, "How To Live in a Sexually Inflamed Society." She told me how disturbed she was by the fact that not long before she had come to school she had been guilty of sexual immorality. She described how terrible it made her feel, especially in this school where she felt that the other young people there had clean lives, in that respect. She said, "I feel so dirty, I feel so guilty, and I can't get rid of this feeling. I know God has forgiven me, but I can't forgive myself." As we talked she said, "You know, there is one thing though that really strikes me. Since I've been here, God has been so good to me. There are so many wonderful things that he's given me and shown me while I've been here." I said to her, "Doesn't that tell you something? Doesn't that tell you that God loves you yet, and that he has forgiven you? Do you think a Holy God would let you stand in his presence unclean, as you feel yourself to be, and not cast you out? The very fact that he loves you, and takes care of you, and does wonderful things for you is his way of telling you you've been cleansed, forgiven." Then I reminded her of the Lord's words to Peter when he refused to eat unclean animals, "What I have cleansed, don't you dare call unclean," {cf, Acts 10:15}. When I said that her face brightened, and she said, "Oh, that's right, that's right. God has cleansed me. It's an insult to him to say I'm unclean."

That is what this Psalmist found. He finds four things: first, forgiveness; and then, God's restraining hand. He says, "Thou dost hold me by my right hand." What is it, after all, that drew him back, that stopped him from going over the brink? It is the hand of God, he sees now. It was God himself who put into his mind to go into the sanctuary, and thus stopped him and turned him around. God has been holding him with his right hand. Third, he saw that God would guide him for the rest of his life. "Thou dost guide me all the way." The word of God is there to unfold reality, dispel illusion, and guide him safely through the snares and the problems. Finally he cries, "Afterward thou wilt receive me to glory." That is the end of the Christian. He had seen the end of the ungodly; now he sees the end of the Christian. It is glory.

That leads inevitably to the sixth step,

**Whom have I in heaven but thee?**

**And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.**

**My flesh and my heart may fail,**

**but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever. {Psa 73:25-26 RSV}**

Sometimes we say that New Testament Christians, having the Holy Spirit indwelling us, are much better off than Old Testament saints. But let me ask you this: Can you say what this Psalmist said? Have you come to the place where you can say, "God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee." Here is a man who has seen the utter adequacy of God. God can meet your need in loneliness, in despair, in frustration, in disappointment, in sorrow, in life and in death. In every situation or condition of life God is able to meet you and to supply all that you need. No one else can do this, the Psalmist says. So he cries out, "What I want is God himself."

Now that had been his problem. He had been thinking that he needed other things than God, that he needed things the ungodly had. But now he comes to realize that all he needs is God himself. If he has God, and the fellowship of God, then nothing else is needed. So he concludes with this resolution, which is a most wonderful thing:

**For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish;**

**thou dost put an end to those who are false to thee.**

**But for me it is good to be near God;**

**I have made the Lord God my refuge,**

**that I may tell of all thy works. {Psa 73:27-28 RSV}**

His conclusion is, God does keep his word. "The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine." God does exactly what he says he will do. He is good to those who are upright and to those who have found purity of heart in him. He keeps them. Those who are far from him shall perish; but those who draw nigh to God are established and kept. So his resolve is, "But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all thy works."

Remember how James puts that same truth, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you," {Jas 4:8 RSV}. When you begin to search for God, to seek his mind in the Scriptures or in the fellowship of others; to expose yourself to the teaching of the word of God, or to pray before God, then you are drawing near to God. God promises that if you take one step toward him, he will take a dozen toward you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. That is what will keep you through any difficulty of life. The Psalmist concludes with that. God, he says, is my rock -- that is the meaning of the word, strength. I can take anything life can throw at me, resting on this rock.

### **Prayer:**

Father, teach us this same truth. These are turbulent days in which we live, days in which there are many pressures, many problems. Keep us from being envious of the ungodly, but help us to hunger, Father, to reach them and to see them delivered as we have been delivered. Make us to trust, Lord, in thy greatness and thy power. In Christ's name, Amen.

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## **A SONG OF REALITIES**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

We have come now to the psalm which introduces the fourth book of Psalms, the ninetieth. You may be interested to learn that this is the oldest, i.e., the earliest, of the psalms. According to the inscription, this was written by Moses, and is one of possibly two psalms which Moses wrote. Some scholars feel that he also wrote Psalm 91, which ties in somewhat with Psalm 90. But there is little question but that Moses is the author of this ninetieth psalm. This is probably the pattern psalm upon which others are based. It corresponds to the book of Numbers in the Pentateuch.

The book of Numbers is the book of wilderness wanderings, the story of the failure of man, and it is most fittingly introduced by this ninetieth Psalm. It is very likely that Moses wrote this psalm at the end of the wilderness wanderings, just before he died. This is, in my judgment, one of the greatest of the psalms. In its scope, its range of thought, and its vastness of concept, it is a marvelous statement of divine glory.

It opens with a powerful declaration of the greatness of God.

**Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place  
in all generations,  
Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world,  
from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. {Psa 90:1-2 RSV}**

In that brief sentence are three great facts that mark the greatness of God. The Psalmist begins by declaring that God has been the dwelling place of man in all generations. What is a dwelling place? Well, it is where you live. It is your home. This statement declares that God has been man's home ever since man has been on the earth. In all the generations of man it is where he continually lives. You will recognize that this is the same truth Paul uttered when he addressed the Athenians on Mars Hill. He said to them, God is not far from any of us (even pagans, he points out), for "in him we live and move and have our being," {Acts 17:28}. God exists as a home for man.

That is a tremendous thought, is it not? Here Moses is looking back over the course of human history and declaring that God is great because he is the God of history. Moses had seen the Pharaohs live and die. Perhaps he had often crossed the Nile River and gone over to that Valley of the Kings which tourists now visit, where the tombs of the Pharaohs are located and there had noted the many who through past history had been laid to rest. Yet, despite the passing centuries there is no change in the relationship of man to God. He has been the home of man for all the generations of history.

Then the Psalmist points out that God is the God of creation.

**Before the mountains were brought forth,  
or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world. {Psa 90:2a RSV}**

Notice the order of events here. He is beginning with the latest geological fact: the mountains were formed. They were formed after the earth itself had been created and are last in the geological record. Moses here is looking back across that record and saying, the mountains were formed, but before that, God was. Then before that, he "formed the earth and the world." Now to us that is saying the same thing but in the Hebrew it is literally, "the earth and the land." God formed the earth first and then later brought out the land from the waters, as the book of Genesis makes clear. The land emerged from waters that covered the earth. So Moses is gradually moving back in time from the formation of the mountains to the emergence of the land and finally the creation of the earth itself. Before all this, God was. Then he takes a longer leap into timelessness and says,

**from everlasting to everlasting thou art God. {Psa 90:2b RSV}**

Surely here is the greatness of God. He is the God of history. He is the God of creation. But beyond all that, he is the God of eternity. He is beyond and above his creation. He is greater than the universe he produced, and before it existed, he was. In fact the Hebrew here is again very interesting. It suggests the translation

"From the vanishing point in the past to the vanishing point in the future," thus, from everlasting to everlasting God exists. How great he is!

This is far different from any pagan concept of God. Plato, the great Greek philosopher, was the only one of whom we have record in the ancient world who held some concept of the timelessness of God. In the eyes of others, the pagan gods all had a beginning. Read the pagan myths and you will find that all the gods started somewhere. But here is a God who never begins, a timeless endless God who is beyond and above his creation, and beyond and above all the events of history. That mighty God, that tremendous Being, who is so far different, above, and "other" than ourselves, is now brought close to us in the rest of the psalm.

Here the Psalmist is examining the relationship of God to man. That is the theme of this psalm. How do you and I relate to the greatness of God? Again he gives us three great facts, beginning with Verse 3.

First, there is God's sovereignty over man:

**Thou turnest man back to the dust,  
and sayest, "Turn back, O children of men!"  
For a thousand years in thy sight  
are but as yesterday when it is past,  
or as a watch in the night.  
Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream,  
like grass which is renewed in the morning:  
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening it fades and withers. {Psa 90:3-6 RSV}**

Three things about God mark the limits of life for man. These are the three greatest facts of human existence:

First, we must live within the sovereignty of God. It is God who controls human life. As the Psalmist points out, "Thou turnest man back to the dust, and sayest, 'Turn back, O children of men!'" God sets the limits to life. There are certain things he will not let us do. Many people today are asking, "Is it right for man to explore space? Is it right for us to go up to the moon? Is this a proper activity of man?" The answer is "Yes." If it were not, God would simply say, "Turn back, O children of men," and that would be as far as we could get. What he has allowed as possible is something he obviously permits. The very fact that man is now exploring space makes it clear that this is within the limits of God for man. We could never explore what God does not permit us to explore. But throughout the Bible we find two or three things reserved from man's knowledge. The understanding of time is one. God says, "The times and the seasons are not for you to know." Again and again he hints that time is a mystery which man will never understand. The nature of the occult world is also a secret hidden from man. Thus God sets certain limits to human life. He says to man, Turn back to the dust for you came from the dust. To each individual, at some time or another, God says, "Go back to dust."

Do you remember the story of the little girl who learned in Sunday school that man came from the dust and eventually returns to the dust. She looked under her bed one morning and said, "Mother, mother, come! There's someone under my bed, but I don't know whether he's coming or going!" That is a child's way of underscoring this great truth. God sets limits to life. Man comes from the dust but he must return to the dust.

There is suggested in Verse 4 the thought that God had originally intended a greater span of life for man. In connection with his word about the limits of life, the Psalmist says, "For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night." In reading that I have often wondered if a thousand years was God's originally intended limit for the life of man.

That is, incidentally, the length of the Millennium. According to Revelation 20, the coming Golden Age of earth will be a thousand years long. That this suggestion may be true is strengthened by the fact that early man, as recorded in Genesis, lived almost a thousand years. The oldest man who ever lived, Methuselah, lived 969 years. Before sin began to spread through the earth it is quite likely that God intended that man should live a thousand years. But even a thousand years, even the longest possible lifetime of man, compared with the greatness of God is "but as yesterday when it is past, or as a watch in the night."

Then the Psalmist points out that man also is suddenly taken from the earth. "Thou dost sweep men away; they are like a dream." Again it is clear that we live within the sovereignty of God. We have no control over how long we are to live. History confirms to us the fact that men can very suddenly disappear from the scene. We all remember how, less than ten years ago, it looked as though the Kennedy family would be prominent in politics in the United States for many years to come. When John F. Kennedy was elected President news of the Kennedy tribe filled the papers. It looked as though they would be a force to reckon with for decades of American history. But how suddenly the picture changed. "Thou dost sweep men away," says the Psalmist. No one's life is at all certain. Men can suddenly disappear from the scene.

But even if they do not, they are but as grass which is renewed in the morning, "in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers." Even the normal span of life is one of gradually increasing decay and deterioration until, like the grass, it is there in the morning but is gone in the evening. The grass he is talking about here is not marijuana. Any plant will do. It grows up in the morning but by evening it is cut down and disappears. This is a picture, he says, of the life of man. Again, history confirms this. We think of Ho Chi Minh and how he has dominated the scene in Vietnam. He was a threat to many, but now he is gone, his life has deteriorated. Mao Tse-tung has been tottering on the brink of disappearance for many months. The course of history has been the story of the rise and fall of men who appear for a brief time and then disappear, exactly as the Psalmist says. So man lives within one great fact about God: his sovereign control over man.

But there is another relationship which concerns the Psalmist, God's wrath. He moves on to that in Verses 7-12:

**For we are consumed by thy anger;  
by thy wrath we are overwhelmed.  
Thou has set our iniquities before thee,  
our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.  
For all our days pass away under thy wrath,  
our years come to an end like a sigh. {Psa 90:7-9 RSV}**

Here the Psalmist, in all the honesty of his outlook on life, is facing a reality that many of us try to avoid. He is dealing with what we might call, the tragic sense of life: the fact that every moment of enjoyment is tinged with something sorrowful, tragic, or unhappy. There is a bittersweet quality about life, and these Psalmists realistically face it. They are quite ready to come to grips with the problem of evil. Why is human life tinged with a dark side? Why do we have these tragedies, irritations, injustices, and the catastrophes that strike both innocent and guilty alike?

The other day I succumbed to family pressure and a long-standing interest on my part and bought a small motor boat, to use for water skiing, fishing, and other things. Of course I couldn't wait to see how the boat would run. I took it down to the Palo Alto Boat Harbor and launched it in the bay. My wife and youngest daughter were aboard and we went out for a spin on the bay. We took right off and headed for the Dumbarton Bridge. But out in the middle of the bay, almost under the Dumbarton Bridge, we ran aground! The motor hit bottom and before I could lift it up the shear pin had severed and there we were, powerless in the middle of the bay. Fortunately I had taken along a couple of paddles that belonged to a little rubber boat we had, but all I had were these little paddles that fit together like a kayak paddle. When I fully realized that we were adrift in the middle of the bay I was a bit concerned as I didn't know which way the tide was running and I had read stories in the paper about people who spent the night on the mud flats.

The thought crossed my mind, "Is this really fair? Should a thing like this happen to the pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church?" The longer I paddled toward the disappearing shore, the more convinced I was that it was unfair treatment. We finally landed at the only place on the lower western side of the bay where there was a telephone, and some people, so we didn't spend the night on the bay. But it served to underscore to me the fact the Psalmist is facing here.

There is a dark side to life. There come sudden occurrences that cast a cloud over the sunshine. Sometimes they are much more serious than my boat incident. There is a family here on the Peninsula that is grieving over

the loss of a little eight year old girl whom some sex deviate apparently has kidnapped for she has been gone for several days now. We all know how frequently these things happen. What is the reason for them?

The Psalmist says it is because of the wrath of God. He ascribes them directly to God. Surely this phrase, "the wrath of God" is greatly misunderstood by many people. Many think invariably of some sort of peeved Deity, a kind of cosmic Terrible-Tempered Mr. Bang who indulges in violent and uncontrolled displays of temper when we human beings do not do what we ought to do. But such a concept only reveals the limitations of our understanding. The Bible never deals with the wrath of God that way. According to the Scriptures, the wrath of God is God's moral integrity. When man refuses to yield himself to God, he creates certain conditions (not only for himself but for others as well) which God has ordained for harm. It is God who makes evil result in sorrow, heartache, injustice and despair. It is God's way of saying to man, "Look, you must face the truth. You were made for me. If you, in the dignity of human choice which I have given you, decide that you don't want me, then I will leave. But you will have to bear the consequences." The absence of God is destructive to human life. That absence is God's wrath and God cannot withhold it. In his moral integrity God insists that these things should occur as a result of man's choice. See how the Psalmist links these two together. He sets man's sin and God's wrath within the same frame.

**For we are consumed by thy anger;  
by thy wrath we are overwhelmed.  
Thou hast set our iniquities before thee,  
our secret sins in the light of thy countenance. {Psa 90:7-8 RSV}**

The cause of God's wrath then, is always human sin. The manifestation of God's wrath would never be apparent were it not for the secret sins that are set in the light of God's countenance. God knows our inner sins, our secret inner thoughts. The Scriptures never teach that a passing thought is a sin. A thought that comes to your mind unbidden, remains there for a moment tempting you to do something wrong, is only a normal exposure to temptation. Even the Lord Jesus experienced it. But here the Psalmist refers to thoughts that we harbor, that we mull over and play with, that we take great pleasure in and often summon up ourselves if they do not come to us unbidden. God is aware of these inner defilements of life, and they are all contributing to the tragic sense of life.

It is amazing how blind we are in this area. Every now and again someone will ask the question, "Why doesn't God kill the devil? If it's the devil that is doing all this to us, why doesn't God get rid of him?" That same question appears often concerning a human being. "Why didn't God kill Hitler? Look at all the terrible things Hitler did, and the awful bloodbath to which he subjected the world. Why didn't God kill him before he could do this?" We ask such questions with great ease, but when we ask a question like that we should also ask, "Why didn't God paralyze my hand when I filled out my income tax and put down a wrong figure?" We should ask, "Why did not God strike me dumb when I yelled at my wife, or my children?" And "Why didn't he send a stroke when I said that catty thing over the phone to my neighbor? Why didn't he paralyze my tongue?" If God is going to deal with sin he must deal with it in everyone, not just the Hitlers, and not only in its extreme forms. So the Psalmist faces the fact that God allows his wrath, his moral integrity against sin, to be manifest precisely because it affords him opportunity for the exercise of his love.

Then he goes on to consider the universality of this:

**The years of our life are threescore and ten,  
or even by reason of strength fourscore;  
yet their span is but toil and trouble;  
they are soon gone, and we fly away. {Psa 90:10 RSV}**

"Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward," says the book of Job {Job 5:7}. Job, of course, is the clearest demonstration of this very thing. Here is a statement of the length of life to which man is reduced under sin. At best we live to seventy years of age, and if by reason of strength we reach eighty, still it is filled with trouble. This was written by Moses, remember, and Moses himself lived to be one hundred twenty years of age. Surely that was a remarkable extension of time, beyond the ordinary for his own day. It is striking that two thousand years the other side of Calvary, man's span of life was only seventy, or at the most, eighty



years. We really have not made much progress, have we? All our vaunted achievements in medical science have not quite reached this figure as the average span of life for man today. But still the Psalmist is right. No matter how long man lives, his days are filled with trouble and the tragic quality of life that marks the presence of the wrath of God. So the Psalmist closes this section with a question,

**Who considers the power of thy anger,  
and thy wrath according to the fear of thee?  
So teach us to number our days  
that we may get a heart of wisdom. {Psa 90:11-12 RSV}**

Now he is facing the strange indifference of man. Why do we ignore the fact of the wrath of God? Why do we try to pretend it does not exist? Why do we not face up to these great relationships: the sovereignty of God over man and the ever-present justice of God working in human society? Why do we struggle so to blame other conditions in human life, or to blame everyone but the one who is most to blame, ourselves? In answer, the Psalmist prays, "Lord, help me to number my days, (i.e., to be aware of the limitations of life), that I might get a heart of wisdom." What is a heart of wisdom? Well, it is a realistic outlook on life. It is facing life the way it is, and fully reckoning with the relationships of man to God.

In the last section the Psalmist moves to the third of these relationships. It is a declaration of what a heart of wisdom will bring us to. It is the declaration of God's love for man. This is rather unexpected, is it not? Most of us think of man's relationships to God only in terms of God's justice and God's wrath. He is the great Law Giver watching over us, and we are responsible to fulfill his law -- or else. But here is a closing section in which the Psalmist speaks of the love of God.

It begins with a cry for a personal God:

**Return, O Lord! How long?  
Have pity on thy servants! {Psa 90:13 RSV}**

You cannot experience the love of God unless you are ready to cry out like this for a personal relationship to God. "Return, O Lord! This great and mighty God who rules the universe, may he come back to me," says the Psalmist. "Enter my heart and have pity upon me, thy servant." That cry for a personal relationship is the key to the results that follow, as set forth in the following verses:

**Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love,  
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. {Psa 90:14 RSV}**

Supposing now you have come to a relationship with God personally. You know him, he has returned to your spirit where he was intended to dwell. What has really happened of course is that you have returned. From our human point of view we think that God has come to us. We cry out for him to come to us, when all the time he is saying to us, "Come unto me." But, as James says, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you," {Jas 4:8 RSV}. Now supposing this has happened in your life, what can you expect?

First, you can expect to know a satisfying love:

**Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love,  
that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. {Psa 90:14 RSV}**

You will notice that in the RSV all through the Psalms there is a repeated reference to the steadfast love of God. In the Authorized Version it is translated, "loving kindness." I admit I have an emotional preference for the term *loving kindness*. I often think of the little boy in Sunday school who was asked to describe loving kindness. He said to the teacher, "Well, teacher, if I ask my mother for a piece of bread and butter, and she gives it to me, that's kindness. But if she puts jam on it, that's loving kindness." That is striking very closely to what the word really means.

The Revisers are quite right in noting that there is a time quality about it. It is continuous love. It is love that does not change. It is, in other words, unqualified acceptance. That is love that satisfies. It is a love that does

not depend on whether I am good or bad but is ready to receive me and forgive me and set me back on my feet again. That is the kind of love God shows -- unqualified love; love that has already dealt with our behavior, already dealt with our misdemeanors and our rebellion -- and still loves. We sing the hymn, "O love that will not let me go." It is that kind of love that the Psalmist is talking about. That is satisfying love.

Then he speaks of recompensing joy:

**Make us glad as many days as thou hast afflicted us,  
and as many years as we have seen evil. {Psa 90:15 RSV}**

There is a joy that makes up for the past, a joy that "restores the years which the locusts have eaten," to use the beautiful phrasing of one of the Minor Prophets. It looks out upon the field of life and sees it eaten of locusts, all its value gone, all its worthwhileness ended, but then it sees God coming in and restoring, planting a new crop, bringing it to fruition and to harvest, so that one may look out across a full field blowing in the wind, every head laden with grain, and rejoice over the fact that God has restored the years which the locusts have eaten. One of the greatest joys of my Christian life is to look back upon the wasted moments and years of my past, and set in contrast to it the fruitfulness of my present experience. God is continually correcting what once looked like a hopeless situation, restoring to me the years that the locusts have eaten. A recompensing joy, that is part of the glory of God's love.

Then the third element the Psalmist sees is in Verse 16.

**Let thy work be manifest to thy servants,  
and thy glorious power to their children. {Psa 90:16 RSV}**

This is an amazing request. It envisions what I would call, hereditary healing. We moderns are inclined to see life out of focus. We seldom think of ourselves as being part of a bundle of life which goes back to the very beginning. Americans, particularly, are very individualistic. We like to think of ourselves as individuals almost as though we were the first men in the world. It is part of the American dream to feel we are starting all over. We can correct all the mistakes of the past. We can change everything within our lifetime. But the Bible never takes that view. The Bible recognizes the fact that man is tied to his past and it is affecting the immediate future. God himself stated it in the giving of the Law, in Exodus 20,

**" ... for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments." {Exod 20:5b-6 RSV}**

There is something in human life that persists from one generation to another. Though you or I may become a Christian and God begins to heal our personal life, we will never experience the full effect of that healing in our lifetime. But our children will! That is what the psalmist is saying here. Notice how he puts it. "Let thy work be manifest to thy servants," i.e., his own generation. Let me understand how you work, Lord, give me an understanding of your methods in society and life, and then let the effect of that understanding be evidenced in my children." That is what often happens. I have seen young men and women beginning a family, as new Christians. They are discovering for themselves the healing power of God to change a wretched, miserable, and wasted life, and the<

Then the fourth thing:

**Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us. {Psa 90:17a RSV}**

Here I would like to revert to the Authorized Version; it is much better.

**Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us. {Psa 90:17a KJV}**

This is a prayer for the visible manifestation of God's beauty. It is what the New Testament calls "godlikeness," or godliness. What is the beauty of God? God is beautiful because he is two things: truth and

love. Truth is always necessary to beauty. You can never have anything beautiful that is not true. And love is warmth, graciousness, and attractiveness, which, added to truth, constitutes beauty. A man or woman, boy or girl, whose life is characterized by truth and love is a beautiful person. We hear much about beautiful people today. The world uses that term. What does it mean? Basically it means to them someone who pleases me, whom I like; that is a beautiful person. But in the understanding of life which the Scripture represents, beauty is the manifestation of truth and love. The only place you can get those, in the ultimate sense, is from God. So the Psalmist prays, "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,

**and establish thou the work of our hands upon us,  
yea, the work of our hands establish thou it. {Psa 90:17b RSV}**

What does this mean? The last result of God's love is to make our labor, our work, meaningful, valuable, and enduring. It will not be something wasted, or frantic and frenetic, spent in a moment. The work of our hands becomes an enduring thing, impressive, affecting others, having in itself great value. Who does not long for this?

Here, this morning, in everyone's heart, is there not a longing that your life will be worthwhile, that you will be the kind of person who will be worth something; others will value you and your life. Well, that is the great promise of God's love. That love is available to any who are ready to say, as this Psalmist says, "Return, O Lord! How long?" Come back, O God. Come back into my life and work through me. God is ready to produce in you that kind of love.

Here then, are the three great facts that relate to God and man: God's sovereignty, within the limits of which we all live, whether we like it or not; God's wrath, which we all experience, whether innocent or guilty, because we are living in a world in which God is allowing man's sin to have its full expression. But in the midst of all this is the glory and wonder of God's love, manifesting itself to us in terms of these qualities of satisfying love: recompensing joy, hereditary healing, visible beauty, and meaningful labor. All is available to those who love him.

### **Prayer:**

We never fail, Father, to be awed and humbled by the words of Scripture. When we think that Moses, so many long centuries ago, understood these great facts about you, we are inclined to cry with him, "O Lord, thou hast been our dwelling place throughout all generations!" Thou art the same God, the eternal unchangeable God, the Rock upon which any life may be built. Lord, we pray that none of us will be so foolish as to try to build on any other rock, but that each of us will give ourselves to establishing our life upon Thee, our rock and our strength. We ask in your name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman  
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## **A SONG OF RESTORATION**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

**O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures for ever! {Psa 107:1 RSV}**

This is the recurrent theme of the 107th psalm. It introduces the fifth book of the Psalms, the book that corresponds to the book of Deuteronomy in the Pentateuch and has the same message as that book. Deuteronomy declares the "Second Law" and that is what the name means. *Deutero* means "second;" *nomos* is "law": the second law. The First Law is the law of sin and death, the law that condemns, the law that destroys, the law that makes us feel guilty and brings us under a sense of fear and condemnation. But the Second Law, says the Apostle Paul, is the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus which sets us free from the law of sin and death. It is the way God finally redeems his people. He buys them back (redeems them) by the operation of the Second Law, of which this psalm speaks.

The Psalmist speaks of the steadfast love of God. In Hebrew, the word means "an eager and ardent desire" and refers to the fact that God's love never gives up. We sing about it in the hymn,

O Love that wilt not let me go,  
I rest my weary soul in Thee.

The thing that finally gets to us, breaks the back of our rebellion, and sets us free from our emotional hang-ups is the unqualified love of God which never lets us go. We might use a term that is more easily understood in our day. Instead of "steadfast love" read "unqualified acceptance." That is what God's love does. It accepts us without reserve. I ran across an article this week which describes that very well. It is in the October issue of Eternity Magazine.

Acceptance means you are valuable just as you are. It allows you to be the real you. You aren't forced into someone else's idea of who you really are. It means your ideas are taken seriously since they reflect you. You can talk about how you feel inside and why you feel that way, and someone really cares.

Acceptance means you can try out your ideas without being shot down. You can even express heretical thoughts and discuss them with intelligent questioning. You feel safe. No one will pronounce judgment on you even though they don't agree with you.

It doesn't mean you will never be corrected or shown to be wrong; it simply means it's safe to be you and no one will destroy you out of prejudice.

That is what this psalm is all about, because that is what God does. He accepts us as we are and then sets about to make us what we ourselves are longing to be. That ability is what the Psalmist calls "steadfast love of God."

The psalm is very simple in its structure. It is divided into two major parts after the opening sentence which introduces it.

**O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures for ever.  
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,  
whom he has redeemed from trouble  
and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south. {Psa 107:1-3 RSV}**

In two following sections the Psalmist describes first the works of God and then the ways of God, i.e., how God proceeds in his wonderful demonstration of loving acceptance. The psalmist uses a very modern yet ancient technique for this; he asks for testimonies. We have all been in testimony meetings where people stand and tell what the Lord has done for them. In these next verses, beginning with Verse 4 and on through Verse 32, there are four testimonies of how God delivered people from circumstances and difficulties which are very much like the ones you are going through today. He describes four different kinds of trouble from which God can deliver. The first description is found in Verses 4-9.

**Some wandered in desert wastes,  
finding no way to a city to dwell in;  
hungry and thirsty,**

**their soul fainted within them. {Psa 107:4-5 RSV}**

Who are these? They are what we might call the restless ones. They are the ones who wander about from place to place or from job to job from marriage to marriage, filled with questions and seeking to find where the answer lies. There are a lot of them today. They cannot find the answers. They are looking for something but they cannot find it. They keep wandering from place to place and from experience to experience, trying to find something to satisfy.

The Psalmist says they are looking for "a city to dwell in." Those of us who live in a twentieth-century city, who are choked with fumes, crowded on the freeways, fighting taxes, crime, and crabgrass, wonder why on earth anyone would want to live in a city; it is the country that attractive to us. But the Bible indicates that God has designed that man should ultimately live in cities. It says of Abraham, in Hebrews 11, that he was looking for the city "which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God." Why? Because a city always has two qualities about it. First, it is characterized by excitement, and then, security. Excitement is created whenever people gather together. There things are happening, that is where the action is. Cities are also a place of security. If you are going to meet trouble it is better to have others around. If you need defense you want to be where others are. Defense is more easily possible in a city if an attack comes. So these people described here are looking for the things you can find in a city: excitement and security.

Surely there is nothing wrong with these. Excitement is a quality we need in life. There is nothing worse than a life filled with boredom and dullness. What a drag it is! How difficult it is to live when everything is dull! But God never intended life to be that way; he intended it to be exciting. Youth today are demanding this, even at the price of their health or sometimes their very life. But it is quite right to want excitement because life is intended to be exciting. It is also intended to be secure, to afford a place where you feel at home, at rest, relaxed. That is what these people are looking for, but they cannot find it. They are hungry and thirsty, the psalmist says. That means their cravings have not been satisfied.

Then we are told how they find satisfaction.

**Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress;  
he led them by a straight way,  
till they reached a city to dwell in. {Psa 107:6-7 RSV}**

Some of you have had this experience. You too were restless, you were uncertain, wandering, you were hungry and thirsty for life but you could never find it. You tried everything. Finally, when you reached the bottom, you cried to the Lord in your trouble. When you did he heard you. Not suddenly or instantaneously but gradually, he began to set you free. He began to lead you "by a straight way." Those in this condition God delivers by leading them in a straight way. They have been wandering circuitously, deviously; now they start going straight. That is the way described in the scripture. It is a straight way, right through the middle of life. God leads them until they find a city to dwell in, until they reach the place of excitement and security. It does not happen overnight. Sometimes it takes awhile.

Some of us are finding this true in our lives. Gradually, step by step, as we walk the straight way, God is leading us to a place of excitement and security, of adequacy, of power. Power is always exciting, is it not? Those who have found this way then have a responsibility, says the Psalmist.

**Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful work to the sons of men!  
For he satisfies him who is thirsty,  
and the hungry he fills with good things. {Psa 107:8-9 RSV}**

Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, because the factor that reached and held them was God's unqualified acceptance of them. Those who have come from this background ought to praise God. They ought publicly to give thanks for this one quality by which God has led them to contentment, and they are satisfied.

Now here is another problem:

**Some sat in darkness and in gloom,  
prisoners in affliction and in irons,  
for they had rebelled against the words of God,  
and spurned the counsel of the Most High.  
Their hearts were bowed down with hard labor;  
they fell down, with none to help. {Psa 107:10-13 RSV}**

Who are these? These we might call the hostile, the rebellious ones. Notice their condition. They sit in darkness and gloom. That is always the figure in the Bible for hopeless ignorance. They cannot figure out what is wrong with them. Their lives are filled with gloom, they have no hope, but they do not know what is wrong. They cannot understand their condition.

More than that, they are afflicted and in irons. That means they are held by something, they are as men put in chains. They are held prisoner by certain habits, by ideas, by thoughts, by attitudes that hold them in an iron grip. No matter how hard they try they cannot break the grip, despite the misery it causes. There are many things that can do this. Drugs can do it. Just this week the paper told about the body of a seventeen year old boy which was dumped on the steps of the police station, scarred with needle marks. That boy got into the grip of drugs and could not break loose and they finally took his life. Sex can also do it. I have seen young people (and old people too) so given over to sexual promiscuity that they could not break the habit. They were wrecking themselves and wrecking their homes but they could not stop. A bitter attitude can do it, too. There are people who never give way to sex or drugs or alcohol but who nevertheless are bound in irons because of a bitter, resentful, critical spirit. I know a family right now where the whole family is being ruined because the father and mother both have a critical spirit and they cannot seem to break loose from it. The children are growing up afraid of life because they have been affected by this negative, bitter attitude. That is the condition the psalmist is describing here.

The cause is clearly revealed to us. It is because they "rebelled against the words of God." In other words, they did not like what God said about life. They disagreed and they chose to act on what they felt. They did not realize that God was telling them the truth, and they rebelled against reality. That is the first cause. Second, they "spurned the counsel of the Most High," i.e., since they did not like what God said they decided not to follow what he advised. They turned aside from it and thus they found themselves "bowed down with hard Labor." Do you know why that inevitably follows? Because if you will to follow God, who is intended to be the strength of man, you have only one other place to go -- your own resources. The man who is trying do it all by himself is already in trouble. It is a hard, hard life. Remember when the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road, he said to him, "Saul, it is hard for you to kick against the pricks," {cf, Acts 9:5 KJV}. Yes, it is hard. It is agonizing, exhausting labor to try to work up excitement and security out of your own resources. It will drag you down every time. So, no matter how long it might take, these who rebelled against and spurned the counsel of the Most High turned to their own resources, fell down, and there was no one to help them. Thus they ended up literally prisoners, bound by their own weakness. Well, then what? God does not leave them there. That is the glory of this. He does not say, "All right, you've made your bed; now lie in it. Tough! You made your own decision, you took your own course, now it's too late. You will have to reap the results."

No, listen:

**Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress. {Psa 107:13 RSV}**

And it tells us how he did it:

**he brought them out of darkness and gloom. {Psa 107:14a RSV}**

That was the first step. He opened their eyes to show them that what they were rebelling against was reality, that the words of the Most High are not an artificial standard which God has imposed in order to give man a bad time. God is not a peeved Deity, enjoying the struggles of men. His words are a revelation of the way things are.

So, having dispelled their ignorance,

**and [he] broke their bonds asunder. {Psa 107:14b RSV}**

I love that. That means that when these people cried to God they found a power to act which they never had before. It means that though they were in the grip of vicious things (drugs, sex, alcohol, bitterness, whatever it might be), they finally brought their problems to the Lord and laid it at his feet. Then they rose up with a new kind of power, suddenly, just like that. It does not mean they did not have a struggle, but the struggle was on different terms from then on. It was no longer a struggle to break free but to keep from sliding back again. They fought on a wholly different basis. Some of you have had this experience. You know what the psalmist is talking about here. You can sing, with Charles Wesley,

He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean;  
His blood availed for me.

When this happens their responsibility is to give thanks, and to give thanks with a special note. They are to thank God for his shattering power, his ability to deliver suddenly and instantaneously.

**For he shatters the doors of bronze,  
and cuts in two the bars of iron. {Psa 107:16 RSV}**

There is a place of deliverance for anyone bound by evil. If you are struggling with habits you have not been able to break, there is power in God to set you free. Once you experience it you ought to spend the rest of your life talking about it. There is a power that can do what no psychologist, or psychiatrist, no social worker, or any other well-intentioned person can do for you; it can set you free. That is what the Psalmist is singing about.

Now the next condition.

**Some were sick through their sinful ways,  
and because of their iniquities suffered affliction;  
they loathed any kind of food,  
and they drew near to the gates of death. {Psa 107:17-18 RSV}**

Here are the neurotics. They are sick people, either physically or emotionally sick. How many millions there are like this today! Some, perhaps, are here this morning! The characteristics of them are, first, they loathe food. Now food is what the body requires and, figuratively, it is what the soul requires. It is that which ministers health and strength. But these neurotic people are characterized by the fact that they do not want healthy things. They do not want good food. They do not want the plain fare of meat, potatoes and gravy; they want whipped cream and caramel sauce. They do not want to read good books; they want highly spiced literature that sets them a-tingling, and panders to their lust. That is all they will eat. That is all they will read. That is all they want to live on. Therefore they get worse and worse. "They draw near to the gates of death." Here are sick people, neurotic people, who are unable to handle life. They are fearful, nervous, anxious, afraid to go out and face life as it is.

The cause of this sad condition is given to us. It is because of their "sinful ways" and "their iniquities." As a pastor I have met with scores of this kind. They never like to be told that their problem is their sinful ways, because they never think of themselves as sinful. Yet they cannot be helped until they see that that is their problem. Dr. Henry Brandt once told of a woman who came to him in deep emotional difficulty. She told her story and he watched her as she talked for a half hour or more. Finally he said to her, "You're not a very peaceful woman are you?" She said, "Why do you say that?" He said, "Well, I've been noticing you chewing on the edge of your handkerchief, upset and distraught, and you tell me all these terrible things that happen to you all the time. Even though you're a Christian, you are not very peaceful, are you?" She wanted to know what that had to do with it. He said, "You know, in Isaiah it says, 'There is no peace,' sayeth my God, 'to the

wicked." She sat straight up and said, "Are you calling me wicked?" He said, "Well, you know, there are various degrees of wickedness. It's wicked for a man to take a gun and go into a bank and rob it of a hundred thousand dollars; but, if a little boy takes a nickel out of his mother's purse when she isn't looking, that is wicked too. It is wicked to take a knife and plunge it into someone's heart and thus murder him; but it is wicked also to use your tongue to shatter, destroy, and murder the reputation of another. It is the same kind of wickedness, but of a different degree. But in each case, there is no peace to the wicked. If you do not have any peace it is because you are wicked." Little by little he began to show this woman that her troubles came from sinful ways of which she was not aware, things that she was doing to herself and to others that were wrong. She did not mean to do these, but this was what was destroying her and making her sick and neurotic.

Then what happens?

**Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress;  
he sent forth his word, and healed them,  
and delivered them from destruction. {Psa 107:19-20 RSV}**

They cried to the Lord. It is when a man gets into trouble that he cries to the Lord. "And he delivered them." How? "He sent his word, and healed them," and thus delivered them from destruction. Is that not wonderful? I love that phrase, "he sent his word, and healed them." When the psalmist says, "He sent his word," it does not mean God gave them a Bible to read; it means he identified with them. The Lord Jesus is called the Word of God, the Living Word, the Logos. We read of that Word, "he became flesh and dwelt among us." He came to live where we live. Thus when it says that God sent his word and healed them, it means that in some way he moved right in where they were. He identified with them. He did not reject these neurotic people because they were difficult to live with, he moved right in beside them, put an arm around their shoulder, and said, "I understand; but let me show you what's causing this." And with his word he healed them. He set them free. Jesus said, "If you continue in my word, you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free," {cf, John 8:31-32}. Is that not wonderful? How many have been set free as they have begun to understand the truth about themselves and about life through the word. That is what God does by his word.

These kind of people have a special responsibility to praise the Lord.

**Let them thank the lord for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to the sons of men!  
And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,  
and tell of his deeds in songs of joy! {Psa 107:21-22 RSV}**

Joyful service is the thing for them. Sacrifice always pictures costly service. But it is service that is done with joy, with gladness, with cheerfulness. That is the way to say "Thank you," to a God who has set you free from neurosis.

Now, let us look at the next:

**Some went down to the sea in ships,  
doing business on the great waters;  
they saw the deeds of the Lord,  
his wondrous works in the deep.  
For he commended, and raised the stormy wind,  
which lifted up the waves of the Sea.  
They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their evil plight;  
they reeled and staggered like drunken men,  
and were at their wits' end. {Psa 107:23-27 RSV}**

Through the Christian centuries, some have actually been saved through this sort of circumstance. We sing the hymns of John Newton who was a slave trader and owner of a ship running slaves from Africa to England. He was converted when he ran into a great storm. In the midst of that storm, fearing for his very life, John



Newton cried out to God and God changed that man's heart right there. He became a great preacher and wrote many songs which have helped many since. It is easily possible to get into trouble at sea. A friend was telling me this week of a man who went out on a sailboat for the first time. As they were sailing along the owner of the sailboat fell overboard. Suddenly this man was confronted with a crisis: he had never been on a sailboat before, and the owner was now overboard, struggling to keep afloat. He had two choices: he could turn the helm this way, or that way, but he didn't know which to choose. The one he chose promptly capsized the boat, he too was "at his wits' end." That is exactly what the Psalmist is describing here.

But we can take this also as figurative language. The Scriptures often picture life as like the sea. Here is a man who is going out to do business on the great waters, i.e., he is a business man. He is carrying on his business ventures on the sea of life in a normal fashion. There is nothing wrong with what he is attempting to do. But suddenly he is confronted with a crisis. The interesting thing is, the Psalmist says God sent that crisis. It is God who "commanded and raised the stormy wind" which lifted up the waves of the sea. It is God who brought this man into trouble.

Surely trouble can come that way. A business man told me this week of how suddenly, out the blue, two men to whom he owed money on a short-term loan (which business men use frequently) suddenly decided to foreclose on him and take over his business. Within hours he was confronted with a crisis in which his business and livelihood was severely threatened. This is what the Psalmist describes. A storm comes up suddenly and courage melts away. Men reel and stagger like drunken men and are at their wits' end.

**Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,  
and [now it is the fearful whom] he [God] delivered from their distress. He made the  
storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.  
Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven. {Psa 107:28-30 RSV}**

What can we learn from this? Here is the account of people who are engaged in the normal practices of life when a crisis arises. They had been counting on themselves, thinking they had what it takes to handle their affairs, when suddenly a crisis of overwhelming proportions arises and now they do not know what to do or where to turn.

At last they turn to the Lord and they discover that he, and he alone, is capable of getting them to their desired haven. When that occurs they have a responsibility to thank the Lord for his steadfast love and for his wonderful works to the sons of men, and to do it publicly.

**Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,  
and praise him in the assembly of the elders. {Psa 107:32 RSV}**

There are many in this kind of circumstance and for their sake thanksgiving ought to be expressed publicly and openly, for all to hear.

Now there are the works of God. He delivers the restless, the neurotic, the hostile, the fearful; those who are sick, who are wandering, and who are unsatisfied. He delivers them by that unqualified love which keeps after them and will never let them go. That is what sets them free.

The latter part of the psalm we will go through very quickly. It describes the way God does this, his methods.

**He turns rivers into a desert,  
springs of water into thirsty ground,  
a fruitful land into a salty waste,  
because of the wickedness of its inhabitants. {Psa 107:33-34 RSV}**

First, to accomplish his purposes, God uses adversity. He deliberately at times sends into our pathway trouble and disaster, because it is the only way he can get our attention. You know that you never had time to listen to the voice of God until you got sick, or in difficulty, or in trouble. But when trouble loomed then you had time

to listen to what God had to say. But God knows that the most important thing for you to learn is to hear his word, because that word reveals what life is all about. So he sends trouble, deliberately. C. S. Lewis put it well. "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our consciences, but shouts at us in our pain. Pain is his megaphone to reach a deaf world."

Then God can use prosperity.

**He turns a desert into pools of water,  
a parched land into springs of water.  
And there he lets the hungry dwell,  
and they establish a city to live in;  
they sow fields, and plant vineyards,  
and get a fruitful yield.  
By his blessing they multiply greatly;  
and he does not let their cattle decrease. {Psa 107:35-38}**

When you take God at his word, you walk in the fullness of his strength and supply, and you begin to fellowship with him and enjoy his presence, he rewards you. He sends you the very thing you are looking for. He meets your needs, satisfies your heart, and fills you with good things. Your prayers do not go unanswered for God moves to meet your need. And protects you. He not only supplies, abundantly, but he also protects.

**When they are diminished and brought low  
through oppression, trouble, and sorrow,  
he pours contempt upon princes [your enemies]  
and makes them wander in trackless wastes;  
but he raises up the needy out of affliction,  
and makes their families like flocks. {Psa 107:39-41 RSV}**

Protected and sheltered. God uses adversity and God uses prosperity to accomplish his work.

Then we get, in closing, the reaction of men to this.

**The upright see it and are glad. {Psa 107:42a RSV}**

That is, if you are beginning to understand God and relate to him, you can see these two things and neither one disturbs you. If things get rough, it does not bother you, neither are you turned aside by prosperity. As Paul says, "I have learned whatever state I am therewith to be content." Whether I am abased or abounding it does not make any difference, he says, because God knows what he is doing.

**and all wickedness stops its mouth. {Psa 107:42b RSV}**

It has nothing left to say. That was the reaction of the Pharisees when they questioned Jesus. They tried to trap him but when he answered they were reduced to silence. They had nothing to say. This is what God says will happen to the upright man. As he works his way through life and men become aware of the whole story of how God acts, they simply have nothing to say. They are reduced to silence. It becomes evident that God is fair and just in what he does, and no man can complain.

So the last word is one of admonition.

**Whoever is wise, let him give heed to these things;  
let men consider the steadfast love of the Lord. {Psa 107:43 RSV}**

That means, think about all this! How does this relate to you? Ask yourself that. There are people here this morning who have been going through one or more of these difficult situations. Many are wandering, restless, hostile or bitter. They are held prisoner by some attitude, outlook, or habit. Or they are sick, neurotic, emotionally upset. Perhaps some are fearful, troubled by a crisis into which you have come. All right. Stop and think about how God accepts you, how he loves you, how he is deeply concerned about you and will meet

you right where you are and take you just as you are. His love does not change a bit whether you are a failure or a success. It does not make any difference to him how you appear in the eyes of men. God loves you, he is concerned about you and has already received you, already given you all that he can give, in Jesus Christ. All right, then. Begin to rejoice in that fact. You will find that love will set you free, so that you can act upon the power and liberty God gives.

When think about your relationship to others. Give heed to these things. Have you ever tried unqualified acceptance on your boss? Or your mother-in-law? Or the kid next door who is so mean and difficult? Have you ever tried unqualified acceptance with your children who are giving you so much trouble, your teenagers who make you mad every time you come in the door? Have you ever tried unqualified acceptance with your parents who are always on your back and never seem to give you a break? Have you ever tried unqualified acceptance with those who are difficult or demanding of you? That is what this Psalmist is saying.

**Whoever is wise, let him give heed to these things;  
let men consider the unqualified acceptance of the Lord. {cf, Psa 107:43 RSV}**

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we ask you to help us with this. We are beginning to catch on to the wonderful way you work. How different it is than the way the world around us acts. Father, how wonderful to see that your unqualified love is designed not only for church but for life and the situations in which we find ourselves right now. We ask you to set us free by love that we might sing this wonderful song of deliverance. In Christ's name, Amen.

Title: A Song of Restoration  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Folksongs of Faith  
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## **WHO AM I, LORD?**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

Everywhere today one hears of those who are passing through an identity crisis., That is a fancy way of saying what people have been asking for a long time, "Who am I?" We all ask this question occasionally but perhaps it is asked more frequently today because of the prevailing scientific view of the universe. That view tells us that our earth is but a tiny speck in a vast universe, and we are struggling mortals on an obscure planet located in a second rate galaxy among billions of other galaxies in a great universe. Such an outlook tends to make us feel most insignificant. It contrasts sharply with the biblical view of man and especially the view which deals with man in relationship to God. This 139th Psalm describes a man who is thinking about himself and his relationship to God. If you are struggling with an identity crisis and you are not sure just who you are then I suggest you read carefully as we look together at this marvelous psalm.

It is divided into four paragraphs of six verses each. It is easy to follow the outline for it is already structured for us in the RSV. In each paragraph the psalmist faces a question about himself in relationship to God.

In the first paragraph he asks, "How well does God know me?" The first sentence gives us his answer:

**O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me! {Psa 139:1 RSV}**

The Hebrew word for "searched" is the word, "to dig." Literally what this man is saying is, "O Lord, you dig

me!" Now that is how up-to-date the Bible is! The word means, "You dig into me and therefore you know me." It is not surprising that the word *dig* has come to mean in English, "to know or to understand." This is the way the psalmist begins, "Lord, you dig me!" In what way does God understand?

**Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;  
thou discernest my thoughts from afar. {Psa 139:2 RSV}**

That is, "Lord, you understand and know me in my conscious life. You know when I sit down (my passive life) and when I rise up (my active life). When I am resting or when I am acting, you know me. And you know me also in my subconscious life -- that level of life from which my thoughts arise. You understand them even before they get to the surface. You know how I think and what I think about. You even understand the thoughts which come unbidden, in a constant flow to my mind."

Then there follows the awareness of God's knowledge of habits and choices.

**Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,  
and art acquainted with all my ways. {Psa 139:3 RSV}**

You know the way I choose to go, and you know the habits of my life. "You know me, Lord," says this man, "intimately -- inside and out." Then in verses 4 and 5 he contemplates the fact that God is concerned about him.

**Even before a word is on my tongue,  
lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. {Psa 139:4 RSV}**

That is, "You understand my language. Every word that I utter you know and understand."

When I was a boy in northern Minnesota I lived for a time in a Swedish settlement. The Swedish Christians used to tease the rest of us, saying, "You know, we Scandinavians are going to have a wonderful time in heaven while all the rest of you are learning the language!" I used to resent that until I discovered that God knows more than Swedish; he also knows English, Afrikaans, Hebrew, and all other languages of earth. That is what impresses the psalmist: "Even before I utter a word, Lord, you know it. You understand my language, you communicate with me."

Then God is active, the psalmist discovers, in his past, his future, and his present.

**Thou dost beset me behind [the past] and before [the future],  
and layest thy hand upon me [now, the present].  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is high, I cannot attain it. {Psa 139:5-6 RSV}**

He is simply overwhelmed by the fact that God knows him better than he knows himself, better than anyone else knows him. That is amazing, is it not? God knows me better than I know anyone else, no matter how hard I have tried to communicate to him, and better even than I know myself. For God knows me in the subconscious, the unexplorable part of my life, as well as in the conscious. What a wonderful revelation this is of God's understanding of each individual human being. How desperately we need, in this day of depersonalization, to remember that though science tells us how vast the universe is, and thus how great is the power of God, it takes God's self-revelation to tell us how important we are to him and how well he knows us.

In the second paragraph the writer is exploring the question, "How near is God to me?"

**Whither shall I go from thy Spirit,  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? {Psa 139:7 RSV}**

How many times we have asked that of ourselves "Lord, how can I get away from you? Is there any way in my guilt that I can escape?" This is the psalmist's answer.

**If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there! {Psa 139: 8 RSV}**

No destiny can separate me from the fact of God. If I go to heaven, God is there, of course. And even though I go to hell I still will not escape God. Of course, other Scriptures make clear that there is a vast difference between the experience of God for one who is in heaven and for one who is in Sheol, or hell. In heaven we shall experience to the full the love, compassion, glory and warmth of God; the positives of God. In hell it is the other way around. There men experience the absence of God's love, the dark side of it, the wrath of God; his negatives. But it is still God, that is the point. God owns and runs his universe and there is no escaping his presence.

The presence of God is not a fearful thought. The writer goes on to say that no distance can separate him from God.

**If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there thy hand shall lead me,  
and thy right hand shall hold me. {Psa 139:9-10 RSV}**

What do you think he means by the "wings of the morning"? This is a beautifully poetic expression. If you have stood and watched the sun come up you will have noticed how the rays of the rising sun shoot across the heavens with the speed of light and reach to the farthest bounds of the horizon. This is what he is describing. "If I could travel with the wings of the morning," that is, with the speed of light; "if I could go with the speed of light and reach to the farthest points of earth (the uttermost parts of the sea), even there," he says, "I would find you Lord. You have gone before me, have preceded me, and I will find you there as much as here."

When I was about twelve years old we moved from Minnesota to Montana. The night before we left I got down by my bed and said, "Good-bye, God. We're going to Montana." I was sure I would not find him there, but when we arrived, there He was. I have found him everywhere since. That is what this writer is saying.

A young airman of the Royal Canadian Air Force wrote a poem which ties in beautifully with what the psalmist is saying. Killed at the age of nineteen, this is the way John Gillespie Magee described his experience of flight.

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds -- and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of -- wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
My eager craft through footless halls of air.

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or even eagle flew  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.  
(From *Sourcebook of Poetry*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1968, p. 500.)

This pilot had experienced the truth that, "if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the earth," there God has gone before.

Finally in this section the psalmist cries that not even darkness can separate him from God.

**If I say, "Let only darkness cover me  
and the light about me be night,"**

**even the darkness is not dark to thee,  
the night is bright as the day;  
for darkness is as light with thee. {Psa 139:11-12 RSV}**

Remember when you were little how you felt guilty and tried to hide from God by crawling under the covers or hiding under the bed, or in the closet? You thought that God could not see you because humans couldn't. There are many grownups who are still trying to do that. They feel that if they do not think about certain things then God will not think about them either. But he does. No darkness, physical or mental, can hide us from God's presence. He knows us and sees us no matter how dark it is. Paul reminded the Athenians that God is not far from any one of us. Whether we know him or not, he is but a touch away.

In the third paragraph the psalmist is telling us how he knows all this. Someone might say, "Well, this is certainly beautiful poetry, all this about God's knowing me and being with me, but how do you know it is true?" "All right," says the psalmist, "I'll tell you." First, because of deduction from the design of the body.

**For thou didst form my inward parts,  
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. {Psa 139:13 RSV}  
I praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. {Psa 139:14a}**

The RSV says:

**I praise thee, for thou are fearful and wonderful. {Psa 139:14a RSV}**

but there is very shaky ground for that translation. It should be as the Hebrew reads:

**I praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made,  
Wonderful are thy works! {Psa 139:14}**

Here he is examining himself, and he is amazed at the vitality and complexity of the forces in his own body which are essential to life, but over which he obviously has no control, yet they are essential to his life. "That," he says, "shows me there is something outside of man that is regulating and running me. I live within the limits of that force or Being, whatever or whoever it is."

Have you ever stopped to think how much of your life is dependent upon forces at work in you? If any one of them stopped you would die very quickly. You are dependent on something that you have no control over. Your heart is thumping away right now, and it would be terrible if you had to control it with your mind or will. How would you like to have to keep saying to yourself now as you are listening, "Now thump. Now thump. Now thump. Now thump." Or if you had to say to your diaphragm, "Now dia, now phragm. Now dia, now phragm." No, it is wonderful, is it not? Someone else is running our lives, that is obvious from the design of our bodies.

This is what has struck the psalmist. He says, "Thou didst knit me together in a most amazing way in my mother's womb. I praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

Then he is struck by the progress that is necessary in the forming of a human being.

**Thou knowest me right well;  
my frame was not hidden from thee, {Psa 139:14b-15a RSV}**

The frame is the foundation of the body, the bone and muscle system. That is where the body begins to be put together, with the frame. Without a frame we would be but rolling balls of gelatin. Some of us are getting that way anyhow!

**my frame was not hidden from thee,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. {Psa 139:15 RSV}**

That phrase, "intricately wrought" is one word in the Hebrew. It is really the word for "embroidered."

You ladies know what embroidery is, the little fancy stitches that are added to cloth. I don't know how you do it; we men never understand embroidery, but it adds beauty and is especially fancy. That is the word used here.

It describes the delicate embroidery of the body, the things that tie us together so that one organ supports another. The lungs need the heart, and the heart needs the lungs; the liver needs the kidneys, and the stomach needs both; all the parts are amazingly embroidered together.

This, by the way, raises one of the unanswered questions of evolution: How an organ which is only helpful to the body when it functions as a complete and mature organ can develop in stages over a long period of time. Evolutionists have never answered that, yet it is one of the most vital questions to ask. The psalmist simply says, "I am astonished when I consider the fact that my inward parts are knit together and embroidered together, and are so necessary one to the other."

Then he uses this phrase, in Verse 16,

**Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance. {Psa 139:16a RSV}**

Literally the word in Hebrew is, "my rolled up substance." It pictures the embryo, all rolled up. People are asking questions today about when life begins. When does an embryo become a human being? When does abortion become murder? The answer of the psalmist is, "Thy eyes beheld me, not an impersonal collection of cells that wasn't me yet, in my rolled up embryonic state." The marvel of the human body, even at that stage of growth, has convinced him that God is with him and knows him immediately.

Some of you will remember the Alger Hiss case quite a number of years ago. Alger Hiss was accused of Communist conspiracy while he was a functionary of the government. The case brought into prominent view an unknown (at that time) Congressman named Richard Milhous Nixon. A primary participant in that case was a man named Whittaker Chambers, also a member of the Communist Party and a contact of Alger Hiss.

Whittaker Chambers later wrote a book in which he told how he became a Christian. He describes an incident. One day when he was sitting with his little two-year old daughter on his lap, his eye fell on her ear and it caught his attention. He was struck by the design of that ear. How beautiful, how shell-like it was, and how perfectly designed to catch every sound wave in the air to be translated into sound by the brain. Knowing something of the mechanics of the ear he began to think about it. He was struck by how impossible it is that anything so intricate, so complex, so beautifully designed could ever occur by chance. That led him to other lines of thought and eventually he investigated the Christian position and became a Christian. The argument from design is a great argument and it is what the psalmist uses here.

But that is not all. In Verse 16 he says,

**Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;  
in thy book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them. {Psa 139:16 RSV}**

He is not only impressed by the argument from design but by the evidence of determination. Evidently he had an experience similar to many of us -- there came certain days in his life during which so many unrelated factors suddenly fell together to produce a circumstance or an experience that he could not help but be aware that something was causing it to happen, that it was all being brought about by a mind greater than his own. There was evidence of determinism.

We have all had something happen suddenly, something which we did not plan nor expect. It was made up of so many varied factors which all of a sudden fit together, dovetailing beautifully, that we become aware that Someone else was planning our days, and yet allowing us free will in the experience of them. That was what

struck this Psalmist. It was the fact that, even before these days occurred, they were written in the book of God -- they were planned of him.

This of course is the basis for all biblical prophecy. How is it that an event can occur in the life of our Lord which was predicted by the prophets 500, 600, sometimes 1000 years before -- and not only by one prophet, but by several? After the passing of years, and even centuries, there comes a moment when many factors suddenly fall together and our Lord fulfills an event that was foretold long before. All this impresses the psalmist, and he is made aware of God's knowledge of him.

The third thing that convinces him then follows.

**How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.  
When I awake, I am still with thee. {Psa 139:17-18 RSV}**

The margin says, "Were I to come to the end I would still be with thee." The psalmist is impressed by the abundance of revelation from God. We would never understand our lives if God did not tell us who we are. Thus even though we have the evidence of design and the evidence of determination, yet apart from this marvelous revelation of the thoughts of God which fit so perfectly with the design and the determination, we would never understand ourselves.

The present professor of nuclear physics at Texas A&M University, Dr. John McIntyre, was converted in one of our home Bible classes when he was a graduate student at Stanford. He said that the thing which impressed him about the Christian faith was the fact that the Bible was the same kind of a cohesive system as nature -- that the more one examines the Bible the more complex it appears, and the deeper and more unfathomable are its thoughts. It is the same with nature. It appears rather simple on the surface, but, when one examines it, it becomes more and more complex until it staggers the mind and becomes incomprehensible in its complexity. When he found the Bible to be the same kind of thing, perfectly in harmony with the revelation of nature, he was powerfully impressed -- and that is what made him listen to the Christian claims.

That is also what this psalmist says: How precious are God's thoughts! How vast is the sum of them! How wide is the range of fact that God comments upon in his revelation. Even if you come to the end, says the psalmist, God is still more. No revelation can ever plumb the depths of God. How great, how impossibly great, are his thoughts toward us.

Now the last paragraph seems to take a rather abrupt turn:

**O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God,  
and that men of blood would depart from me, {Psa 139:19 RSV}**

Many have asked: Why do these psalmists seem all of a sudden to interject these bloody thoughts? Why this sudden word of passion, "Lord, kill the wicked!" This has troubled many because it seems so far from the New Testament standard, "Love your enemies; pray for those who spitefully use you; do good to those who injure you." How shall we understand these things?

First, we need to recognize that everything that is declared in the Psalms is not necessarily a reflection of God's will. We are listening to the experiences of believers and they do not always reflect God's truth. They honestly mirror man's viewpoint, and we need to understand these passages in the light of their context. In this paragraph the psalmist, having been impressed by his close relationship to God, now, naturally, comes to the place where he asks God for something. That is also what we do. When we are aware of being near to God, being dear to him, we tend to ask God for something. That is what this man does.

He asks for two things:

First, he asks God to take care of the problem of the wicked. His suggested manner of handling it is rather



naive. He says, "Lord, wipe them out," as though such a simple remedy for human ills had never occurred to the Almighty. "Lord, wipe them out, that's all. That will take care of them." Have you ever felt that way? I remember hearing of Mel Trotter, the famous American evangelist, who said, "There are a lot of people I know who are wonderful people. They're going to go to heaven some day, and, oh, how I wish they'd hurry up." We have all felt that way, have we not? One of the refreshing things about these psalms is the honesty they reflect.

There are several things we need to note about this: For one thing, this psalmist's request falls short even of the Old Testament standard. It is the Old Testament that first says, "Love thy neighbor as thyself," {Lev 19:18 KJV}. The New Testament and the Old Testament are not opposed to one another in this matter of moral standards, not in the least. But this man has not yet learned this. In his honesty, he says "Lord, it seems to me the easiest way for you to handle this problem of evil would be to slay the wicked. Why don't you do that?"

Notice he does not say, "Why don't you let me do it?" He recognizes that vengeance belongs to God and that if anybody is going to do it, and do it right, God alone must do it. So he is not saying, "Lord, let me handle this." That is what many are saying today: "Lord, I'll wipe out the wicked; just turn them over to me. I'll take care of them." But this man does not say that; he is saying, "Lord, it's your problem; why don't you do it?"

We can understand why he is so upset by this, because Verse 20 points out he is not concerned about what the wicked do to him but what they do to God. "They maliciously defy thee." In the Hebrew it is even clearer. Literally he is saying, "They speak of thee for wickedness," that is, "they use your name to carry out their evil designs." In effect, he says, "they take thy name in vain for evil." In other words, these are religious hypocrites, and there is nothing more disgusting than religious hypocrites. The sharpest words Jesus ever spoke were against the religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who were using God's name for evil.

Here is the case of a man who has felt the hatred of God against sin, but not yet the love of God for the sinner. That is why, I think, he concludes with these words:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
Try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting! {Psa 139:23-24 RSV}**

Is he not saying, "Lord, I don't understand this problem of evil. It appears to me the easiest way is for you to eliminate the evil man. But Lord, I also know that I don't think very clearly, and I don't often have the right answer. There can easily be in me a way of grief (that is literally what 'wicked' means). I have often found, Lord, that my thoughts are not right. So, Lord, in case I don't have the right remedy for this problem, let me add this prayer: Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! See if there be any way of grief in me, and lead me in the truth, the way that leads to everlasting life!"

What a wonderful prayer. How often we should pray like this! "Lord, I don't understand what's going on around me, and my solutions may be quite inferior -- may even be wrong. But, Lord, I'll trust you to lead me. Reveal the wickedness that may lie undetected in my own heart, and guide me in the way that leads to fullness of life."

### **Prayer:**

Father, we thank you for this revelation of the humanity of these men of old, and how it fits our own situation today. How desperately we need to be led through the complexities of our age. Help us not to settle for simple yet wrong solutions but to be willing to let you work out your own purposes, knowing that you have taken all the factors into consideration for you know us so intimately. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Who am I, Lord?  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Folksongs of Faith

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## HOW TO WORSHIP

by Ray C. Stedman

The ninety-fifth Psalm is one of a series of psalms which the Israelites sang together as they went up to the temple in Jerusalem to worship. The series begins with the ninety-third Psalm and concludes with the one hundredth Psalm. Each of these is a demonstration and exhortation on how to worship. They are not only magnificent poetry but they are also instructions on what worship is and how it is to be done.

In the ninety-fifth Psalm there are two appeals made, two exhortations to join in worship. One is in the very first line,

**O come, let us sing to the Lord;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! {Psa 95:1 RSV}**

The other is found in Verse 6,

**O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! {Psa 95:6 RSV}**

As we look at these together, we shall see that these are two invitations to two separate expressions of worship. One is an invitation to sing and the other is an invitation to prayer. Thus, in the opening passage of this psalm, we are immediately made aware that congregational worship largely consists of singing and prayer.

Those of you who are regularly in attendance at any church know that this is almost invariably the pattern which united worship follows even in our day. It is proper that we should worship in this way for even in the days of Israel, under David, it was the pattern of worship.

Now, there is special reason why worship involves singing together. Notice that the exhortation in Verse 2 is to let that singing be an expression of thanksgiving and praise:

**Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;  
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise! {Psa 95:2 RSV}**

Thanksgiving and praise are to be the major elements expressed in our singing. It is possible to give thanks and praise God individually but if any congregation took time to let everyone do that it would take all day for just the preliminaries. But singing is something we can do together. So through the ages the believers in God both of the Old and New Testament have sung their praises and thanksgivings. This is very important. It is the reason we should be careful not to sing in a desultory manner. There is nothing more conducive to dullness in a service than half-hearted singing. So the exhortation here is most appropriate.

**O come, let us sing to the Lord;  
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation! {Psa 95:1 RSV}**

Perhaps in this present generation it is necessary for me to point out that though the word "rock" is linked with singing it does not have the meaning that youth apply to it today. In this case the word, "rock" means a large stone. It is not a form of music. It means the Lord is the strength from which we draw; the rock upon which we rest. The motivation, therefore, for singing thanksgiving and praise is that we recognize the source of our strength.

As we read on we learn that the reason for thanksgiving and praise is because we are related to God in creation, i.e., we are creatures of God. He is our Maker and our Creator.

**For the Lord is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods.  
In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.  
The sea is his, for he made it;  
for his hands formed the dry land. {Psa 95:3-5 RSV}**

Do you see what the Psalmist is doing? He is giving the basic reasons why everyone should give thanksgiving and praise to God. They apply not only to those of us who are believers but to all men. Each man has a responsibility to praise God, for all are creatures of his hands. In the first chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul points out that one of the charges God brings against men is that "when they knew God they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful," {Rom 1:21 KJV}. They did not care to recognize their relationship to him. It is a constant source of amazement to me that men can be so blind to the fact that they are not, as they often imagine themselves to be, independent creatures making their own way through life. It is amazing how much we take for granted. We accept as perfectly natural to us all the forces that keep us alive, and boastfully talk about being self-made men. We strut through life as if there were no one else we need recognize as the source of our strength and power.

Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell of an experience he once had at a restaurant. He ordered his meal and just as he was about to eat a man walked up to his table and said, "Do you mind if I sit down with you?" Dr. Ironside said, "No," it was quite all right, so the man sat down. As was his custom Dr. Ironside bowed his head and said a silent word of thanksgiving to the Lord before he ate. When he lifted up his head, the man said to him, "Do you have a headache?" Ironside said, "No, I don't." The man said, "Well, is there anything wrong with your food?" Ironside said, "No, why?" "Well," the man said, "I saw you sitting there with your head down and I thought you must be sick, or there was something wrong with your food." Ironside replied, "No, I was simply returning thanks to God as I always do before I eat." The man said, "Oh, you're one of those, are you? Well, I want you to know I never give thanks. I earn my money by the sweat of my brow and I don't have to give thanks to anybody when I eat, I just start right in!" Dr. Ironside said, "Yes, you're just like my dog. That's what he does, too!"

That little story suggests quite properly that when men, who are rational creatures of God, will not give thanks to God they are acting like irrational animals. They become bestial and are already losing their humanity. Such is the basis of this appeal by the Psalmist: no matter how we may feel, or what may be our attitude toward God, we are bound, as creatures dependent upon his love and grace, at least to give thanks to him as our Creator. Psalm 96, Verse 8, says, "Ascribe to the Lord *the glory due his name* ." God is worthy of thanksgiving. It is not something we do only when we feel like it; it is something God is always worthy of. We should do it for his name's sake. Doubtless it would make a great difference in our worship if we would remember that praise is not something that merely reflects our transient feelings but it is something we ought to do simply because God made us and we cannot live a moment without him. It is the glory due unto his name that should bring us together for worship.

I ran across a little poem the other day that highlights the irony of man's neglect of thanksgiving toward God. It is entitled, The Humanist which of course is a modern term for what we used to call an atheist.

He exists, because he was created  
He is here, because he was placed here.  
He is well and comfortable because divine power keeps him so.  
He dines at God's table.  
He is sheltered by the roof God gave him.  
He is clothed by God's bounty.  
He lives by breathing God's air  
Which keeps him strong and vocal  
To go about persuading people that  
Whether He is or not,

Only man matters.

What an ironic thing, that a man should use God's resources to try to persuade men that God does not exist! So the Psalmist reminds us that we are related to him as the creature to the Creator.

There are two things which he calls to our attention in this relationship. One is that God is supreme over all the forces that affect our lives. "The Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods." He is certainly not suggesting that there are other gods; it is only that men think there are. Pagans erect idols and call them gods. Even those who deny the existence of God have gods which they worship and to which they give their allegiance and loyalty. No man is without a god. I have never yet met an irreligious Å

Even false gods derive their strength and influence from God himself. There are, as the New Testament reminds us, demonic powers behind the idols of the pagans. They are genuine spirit beings, but they exercise their power under God. He is a great King over all gods. This is important to bear in mind today when we are facing a revival of interest in astrology, horoscopes, seances, and so forth. For a Christian to give himself to these is to deny the Fatherhood of God and the fatherly care of God over him. If you think your life is run by the stars and you give allegiance and loyalty to what the stars decree, then you have ruled out the fatherly care of God. The two cannot be held together. That is why the Bible faithfully warns against getting involved in practices like these. Even the devil is ultimately under God. The devil and God do not constitute a bad god and a good God, opposed to each other; the devil is also under God and derives his power and his authority from God. We must always remember that. Worship, then, is to recognize the authority of God over everything else, the over-arching supremacy of God over all the forces that bear upon our lives.

Then the Psalmist reminds us that in God's hands are all the things that challenge men, that make life exciting.

**In his hand are the depths of the earth;  
the heights of the mountains are his also.  
The sea is his, for he made it;  
for his hands formed the dry land. {Psa 95:4-5 RSV}**

Here we have the depths of the earth, the heights of the mountains, the breadth of the sea, and the dry land; all the things that challenge men, that hold forth promise of adventure, excitement, fascination, and mystery. We are still trying to plumb the depths of the earth, and only a few years ago did man finally scale the heights of the mountains in the climbing of Mt. Everest. We are still exploring the mysteries of the sea. We are trying to solve the problems of the dry land and to discover its resources. The Psalmist is simply reminding us that all these things that hold forth to us challenge, mystery, excitement, and adventure are from God. He has planned them, he has put them there. Let us thank God, not only because he is in charge of all the forces that sustain our lives but let us praise him because he is also behind the mystery, the adventure, the excitement, of life, the things that give it flavor and enticement, and make it worth living. All men are exhorted to worship and praise God for these things.

But not only are we to sing together about these, but we are to pray together.

**O come, let us worship and bow down,  
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!  
For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,  
and the sheep of his hand. {Psa 95:6-7a RSV}**

What does that last sentence mean? Notice that the relationship has changed. It is now no longer God our Creator who is in view but it is rather God our Redeemer, our Savior. We are the sheep of his hand and the people of his pasture. He is our Shepherd-God. We have entered into a personal relationship with him and the proper expression of it is one of awe and humility, "let us worship and bow down." Think of what the word of God reveals to us of the amazing love of God and how that love has pursued us and won us. Despite the obstacles we have raised against him and the resistance we have shown to him, nevertheless his love has kept after us, has broken down our reserves, and won us. There is not one of us who has not fought against God, who has not tried to resist his love's attempt to win us and to change us. Therefore we have nothing to praise in ourselves. We have not added anything to our salvation. We are all like stubborn, stupid sheep who go

according to their own ways. As Isaiah accurately puts it, "All we like sheep have gone astray." Ask any shepherd if that is not the way of sheep. They love to go astray. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way," {Isa 53:6 KJV}. But God has pursued us, found us, and brought us back. Thus, out of a sense of our relationship to him as Redeemer, as Savior, we kneel before the Lord our God and thank him for the amazing love he has bestowed upon us:

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.

It is this that is to be expressed in worship: praise and thanksgiving to God for the personal knowledge we have of him. He is our God, he is our Maker. We have also come out of a distant relationship into a personal relationship with our God. That ought to awaken the love of our heart. We have experienced his Shepherd's care over us as the sheep of his hand, the people of his pasture. That constitutes worship: singing and praying, not artificially, not perfunctorily, but genuinely expressing praise unto God.

In the latter part of the psalm, beginning with the closing sentence of Verse 7, there is a change of voice. The first part has been man exhorting other men to worship God. The Psalmist has cried out, "Let us sing together, let us worship and bow down together." But now the voice of God himself sounds, preceded by this admonition,

**O that today you would hearken to his voice! {Psa 95:7b RSV}**

It is now God who speaks to us and to tell us what it is that he essentially wants in worship, what makes worship true worship. It is that today we would listen to his voice! That is what he wants. He wants us to heed his voice not just come together.

It is commendable for people to come to service, but the value of it soon vanishes if all we do is sit while our thoughts are elsewhere. The central fact of worship is to listen to the word of God, the voice of God.

That is why the exposition of Scripture must be the central thing in public worship. Those churches which have departed from this, and which come together to go through certain formal, liturgical, rites, or where a man gets up to give his opinion on certain current events of the day are making a travesty of worship, a parody of it. There is no true worship there at all. Worship must include listening to the voice of God, hearing what he has to say, and letting his word correct our attitudes and our reactions. I wish it were possible for each of you to be up here on the platform with me and to watch people during the hour of worship. Externally it looks as though you are all paying attention. You sit there quietly, with rapt, turned-up faces, your eyes open and staring straight ahead, apparently attracted by what the Word of God is saying. But having sat there myself I know it is not always true. Some of you are playing golf. Others of you are rehearsing a business deal. Some of you are planning a trip. Some are going over a conversation you had two days ago. Some are doing other things. It would be fascinating at the end of a service to know where everybody had been! But God is desirous that whatever else you may do in a service, when his word is speaking, listen! And not only listen, hearken! Hearken means to heed the word, to do something about it, to let it really change you. God is infinitely concerned that our coming to worship should do something to us. "O that today you would hearken to his voice!"

Then he puts the same thing negatively,

**Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah,  
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,  
when your fathers tested me,  
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. {Psa 95:8-9 RSV}**

The exhortation of God to his people is: When you are worshipping together, listen to my voice, and while listening do not harden your hearts. Hardening the heart is the exact opposite of hearkening to his voice. If you hearken to his voice you are not hardening your heart. If you harden your hearts you are not hearkening to his

voice. The two are mutually exclusive. He gives us an example of what he means by hardening the heart. God himself refers us to the incident we read of in the seventeenth chapter of Exodus. It occurred shortly after the Israelites had come through the Red Sea and had journeyed only a week or two into the wilderness beyond. They came to a place where there was no water, and they all became thirsty. They had hardly had time to become very thirsty when the leaders of the people came to Moses and began to complain. "What are you doing? Leading us out into this wilderness to perish? Where is this God that is supposed to be taking care of us? Why hasn't he provided water for us?" They demanded that God prove himself again. This is the point God makes. They put him to the test. They said, "Where is this God? If there really is a God who loves us and takes care of us, why doesn't he supply our need?" So Moses came to God and said, "Lord, what shall I do? Here are these people murmuring and complaining till they're about to stone me! What shall I do?"

It was on this occasion that God said, "Lead them out to the rock and in their presence strike the rock with the rod with which you struck the Nile, and out of the rock will come water," {cf, Exod 17:6}. Moses did that, and there came out a gushing stream; not just a trickle but a gushing stream, plenty to satisfy all the people (six hundred thousand men, besides women and children, and all their cattle and sheep). The thing that vexed God about this situation was not that they asked for help in their time of need. God never scolds his people for that. But he says, "They put me to the proof, though they had seen my work," {cf, Exod 17:7}. This event occurred only a few days after they had crossed the Red Sea. They had seen the marvelous provision of God during the days of Moses' contest with Pharaoh, when the plagues of Egypt had fallen, and God had resistlessly driven Pharaoh into a corner until eventually, after the slaying of the firstborn throughout the land of Egypt, he had forced Pharaoh to let his people go. Then as the Israelites came to the edge of the Red Sea he had parted the waters before them and they came through on dry ground but the waters came together behind them and covered the Egyptians following. There Israel sang a great song of triumph. All this had occurred only a few days before. Yet in the face of such a magnificent demonstration of the power of God they immediately fell to murmuring and complaining because they were a little thirsty.

That, says God, is what it means to harden your heart. It indicates that you have not learned anything from God. God is concerned that none of us should worship him endlessly but never be changed. He desires that worship should stabilize us, steady us, establish us so that as we see God at work the harder it is to fall back into unbelief. The Lord Jesus was constantly dealing with his disciples about this. Remember how often he said to them, "O ye of little faith." He never said that except that they had seen a tremendous demonstration of his power. Remember when he multiplied the loaves and fishes and fed five thousand men and their families. Immediately afterward the disciples were on the sea and a storm came up. In a panic they came to him and said, "Lord, wake up! We're going to perish!" {cf, Matt 8:25}. And the Lord arose and rebuked the storm. Then he turned to them and said, "O ye of little faith, i.e., Why don't you learn something? Why don't you grow in your faith? Why don't you advance?" {cf, Matt 8:26}.

This is the problem God has with us. It disturbs God that people can come week after week after week and hear stirring and glowing reports of what he is doing in many lives and see the evident change that has come to many and the release and freedom he is bringing about in many hearts, and still, the minute anything goes wrong with them they are ready to fall apart.

In Verse 10 God gives his reaction to this. He says,

**For forty years I loathed that generation. {Psa 95:10 RSV}**

What a revelation of the patience of God! He does not immediately condemn them because of their unbelief. He works patiently with them for forty years. For forty years he cries "O that today you would hearken to his voice!" He makes possible their existence by taking care of them throughout the entire forty-year period. But all the time, he says, they consistently vexed him.

That is the meaning of the word "loathe." They grieved his heart. "Loathe" is perhaps too strong. It does not mean that God felt revulsion or disgust. What it means is that he felt grieved and vexed. He was grieved by this people that they never seemed to catch on. He analyzed their problem in two ways.

**For forty years I was *grieved with* that generation**

**and said, "They are a people who err in heart,  
and they do not regard my ways. {Psa 95:10 RSV, with modification }**

First, their hearts were set on the wrong things. They were not looking for the really important things. Read the account and you can see what he meant. This was a generation that kept harking back to Egypt. They wanted to return to Egypt and kept longing for the melons, the leeks, garlic, and onions of Egypt. Why would they want onions, leeks, and garlic? I don't know. All three are foods which, when you eat them in private everyone in public knows it. But they hankered after such things. They thought only of their bellies, and God says therefore they were wrong in their hearts.

In Colossians God says to us, through the apostle, "Set your affection on things above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God, and not on things of earth," {cf, Col 3:1-2 KJV}. That does not mean to go around thinking of heaven all the time. The "things above, where Christ sits at the right hand of God" concern the important matters of life, the things of truth, honor, and justice; the demonstration of patience, tolerance, and grace toward one another in our personal relationships. Those are the things that Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, is ready to minister to us in these days.

Let me show you that from the letter to the Colossians itself. In the first chapter the apostle prays for his people,

**May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, {Col 1:11a RSV}**

Does that not sound thrilling? Is that not what we all want? Would you like to have Paul pray for you that way -- that you "may be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might?" For what? Well,

**for endurance and patience with joy, {Col 1:11b RSV}**

That is what you need power for. You do not need power to go about moving mountains, and other spectacular demonstrations; you need power to be patient, to have joy in the midst of your trial, to endure to the end. That is what you need power for. That power comes from the right hand of God through Jesus Christ, who ministers it to us now. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. That is God's quarrel with the Israelites; they were looking at the wrong things, desiring foolish trifles instead of enduring realities. Somebody has described "keeping up with the Joneses" as "using money you don't have, to buy things you don't need, to impress people you don't like." How futile that is! That is having your heart set on the wrong things.

Then God puts his finger on their second problem: "they do not regard my ways," i.e., they do not understand how God works. It is important to understand how God works, for God's ways are not our ways and his thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are higher than our ways as the heavens are higher than the earth. That means that God does not always behave the way we expect him to. That is one of the aggravating things about God. He never seems to do what we want him to do. We have a goal in mind and in prayer we outline the process to God of how he can bring it about. But he is so stubborn. He will not do it our way at all. So we get upset with him.

That is what God is saying about these people. The reason they hardened their hearts was because they would not consider that he had his ways of doing things. So, he said,

**Therefore I swore in my anger  
that they should not enter my rest. {Psa 95:11 RSV}**

The supreme thing in worship is to learn how to rest in God. Rest means to depend upon God's activity and not mine. Hebrews defines it, "he that has entered into rest has ceased from his own works," {cf, Heb 4:10}. That is what rest is. It is really mental health, peace of heart, peace of mind, a sense of living out of adequacy. That is what God wants for you and me. He wants us to be adequate, to be able to cope with whatever may come. That adequacy is his provision for us. It will come to us as we hearken to his word. There are many

things that we need to learn about this, and his word will guide us along the way. But if we do not hearken to his words we can worship for forty years and at the end of it we shall have so hardened our hearts that God may finally say, "You shall not enter into my rest," {also cf, Heb 3:11}.

There is no other way. There is no alternative path. There is no drug you can take that will give you rest. There is no pursuit you can follow, no book you can read, no practice you can undertake, that will bring you to peace of heart. There is simply no alternative; you cannot come into rest if you will not hearken to his word. That is why it is so important that when we worship together we listen to the word of God and let it correct us. Let us sit under the judgment of the word. Let it search us and find us out and change us, and thus we shall glorify the God who made us and give unto him the glory due his name.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, perhaps there is even now some evident duty we should be performing; some proper appeal made to us that we are rejecting; some hurtful relationship we are defending; something that we need to do that you are now correcting. Perhaps there is something we need to do positively, something we need to do to draw near to you. Lord, we pray that you will help us to hearken, to not be like the fathers of old who resisted you, vexed you, and grieved you for forty years. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman  
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## **HERE COMES THE JUDGE**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

In looking together at these folksongs of faith we are sharing the experiences of men and women of the past who have found their way through difficulties and troubles, through trials and heart aches, by faith in a living God who has delivered them. To help others they have put their experiences into song and thus we have the psalms. How helpful they can be when we are going through times of difficulty! But not only times of difficulty but they are also for times of rejoicing because they express so beautifully the exultation of the soul which has found deliverance in God.

We are now turning to another of these folksongs, Psalm 50. Its theme is a familiar one among folksongs. Those of you who are acquainted with the ballads and folksongs of America know that they frequently center around courtrooms, trials, juries (rigged or otherwise), prisons, policemen and judges. You get a great deal of this in folksongs and it is the theme also of this fiftieth Psalm. It is a courtroom scene and the Psalmist is recreating in his own experience when God judges his people. If we were to put this in the street jargon of today we should entitle it, "When God Busted Me."

Notice that it is inscribed as a psalm of Asaph. Asaph was the sweet singer who put these songs to music and sang in David's court. This psalm is from his pen though it reflects the experience of many believers. Like all courtroom scenes it begins with a summons.

**The Mighty One, God the Lord,  
speaks and summons the earth ... {Psa 50:1a RSV}**

Some time ago my doorbell rang on a Saturday morning. When I went to the door, there stood a man I had



never seen before. He did not say a word but handed me a piece of paper, turned around, and walked down the driveway. I stood there with the paper in my hands not knowing quite what it was all about. When I went inside and opened the paper I saw that it was a summons to appear in court. It affected me strangely. I was not quite sure what to do. I felt a mingled sense of fear and awe. I wanted to hide, and wondered if it would not be better just to go back to bed and start all over again.

Perhaps this was the reaction of the Psalmist when this great and impressive summons rang out. It is a very impressive scene that is described here as the Psalmist pictures the courtroom as the judge enters and the people are summoned to the bar.

**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth.  
Our God comes, he does not keep silence,  
before him is a devouring fire,  
round about him a mighty tempest.  
He calls to the heavens above  
and to the earth, that he may judge his people:  
"Gather to me my faithful ones,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!"  
The heavens declare his righteousness,  
for God himself is judge! {Psa 50:2-6 RSV}**

The most awesome thing about this description is the last words, "God himself is judge!" This is a courtroom in which God sits to judge his people. In verse one he describes himself in a three-fold way: the Mighty One, God, the Lord. In Hebrew they are three names: El, Elohim, Jehovah. These three names are most impressive for they gather up the major characteristics of God. He is first, El, the Mighty One, the All-powerful One, the One of authority and strength. Then he is Elohim, the One of majesty, of greatness, the Supreme One, sovereign over all else. But, as Jehovah, he is the God of mercy, the One who graciously enters into full understanding of his people's needs. Thus in this scene we have God the Judge introducing himself to us as God of Might, Majesty, and Mercy, holding all three characteristics in perfect balance. He is the One of authority, of sovereignty and majesty, but also the One of grace, love, and tender concern.

Now it is important to note that this judge comes not from Sinai but from Zion.

**Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty,  
God shines forth. {Psa 50:2 RSV}**

Sinai, of course, was where the Law was given. It was accompanied with thunderous judgment, with lightnings and the voice of a trumpet which waxed louder and louder until the people could not stand it. They cried out to Moses, "You speak to us, ... but let not God speak to us lest we die!" {Exod 20:19 RSV}. But here it is no longer Sinai but Zion. Zion is Jerusalem and stands for the mercy of God, the redemptive love of God, the grace of God. God is judging, but he is judging in mercy. It is well to remember that as we go on into this psalm. The judgment will be realistic but it will not be harsh.

Because Zion refers to Jerusalem there have been some commentators who have taken this psalm to be a description of the second coming when the Lord Jesus Christ shall return to earth in power and great glory, (as he himself described it in Matthew 25), and will sit on his throne and gather the nations before him to judge them. That judgment is vividly detailed in Matthew 25. Now, it is true that Jesus Christ is going to return to earth. When he came the first time he came in weakness and humility, born in a cold and dirty cave on the side of a hill in Bethlehem. There was no pomp, no circumstance, no power. But, when he comes again, he will come in great glory to judge the peoples of earth as they are summoned before him. This psalm is, in my judgment, a very beautiful description in the Old Testament of that event which is recorded in the New Testament. It will occur when Jesus Christ comes again. But it would be a great mistake to take the psalm as limited only to that event. As often happens with many scriptural passages we have here a dual application. It not only looks forward to the time when, literally and physically, Christ will return to judge his people, but it is also describing a judgment that is going on right now.

This is indicated for us in Verse 1 by these words.

**The Mighty One, God the Lord,  
speaks and summons the earth  
from the rising of the sun to its setting. {Psa 50:1 RSV}**

Now that is a daily occurrence. The sun rises every morning and sets every evening. Thus this phrase indicates something that goes on daily. God is daily judging his people. He is sitting among them as a Redeemer-Judge. That is why in Verse 3 the Hebrew says, "Our God comes." Not "is coming" in the future but "keeps coming." He is always coming. We are always living in the presence of God and in the coming of God.

**Our God comes, he does not keep silence. {Psa 50:3a RSV}**

Then the psalmist goes on to describe the character of the God who comes to judge his people. Two symbols mark the characteristics of judgment: fire and wind.

**before him is a devouring fire,  
round about him a mighty tempest. {Psa 50:3b RSV}**

You who know the New Testament well know that these two symbols are often used to describe God. "Our God is a consuming fire," says the writer to the Hebrews {Heb 12:29}. And the Spirit of God is in Acts described as a mighty rushing wind. "The wind blows where it desires," said Jesus to Nicodemus, "and you hear the sound thereof, but you cannot tell where it has come from or where it is going. So is he who is born of the Spirit," {John 3:8 RSV}. These are highly suggestive symbols. Fire is that which purifies. Purifying power is the concept here. Fire destroys all waste and trash, the garbage of life. As fire God will burn the dross, waste and trash of our lives, the garbage of the soul.

But he is also wind. Wind is in some ways the mightiest force in nature. Some time ago I saw a picture taken after a tornado in the Southwest. It showed some straw that had been caught up in the wind and driven entirely through a telephone pole. If I gave you a weak piece of straw and told you to drive it through a telephone pole you would look at me in amazement. You do not drive straw through a telephone pole. But this straw had been driven through by the force of a mighty wind. Remember on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were gathered there was suddenly the sound of a mighty rushing wind. Caught up in the power of that wind the disciples did things they had never done before. Empowered by the wind of God they went out to do and say things that upset the world of their day. They startled and astonished men by the power that was evidenced among them.

What the Psalmist is telling us is that when God judges he will do two things: he will burn up the trash and garbage of life, and then he will empower us. He will catch us up in the greatness of his strength, and we will be able to do things we never could do before.

Notice, in Verse 5, who it is that is particularly subject to this judgment:

**Gather to me my faithful ones,  
who made a covenant with me by sacrifice! {Psa 50:5 RSV}**

**He calls to the heavens above  
and to the earth, that he may judge his people. {Psa 50:4 RSV}**

We are his people, are we not? Of old it was Israel. They are the ones who made a covenant with God by sacrifice. Of course he is referring to the animal sacrifice which Israel offered day by day. These were to reflect the relationship God had with his people. It was a covenant made in blood, in other words a life had been poured out on their behalf. But all these Old Testament sacrifices were but a picture of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. Each one was, in a sense, Christ being offered. But, in Christ, we are the people who have made a covenant with God by sacrifice. We have entered into the benefit of the new arrangement for living made through the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This psalm then is really describing what is going on right in this meeting at this very moment. It pictures God among his people and he has something to say to us. The God who comes from Zion, the God who loves, and who sees things the way they are, desires to speak to us. That is why this section ends with the little word, "Selah." It means, pause, stop, look, listen, think! God the judge is in our midst, God is judging his people. Now the judge speaks,

**"Hear, O my people, and I will speak,  
O Israel, I will testify against you.  
I am God, your God.  
I do not reprove you for your sacrifices;  
your burnt offerings are continually before me.  
I will accept no bull from your house,  
nor he-goat from your folds.  
For every beast of the forest is mine,  
the cattle on a thousand hills.  
I know all the birds of the air,  
and all that moves in the field is mine.  
If I were hungry, I would not tell you;  
for the world and all that is in it is mine.  
Do I eat the flesh of bulls,  
or drink the blood of goats?" {Psa 50:7-13 RSV}**

What a remarkable piece of irony that is! It has a sardonic twist to it. God is saying, first, "I do not reprove you for your sacrifices," i.e., "there are certain things you are doing which are right." Israel brought every day, punctiliously, the sacrifices which the Law prescribed. God says that is perfectly right, it is proper to do that. "I do not reprove you for that," he says, "there are certain things you are doing which are fundamentally right." But what was wrong was that they thought the act of sacrificing was all God wanted, that for some reason he needed bulls' flesh and goats' blood. It revealed the tremendously low concept of God they held. God is saying to them, "How absurd can you get? Do you really think I am that kind of a God? Do you think I need flesh and blood? Why, I own the cattle on a thousand hills. I own the wild beasts of the forests, the elk, the bison, and all the other animals. Also I know all the birds of the air. They're all mine and I can do with them as I will. If hunger were my motive in asking you to bring sacrifices then I could heap up mountains of flesh. What do you take me for, anyway? A kind of cosmic Meat Grinder?"

Do you see the parallel to this today? Many people come to church and think that God wants them to sing hymns, bow in prayer, utter certain words and go through certain forms, and that is what he is after. How absurd! It is all perfectly right, there is nothing wrong with it, but that is not what he is after. It is not what God desires.

A young pastor came to me this very week to talk to me about his ministry. He said, "Tell me, what is wrong with the evangelical Church today, anyhow?" I have been trying to answer that question for quite a while but, being challenged to put it in a brief form, I had to think it through and answer his question. I said, finally, that I thought two things were wrong with the evangelical Church. There is a lot right about it. Our doctrine is right, it is scriptural. Our emphasis upon the authority of Scripture is right, it is good, it is solid. Our concern lest we get away from the authority of the Bible and the teaching of the Scripture is right. There is nothing wrong with that. But what is wrong with the average evangelical church is first, it is dead! There is no real demonstration of life in many evangelical Christians. Their words are wonderful but their lives leave something greatly to be desired.

Some years ago when Averill Harriman was first appointed Ambassador to France someone said to him, "How's your French?" He said, "Oh, my French is excellent; all but the verbs!" That is a good description of evangelical Christianity. We have wonderful nouns: joy, peace, faith, redemption, salvation, justification. Oh, these nouns! But the verbs -- loving, forgiving, healing, restoring -- that is where we are weak, are we not? That is what God is finding fault with. He says, your sacrifices are fine, but where are your hearts.

The second thing I see wrong with the evangelical Church is its remoteness. It is far removed from life as it is. It tends to withdraw from the really gut issues of life and will not involve itself where people are bleeding,

struggling, fighting, and facing terrible problems. We tend to excuse that by saying, "Well, getting in and helping outwardly doesn't solve anything ultimately." Of course, we are quite right about that. That is not how the real solution comes. But it is wrong for us not to be involved. That remoteness is what is turning off so many young people today from the evangelical Church. We do not want to touch anyone, like the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who gathered his robe about him and crossed over to the other side leaving the wounded man without help. So God is judging his people. He is saying, "You observe the form but there is something missing."

Then he speaks very clearly and tells us what is missing,

**Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving,  
and pay your vows to the Most High;  
and call upon me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. {Psa 50:14-15 RSV}**

What does God want from us this morning? Well, he does not want mere hymn singing, although that is fine. Nor does he want only prayer, although that too is fine. He does not simply want our attendance here, although that is fine. What he wants is, first, a thankful heart. That is what he seeks, a thankful heart. Each one of us is to offer to him the sacrifice of thanksgiving. A sacrifice is something we put effort into, it costs us. Have you ever asked yourself, why do the Scriptures stress thanksgiving so much? Both in the Old and New Testaments you find the emphasis that above everything else God wants thankfulness. "In everything," says the Apostle Paul, "give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you," {1 Th 5:18 KJV}. Why is this? Well, it is because thanksgiving only comes as a result of having received something. You do not give thanks until you have received something. You only say "Thank you" when somebody has given you something that you did not have yourself. It all comes from another. Therefore thanksgiving is the proper expression of Christianity because Christianity is receiving something constantly from God.

Of course if you have not received anything from God then you have nothing to thank him for. Though you come to the service you really have nothing to say. It is better that you do not come, really, because worship is for those who have received something. God is a realist. He does not want fake thanksgiving. I know there are certain people (and they are awfully hard to live with) who think that Christianity consists of pretending to be thankful. They think it means screwing a smile on your face and going around pretending that troubles do not bother you. That is a most painful form of Christianity. God does not want you to go around shouting, "Hallelujah! I've got cancer!" But there is something about having cancer to be thankful for. That is what he wants you to see. There are aspects of it that no one can possibly enjoy, but there are other aspects which reveal purpose, meaning, and reason. God wants you to see this -- what he can do with that situation, and be thankful. Thanksgiving is the first thing he wants in worship. A thankful heart.

The second thing is, an obedient will. "Pay your vows to the Most High." Notice the kind of obedience it is. It is not something forced upon you; it is something you have chosen for yourself. A vow is something you decide to give, a promise you make because of truth you have seen. You say, "I never saw it like that before. I really ought to do something about it. God helping me, I'm going to do such and such." That is a vow. God says, "I'm not asking you to do things you have not yet learned are important. But when you have vowed something, then do it. Act on it. Obey it." That's the name of the game of Christianity: obeying the truth.

The third thing God wants is a prayerful spirit.

**and call upon me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me. {Psa 50:15 RSV}**

He wants us to recognize where the source of power is. Power comes from him. I love those opening words of the twenty-seventh psalm:

**The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear? {Psa 27:1a RSV}**

I can just see that Psalmist thrusting his chest out and saying, "I've got the Lord; of whom shall I be afraid?" That was the spirit in which David met Goliath. Here was Goliath, nine feet tall, clad in his armor, his spear like a weaver's beam, threatening and frightening the armies of Israel, rendering them absolutely helpless and hopeless in their fear. But little David comes along and says, "Who is this uncircumcised giant who dares defy the armies of the living God? Who does he think he is? Why, he's nothing!"

**The Lord is my light and my salvation;  
whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the strength of my life;  
of whom shall I be afraid? {Psa 27:1 RSV}**

Isn't that great? That is David. How different he is from us. But God is in the midst of his people, and he is pointing these truths out to us. He is burning up the dross. God is a devouring fire and he wants to burn out of us the trash, the garbage, the waste of our life.

Now there is a second class of people God deals with mentioned in Verses 16 and on:

**But to the wicked God says:  
"What right have you to recite my statutes,  
or take my covenant on your lips?  
For you hate discipline,  
and you cast my words behind you.  
If you see a thief,  
you are a friend of his;  
and you keep company with adulterers.  
You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
and your tongue frames deceit.  
You sit and speak against your brother;  
you slander your own mother's son." {Psa 50:16-20 RSV}**

In every congregation there are not only the superficial, who need to be rebuked and challenged to be real; there are also some who are essentially false, hypocrites, who use all the right words and frame their lives in Christian form, but are basically ungodly, or to use the term here, wicked. That is what wickedness is. It is forgetting that God lives and exists. It is to rule him out of your life, to be ungodly and so, wicked. The judge sees these also. He is here and he sees such who are here this morning. He knows the heart.

They are identified as being wicked by three marks.

First, they hate discipline. They want only their own way. They hate discipline and therefore reject truth. They do not want to hear what is true. They do not recognize any absolutes in life. They want to believe that everything is relative, that you can do whatever you like. They want, basically, their own way at all costs, and they resent any form of restraint or criticism. They hate discipline.

Second, they admire evil and they enjoy the friendship of those who do evil. This is exactly the charge, you remember, which Paul levels against some in Romans 1. They not only admire evil themselves but they "approve those who practice" {Rom 1:28 RSV} evil things. This is what God describes here. If you see a thief, he says, you think he is clever. You admire a man who can cheat someone and get away with it. To you he is a clever man, you admire him for it. You want to be with him and to imitate him. You see an adulterer, someone who lives in open, flagrant, sexual immorality, and you say he's free, and seek him out. You think he is better off than you are who must live under certain restraints. You admire this person who seems to be so free, who has kicked over all the traces, and you want to be like him.

Then, third, the wicked possesses an ungoverned tongue; he says whatever he feels like saying. He has a tongue that lies, which frames deceit, one that cuts down others, slicing away, jabbing at another's reputation. You do this even, says God, to your own brother or sister, or anyone in the family. That, God says, reveals that you are wicked, that you do not own God in your life. You are essentially ungodly, there has been no redemptive change in you, but it is all covered by a religious glaze. Today we have not only Christians, but

there are what we might call Christianeers: those who subscribe to the outward forms of Christianity much as they would adopt a political slogan. In every congregation there are Christians and there are Christianeers. Sometimes it is hard to tell them apart, but God knows. God is judging. He is in our midst and he sees. He says, You, you're a Christianeer, you're not real. You may believe you even have God fooled, but listen to what he says,

**"These things you have done and I have been silent;  
you thought that I was one like yourself.  
But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you." {Psa 50:21 RSV}**

God is saying, Now don't fool yourself. I am patient. I do not always act immediately. I do not always strike people with judgment the minute they do anything wrong. Surely it is well for us to remember that. Sometimes we hear people say, "Why doesn't God kill Mao Tse-tung and get rid of him?" But what we need to ask is, "Why didn't God cause my hand to shrivel when I took something that didn't belong to me yesterday? Why didn't he cut off my tongue when I said that sharp and caustic word to my friend this morning? Why didn't he blind my eyes when I let them dwell on something I shouldn't have, and played with my lust in my mind?" You see, if God is going to judge he must judge all.

But God says, "I am patient. Remember, friend, that I have let you go on because I want to reach you. I don't want you to be this way. I want to change you, I want to redeem you, I want to call you back from this. But do not misread my patience as indifference. You thought I was like you; that I didn't give a fig for these things. But friend, there comes a time when I must lay the charge clearly before you, put the cards right on the table. You can't go on this way. I offer you redemption, salvation. And remember, if you refuse it there will come a time when I must become your enemy. And if I, God, who wants to be your friend, ultimately is made your enemy by the way you act toward me, then tell me, who will be your friend in that day?"

God has a thousand ways of leveling accounts, of settling up issues, and who can defend against him? Who can take on God? Who can outwit his purposes? God is an utter realist. I wish we could get that into our minds. He is not fooled by anything or anyone. He sees us exactly as we are. And he is no mere pimple-squeezer, either. He is not dealing with superficial things; he goes right for the jugular, right to the issues of life.

Now the closing word is one of promise:

**He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me; {Psa 50:23a RSV}**

When you come to church in a critical, complaining, griping, grumbling mood, then no matter how many hymns you sing or prayers you recite, you are not worshipping God.

**He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me;  
to him who orders his way aright  
I will show the salvation of God! {Psa 50:23 RSV}**

Such a man is not always able to follow through as he desires, God knows that. But he wants to, "he orders his way aright." To him, God says, "I will show the salvation of God." That word, salvation, is a great word. It is a word that gathers up all God wants to do for us, in us, through us, and by us. All that he has to give us is included in that great word, salvation. God is offering to do this. God offers to produce "men who are not for sale, men who are honest, who are sound from center to circumference, and true to the heart's core. God is offering to produce men with consciences as steady as the needle is to the pole; men who will stand for the right even though the heavens totter and the earth reels; men who can tell the truth and look the world right in the eye; men who neither brag nor run, who neither flag nor flinch; men who can have courage without shouting about it; men in whom the courage of everlasting life runs still and deep and strong; men who know their message and tell it, men who know their place and fill it, who know their business and stand for it and attend to it; men who will not lie or shirk or dodge, who are not too lazy to work and not too proud to be poor; men who are willing to eat what they have earned and wear what they have paid for. That is what God is after. Men who are not ashamed to say, 'No!' with emphatic tones; who are also not ashamed to say, I won't do it,

or I can't afford it."

That is what God wants, men and women, boys and girls, who have found strength in the only place where man can find it -- in the God who provides salvation for them. God wants to show us how it can be done. There is where we start -- every Sunday morning.

**Prayer:**

Oh, Father, help us to understand how real you are, how realistic you are, and to know, Lord, that we cannot fool you about anything. So keep us, Lord, from trying to fool ourselves. We ask in your name, Amen.

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## HOW TO HANDLE A BAD CONSCIENCE

by Ray C. Stedman

A London psychologist once told Billy Graham that seventy percent of the people in mental hospitals in England could be released if they could find forgiveness. Their problem was a bad conscience and they could gain no relief from the guilt and pressure under which they lived.

I read once of a man who wrote a letter to the Bureau of Internal Revenue saying, "I haven't been able to sleep because last year, when I filled out my income tax report, I deliberately misrepresented my income. I am enclosing a check for \$150.00, and if I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." That is one way of handling a bad conscience but I can predict that it will not work. The only way that works is the way set forth in this fifty-first Psalm.

This is one of the few psalms where we are given the historical background from which it arose. The inscription reads, "A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." That identifies clearly for us the incident out of which this psalm arose.

It was the time when David became involved in the double sin of adultery and murder while he was king. He had walked with God for many years. He was widely known as the Sweet Singer of Israel; he had gained a reputation as a prophet, a man who understood the deep things of God; and he had established himself as the long time spiritual leader of his people. Then suddenly, toward the end of his reign, he was plunged into this terrible double sin.

The interesting thing is that David himself records this sin for us. It must have been a painfully humiliating experience to the king. You remember the account. He was on his palace roof one day when the army had gone out to battle and he saw a beautiful woman bathing herself. His passion was aroused and he sent over messengers and ordered her to be brought to him. He entered into an adulterous relationship with her for she was a married woman. Her husband, a soldier in David's army, was away fighting for his king.

Later, when David learned that she was expecting a child, he panicked and tried to cover up. He ordered the husband home from battle and sent him down to his home, hoping that he would sleep with his wife and the child would then be accepted as his own. But Uriah was a soldier, committed to battle, and though he came

home at the king's orders, he would not go down to his own house but slept with the soldiers at the palace and returned to the battle the next day.

David knew that ultimately his sin would be found out so he took another step. This is always what sin does -- it leads us on deeper and deeper, farther than we ever intended to go. Before the king knew it he found himself forced into a desperate attempt to cover up his evil. He ordered Uriah, the husband, to be put in the forefront of the battle where he would most certainly be killed. When news of Uriah's death reached the king he felt he had safely covered his sin. In Psalm 32 David records how he felt during that terrible time when he was trying to cover up his sin. "When I kept silence," he says, "my bones grew old through my groaning all day long," {cf, Psa 32:3}. For a year he tried to live with a bad conscience. But, as the story records, God sent a prophet to David. God loved this king, loved him too well to let him go on covering up and thus damaging himself and his entire kingdom by this hidden sin. So God sent the prophet Nathan to David.

Because David was king, Nathan knew he would have to approach him subtly, for his own life could have been in danger if he had blatantly accused the king. So Nathan told him a story. He said that while he was abroad in the kingdom a certain incident occurred which he felt should be brought to the king for judgment. There was a certain rich man who owned a flock of sheep and a traveler came by to whom he wanted to show hospitality. But instead of taking one of his own sheep and offering it for food, he went to his poor neighbor who only owned one little ewe lamb, and took that lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him. When David heard this he was indignant and cried out, "Such a man ought to be made to restore four-fold what he has taken and then be killed himself," {cf, 2 Sam 12:5-6}.

In a most dramatic moment the prophet Nathan pointed a long bony finger at the king and said, "You are the man!" {2 Sam 12:7 RSV}. David knew then that his sin was uncovered. He fell on his face before God and out of that experience of confession comes this beautiful fifty-first Psalm, which traces for us the proper way to handle a bad conscience. It opens with a prayer for forgiveness.

**Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to thy steadfast love;  
according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.  
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin! {Psa 51:1-2a RSV}**

What a marvelous understanding of the nature of sin and the character of God's forgiveness is found in those verses! There are three things David asks for. First he understands that sin is like a crime. If a criminal is going to be delivered from the effects of his crime he needs not justice but mercy. Sin is an illegal act, a violation of justice, an act of lawlessness, of rebellion and therefore requires mercy.

Then he says, "Blot out my transgressions," and thereby he reveals that he understands sin is like a debt. It is something owed, an account that has accumulated and needs to be erased.

Finally he cries, "Wash me thoroughly, and cleanse me." He understands that sin is like an ugly stain, a defilement upon the soul. Even though the act fades into the past, the dirty defiling stain remains a stigma upon the heart. So he cries out and asks to be delivered from these things.

Notice that he understands well the basis for forgiveness. He asks on the basis of two things: first, "according to thy steadfast love." He understands that he himself deserves nothing from God, that God is not bound to forgive him. Some people are never able to realize forgiveness because they think they deserve it, that God owes it to them. But David knows better. He realizes that only because of God's love does he have any right even to ask. On the basis of that unqualified acceptance, that marvelous continuing love-that-will-not-let-me-go, he says to God, "I am coming to you and asking now for this."

Second, "according to thy abundant mercy," again indicates his understanding of the character of God. God is not a penny pincher; he does not dole out bits of mercy, drop by drop. No, he pours it out. His are "abundant" mercies. When God forgives, he forgives beyond our utmost imaginings. Here are a few of the figures of speech which are used in the Old Testament to depict the forgiveness of God. "As far as the east is from the



west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). How far is that? Well, how far do you have to go east before you start going west? You never come to "west." Then God says he will "cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19). Someone has added that he puts up a sign that reads, NO FISHING. Do not go down there and try to fish old sins out once God has dealt with them. What relief comes when we begin to understand this fullness of God's forgiveness.

Then David goes on to point out the way to lay hold of forgiveness.

**For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is ever before me.  
Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,  
and done that which is evil in thy sight,  
so that thou art justified in thy sentence  
and blameless in thy judgment. {Psa 51:3-4 RSV}**

Here is a frank and full acknowledgment of sin. He says, "I know my sins, I'm not trying to cover them up. They are always before me, this double act of adultery and murder. I am guilty." He does not try to cover them or to blame God for them. He says, "It's not your fault, God; it's mine." That is another reason many cannot find forgiveness for sin. They suffer for years with a guilty conscience because they are not willing to come to the place where they acknowledge their sin. They will not call it what God calls it. We all tend to cover up sin and make it sound nicer than it is. We use pleasant names to describe it.

Is it not interesting that we have one list of terms to describe sin in us, but an entirely different list to describe the same sin in someone else. Others have prejudices, we have convictions. Others have a foul temper; we are seized with righteous indignation. Thus we try to cover over our sins. But we can never be forgiven while we do this, for the first step in the process of forgiveness is an acknowledgment of sin.

There is a most horrible hymn which goes,

If I have wounded any soul today,  
If I have caused one foot to go astray,  
If I have walked in my own willful way,  
Dear Lord, forgive.

"Lord, there is a slight possibility that I might have done some of these evil things, although it is not very likely. But if I have, then forgive them." That kind of "confession" can never lay hold of the forgiveness of God.

If we are going to defend ourselves, the Apostle John argues in his first letter, then we cannot have the defense of that heavenly-appointed Advocate at the Father's right hand who is ready to defend us. If we defend ourselves, if we say it is not our fault because this happened, or someone did this or that other thing, then the Lord Jesus Christ cannot defend us. But if we do not defend ourselves then we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. He will defend us and his defense is perfectly acceptable to God.

It is clear that David understands well the need to acknowledge his guilt, name sin for what it is, and not to charge God with the blame. It is so easy to do the latter. We say, "Well, God, it's the circumstances you put me in. If it weren't for the fact that years ago you allowed me to be married to this woman (or that man), I would never have done this thing. Or, you made me work for this company. Or, it's the people I live with -- my neighbor -- someone else." Whenever we blame it on someone else we are ultimately blaming it on God.

David says, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned." It is not that he does not understand that others have been damaged by his sin. There is the woman, Bathsheba; her reputation was sullied, her character blasted, her marriage broken, her husband murdered, and her own heart grieved by the death of the child that was born, all because of David's sin. There is the man, Uriah, whose life was brought to a sudden and bloody end because of David's sin. But David now sees that ultimately sin is an insult and an injury to God. It is God's love that has been wounded. It is the God of grace whom he has injured most. When a person takes that attitude then God's forgiveness is always present. That is the only way to handle a specific sin and the bad conscience

resulting from evil.

However the problem is not all over yet. Notice how David goes on to strike a deeper note in the verses that follow. He now faces the fear of repeating the same sin. How many of us have felt this way? "Oh, Lord, what a fool I was! What an utter fool I've made of myself! When I see how easily I was deceived and how easily I stumbled into this thing, Lord, I wonder about the future? What's to keep me from doing it all over again next week? If I could be deceived so easily, what's to stop it from happening again?" That is what David goes on to bring before us. Thus, in this section, we have a different prayer, a prayer for purifying power.

**Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,  
and in sin did my mother conceive me.  
Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward being;  
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. {Psa 51:5-6 RSV}**

Here he understands that his sin was not just a happenstance, a combination of unfortunate circumstances which made him do this; he now recognizes that. He says, "I now realize that I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

Now do not misunderstand. He does not mean that there is anything wrong with the act by which conception occurred. His mother was not sinning when she conceived David; that is not what he is saying here at all. There are some who read this as though sexual intercourse was in itself some kind of a sin. But in the marriage relationship it is blessed and honored of God and is a delight to the heart of God.

What he is saying is that the act of conception introduced him into a sinful humanity, that he was born into a sinful race in which sin was already deeply imbedded. Now there are many today who challenge this. They question the doctrine of original sin, the theological term (though it is not very accurate) for the idea that the whole race is basically fallen. But if you challenge that I would like you to answer this question: Who taught you to sin? Where did you learn to lie? Did you have to go to school in order to learn how to be dishonest, to lie or to cheat? Did your parents carefully train you in how to deceive others? No. Every parent here knows that children do these things naturally, they are "doing what comes naturally." This evil shows up in a baby almost as soon as the baby can express itself. There is a rebellious independence, a self-assertiveness, that is present in the tiniest infant and it is there right from the very beginning.

That is what David is saying. "I see now," he says, "that sin is not just a surface problem that can be handled lightly; it is a deep problem. It has stained my whole nature. Unless I find some solution for this polluted nature I will never be able to keep from falling back into sin again." So now he begins to pray for help in the inward life, which is where God wants truth to be found.

In these next verses we find outlined an eight-fold path that one must follow to keep from falling back into a repeated pattern of sin.

Follow these carefully. Each is important.

First, he cries, "Teach me wisdom in my secret heart." "Give me," he says, "an understanding of the facts of life. Show me reality, show me the way things really are." In other words, help me to understand the truth about myself, that I am a fallen being and that this pollution has penetrated my whole nature. Teach me to start there in my secret heart, to accept as fact what is so clearly declared in your Word. I need to understand, Father, the basic facts that reveal reality in life.

The second thing is,

**Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;  
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. {Psa 51:7 RSV}**

Hyssop is a sponge-like plant that grew in Israel which was used to apply the blood of the offering to the altar,

or the doorpost, or whatever. To be purged with hyssop is a figurative expression that declares the need for a blood sacrifice. Again many people are troubled about this. Why all this blood in the Old Testament? Why the millions of lambs, bulls, and goats and the continual flow of blood? Some have even called Judaism a "slaughterhouse" religion because of this. But God makes very clear that all of these Old Testament sacrifices were pointing toward the one blood sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. His life had to be laid down in death. These were but symbols, pictures, of that ultimate sacrifice.

But now the question comes: Why that? Why did he have to die to forgive our sins? The only answer is: Sin is so deeply imbedded in us that it cannot be cured by anything but death. The old life has to die. God cannot improve it. Even God cannot make it better, he cannot cleanse it or wash it; he can only put it to death. David understands that now. He says to God, "If you are going to deal with this terrible fountain of evil in me, I can see that it must be put to death. It must be purged with hyssop, then I will be clean."

Then the third step,

**Fill me with joy and gladness;  
let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice {Psa 51:8 RSV}**

The Hebrew here really means, make to hear -- "Make me to hear joy and gladness." In other words, "Say something to me, God. Not only lay the basis of cleansing in a blood sacrifice, but tell me what it means. Say something to me about it. Let me have your word about it, and that will make my bones rejoice. If you tell me the truth, then I know it's true."

The fourth step is,

**Hide thy face from my sins,  
and blot out all my iniquities. {Psa 51:9 RSV}**

Here he is saying, "Father, if I'm going to be able to be free from falling again, then something has got to be done about the past. I can't always be having it thrown up to me forever. That only depresses me and discourages me and if I'm going to have to live with my wretched, miserable past, I will be defeated over and over again. So, God, I'm asking you, hide your face from my sins and blot out my iniquity." Certainly God is ready and willing to do that. David is only asking for what God has said he would do.

Now look at the fifth step.

**Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and put a new and right spirit within me. {Psa 51:10 RSV}**

See the progress he is making here? He sees he must deal with this old life, this old heart, his old past, that it must be put to death. "But Lord," he says, "I'm tied to it. If this old life and old heart naturally incline me toward evil, and I, doing what comes naturally, do that which is wrong, then obviously what I desperately need is a new heart which naturally does good." That is what he is asking for. It is all-important.

The sixth step follows:

**Cast me not away from thy presence,  
and take not they holy Spirit from me. {Psa 51:11 RSV}**

Some have interpreted this to mean that the Old Testament saints could lose their salvation once they possessed it. I do not think it means that at all. What the psalmist is praying for here is the assurance that the Holy Spirit would be with him. It is exactly the assurance given us in Hebrews 13, "Be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" {Heb 13:5}. David needs, and asks for, that assurance.

The seventh step,

**Restore to me the joy of thy salvation, [That is, believing all this to be true, put back into my heart that gladness and joy which comes from being accepted of you. And finally,] uphold me with a willing spirit. {Psa 51:12 RSV}**

Give me a will that wants to do what you want me to do even though I may struggle at times. It takes all eight of these steps to keep on walking free from sin. Anyone who is acquainted with the New Testament knows that this is exactly what God has already provided us in Jesus Christ.

Several years ago, while preparing to preach a sermon on this psalm, I received an anonymous letter from someone in my congregation, saying that he was a Christian but was involved in a very serious and continuing moral failure. The letter was an attempt to be honest and tell me the trouble in his life. I didn't know if that person would be in the service the next Sunday or not, but I hoped he would be.

I decided to refer to the letter in my sermon for two reasons:

1. Because it was anonymous, and I could do it without betraying a confidence; and
2. Because the problem was of such a serious nature that I wanted to help the person if I could.

The writer had acknowledged that he knew the action was wrong, but finally excused himself on the basis that God had not yet given him the power to break away from it.

Now that was self-deception. The truth is that God has given us the power to break away from these things. Peter dearly declares: "His divine power has granted to us all things that pertains to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). The very possession of the life of Jesus Christ in us is the power that it takes to break away from habits of sin. No person will ever be free from the awful grip of evil upon his or her life until he understands that he already has from God all that it takes to be free, if he will but step out upon it.

David is also asking for help. "Lord, give me this willing spirit," he says, and God immediately gives it. Then it must be acted on"

That is what happened with David, and that is what happened with the anonymous letter writer. After preaching that sermon, I found out the person had been in that service, because later he wrote a second anonymous letter. This time he shared how God had used that message to deliver him from the grip of the evil relationship he had described before.

Finally, David outlines for us the ministry that follows one who has found this kind of forgiveness. First, there is the ministry of teaching.

**Then I will teach transgressors thy ways,  
and sinners will return to thee. {Psa 51:13 RSV}**

Here is the reason why many people do not become Christians today. Their teachers are not teaching out of experience. Instead of talking about forgiveness as an academic subject, those who have really been forgiven ought to be sharing how wonderful it is to be set free. Many are struggling along in guilt because they have never seen what a relief, what a glory it is, to have God refuse to hold a man's transgressions against him. Teaching others should always follow the experience of forgiveness.

Then comes praise.

**Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,  
thou God of my salvation,  
and my tongue will sing aloud of thy deliverance  
O Lord, open thou my lips,  
and my mouth shall show forth thy praise  
For thou hast no delight in sacrifice;  
were I to give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased .  
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;**

**a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. {Psa 51:14-17 RSV}**

What a wonderful understanding these men and women of the Old Testament had of the nature and character of God! They knew that he was not interested in burnt offerings and animals. They saw beyond all that. This man says,

"I will praise you, God, for two things:

- 1) You have taken my guilt away, you have delivered me from bloodguiltiness; and
- 2) You have broken my willful spirit.

That broken spirit, that contrite heart before you, is all the sacrifice you are looking for. So I can praise you, God, for having broken my stubborn will and brought me to the end of myself."

Then David, as king, realizes that he has affected his whole kingdom by his sin, and so he concludes with these words:

**Do good to Zion in thy good pleasure;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. {Psa 51:18 RSV}**

As the king he has caused his whole nation to be in jeopardy because of his sin. The very walls of the city (a symbol of its security) are under attack because of the evil that he has done. So now he says, "Lord, in your greatness, in your goodness, and by your forgiving grace, build it all up again. Heal the hurt to my people and to my kingdom."

**then wilt thou delight in right sacrifices,  
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;  
then bulls will be offered on thy altar. {Psa 51:19 RSV}**

Then worship will be realistic. It will not be a mere form; it will be real. Every song sung, every psalm read, every prayer uttered will not be a mechanical perfunctory repetition of words but the healthy articulation of a heart that has been cleansed and set free.

Do you know that every person is a king over a kingdom? Each one holds a certain area of influence. Our family, our friends, our loved ones are in a sense a kingdom over which we have much influence as a king. What happens to your kingdom when sin reigns unchallenged in your life? It falls apart. You know that, do you not? But God offers to restore that kingdom, to build it up again, to make it real this time, to heal the relationships and build them on a right basis.

Surely our society is suffering as perhaps it has never suffered in the past history of America from the sins of adultery and sexual immorality which have destroyed the fabric of society. How we ought to be praying that God will answer this prayer for America: "Do good to Zion in thy good pleasure and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem" which have been destroyed by the sin of our hearts. Then we shall see God restore that kingdom to us, as David did.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we ask you to heal the hurt of our hearts. You have broken them, Lord, you have caused us to see that we are damaging the very ones we love, and damaging ourselves; destroying, doing terrible hurt to each other and ourselves by clinging to our evil. Now, Father, help us to praise you as David praised you for sending to him that faithful prophet who pointed the finger and told him that he was the man, he was the trouble of Israel. We sense your love, Lord, in pointing out to us things in our own hearts and lives that are wrong and doing damage. Help us, in the words of this psalm, to confess it, to acknowledge our guilt and to receive from you the cleansing that is your delight to give. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: How to Handle a Bad Conscience  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
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Scripture: Psalm 51  
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## MAN AND GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

The inscription of Psalm 8 states "To the choirmaster: according to the Gittith." The word Gittith means a winepress but also designates a stringed instrument which was shaped like a winepress. The Greeks took the word and the instrument which it represented and called it a kithara and from that comes the Spanish guitarria and from that the English guitar. We are therefore, in the prophetic succession when we have a guitar accompaniment to these psalms. They were designed to be sung to the music of a guitar.

The theme of Psalm 8 is given to us in the first and last verses,

**O Lord, our Lord,  
how majestic is thy name in all the earth! {Psa 8:1, 9 RSV}**

It is a psalm of David and most scholars feel that it probably comes from the early part of David's ministry, reflecting his experience as a shepherd boy under the starlit heavens at night alone with his sheep on the hillsides of Judea. There he had ample opportunity to observe the glories of God in nature. It is evident that the Psalmist is greatly impressed with the being of God. This psalm sets forth what he has discovered about God that awes and inspires him and he can only express it in these beautiful words, "how majestic is thy name in all the earth!"

As I read this Psalm, I thought of a young man who came up to me at the close of a service held at a beautiful conference grounds high in the Cascade Mountains of northern Washington. We had been discussing the greatness of God, the glory of his person, the warmth of his compassion, and his redemptive love for mankind. At the close of the service this young man came up, and, in contemporary words, but with utmost reverence he said, "Man, God really swings, doesn't he?" Surely that is something of what the Psalmist is saying here. What a tremendous God! How majestic! How excellent is his name in all the earth!

Verses 2-8 tell us why he came to this conclusion; what it is about God that is so impressive. The first thing is rather startling. It is God's simplicity. He puts it this way:

**Thou whose glory above the heavens is chanted  
by the mouth of babes and infants,  
thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,  
to still [or silence] the enemy and the avenger. {Psa 8:1b-2 RSV}**

What had impressed this man was the fact that the transcendent glory of God, his greatness which was far above all the heavens, nevertheless could still be grasped and expressed by a child. That had gripped this Psalmist. Evidently he had often struggled to put into words the thoughts and ideas of his heart but he found that all his rationality, his intelligence, was challenged by such an attempt. Yet here is a God who can reveal himself in such marvelous ways that children, babes, infants even, can grasp what he means. In fact they often understand more rapidly and more thoroughly than do the intelligentsia.

That this is exactly what the Psalmist means is confirmed by an incident from the New Testament. In the twenty-first chapter of Matthew the Lord Jesus quotes the words of this psalm on a certain occasion. Matthew

tells us,

**And the blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them. But when the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant; and they said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought perfect praise?'" {Matt 21:14-16 RSV}**

These chief priests and scribes thought that Jesus should be offended by the fact that these street urchins, ragged and dirty, were crying out, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" This was not a children's choir, trained by the temple leaders, it was merely a band of ordinary children who happened to be there at the time Jesus healed the blind and the lame. But when they saw these wonderful things the children began to cry out, "Praise be to the Son of David! Hosanna to the Son of David!" The scribes and chief priests were indignant and thought Jesus ought to silence these ragamuffins. Instead he said, "They are the ones who have caught the truth, they are the ones who see. They understand that here is being manifested the healing power of God. It is all right in line with the prediction of David in the eighth psalm that God's marvelous simplicity can be conveyed to a child much more easily than it can to an adult."

Remember that the Apostle Paul says much the same thing in his opening words in First Corinthians. He declares that God has deliberately designed life in this way. God has ordained, has chosen, the weak things and the things that are not to set at naught the things that are -- to show them up, to expose them -- and to convey messages through weak, foolish and obscure things. Every now and then God seems to delight in taking some poor uneducated person and using him in great power to change a nation or the world. He has the ability to convey himself to the childlike mind. The reason for this, of course, is because children (and those who are childlike) are filled with humility. It is pride that blots out truth. Any time you approach the Scriptures regarding them as insignificant or thinking yourself superior to their wisdom, that you must correct them or sit in judgment over them, you will find that their pages are shut to you. You will never understand them at all. But if you come as a child comes to life, impressed by everything and listening to everything, not thinking that he knows all the answers but simply trying to observe, then you will find the truth begins to speak volumes to you and you will understand it. Jesus prayed on one occasion, recorded in Matthew 11, "I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto babes," {cf, Matt 11:25}.

Now, says the Psalmist, this is not only the mark of the greatness of God, but it is also that which baffles the enemy. By means of his ability to convey truth to infants, God has founded a bulwark -- erected a wall -- "because of your foes, in order to silence the enemy and the avenger." That expresses the idea that when God speaks through children (and childlike persons) he often baffles the rational, the intelligent. Those who pride themselves upon their wisdom are frequently routed by the insight of some rather insignificant person.

I often think of the story of an infidel who was lecturing against God. Again and again in his lecture he would state, "There is no God!" There was a rather simple individual in the back of the room listening who was a believer in God, a Christian. After a bit he raised his hand, and when the lecturer recognized him, the Christian stood up and said, "Sir, the next time you say, 'There is no God' would you mind adding, 'as far as I know.'" With keen insight he had put his finger upon the logical fallacy of that lecturer. The lecturer was trying to defend a negative absolute. It is absolutely impossible to defend such. No one can ever prove that there is no God -- it is impossible of proof. Yet this uneducated person saw the error and put his finger right on it. "You are limited by your own knowledge," he is saying. "You don't know enough yet. You don't know that there is no God so don't speak out of your ignorance."

I remember reading some time ago a story of a rather liberal Sunday School teacher who had a class of boys. He was teaching the story of the feeding of the five thousand, and said something like this. "You know, this isn't really a miracle. Jesus did no miracles. What really took place here was that when this crowd was hungry a little boy present there decided to share his lunch with Jesus. He brought his lunch to Jesus and Jesus commended him for this. When the crowd saw that, it suggested to them that if they would share the lunches they had brought, everybody would have enough. So they all began to share and there was plenty for

everyone. If there was a miracle at all it was a miracle of sharing." He leaned back rather satisfied with himself that he had explained away the miracle when one little boy in his class said to him, "Sir, may I ask a question?" The teacher said, "Yes." And he said, "What did they fill the twelve baskets with afterwards?"

God often uses children to teach truths that adults will not face, in order to demonstrate his greatness. Man is forever thinking that it takes vast education and profound knowledge in order to reach God. But God is forever trying to tell us that although he is certainly in favor of knowledge, for he is a God of truth and knowledge, nevertheless knowledge is not the way man finds God. He finds him by listening with the humility of a child. That is why Jesus said, "Except you become as little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven," {cf, Matt 18:3}.

One of the greatest saints of all time, and one of the most profound theologians of the church was St. Augustine. He was a wild and profligate young man in his early days in Rome, studying philosophy. He lived an immoral and lecherous life, carousing and reveling till all hours of the nights. At last he became sick of his guilt, of his immorality, and in his autobiography tells of his conversion. He says,

I flung myself under a fig tree and gave free course to my tears. I sent up these sorrowful cries, 'How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not this hour an end to my uncleanness?' I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when, lo, I heard the voice of a boy or a girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting, and oft repeating, 'Take up and read; take up and read.' Immediately I ceased weeping, and I began to consider whether it was usual for children in any kind of game to sing such words; for I could not remember ever having heard the like. I got to my feet, since I could not but think that this was a Divine command to open the Bible and to read the first passage I should light upon. I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting; for there I had put down the Apostle's book [the book of Romans] when I had left. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the passage on which my eyes first fell -- 'Let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.' I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to; for instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty, and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

What an impressive God, who is able to convey truth in such a simple way, through the lips of a child!

The Psalmist now turns to the second thing that has impressed him about God: his wisdom.

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou hast established,  
what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him? {Psa 8:3-4 RSV}**

Imagine the scene. Here is young David out under the stars at night watching his sheep. Of course, the air at that time and place was not darkened with smog or polluted with the irritants that fill the air today. The stars were brilliant, and the moon, in its full phase, was crossing the heavens. He felt, as we have all felt as we have stood under the stars at night, something of mingled mystery and awe as he looked up into the star-spangled heavens. He considered the beauty of nature and its silent witness to the wisdom of God. He sees the ordered procession of the stars and watching them through the night sees how they wheel in silent courses through the heavens. He notices the varying glory of different stars, and the evident vast distances that are visible in the heavens. All the breath-taking beauty of this scene breaks upon his eyes as the sun sets. He is astonished at the greatness of a God who could create such things. The interesting thing is that thirty centuries after David wrote these words we feel the same impression when we consider the starry heavens. This month man is proposing to take another walk on the moon. Thought we are now able to go to the moon which David could only see, yet all the knowledge that has been gained about the universe in which we live only serves to deepen our impression of the tremendous wisdom and power of God. How vast is the universe in which we live! Incredible in their extent and outreach, these vast distances are spanned only by the measurement of the speed of light -- and even that is hardly adequate. These billions of galaxies whirl in their silent courses through the deepness of space. How tremendous is the power that sustains it all and keeps it operating as one harmonious unit! That is what impressed this Psalmist.



Then he faces the inevitable question which comes to man whenever he contemplates God's greatness. What is man, he asks, in the sight of a God who could make a universe like that? "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" You will recognize that this is the question that cries for an answer in our day. What is man? Where did he come from? What is his purpose here? Why does he exist on this small planet in this vast universe? Is there meaning, is there significance, is there reason for his living? Those are the questions that are being asked more and more. You can hardly open a magazine today but what you find writers who are trying to come to grips with that question. What is man? Why are we here?

Now there are basically only two answers that are being given. A mechanistic science looks out into the universe around using instruments of exploration, such as the telescope, and tells us that man is nothing but another creature like the animals; that he is the highest of the animals, having grown from animal stock, and that he is alone in the universe as an intelligent rational being. There is nothing beyond the whirling stars; man is part of a great cosmic machine which grinds on relentlessly and man is but an insignificant cog, hardly able, with the exercise of his utmost powers, to do anything at all about the universe in which he lives. I do not think this has been more eloquently expressed than by Bertrand Russell, whom many today regard as the high priest of humanism. This is the way he puts it.

The life of man is a long march through the night surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal that few can hope to reach and where none may tarry long. One by one as they march our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death.

Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

That philosophy is producing widespread despair in our world today. Everywhere young men and women, boys and girls, are succumbing to this philosophy of despair that says there is nothing permanent, life is futile, and we all live out our days in a hopeless tangle of meaninglessness. As Shakespeare put it, "Life is but a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." The result of that is the violent attempt to grasp what life there is for the moment that we see about us on every side; the awful sense of frustration and meaninglessness, the skyrocketing of suicide rates, and the dark despair that spreads like a blanket of gloom across the peoples of earth as they face the growing, inexorable problems of our day.

But contrast that with the biblical view of man, for the Psalmist goes on to answer his own question by the revelation of the program and purpose of God for man.

**Yet thou hast made him little less than God,  
and dost crown him with glory and honor.  
Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet,  
all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the sea. {Psa 8:5-8 RSV}**

The Psalmist says that God's greatness is revealed by what he intends to do with man. It constitutes a two-fold relationship:

First, man has a unique relationship to God. He was made to be a little less than God. Some perhaps are startled by that translation, for the King James version says, "a little lower than the angels." But it was the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that used the phrase "the angels." The Hebrew actually says "little less than Elohim," i.e., a little lower than God. What is included in that remarkable expression is the revelation of God's purpose for man. According to the Bible, God made man to be the expression of God's life, the human vehicle of the divine life, the means by which the invisible God would be made visible to his creatures. Man was to be the instrument by which God would do his work in the world and the expression of the character and being of God. He is the creature nearest to God. There is none other nearer, for

God himself was to live in man. That is the revelation of the Bible. Man is such a unique being, such a remarkable being, that God himself intends to live in him to be the glory of man's life. Man is the bearer of God.

What a tremendous gulf there is between this and Bertrand Russell's view of man. What an infinite difference. This is why God loves man -- even lost man. It is because he sees in every man and woman his own image, that which was designed for himself, that which he made to be the bearer of his glory. That is why every man is inexpressibly important to God. God longs to reach every man, woman, boy, girl, because each is made and designed for himself.

But further, says the Psalmist, because of that unique relationship, man is designed to be in dominion over all other things. He is to rule the animal creation and all the natural forces in the world in which he lives, and to exercise that dominion in an effective way. We read "thou hast put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field," etc., and we say, "Yes, that's true because man can assert his will over the animals of the world." But that is not what this Psalmist means. He is not talking about man's ability to force the animal creation to obey him. What he is describing is the relationship God intended in which the animals would willingly serve man. We get a little picture of it in man's ability to tame the animals. You may have pet dogs or cats at home -- even birds, turtles, or snakes. You have tamed them, i.e., they willingly, gladly, cheerfully submit to you -- most of the time. That is a small reflection of what this Psalmist is describing. It is a demonstration of the willingness of the created world to obey man.

In Hebrews, Chapter 2, the writer quotes this passage and says two very significant things. First, "We do not yet see all creation in subjection to man," {cf, Heb 2:8}. That is clearly true. It is so obvious today. Here we are facing the fact that man has been so twisted and perverted by the Fall that instead of running the creation he is ruining it. He is polluting the air and consuming natural resources at a prodigious rate. He is befouling the waters and the soil and making it almost impossible for human life to continue. We must face this. There is no way out of it. It stares us in the face every time we turn around. Each time we take a breath we experience the terrible evidence for the truth of what the writer says in Hebrews, "We do not yet see all things in subjection to man." We find no way out.

But he also says something else. "But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death," {Heb 2:9 RSV}. Because of the suffering of death God has crowned him with the glory and honor which he had intended for man at the beginning. In seeing Jesus we see that God yet intends to fulfill his original creation. Watch the Lord Jesus in the gospel record. The first thing he does is to change water into wine at a wedding feast. He short-circuited the process that is taking place in every vineyard in California right at this moment and thus changed water into wine. But he did not do that as God; he did it as man; man as God intended man to be. When he quieted the winds and the waves with the word, "Peace, be still," {Mark 4:39}, and the wind whimpered and stopped its blowing and the waves quieted down, the disciples looked at one another and said, "What manner of man is this?" {Mark 4:41 KJV}. They did not realize that what he had done was not done out of his inherent deity, but as a man indwelt by God. As Jesus himself said, "It is not I who do the works; it is the Father who dwells in me, he does the works," {cf, John 14:10}. When he broke the loaves and fishes and fed the five thousand he did not do that as God; he did that as man -- man ruling over creation, man fulfilling the intention of God for man. All the other natural miracles which he performed he did not as God but as man. Thus the writer of Hebrews says, "We see Jesus" {Heb 2:9} ... the beginning of a new humanity God is building.

The ultimate question we are facing here is: What is the purpose of life? What are you here for? Why do you go on making money to buy food and other things year after year? What is the reason for it all? The answer is, if you have discovered Jesus Christ, you are a part of God's new humanity. God is fulfilling his original intention for man right now. He is beginning a new humanity right now, and he is teaching us lessons we could never learn in any other way, through the struggles and difficulties of life. He does this in order to fit us for the day when he will pull aside the curtain and the whole world will suddenly see what he has been working on all the time -- a new humanity. Paul says in Chapter 8 of Romans that the whole creation is eagerly looking forward to the day of the manifestation of the sons of God. God is not going to be defeated by the wickedness and foolishness of man. Even though man is destroying the world in which he lives, making it a mess in which he can no longer exist, yet God will not be defeated. Amidst the increasing ravaging of nature,

God is doing something. The exciting news of today is not what is recorded in our newspaper headlines. The events that are reported in the headlines will all be entombed in some dusty old history book or buried in a trash can in another ten years, and it will be of very little significance to any living being at that time. But the exciting thing today is what is happening in the new humanity that God is creating through the trials and difficulties we are going through. That will be the truly exciting thing. These troubles are transforming you and me who know Jesus Christ into sons of God, who are awaiting the day when the curtain is drawn back, and all the world shall see what God has been doing behind the scenes. In Romans 8 the apostle says, "I know that the sufferings of this present time are not worth being compared with the glory that is to be revealed," {Rom 8:18 RSV}. In Second Corinthians he says, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," {cf, 2 Cor 4:17}. There is purpose to life -- if you know Jesus Christ! There is no purpose outside of Christ. There is no reason to live if you do not know Jesus Christ. But if you know him you are part of a new creation that God is fashioning behind the scenes within the framework of history and one of these days it will be revealed. When the curtain is drawn back all the world -- and all the universe -- will sing together the words of the last verse of this psalm.

**O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth! {Psa 8:9 RSV}**

What a magnificent God who can work through babes and infants and who is deeply concerned about man! The One who created the heavens is concerned and compassionate toward man and ultimately will fulfill all the dreams of humanity. "O Lord, our Lord, how wonderful is thy name in all the earth!"

**Prayer:**

We bow before thee, our Father, and almost tremble because we are privileged to call you Father -- such a great God, such a revelation of wisdom, greatness, power and strength and yet, our Father, our Lord, our God.

That thou shouldst so delight in me and be the God thou art;  
Is darkness to my intellect but sunshine to my heart.

Thank you for it. If any here have not yet found the way to your heart through Jesus Christ we pray that this very moment they will open their heart to the One who has been seeking them for many years, that he may come into them and change them and make them part of a new creation. We ask in his name, Amen.

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## **THE LIVING GOD**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

You will notice in the inscription to Psalm 84 that, like Psalm 8, it is "according to The Gittith" which, as I have pointed out in connection with the eighth Psalm, is an eight-stringed instrument very much like our modern guitar. This psalm, too, is designed to be accompanied by the music of a guitar. In our day we have come full circle in time and have come back to singing with a guitar accompaniment as in the days of David.

The theme of this wonderful little psalm is the advantages that accompany one who is in touch with the living

God, the advantages that belong to the life of faith, the life of fellowship with a living God. The psalm divides very simply into three parts which are marked off by the little word Selah which in Hebrew means "think of that" -- pause and think of what has just been said. In the first four verses, the psalmist is setting before us the advantages of life with God -- God at home within his people.

**How lovely is thy dwelling place,  
O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, yea, faints  
for the courts of the Lord;  
my heart and flesh sing for joy  
to the living God. {Psa 84:1-2 RSV}**

What a wonderful expression that is of the excitement produced by the presence of God. Now of course when these psalmists talked about the dwelling place of God they meant the Temple, the building in Jerusalem where God's Shekinah glory was manifest. In the holy of holies within the Temple was a strange and mysterious light which marked the presence of God. Into that holy place, no Israelite was permitted to enter that holy place except the high priest, and he only once a year, and only then under the most rigorous of rituals. When the Israelites came into the Temple, though they could not physically enter the holy of holies to be in the presence of God there, there is no question but that, in their hearts and minds, as they appreciated and understood the truth pictured by their sacrifices and other things, they entered in spirit into the holy of holies. This is what the psalmist is now singing about: "O the joy of having God living in me!"

When we, as Christians, talk about the dwelling place of God, we learn from the New Testament that we are talking about our bodies. Paul says in First Corinthians 6 that our bodies are the "temples" of the Holy Spirit who lives within us. Therefore, we can read the words of this psalm and take them as an expression of the excitement that comes because of the presence of God in our bodies.

There are three things that the Psalmist sees here that mark his experience along this line. But it is possible that you may have God in your life through Jesus Christ and still not have these things true of you because they are made available only by faith. It is as you believe that God is at work in your life and ready to do these things, and you expect him to act this way, that they occur. It is possible for us to have become Christians, but not to be the Christian that we have become. This psalm is written to urge us on to that, and to explain it all to us.

The first thing the Psalmist sees is an inner beauty that God creates by his presence: "How lovely is your dwelling place why he's excited about being in the presence of God. The first is the inner beauty God creates by his presence. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O God." The place where God lives, the heart where God dwells, becomes a lovely place, a beautiful spot.

The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians, prays that Christ "may make his home in your hearts by faith" {cf, Eph 3:17}, because that heart will then always be a lovely place. The character of that heart is changed. In practice that means that you will be a lot easier to get along with. You will be less prickly and difficult when God is living in you. You will become a beautiful person in the truest sense of that phrase.

The second thing is, he creates a compelling hunger. "My soul longs, yea, faints for the courts of the Lord." Have you ever felt this way? Have you known a deep-seated longing to have more of the glory of God, more of the sense of his presence in your life? Have you fed upon his Word and been satisfied, and yet as you went away, felt a hunger for more? We sing this sometimes in a hymn,

We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread,  
And long to feast upon Thee still;  
We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,  
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill.

It is a strange paradox, this wonderful ability God has to satisfy us and at the same time make us hungry for more.

Then the third thing is the joyful vitality that the presence of God gives. "My heart and flesh sing for joy to the

living God." This is an exciting experience and is exactly what God has meant life to be. You may have been a Christian for many years, but if you have not yet found this kind of excitement you haven't yet touched the possibilities and resources of a Christian life. This is not an artificial excitement. I do not mean that this is an artificial excitement. It is not something put on -- it is not a mask -- but it is the real thing. This Psalmist is struggling to set before us the reality of the excitement of God's presence.

A young man once wrote me a letter which said something like this.

I'm a janitor and my work is boring to me. I do the same old things over and over. What can you suggest that will help me in this problem of boredom?

That is a perfectly proper question to address to a pastor. If your relationship with God does not help you with that kind of a problem, then it is not much of a relationship. I answered him by pointing out that the secret to the relief of boredom, in my judgment, was given to us in the fourth chapter of John's Gospel. There the Lord meets with a jaded, bored woman who came to a well; She had run through several experiences of marriage already (having had five husbands) trying vainly to find something to satisfy her. Life for her had grown tedious and dull and boring. Jesus said to her,

**"If you knew who it is that is asking you to drink, you would ask of me and I would put in you a well of living water, springing up unto eternal life." {cf, John 4:10-14}**

By that "well," he was referring, of course, to himself. He would enter her heart and he would become to her a well from which she could drink at any time.

Years ago I learned the practical secret of that. Whenever my outward circumstances get boring, I drink from that which is within. I take a good long drink of the living God who lives within; a drink of the refreshing character of his being. I remind myself of who he is and of my relationship with him, and that he is continually there. I have never done that but what my spirit has been refreshed and I have come back to my work -- the same old work -- with a new attitude. That is what the psalmist is talking about here.

The next two verses describe the contentment that the presence of God brings:

**Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at thy altars, O Lord of hosts,  
my king and my God.  
Blessed are those who dwell in thy house,  
ever singing thy praise! *Selah* {Psa 84:3-4 RSV}**

He mentioned here two birds frequently found in Scripture.

First is a sparrow. Do you remember when the Lord Jesus speaking to his disciples referred to the sparrows? "Not one of them will fall to the ground without your father's will" {Matt 10:29 RSV}, he said, "you are of more value than many sparrows." {Matt 10:31 RSV}. In another place he said, "Are not five sparrows sold in the market-place for a farthing (the smallest value of money)?" {cf, Luke 12:6}. By these statements he recognized that the sparrow is a popular symbol for insignificance. Sparrows represent those who feel they are not worth anything. Now, says this psalmist, even the man or woman who feels insignificant finds in God a home, a place of warmth and security, a place where life is fulfilled. You may feel terribly useless, but when you come to God you will find through him a wonderful sense of purpose.

I am impressed, as I read the Scriptures, how many times God passes over the proud, the haughty, the powerful, and the ostentatious, and selects some insignificant, obscure individual and uses him to accomplish his purposes. Gideon was that kind of a man. He was so sure he didn't amount to anything that he protested when God called him to deliver Israel. Moses did the same thing. He had been a king's son in the courts of Pharaoh with all the possibilities of power at his command, but he felt he had blown it when he killed that Egyptian and had to flee to the backside of the desert. You can see that he thought he had wrecked his life --

that there was no more chance for him.

But it wasn't all over in God's scheme; all that had happened was only part of the training course. When Moses had reached the place where God could work through him, God picked him up in his insignificance and began to use him mightily. I am convinced that God never uses anyone continuously until he has put them through that kind of training. It is usually to those who have a deep sense of failure that the call of God comes, for they can understand how others feel.

When did the Lord Jesus say to Peter, "Feed my lambs"? {John 21:15}. Was it after Peter had come up to him in all his boastfulness and said, "Lord, look at these other fellows; you can't count on them. But Lord, you can count on me. I'll see you through to the end, Lord." Did the Lord then say to him, "Very well, Peter, very well spoken. I can count on you. Feed my lambs?" No, no! It wasn't until after Peter had denied his Lord and had gone out to weep bitterly in the streets of Jerusalem that the Lord Jesus called him and said to him, "Peter, feed my lambs." Yes, even the sparrow will find a place of usefulness, a home in God.

So, too, has the swallow. Where I once lived, in northern Minnesota, we had many swallows. Every evening you could see them darting about. They are swiftest of birds and exemplify restless activity. They are used that way also in the Scriptures. The swallow represents those people who are restless, who are forever looking for something new. They settle down and try this and that but it doesn't work. They are rolling stones, restless, ever on the move. But even the swallow, says the psalmist, can find in God a home, a place to build a nest and to raise young, a place of purpose and fulfillment.

Through thirty years of observation I can tell you that that is the only place the restless will ever find rest -- in God. They will find in him that rest of which Jesus spoke, "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" {cf, Matt. 11:28-29}. Those are not mere words. It is not just beautiful language designed to stir your spirit a bit on Sunday mornings. Those words are designed for life. If you are restless, there is a message in them for you. God is speaking to you. God wants to give you rest. You won't find it in circumstances, you won't find it in adventure. These things will pale on you. You will find it only, as the Psalmist tells us, "at thy altars, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God."

I love that phrasing. He puts together two concepts of God which seem contradictory. It is done two or three times in this psalm.

First he refers to God, "O Lord of hosts." What does that mean? Well, that means the Lord of the multitudes, Lord of the many, Lord of the great crowds, the One on whom all the creatures of earth depend for a living. One mighty in power who is able to meet the needs of thousands and thousands everywhere.

Then he adds to this, "my king and my God." That is a personal note, set in contrast to the Lord of Hosts. One of the glories of God is this wonderful fact, that he is able to do what none of us can do. He is able to give himself wholly to me as an individual. At the same time he is doing it also to you and to everyone else all over the world.

I wish I had that power. I sometimes feel stretched in fifteen different directions. Everyone wants to be my friend and I wish I could be their friend. I'd love to, but I can't. But God can! "My king and my God." No wonder he says, "Blessed are those who dwell in thy house, ever singing thy praise! Selah." What a tremendous thing that is!

Then in the next section he sets before us a description of what happens when God is at work in our hearts.

**Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee,  
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.  
As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools.  
They go from strength to strength;**

**the God of gods will be seen in Zion.  
O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah. Selah {Psa 84:5-8 RSV}**

Here the secret of usefulness is set forth. "Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee."

Now I want to ask you something. Many of you have been Christians for a long time. When you get in difficulties or troubles or pressures, where is your strength? Have you found that your strength is in God, that he is the One who makes a difference?

One Saturday night I came home after a day away from my church responsibilities and I was tired, very tired. My wife told me some of the things that had been happening, some of the pressures that had come that day from the church and from the family. They were the kind of things I would normally want to lay before the Lord and pray about. But I didn't feel like praying. I was tired and I wanted to go to bed. I thought to myself, "What's the use of praying, anyway? I'm so tired that my prayers wouldn't have any power."

Then it struck me; what a thing to say! What difference does it make how I feel? My reliance isn't upon my prayers but upon God's power. It always bothers me to hear Christians talk about "the power of prayer." There isn't any power in prayer. There is power in the God who answers prayer. I was rebuked in my own spirit by the remembrance that it makes no difference how tired I happen to be. So I prayed -- very short, because the power of prayer doesn't lie in the length of it, either. Charles Spurgeon used to speak of those who had the idea that the power of the ministry lay in the lungs of the preacher. But it doesn't lie there, either. Power lies in the God who is behind prayer. "Blessed are the men -- and women -- whose strength is in thee."

Some time ago I was trying to sell my car. Intending to put an ad in the paper I read through several car ads to learn how to phrase it. I noticed a phrase that appeared again and again throughout the ads. It said, "Power all around." At first I didn't know what that meant, and then I realized it meant power steering, power brakes, automatic transmission, power windows, power seats and, in the case of a convertible, a power top. Power all around! All this power is designed to take the terrible strain out of driving so that all you need to do is sit there and push little buttons and things will happen. What a tremendous description of the Christian life! Power all around! "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control," {2 Tim 1:7 RSV}. Power all around.

Someone has suggested that when you get into difficult places where it is hard to know what decision to make, that you try power steering. "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left" {Isa 30:21 RSV}. Are you having trouble with a stubborn habit? Well, try power brakes. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" {Rom 8:37 RSV}. Are you bothered by moodiness and discouragement? Try power windows. "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" {Phil 4:7 RSV}. For a satisfying life, try power unlimited. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and shall be my witnesses" {Acts 1:8a RSV}. Says the psalmist, "these are the men who have their strength in thee."

Then he adds, "in whose heart are the highways..." Take out the words, "to Zion," because, they are not in the original Hebrew. What kind of men are these, with highways in their hearts? All through the Scripture you will find references to the highways, and they always refer to what men do in their lives to prepare the way for God, to give God access to all areas of their life.

You remember when John the Baptist came preaching before Christ, it was said that he fulfilled the words of Isaiah 40,

**A voice cries:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God" {Isa 40:3 RSV}**

The prophet also described how it would be done:

**"Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain." {Isa 40:4 RSV}**

That is what is described in Psalm 84: men and women who know how to build in their hearts a highway for God. How is that done? Well, when you get into the valleys, you bring them up to the level by trust in God: "Every valley shall be exalted." And when you get to a mountain of difficulty, or you find yourself lifted up in pride and self-conceit, you judge it in the light of the word, and bring it low: "Every mountain shall be made low." Thus you make a highway for God to travel in blessing, not only to your heart but to others. Blessed are the men who have learned this secret of usefulness. Their strength is in God, and they have made a highway by which God can work in the valleys and the mountains.

Then the psalmist refers to what happens when this occurs:

**As they go through the valley of Baca  
they make it a place of springs;  
the early rain also covers it with pools. {Psa 84:6 RSV}**

The valley of Baca is the valley of weeping. This refers to the ministry that men and women who know how to make a highway for God will have in the lives of others. They will come into the place of sorrowing, of despair, of discouragement, and by their radiant faith and their cheerful outlook, turn it into a place of fountains, of refreshment, of satisfaction. They will do it by means of the Holy Spirit. The early rain is a picture of the Holy Spirit.

This beautiful, picturesque language of Scripture lends itself to exact interpretation if you understand how these symbols are used in other places. Here is a reference to the early rain and in the prophets there is also a reference to the latter rain. The early and the latter rain is a symbol of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as the prophet Joel makes clear. Pentecost was such an occasion -- pouring out of the Holy Spirit -- and that is what is referred to here. These men and women are able to turn sorrow into joy by means of the Holy Spirit who fills their lives with pools of blessing, and springs (permanent fountains) of joy.

Do you know people like that? What wonderful people they are. It is refreshing to have people who come into your life and with but a word change your whole outlook. I thought of that last week when Dr. Jack Mitchell was here. What a dear man of God and seventy-seven, and yet what a blessing he is whenever he comes, for he opens the windows of God and helps us to see again the glory of the Lord Jesus.

Last week provided a particularly apt illustration of the ministry in the valley of Baca. There was present here last Sunday a young man in both morning and evening services who had been struggling with some very difficult problems in his life. He had come under an awful load of defeat and depression. In the morning service, he was so held by what Dr. Mitchell said, that he came back for the evening service. Those of you who were with us may remember that Dr. Mitchell brought forth most beautifully the forgiveness of God, and how the grace of God sets us free. This young man sat in the second row, his face fastened on Dr. Mitchell, listening and drinking in every word. At the end of the service he said to one of his friends, "What a burden of guilt has been lifted from my life!" The following Tuesday, he met with Dave Roper at noon to have lunch together and talk over his difficulties. As they were riding in Dave's Volkswagen, they stopped at a they stopped at a red light. They were engrossed in their talk when around the corner -- and through a red light -- came a huge, loaded, moving van. It hit the front of the Dave's Volkswagen, drove it under the truck, the door on the right side opened up, and the young man fell out and was instantly killed. Dave was left unhurt, with hardly a scratch.

It was a shocking thing to him, and to us, for our staff had been praying for that young man just that morning. When Dave came back, he said, "The boy we prayed for this morning is dead." Though we were shaken and shocked by what happened, I couldn't help but think of the comfort that had been brought him as Dr. Mitchell had passed through his valley of Baca and had made it a place of springs instead of tears. What a ministry that is.



The Psalmist points out the effect that building these "highways" has on the persons who do it, too: "They go from strength to strength." They get better and better as they experience God's grace until, ultimately, the God of gods is seen in Zion. The manifestation of the invisible God becomes visible through the lives of people like that. When I read this psalm I feel like praying exactly what this Psalmist prays in Verse 8.

**O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;  
give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah. {Psa 84:8 RSV}**

He asks, in effect, make me this kind of a man. Help me to learn where my strength lies and to build in my heart highways for God so that I can go through the valley of weeping and make it a place of springs and so go from strength to strength until the God of gods is seen. Is that not what you want?

Then let us give ear to this prayer as it is set forth in the closing section,

"Behold our shield, O God," or more literally, "O shield, behold!" It is God who is the shield. The writer is now addressing God and he says:

**Behold our shield, O God;  
look upon the face of thine anointed! {Psa 84:9 RSV}**

It is a cry for a personal application of these great truths. This is perfectly proper. The Palmist says, "Lord, I see your blessing and power in the lives of others and I want this. Give it to me as well!" It is perfectly right to pray that way. It is never wrong to ask God to do for you what he wants to do for you. It is right to pray, "Lord, I want to find the way into this!"

Then the Psalmist gives two reasons why he wants this kind of life, set forth by the "for's" of Verses 10-11.

**For a day in thy courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of wickedness. {Psa 84:10 RSV}**

The first reason he wants this is because life with God is incomparably better than anything else. There is no other place to go. One day lived in fellowship with God is the equivalent of almost three years (1000 days) without him. That is worth something, is it not? This man has evidently discovered how rich God can be and remembering it he says, "If every day could be like that, what a difference there would be in my life! Lord, this is what I want. A day with you is worth a thousand elsewhere. I'd rather be a humble door keeper in your house than to have everything else without you, to live in the tents of wickedness. Life with you is incomparably better."

Second, it is inexhaustibly complete:

**For the Lord God is a sun and shield;  
he bestows favor and honor.  
No good thing does the Lord withhold  
from those who walk uprightly. {Psa 84:11 RSV}**

If I need a sun, if I am in darkness, if I do not know where I am going and I do not know what lies ahead of me, then God can be to me a sun. He is wonderfully adaptable to my need. If I need protection, then he is a shield around me, guarding me, guiding me. Whatever I need he is. That is the good news of the gospel. I love the acrostic that is built around the name of Jesus,

J - Just  
E - Exactly  
S - Suits  
U - Us

S - Sinners.

Is that not right? Jesus exactly suits us sinners! He is designed for us. He is a sun and a shield, and gives grace and glory. Grace is for pressures. It is his power to keep the heart at peace within. That is the inner gift. Glory is the outward expression. God gives grace in order to bring us to glory, not only finally, in heaven, but *now* .

God is constantly giving grace and glory. He does not take us out of the pressures, but he gives us grace in the midst of them in order that he might bring us to glory (thanksgiving, joy and gladness). This is to be the repeated pattern of the Christian life.

If you are going through a time of pressure, thank God for it and ask for grace. He will give it, and you know that it will lead you on to glory. Our problem is that we are always wanting it to happen *now* . We want glory all the time. But God knows that is not good for us. So he gives us grace first, and then glory.

This writer sums it all up in Verse 12,

**O Lord of hosts,  
blessed is the man who trusts in thee! {Psa 84:12 RSV}**

Happy is the man who trusts thee, who has learned that life lived with God has tremendous advantages. Again, this is not designed to make you excited on Sunday morning; this is for all the week. This is for the problems you are now facing. You young people, this is for you at school, to help you with the longings and yearnings of your heart. This is for you in business. You older people, retired, facing loneliness; this is for you. Blessed is the man who trusts in God. That is the secret of life.

**Prayer:**

Heavenly Father, keep us from taking these words artificially or mechanically. Help us to know they are a testimony given to us to make us see that our lives can be rich and full. Teach us patience in this, Lord. We want richness overnight. Help us to realize that your process is to drop a seed and let it grow, to come at last to fruition. Teach us then to wait, Lord, upon you, but to know that you will bring us to a glory and a richness that is beyond our wildest dreams, more than we can ever express. We ask in your name, Amen.

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## **WHEN YOU ARE FALSELY ACCUSED**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

Psalm 109 reflects a common problem which we have all experienced. The psalm describes the reactions of a man who has been unjustly accused, wrongly treated. He has been set upon by those who are attempting to destroy him, yet without a cause. The psalm also is a problem psalm. One need only read it to be troubled about this psalm. Why should this strange, extravagant language of hostility against another human being be included in the Book of Psalms. We shall attempt an answer to that as we go through the exposition of this psalm.

Notice that it is a psalm of David and therefore reflects an experience which David went through. It is difficult to tell exactly which of his recorded experiences is referred to. Personally I think it probably is the time when he was railed upon by Nabal, the husband of Abigail, as recorded in the twenty-fifth chapter of First Samuel. Later, God judged Nabal and took him in death and David married Abigail. I think this psalm best fits on that occasion. It is clearly a psalm of someone who is deeply, deeply disturbed.

The opening words of the psalm set before us the problem this man faces.

**Be not silent, O God of my praise!  
For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,  
speaking against me with lying tongues.  
They beset me with words of hate,  
and attack me without cause.  
In return for my love they accuse me,  
even as I make prayer for them.  
So they reward me evil for good,  
and hatred for my love. {Psa 109:1-5 RSV}**

Here is a man who is under attack and that from rather unscrupulous persons. Those who attack him so bitterly are obviously not to be trusted. "They are deceitful," he says, "they are wicked," i.e., they are determined upon evil, and they are thoroughly unscrupulous; they do not care what they say or what they do. With lying tongues they are out to destroy.

Perhaps some of you have had this experience. You have been unjustly accused by someone who has deliberately sought to slander you, to besmirch your character, or ruin your reputation, and you know just how this man felt. Furthermore, these people are wholly unjustified in this attack. He says they do this "without a cause," at least as far as the Psalmist can see, and we take him to be an honest man. He sees absolutely no reason for their accusations. They are afflicting him, upsetting him, and attacking him without him having given them any reason to do so.

In Verses 4-5 it is apparent that this man has tried to remedy the situation, but it has come to a place where it is humanly hopeless. He has tried to answer these people in the right way. He says,

**In return for my love they accuse me,  
even as I make prayer for them.  
So they reward me evil for my good,  
and hatred for my love. {Psa 109:4-5 RSV}**

This man understands that "a soft answer turns away wrath," and he has tried that with them. He has followed the New Testament standard of praying for those who hate him and despitefully use him. It is remarkable, is it not, that here in the Old Testament you find such a clear demonstration of the fulfillment of the New Testament requirement to pray for our enemies. We are to love those who persecute us and try to do good toward them. This man has done that yet it has not altered the situation. His enemies have not ceased their attack; they are just as vicious, just as malicious, just as fiercely hostile as they were before, and now he does not know what to do next. This is the problem that faces him at this point.

Now according to the next verses it sounds as though he gives up. He has tried the right thing, and it doesn't work so he gives up. It is very much as you sometimes hear the Sermon on the Mount quoted. "If someone smites you on the right cheek, turn to him the other cheek" -- and then, POW, let him have it! It almost sounds as though this man is doing this. He has tried the right thing and when it didn't work he lets them have it. Listen to the vitriol that pours out!

**Appoint a wicked man against him;  
let an accuser bring him to trial. [Literally it is, "stand at his right hand" and means to  
accuse him in court.]  
When he is tried, let him come forth guilty;  
let his prayer be counted as sin!**

**May his days be few;  
may another seize his goods!  
May his children be fatherless,  
and his wife a widow!  
May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit!  
May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!  
let there be none to extend kindness to him,  
nor any to pity his fatherless children!  
May his posterity be cut off;  
may his name be blotted out in the second generation!  
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord,  
and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out!  
Let them be before the lord continually;  
and may his memory be cut off from the earth! {Psa 109:6-15 RSV}**

What strong language! What hostility! How fierce is the invective here! Some of you are trying to memorize this so you'll remember to say it the next time a suitable occasion arises! This passage has raised the problem of so-called "imprecatory psalms," these psalms which seem to heap imprecations, maledictions, against people. Many have been troubled by these, and this is the worst of them all. There is no stronger language in the Psalms. We have chosen the toughest one of all to deal with.

How do you explain language like this in the Psalms? What do you do with this? Well, it seems to me that the clearest and simplest answer is, this is not one of the imprecatory psalms at all. This man is not saying this himself, but is quoting what his enemies say about him. In Hebrew there is no way of indicating a quotation, as we do in English, with quotation marks. There are no quotation marks in Hebrew, so the Psalmist simply has to run on. But there are several things which give us a clue here:

First, you will notice a very remarkable and immediate change of attitude between Verses 5 and 6. In Verse 5 he says, "They reward me evil for good," (i.e., I am doing good to them; they do evil back), "and hatred for my love." Now it seems to me incredible that a man should so suddenly turn from an expression of love and of warmth to one of such violent and appalling invective. So there is a drastic change of attitude which comes in here.

Second, there is a change of number that occurs. We must have a little lesson in grammar here. Notice that in Verses 1-5 you have his enemies referred to in the plural, "them," "they;" but now suddenly it has become "he." If this Psalmist is going on now describing what he wants to have happen to his enemies, it is difficult to explain this sudden change of number. Why does it suddenly become "he" instead of "they"? But if what he is doing is quoting what they say about him, it makes perfect sense. The harsh words fit best in the mouths of the psalmist's accusers. This is confirmed by the fact that in the Jewish version of the Old Testament, Verse 20, which is the conclusion of this quoted portion, instead of reading "May this be the reward of my accusers from the Lord," says instead, "This is the reward which my accusers seek from the Lord, those who speak evil against my life!"

This would confirm, therefore, that this entire portion from Verse 6 through Verse 19 should be put in quotation marks. Perhaps you might like to mark your own Bible that way. He is simply revealing what these people have said about him that distresses him so, and which makes him cry out before God. They are so fierce and unrelenting in their hostility, and from their language, we get a glimpse of the intensity of their hatred.

In Verses 6-15 there is a revelation of the strategy they have devised against him. Notice what they are after.

First, they want to rig a false trial. They want to get him before the law on a false charge and arrange a false witness to accuse him and thus gain a legal condemnation. Note the cleverness of these people. They are not going to waylay him and murder him; they would be open to charges themselves if they did that, but they are going to destroy him legally. They have figured out a way by which they can rig the trial and get him

condemned, and do it all legally. Then they mean to accomplish his death. They want a death sentence.

**May his days be few... {Psa 109:8a RSV}  
May his children be fatherless,  
and his wife a widow! {Psa 109:9 RSV}  
May his children wander about and beg ... etc. {Psa 109:10 RSV}**

Clearly they are out to destroy him physically.

Then they want to take everything he has. Their hatred is so terrible that they want to leave nothing for his wife and children but wish to destroy them as well.

**May the creditor seize all that he has; {Psa 109:11a RSV}  
Let there be none to extend kindness to him,  
nor any to pity his fatherless children! {Psa 109:12 RSV}**

Finally, so fierce, so appalling is their revenge that they even want to carry it on before God himself. The attempt is made on their part to seek his eternal damnation. Their prayer is,

**May his posterity be cut off;  
may his name be blotted out in the second generation! {Psa 109:13 RSV}  
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord, {Psa 109:14a RSV}  
Let them be before the Lord continually;  
and may his memory be cut off from the earth! {Psa 109:15 RSV}**

To put it bluntly, what they are asking for is that God should damn this man. They are saying, "God, damn him!" Now is it not rather revealing that this is the most common oath heard today? When hatred rises in the heart, the easiest thing for men to say is "God, damn him!" Hatred seeks the ultimate destruction, even the eternal destruction of an individual. The ultimate wish of hate is that God would damn.

Now the psalmist lists the reasons his enemies give for this vituperation. What is it this man has done that makes them so vindictive, so filled with fierce hatred? He lists the two reasons they set forth. First,

**For he did not remember to show kindness,  
but pursued the poor and needy  
and the brokenhearted to their death. {Psa 109:16 RSV}**

From their point of view that was the way it looked. You can see in this that strange twisting of reason that occurs when we act in self defense; that strange rationalizing by which we appear to be ourselves the victims of injustice, even though we may well deserve what is happening to us. This is what these men are feeling. They are blaming this poor man, saying that he did not remember to show kindness but pursued the poor and needy and brokenhearted to their death, but all the time it was they who were doing it.

I am struck by how prevalent this is in human nature. Some of you may remember that just a few weeks ago a trial was concluded in San Mateo where a man was on trial for his life. He was charged with the rape and murder of a young woman who stopped by his service station late one night to get the lights on her car fixed. In a very cruel and terrible manner he had destroyed this woman. All the ugly facts were brought out at the trial and the jury brought in their verdict. He was found guilty and the judge sentenced him to death. According to the papers, when the sentence was pronounced the parents of this man stood up and shook their fists at the judge and the jury and threatened them, charging them with injustice, although the man was caught red-handed in his guilt. There is this strange reaction in humanity which blames another for the things we ourselves have caused.

The second reason for his enemies' hatred is like the first. They said of him,

**He loved to curse; let curses come on him!  
He did not like blessing; may it be far from him!**

**He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, {Psa 109 17-18a RSV}**

Again they are blaming him to justify their own cursing. They have just cursed him, they have just said, "May God damn you!" But to justify it they say, "Well, that's what he said to us!" Again, this is human nature, is it not? I remember seeing two children fighting, one of whom happened to be my own. I broke up the quarrel and said to them, "Who started this?" The boy said, "She did! She hit me back!" How true that is to our nature. We love to blame the other. We accuse others of the very things for which we are guilty. That is what is happening here.

Notice how they intensify this.

**may it [these curses] soak into his body like water,  
like oil into his bones!  
May it be like a garment which he wraps round him,  
like a belt with which he daily girds himself! {Psa 109:18b-19 RSV}**

So terrible is their hatred, so malevolent is their fierce reaction, that they intensify language to the ultimate refinement of malice. They pour out invective upon him to justify their own hate.

Before we go on to look at the psalmist's reaction perhaps it might be well to note one further thing in this section. In verse 8 are words which are taken by the Holy Spirit and applied, in the New Testament, to Judas Iscariot.

**May his days be few;  
may another seize his goods! {Psa 109:8 RSV}**

Or literally, "May another take his office!" You will recall that in the first chapter of Acts the eleven apostles are gathered together to appoint a successor to Judas. Peter quotes from two of the psalms to justify that appointment. One of them is Psalm 69 which stated, "May his habitation be left desolate," and the other is this verse from Psalm 109, "May another take his office!" This has raised the suggestion that perhaps this whole passage applied to Judas, that it is all a prediction of the terrible fate that would await Judas Iscariot; his wife and children would be left desolate and he himself would be damned of God.

Perhaps that view is justified in the light of the New Testament. Remember that it was Jesus who said, "Woe unto that man by whom the son of man is betrayed. It were better for that man that he had not been born," {Matt 26:24 KJV}. At any rate this indicates that cursing, though men do it rather lightly, has a terrible reality about it. There is really such a thing as being cursed. There is such a thing as being damned. What makes cursing so terrible is that men take it upon themselves to pronounce this sentence of damnation and they do it in the lightest way, as though it were nothing. When you hear someone say, "God damn you!" remember that it is a terrible malediction, an awful thing which only God has the right to say.

Now let us look at the reaction of this man. Here he is in this terrible situation with his enemies attempting to take his life. He has tried the right way to react but it does not seem to work. He does not know what to do now. He cries before God, in the literal rendering of Verse 20,

**This is the reward which my accusers seek from the Lord,  
those who speak evil against my life! {Psa 109:20 Literal}**

What shall he do? Well, what he does is beautiful. He commits the whole matter to the Lord in prayer. This closing prayer of the psalm is a marvelous picture of the right attitude, the right reaction, the right way to handle this kind of a situation. Listen to it.

**But thou, O God my Lord,  
deal on my behalf for thy name's sake;  
because thy steadfast love is good, deliver me!  
For I am poor and needy,  
and my heart is stricken within me.**

**I am gone, like a shadow at evening;  
I am shaken off like a locust.  
My knees are weak through fasting;  
my body has become gaunt.  
I am an object of scorn to my accusers;  
when they see me, they wag their heads. {Psa 109:21-25 RSV}**

Notice that the first thing he does is to commit the cause to God. "Thou, O God of my life, deal on my behalf for thy name's sake!" Here is a man who understands the nature of reality. He understands how life operates. He understands the truth behind the admonition of Scripture, both in the Old and New Testament, "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord; I will repay," {Deut 32:35, Rom 12:19}. Vengeance is mine! Don't you try it, don't you attempt it. Don't try to "get even" because if you do you'll only make the matter worse. You will perpetuate a feud that may go on for years, even for centuries, destroying, wrecking, damaging others and creating all kinds of difficulties both for them and for you. No, no, vengeance is mine, says the Lord. I am the only one who has the wisdom adequate to handle this kind of a problem. This man recognizes that and commits the cause to God.

But he also understands something else. He understands that God's name is involved in all this. When God's people are being persecuted then God is also being persecuted. His name is involved in it. It is up to God to defend that name, not man. Recall that when Saul of Tarsus was converted on the Damascus road and the Lord Jesus appeared to him in light brighter than the sun, that Saul cried out to him and said, "Lord, who are you?" Jesus said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." Saul was persecuting the Christians, but when he was persecuting them he was also persecuting the Lord. God is involved in his people's trials. God is involved in what happens to his own. The Psalmist, understanding this, commits the whole cause to God and says, "God, you deal with it. It is your problem. Your name is involved; you handle it on my behalf for your name's sake." Is that not a thoroughly Christian reaction? Listen to Peter as he shows us that this was exactly the reaction of the Lord Jesus, himself.

**He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. {1 Pet 2:22-23 RSV}**

Peter says he has left us an example that we should follow in his steps. He trusted himself to him who judges justly.

Dr. F. B. Meyer has said,

We make a mistake in trying always to clear ourselves. We should be wiser to go straight on, humbly doing the next thing, and leaving God to vindicate us. "He shall bring forth thy righteousness as the light, and thy judgment as the noon day." There may come hours in our lives when we shall be misunderstood, slandered, falsely accused. At such times it is very difficult not to act on the policy of the men around us in the world. They at once appeal to law and force and public opinion. But the believer takes his case into a higher court and lays it before his God.

That is what this man has done. He has laid it before God. Then he cries out for strength. He himself is in need.

**For I am poor and needy,  
and my heart is stricken within me.  
I am gone, like a shadow at evening,  
I am shaken off like a locust.  
My knees are weak through fasting;  
my body has become gaunt. {Psa 109:22-24 RSV}**

It is a difficult thing to endure slander. It is hard; it does something to you; takes something out of you. When I read this my reaction was, "Lord, is this what I do to people when I accuse them? Is this what I have done to others? Made them feel like this? What an awful thing!" This man cries out to God for help in his physical weakness, in his humiliation and the scorn that he feels heaped upon him.

Then he asks for vindication, and he does it on two grounds.

**Help me. O Lord my God!  
Save me according to thy steadfast love!  
Let them know that this is thy hand;  
thou, O lord, hast done it!  
let them curse, but do thou bless! {Psa 109:26-28a RSV}**

The version as we have it puts the next two sentences in the optative mood, i.e., "may this happen," "let this happen." It should, however, be stated in the indicative: it is really a statement of fact.

**My assailants shall be put to shame,  
and thy servant shall be glad!  
My accusers shall be clothed with dishonor;  
they shall be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle! {Psa 109:28b-29 Indicative Mood}**

Now notice what this man is doing. He is asking God to vindicate him, but to do it in such a way as to reveal the fact that God is doing it. He says, "Now, Lord, let them curse. I can't stop them, and you may not choose to, but if you let them curse, bless me anyhow so that they will see that you are not cursing me; it is they who are doing it. Give me inner strength, inner blessing, so that I can remain calm, untroubled and undistressed in the midst of the cursing. Then men will see that it is your hand that is holding me up, your hand that is strengthening me. Second, do it in such a way as to make the accusers ashamed of themselves." Now he does not mean "put to shame" in the sense of heaping scorn and humiliation upon them; he means let them be ashamed of themselves, let them see the facts in such a light that eventually they'll be sorry, be ashamed, that they ever attempted anything like this, because it is so unjustified. "Lord, vindicate me in that way."

Once again this is exactly in line with the New Testament. Again in First Peter, Chapter 3, Peter says,

**And [you who are abused] keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are abused,  
those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. {1 Pet 3:16 RSV}**

It is the same thing, you see. If you are in this situation, keep your conscience clear. Don't return in kind. Don't strike back. Don't curse, don't revile, don't attack, don't try to get even, don't avenge yourself; but walk with God. Those who revile your good behavior will be brought to shame, brought at last to the place where they are ashamed of themselves.

Someone has beautifully expressed that truth this way:

When you are neglected or snubbed or insulted, and you're able to thank God for the experience, accepting it as allowed by him for your spiritual development, that is victory.

When you're seeking to serve him faithfully and you find yourself criticized severely for the way you do it, and you accept the criticism patiently for his sake -- that is victory.

When you are slandered and your motives are impugned and you do not complain but receive it in love and as a measure of the filling up of that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ -- that is victory.

Such a victory can only be won in the yieldedness of self to Christ. "Thanks be to God who causes me to triumph through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

This is the note on which this psalm closes. It is a note of ringing affirmation, of confidence.

**With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord;  
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.  
For he stands at the right hand of the needy,  
to save him from those who condemn him to death. {Psa 109:30-31 RSV}**



Recall that in Verse 6 this man's enemies had wanted to appoint an accuser to stand at his right hand and condemn him. But he closes the psalm by saying that he realizes it is God who stands at the right hand of the needy, God who makes their cause his own, God who knows a thousand ways to work it all out without violence, without the perpetuation of hatred, without the destruction of lives; to bring truth to light and to establish the facts in such a way that even the accusers will be ashamed of themselves that they ever attempted such a thing. How wise it is to commit our cause to God in times like this.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, these words have found every one of us this morning. We have all been guilty, we have all felt feelings of resentment rising up within us. We have all wanted to strike back, to pour invective against another. And we have done it, too, at times, Lord. We ask you to forgive us that, and to teach us from these psalms how to handle such problems. Help us to have confidence in the fact that you, Lord, know how to work these things out, and that we do not need to have our little pound of flesh. Rather it is you, Lord, your great cause and your great name which needs to be vindicated and justified. Help us to follow the example of this Psalmist to turn these issues over to you and quietly go on trusting you, just as the Lord Jesus did, to work it out to your glory. We ask in your name, Amen.

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By: Ray C. Stedman  
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## **THE KING IN HIS BEAUTY**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

At Christmastime it is very fitting that we should examine some of the psalms we have completely bypassed till now -- the Messianic psalms, i.e., the psalms which look forward to the coming of Messiah. There are a number of them among these folksongs of faith which we call "psalms," and both Jewish and Christian commentators agree that they do indeed portray the Messiah.

Some of them are well known. They cover various facets of the life and ministry of Messiah. Psalm 22, for instance, is one of the most striking and graphic descriptions we have in the entire Bible of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There we are told that they would pierce his hands and his feet, and part his garments and gamble for them. All of this was fulfilled, as you know, at the foot of the cross. Psalm 16 is a wonderful description of the resurrection of Jesus. On the Day of Pentecost, when the apostle Peter stood up and spoke to the gathered multitudes after the manifestation of the Holy Spirit's presence there, he used this psalm to prove to them that the Scriptures had foretold that Jesus would be raised from the dead. Psalm 69 tells us of the betrayal of Judas, and how the Lord would react to that betrayal. These Messianic psalms give us facts about the ministry of Christ that we would not have known otherwise -- even from the Gospels. Psalm 110 is a wonderful description of his present ministry with us -- what the book of Hebrews calls the "Melchizedek priesthood" of Jesus.

You remember that Jesus himself told us that the psalms spoke of him. In the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke's gospel, as Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room after his resurrection, he said to them, "These are the words which I spoke unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me," {Luke 24:44 RSV}. As he had read the psalms he had noted in them various things concerning himself, and these were fulfilled in his

ministry.

There are three psalms which portray the King:

Psalm 2 is a picture of the King in his authority: "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples imagine a vain thing?" {Psa 2:1 RSV}. Here are the nations of the world, all upset. God says, in the midst of this, "I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion," {cf, Psa 2:6}. And he warns the nations, "Kiss the Son, ... lest you perish from the way," {cf, Psa 2:12}.

Then in Psalm 72 you have another beautiful description of Messiah as King. This is a wonderful picture of the day which is coming, when Messiah shall reign throughout the earth. All the earth shall be restored in beauty and splendor, and peace shall fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.

And here in Psalm 45 we will be looking at the King in his beauty. It is a beautiful glimpse of the perfection of the character and the beauty of Jesus Christ.

As were all the psalms, this one was built around an historic occasion. It evidently was originally written on the occasion of the marriage of a king, probably King Solomon, many scholars feel, at the time of his marriage to the daughter of the king of Tyre, which is mentioned in the book of Chronicles. But here is a description which goes far beyond the earthly wedding service. These words could never be limited to an earthly king; they clearly go beyond that. Even the Jewish commentators on this passage recognize that this is a picture of Messiah.

The first nine verses describe to us the King in his beauty. They open with a personal note from the author:

**My heart overflows with a goodly theme;  
I address my verses to the king;  
my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe. {Psa 45:1 RSV}**

You can see from that that this psalm is indeed what the superscription says: a love song, a song inspired by the love of this writer for the King he sees. And, as the superscription also tells us, it is a Maskil, a teaching psalm. It is designed to teach us something about the beauty of the King.

So, as we read this psalm through, let us see that it is inspired by a heart which overflows with a sense of love and adoration for One with whom he has fallen in love. There is no other way to interpret this but to see it as applying to and being fulfilled in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This writer confesses an eagerness to write. Words flow easily and "my tongue," he says, "is like the pen of a ready writer." When my son-in-law, Steve Kappe, left for Vietnam just one week after his marriage to my daughter, we started receiving letters every day. Week after week, day after day, there came a letter from Steve. Unfortunately they were not addressed to the family, so I don't know what was in them! But I was struck by this remarkable phenomenon. Steve had never been a letter writer before, but now the words just flowed from his pen. That is what love does to you. And here is one who has fallen in love with the King in his beauty, and now he describes it to us -- first of all, the general impression that he creates:

**You are the fairest of the sons of men;  
grace is poured upon your lips;  
therefore God has blessed you for ever. {Psa 45:2 RSV}**

"What an incomparable person this is," says the writer. There is no one like him, no one who can compare to him. We get a hint here of the physical appearance of Jesus Christ. I know there are many who have tried to guess what Jesus looked like, but it is amazing that in the Gospels we are never told what he looked like. No hint is given to us of his physical appearance. Many painters have tried to portray how he looked. Some have felt that perhaps he was very ugly, marred, disfigured, unattractive. They draw that conclusion from the words in Isaiah 52 and 53:

**As many were astonished at him --  
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,  
and his form beyond that of the sons of men -- {Isa 52:14 RSV}**

**he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him,  
and no beauty that we should desire him.  
He was despised and rejected by men; {Isa 53:2b-3a RSV}**

But I have never belonged to that school of thought, because I feel those words are a description of what happened to him on the cross. But our Lord in his lifetime was evidently a most attractive person. Everywhere he went children flocked to him, and the multitudes followed him -- not only to hang upon his words, but also because they were drawn by his beauty. As this writer says, "He was fairer than the sons of men."

Incidentally, I do not think it can be established from the Scriptures that he had long hair. I know there are many today who say they want to look like Jesus, so they let their hair grow down to their shoulders. But Jesus did not look that way. I am sure of that, because Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says that it is a shame for a man to have long hair, that it is basically a denial of his masculinity, that even nature teaches us this. Now, Jesus undoubtedly had a beard, and there is nothing at all wrong with a beard or a mustache or long sideburns. But long hair is a different matter. It is interesting that statues dug up from Greek and Roman ruins of that period all depict men with short hair. The reason why artists depict Jesus with long, shoulder-length hair is that this convention was established during the Middle Ages by artists who simply adopted the style of their own day. But there is no basis for this in the Scriptures.

Jesus did not have long hair, but he was fairer than the sons of men. We capture this in a hymn which is a favorite of many: "Fairest Lord Jesus". That captures this very thought: "Thou art fairer than all the sons of men."

But most remarkable and impressive, says the writer, are the words which came from his lips: "...grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you for ever." Luke tells us that on one occasion Jesus went into the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town, and there among the people who had watched him grow up as a boy, he stood up and asked for the roll of the prophet Isaiah. He opened it up and read to them the words from the sixty-first chapter which are predictive of him and his ministry:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. {Luke 4:18-19; cf, Isa 61:1-3a RSV}**

Then he closed the roll and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," {Luke 4:21b RSV}. And then he went on to preach other things. At the close of the message it is recorded that "all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth," {Luke 4:22a RSV}. These words captivated men, as they saw that here was One who held the secrets of life, who understood what life was like. This is what made the crowds follow him and the multitudes seek him out, forgetting their work, their lunch, and everything else, in order that they might hang upon his words. No wonder they said of him, "Never did man speak like this man!" He himself said that his words would have this power. He said to his disciples, "If you continue in my words, then you shall be my disciples indeed. You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free," {cf, John 8:31-32 RSV}. That has been the experience of millions through the generations since, as they have listened to the words of Jesus and have been set free to be the men and women God intended them to be.

Many writers have tried to capture, in one way or another, the incomparable character of Jesus Christ. Not all attempts are successful, but here is one which has always struck me as being very realistic and true:

More than 1900 years ago there was a man born contrary to the laws of life. This man lived in poverty and was reared in obscurity. He did not travel extensively. Only once did he cross the boundary of the country in

which he lived, and that was during his exile in childhood. He possessed neither wealth nor influence. His relatives were inconspicuous and had neither training nor formal education. Yet in infancy he startled a king, in childhood he puzzled doctors, in manhood he ruled the course of nature, walked upon the billows as if pavements, and hushed the sea to sleep. He healed the multitudes without medicine and made no charge for his service. He never wrote a book. Yet all the libraries of the country could not hold the books that have been written about him. He never wrote a song. Yet he has furnished the theme for more songs than all the songwriters combined. He never founded a college. But all the schools put together cannot boast of having so many students. He never marshaled an army nor drafted a soldier nor fired a gun. Yet no leader ever had more volunteers, who have, under his orders, made more rebels stack their arms and surrender without a shot fired. He never practiced psychiatry. And yet he has healed more broken hearts than all the doctors far and near. He stands forth upon the highest pinnacle of heaven's glory, proclaimed of God, acknowledged by angels, adored by saints, feared by devils, as the living, personal Lord Jesus Christ -- my Lord and Savior.

There also is one whose tongue is like the pen of a ready writer, and who has written a goodly theme concerning the King.

Next the Psalmist goes on to give us another picture of the victories of the King:

**Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one,  
in your glory and majesty!  
In your majesty ride forth victoriously  
for the cause of truth and to defend the right;  
let your right hand teach you dread deeds!  
Your arrows are sharp  
in the heart of the king's enemies;  
the peoples fall under you. {Psa 45:3-5 RSV}**

This seems to be a complete about-face. Here is One who has been extolled as gracious in his words, but now he is pictured as mighty in his enmity, and he fights and destroys all his enemies. We must remember that in these psalms we have figurative language. This is not a description of actual bloody warfare. The enemies spoken of here are not flesh and blood. Rather, as the apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians 6, "We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places," who hold humanity enslaved. And when this writer is picturing the victories of the King, he is not talking about battles won and bodies slain; he is talking about powers destroyed, and forces made to loosen their grasp, and powers of darkness driven back, and men and women set free to be what God intended them to be. These are the victories of the King.

And he accomplishes them with the weapons of truth and righteousness, Verse 4: "In your majesty ride forth victoriously," and not: for the cause of truth and to defend the right; literally it is: "by means of the truth and humble righteousness." Humble righteousness, i.e., meekness -- that is the quality of Jesus Christ. You know, there is another kind of righteousness -- self-righteousness. Jesus never had that. What the writer is talking about here is that unselfish righteousness which Jesus Christ always manifested, which never made anybody feel uneasy, or feel that he was "holier than thou", but which was perfectly right and true to the character and the being of God. Those are the weapons by which he destroys his enemies: truth and humble righteousness.

Yesterday our Board of Elders met at Dr. Lazier's home. We were sharing some of the things we were thinking about and experiencing lately. Dr. Lazier told us that he had been struck by the fact that in any gathering of businessmen today there are expressions of fear for what is happening in the world. They do not understand why people act the way they do. They can no longer account for the behavior of people, in public or private, on the basis of the old explanations, but people act in strange and unusual ways today. Why is this? Well, it is because, as Paul says, "we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but we are striking out against those dark powers which hold humanity enslaved," {cf, Eph 6:12 KJV}. Dr. Charles Malik, former President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, said, "We must remember that we are still living, as the Germans say, *zwischen den zeiten* (between the times) when demonic forces can quickly soar very high, and can bring about conditions wherein men are no longer able to control the events of their lives." This is what we

are facing.

And, you see, this is what the writer is celebrating -- the mighty power of Jesus Christ to open men's eyes, and to stroke them free from the shackles which bind them -- these illusions that clamp an iron grip on the minds and hearts of people, young and old alike, and hold them in enslavement to do things which destroy themselves and others, and yet which they can seemingly do nothing about, because they do not even see how mixed up their thinking is, how confused they are. What a King is, who rides out in majesty!

The next section describes the nature that he possesses:

**Your divine throne endures for ever and ever.  
Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity;  
you love righteousness and hate wickedness.  
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you  
with the oil of gladness above your fellows; {Psa 45:6-7 RSV}**

These verses are quoted in the opening chapter of Hebrews to prove the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and his superiority to any of the angels. He is not an angel; he is not the highest of the created beings; he himself is God -- yet God become man. Instead of, "Your divine throne..." the Hebrew reads, "Your throne, O God, endures for ever and ever." The reason it is rendered as it is in the Revised Standard Version is not that the revisors were trying to destroy the doctrine of the deity of Jesus. Rather, they were trying to use language which they felt would fit the human situation from which this psalm arose. No Hebrew would ever address a king as, "Your throne, O God..." So, in order to tone down the language to fit the human situation, they made it, "Your divine throne..." But this is what we need to remember about the psalms -- oftentimes their language is exalted beyond any possible application to an earthly being, and then it must be translated the way it is. And here it is, "Your throne, O God..." The King is addressed as God.

Yet the very next sentence says, "Therefore God, your God, has anointed you..." Here is One who is both God -- and yet has a God -- God and man! So the secret of Jesus' incarnation is recorded for us here one thousand years before he appeared on earth. Here is blended this marvelous mystery which caused the shepherds to whisper in awe-struck wonder on the occasion of his birth in Bethlehem, "Emmanuel -- God with us." Think of it! Think of the wonder of this Person, who was himself the mighty God -- and yet became flesh. This is what moves the Apostle Paul to cry out to Timothy, "Great indeed is the mystery of our faith: God was manifested in the flesh!" What an amazing mystery this is! This is what has moved the hymn writers of the Christian faith to write such startled phrases: "The Son of God appears." "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!" "The Immortal dies!" -- all centering on this amazing, remarkable secret: that here is One who blended together the natures of man and God.

And yet as he lived among us, though his deity was there, hidden away, he never acted from it, he never spoke from it. Instead, he relied, as we must rely, upon the imparted life of the Father dwelling within him. Yet he himself was God the Son. This is a mystery which beggars all possible explanation; we cannot grasp it.

Because of this mystery, as we are told here, he was the Anointed One. He fulfilled all the offices for which an anointing was required in the Old Testament: the Prophet, the Priest, and the King. As the Prophet he spoke the words of God in a way which has never been equalled. As the Priest he offered himself as a sacrifice. As the King he ruled the course of nature, and he came rising up from the dead. Death could not hold him, because he was anointed of God: "Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows..." That is a beautiful phrase to describe the Holy Spirit: "the oil of gladness". It was by the Spirit that he did all these things. And it is the Spirit that creates gladness in the human heart. This is the heritage of all who come to know the Son of God. They share with him in this anointing with the oil of gladness.

The final section of this division of the Psalm sets before us the relationship that he desires. What is this all about? Why this marvelous story of One who is fairer than the sons of men, and whose lips are filled with gracious words, who is able to strike the shackles of slavery from people and set them free, and who combines in his own being the character of God and man in a marvelous mystery of union? What is he after, what does he want? Well, the Psalmist tells us. He has come to get married. He has come for a bride:

**your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes of cassia.  
>From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad;  
daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor;  
at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir. {Psa 45:8-9 RSV}**

This describes a marriage service. And traced for us here is a remarkable series of preparations. First of all, he has prepared himself. The writer says, "Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia." Now, these are burial spices. You remember that when the women went to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning, they carried with them a quantity of spices -- myrrh and aloes -- in order to wrap the body of the Lord and preserve it in its death. And yet here these same spices are present at the wedding. What does this mean? Well, that this marriage is made possible out of death, that somehow out of death comes this fragrant incense which makes glorious the scene of the wedding. You can see how beautifully this fits with what the Apostle Paul describes for us in Ephesians 5, when he says that Christ loved the church and gave himself for it, {cf. Eph 5:25}. He died for it. He went into the bonds of death for us. Why? In order that he might present to himself a glorious church, a beautiful bride, without spot or blemish or any such thing. That is what he is after. So he prepared himself for this purpose.

Then, he has prepared a place. We read of where this wedding is to take place: "From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad; daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor..." It is a picture of a beautiful place, and it reminds us immediately of Jesus' words to his disciples before the cross. He said to them, "I am going to prepare a place for you. But if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am you may be also," {cf, John 14:2-3}. That place is being prepared now. It is a place of beauty and glory beyond any possible description. These terms used here are simply a way of suggesting to us what it is like: ivory palaces, filled with music and gladness, with a rejoicing company around.

And finally the bride herself is prepared: "...at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir." In Oriental custom, this golden dress was always presented to the queen by the bridegroom himself. He paid for the golden dress. I have been interested for some time in trying to reestablish scriptural customs for wedding services here in the Western world. It is right for the grooms to pay all the expenses, as they did there! Since I have four daughters, you can understand my urgency in this respect!

But this is also a wonderful picture for us, is it not? Who is it that is preparing us for this day, for this sharing of life together? There is a sense in which we have already entered into this relationship with the Lord, if we belong to his bride, the church of Jesus Christ. Well, it is he who is preparing us. He has clothed us with his own righteousness -- our golden robe. Gold, in Scripture, is always the picture of deity, and this is a hint of what Peter speaks of: "We are made partakers," he says, "of the divine nature," {2 Pet 1:4}. Do you really grasp this? Have you ever really thought that these words are not merely magic poetry? This is true! Jesus Christ is blending our lives with his, and giving us all his position and all his privileges and all his power and all his interests. All that belongs to him belongs to us. One of the things which is most seriously wrong with the church today is that we are forgetting the privileges we have. We do not reckon on them, we do not think about how tremendous they are. Yet here stands the bride, ready to join him, dressed in gold which he has provided.

The next division of the Psalm is addressed to the bride. If anything should be significant to us in this psalm, it is this. Here are the words to the bride:

**Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear;  
forget your people and your father's house;  
and the king will desire your beauty.  
Since he is your lord, bow to him [literally, "worship him"],  
the people of Tyre will sue your favor with gifts,  
even the richest of the people. [Put a period there, because the next phrase really belongs  
with what follows.] {Psa 45:10-12 RSV}**

Two things are said here to the queen. First, "Consider, and incline your ear; forget your people and your

father's house." What does that mean for us today? What is the Psalmist saying to us when he exhorts us as Christians to forget our people and our father's house? What is our father's house? Well, it is the old nature, the place where we were born. It is the Adamic life, the flesh, the self-centered life with which we started, the process of depending upon self, by which we have been operating. Forget this, turn from it, reject it, "forget your people and your father's house; and..." What? "...the king will desire your beauty." Is not that beautiful? Do you see what he is saying there? Have you ever thought, when the Lord Jesus throughout the Scriptures is exhorting you to give yourself to him, to forget your old, selfish, self-centered way of life and to make yourself available to him, an instrument of his working, that you are arousing a desire and a hunger in his heart for you, that he desires your beauty? This is, of course, put into the intimate language of a marriage relationship -- a husband and wife. He is exhorting her to forget the old in order that he might desire the new.

And the second thing said to the queen: "Since he is your lord, bow to him; [Worship him, acknowledge his Lordship. And the result will be,] the people of Tyre will sue your favor with gifts, even the riches of the people." Throughout the Scriptures the city of Tyre is used as a picture of the world. He is saying that if the church begins to worship its Lord as it should, the world will start coming to our door asking for help. One of our problems at present is that the church has stopped worshipping its Lord. We do not bow to him anymore, do not acknowledge him. He is no longer King in our hearts; he is more like a constitutional monarch who is sort of a figurehead to whom we pay a little homage now and then. Once in awhile we toss him a dime or two to keep him happy. But we do not follow him; we do not obey him. This is why the world looks at the church as irrelevant and foolish, a waste of time. But when the church begins to worship its Lord again, and to glory in his being, and to count on the riches of his grace, and to honor and exalt and obey him, then the people of the world will court the favor of the church, and will come again for wisdom and help, and for light in their darkness.

The rest of the psalm is simply a description of the beauty of the wedding. We will read it quickly, beginning with verse 13, and will adopt the marginal reading:

**All glorious is the princess within, [that is, her inner life is right]  
gold embroidery is her clothing; [Her outer life also.]  
in many-colored robes she is led to the king,  
with her virgin companions, her escort, in her train.  
With joy and gladness they are led along  
as they enter the palace of the king. {Psa 45:13b-15 RSV}**

That is another way of describing the coming event which Paul speaks of in the eighth chapter of Romans, when he says that the whole creation is now held in bondage and travail, groaning in pain, waiting for the day when what God is doing through this present age will suddenly be unveiled, and the sons of God will stand forth in manifestation. In that day, he says, the whole creation will be delivered from bondage, and it will shout and sing as in a great wedding celebration.

On that day, the bride of Christ will be claimed in open acknowledgment for what she is, having been fashioned through this period of time. This is what God is doing now. The important things happening today are not what is recorded in our newspapers. What is happening today that is important, what will be reckoned throughout eternity as the most staggering thing that has occurred in our day, is what is taking place right now, right in our hearts -- changes of attitude, deliverance from various bad habits, freedom to be what we ought to be, the fact that love is beginning to fill our homes, and that we react less frequently in resentment and bitterness toward one another but are beginning to learn how to show forth the love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Those are the important things.

The psalm concludes with two verses which are the promise of God toward this mighty King. Rather than upon his human ancestry, the Davidic line, the emphasis in that day will be upon those who are linked with him as sons. The book of Hebrews says that the Father is in the process of bringing many sons to glory. This is what he is doing right now.

**Instead of your fathers shall be your sons;  
you will make them princes in all the earth.**

**I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations;  
therefore the peoples will praise you for ever and ever. {Psa 45;16-17 RSV}**

Is this not another way of saying what Paul so beautifully says in Philippians?

**Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:9-11 RSV}**

What a king! The king in all his beauty!

**Prayer:**

Our Father, we thank you for this glimpse, through this Old Testament Psalmist, of the beauty of the Lord Jesus Christ. How our hearts are stirred again by this story -- which is told out in this old, old Christmas tale -- of One who left heaven's glory and came to dwell among us, in all the coldness and bondage and enslavement of earth, in order that we might be free to be with him some day in all the glory of his being and to share his glory for all eternity. How tremendous this is, Lord! What purpose and meaning it gives to life! Help us to rejoice in it this day, we pray in his name, Amen.

Title: The King in His Beauty

By: Ray C. Stedman

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## **BEST WISHES FOR THE NEW YEAR**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

I never start a new year without a sense of adventure, and also an awareness of peril, of danger. I do not know how you feel, but I feel a little grip of fear, as well as the thrill of excitement, as we look forward to the new year and a new decade. Standing at the gateway of this new decade makes us feel very much like explorers entering an unknown land where we do not know what lies ahead -- what perils may beset us, or what joys await us. We have passed through "the sobering sixties." What will we call the seventies when we get through them? Will they be the "shining seventies," or the "shattering, saddening seventies"? It is hard to know.

The twentieth psalm is wonderfully suitable for this occasion because this is a song that the people of Israel sang when the king went forth to battle. Before he went out to face the peril and uncertainty of war, they sang this psalm as a prayer for his safety and victory. It was not just a nice custom on their part, as when we gather on New Year's Eve to sing "Auld Lang Syne" and fill our hearts with nostalgia. It was a genuine prayer, an expression of their faith, a song of trust in the power of the living God who would keep the king and his armies in the midst of desperate battle.

The psalm falls into three natural divisions. The first five verses are the people's prayer for the king. In Verses 6-8 we have the king's response. Verse 9 is a shout of benediction by the people.

You remember that the New Testament tells us that God has made every believer in Jesus Christ both a king and a priest. So when we read Old Testament stories about kings and priests of old, we are perfectly justified in applying them to ourselves. They are designed to teach us how a king ought to act and how a priest ought to



behave, to lead us through experiences that kings and priests have, and to show us the way out. On this New Year Sunday let us pray this prayer together for each other, for we are all kings and priests here and we are all going out to battle in 1970.

It opens with a very realistic recognition of the situation:

**The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!  
The name of the God of Jacob protect you. {Psa 20:1 RSV}**

Right from the start there is recognition that the king is heading into a day of trouble. It is not easy to fight battles. And the battles that lie ahead of us in 1970 promise to be unusually severe. Did you read in last night's Palo Alto Times a small item taken from a Hong Kong newspaper? The article was headed: "Words that were meditated upon after having read the comments of the leaders of state and the thinkers of the day." There followed 161 words, every one of which was the same word: gloomy. "Gloomy, gloomy, gloomy, gloomy..." That was all the writer could say after reading the comments of today's leaders.

Certainly that is apropos. We do not know what lies ahead, but we do know that we have never faced such a time of peril and danger to the human race as we are facing today. What awaits us is no joke. It is going to be tough, really tough. I can not sum it up any better than John Mullett, one of our young people, has done in the opening paragraphs of an editorial published in the Sunnyvale High School newspaper.

Things are happening, and they're happening fast: at this very moment, millions are starving in Biafra, India, and Asia. Overpopulation is threatening every country in the world, including ours. Violence is increasing by leaps and bounds. Scientists predict that within the next few years, the world's food shortage will start affecting the United States seriously. Man is now capable of completely wiping himself out hundreds of times over with the pushing of some buttons. Pollution is very real -- the history of the automobile in America can be read by the layers of lead from car exhaust in the remote snows of Greenland. DDT has been found in seals from the far north...

1970 could be a dangerous year to live in.

There are considerably more risks in living today than there were even five years ago: the quagmire in the East called "Vietnam" is taking its death toll daily. The nightmare of violence in America today is killing and smashing many young people, and it looks as if it's here to stay. Crime, and I'm talking about murders and rapes and stealing, is rapidly increasing...

Well, that is nothing new, is it? We know that the problems which have been hanging on the periphery of our nation and of our lives have now moved overhead. The dark clouds can no longer be avoided. And they are going to come home to us much more personally in 1970, and all through the seventies, than they ever have before. They are going to park in our driveways, and sit on our doorsteps, and climb into bed with us, and grip our hearts with the clammy fist of fear, in this coming decade. A day of trouble lies ahead, and there can be no escape from it -- personally, or nationally. How are you going to find your way through? Well, the Psalmist, David the king, gives us the answer. His day, too, was one of trouble:

**The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!  
The name of the God of Jacob protect you! {Psa 20:1 RSV}**

There is where our refuge lies -- in the name of the God of Jacob. Only God is adequate for the situation. Only he can tell what dangers lie ahead. Only he has the wisdom and foresight to steer a course through all the various perils. If you are not resting upon the God of Jacob, you will never make it. That is what this Psalmist is saying, and he drew upon a wealth of personal experience.

Why does he say "the God of Jacob"? I am so glad he chose that title. There are two men in the Bible who have always encouraged me greatly. In the New Testament it is Peter, with his handicap of congenital foot-in-mouth disease, because I suffer from the same malady. In the Old Testament it is Jacob -- Jacob, the

maneuverer, the manipulator, the wheeler-dealer, the Big Time Operator. He thought he always had to maneuver everybody, to manipulate them, in order to bring a situation around to the way he wanted it. He depended upon his wits, his wisdom, his cunning, in order to accomplish what he wanted. The result, for people like that, is always that they are constantly short-changing themselves. The very thing they think they are protecting -- they end up destroying. They always find themselves coming out with the short end of the bargain because no man is adequate for that kind of living.

But God found a way to set Jacob free from that kind of thinking. Jacob had a God, and his God finally taught him, lesson after painful lesson through the years, to abandon that way of life, that way of thinking, and to come at last to trust and to worship. Hebrews 11 tells us that Jacob was one of the great heroes of faith because he finally learned to lean on the top of his staff and to worship. By then he did not feel he had to maneuver everything; he could wait on God and worship, while God acted. That is why God is called here "the God of Jacob."

What do you and I do when we face a day of trouble? We tend to panic, don't we? We want to cast about for some kind of maneuver to accomplish what we want. We tend immediately to start manipulating, bringing pressure, trying to finagle the situation -- like Jacob, exactly. But the God of Jacob is our refuge. May the name of the God of Jacob protect you in 1970.

In the second verse we have the procedure by which the help of the God of Jacob will come to us:

**May he send you help<  
and give you support from Zion! {Psa 20:2 RSV}**

That is wonderful -- "help from the sanctuary"! You who have been studying the psalms with us know that the sanctuary is always a picture of the place where we meet with God. In Israel it was the temple, the place where the Israelite came to get his thoughts straightened out, to get his thinking corrected. There he met with God, there he heard the word of God, the mind and the thoughts of God.

You will recall that in the seventy-third psalm the psalmist is deeply troubled by the prosperity of the wicked, that perennial problem which can still bother us: Why do the ungodly prosper, while the righteous seem to be downtrodden all the time? Why do the wicked strut their way through the earth so that nothing ever seems to go wrong for them, etc. This had upset him -- until he finally went into the sanctuary. There he began to perceive their end. There he began to see the whole story, he began to see the full picture, and his thoughts were corrected. This is what the sanctuary does.

For us the sanctuary, obviously, is the Scriptures. There is where we get help. It is there that our minds are illuminated, that we begin to see the world the way it is, not the way it appears to be. There is not one of us who has not already learned that life is not the way it seems to be, that what looks to be the answer and what we are convinced at first is the way things are, often turns out to be exactly the opposite. Life is filled with illusion, with deceit; things are not what they appear to be. Doesn't your heart cry for somebody to tell you the truth, to tell you the way things really are, to open your eyes to what is going on? Well, that is what the Bible is for. That is what it does. And unless you are in the Scriptures there is no help. This is the provision God has made for the help of the God of Jacob to come to you. "May you find help in the sanctuary, in the Scriptures," is the Psalmist's prayer, "that your eyes might be enlightened and you might understand."

It always amazes me how many Christians fail to employ the Scriptures when they are in difficulty. If your television set breaks down, what do you do? You call for the repair man. You get him to come over promptly so you won't miss "Bonanza". If your water pipes begin to leak, what do you do? You send for the plumber. If you are slapped with a lawsuit, you call up a lawyer. If your tooth begins to ache, you phone Dr. Lazier or, if it is bad enough, Dr. Edrington -- he'll pull it. We seem to know instinctively what to do when some of these physical things go wrong. But what amazes me again and again is that people can have their hearts broken, they can be depressed of spirit, or sick with shame or guilt, or driven half mad with fear or worry, and their Bible lies unopened, its promises unclaimed, even unread. They desperately cast around for some kind of help, when the help already provided is ignored. Is that not amazing? Why do we live that way? Why do we act so stupidly in that area of our lives?

I am indebted to a friend for sending me this week a wonderful quotation of President Woodrow Wilson:

**I am sorry for men who do not read the Bible every day. I wonder why they deprive themselves of the strength and of the pleasure? It is one of the most singular books in the world, for every time you open it some old text that you have read a score of times suddenly beams with new meaning. There is no other book that I know of, of which this is true. There is no other book that yields its meaning so personally, that seems to fit itself so intimately to the very spirit that is seeking its guidance.**

That is a wonderful word from the twenty-sixth President of the United States.

Help from the sanctuary, and support from Zion. Zion is another name for Jerusalem, the capital of the kingdom, the headquarters. In the Scriptures it stands as a symbol of the invisible kingdom of God with which we are surrounded, made up of ministering angels sent forth to minister to those who are to be the heirs of salvation. In other words, all the invisible help that God can give you in the day of trouble, in the hour of pressure, is made available by prayer.

Remember that in the garden in Gethsemane, as he was praying and sweating drops of blood, in the height of Jesus' agony an angel appeared and ministered to him and strengthened him. That angel was made visible to him in order that we might be taught a lesson of what happens when we pray. I have never seen an angel, but I know that I have experienced the ministry of angels. I have gone into prayer depressed, downcast, discouraged, defeated, but while I have prayed I have felt my spirits caught up, changed, and strengthened. I came out calm, at rest, and at peace. Why? Because I have received help from Zion, from the invisible kingdom of angels waiting to minister to those who are struggling through a time of trouble. Does that not encourage you in facing 1970?

But that is not all the encouragement available. In Verse 3 we have the basis and the guarantee upon which help rests.

**May he remember all your offerings,  
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices! Selah. {Psa 20:3 RSV}**

The offerings of Israel were the meal offerings, the cereal offerings, and the sacrifices of bulls, goats, lambs, and calves, pigeons, and other animals. What did they mean? Well, those sacrifices, we well know, are pictures of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the great sacrifice. And these offerings speak of the basis that he has laid, and of the guarantee which that basis gives us that our prayers will be answered. How do you know that God will help you in the reading of Scripture and in prayer? Because of the sacrifice of the Son of God.

He has given himself in order to remove any hindrance of God's love toward us. In the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus our sins and our guilt were taken care of completely. So there is no hindrance at all of God's mercy and ministry to us. Therefore he can pour it out upon us without restraint, no matter what we have done, as we confess our sins and receive the forgiveness of his grace. That is wonderful. That is why the writer says, "Selah," at this point. It means, "Stop and think. Pause for a moment and think about this." I think the Apostle Paul puts it so beautifully in Romans 8:32: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"

Is that not marvelous? There is your guarantee that God will be with you in 1970! He who spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all, while we were yet enemies, now that we are his children, now that we are friends, will he not with him freely give us all things?

You see, when you come to God in prayer on that basis, you are praying in Jesus' name. That is what that means. "In Jesus' name" is not a little magic formula you tack on at the end of a prayer to make it work.

"In Jesus' name" means that you are praying on the basis of his sacrifice. You are resting on the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that is why you expect God to answer your prayers. That is why the Psalmist

says, "May he remember those sacrifices!" In Verse 4 we have the extent to which this help is available:

**May he grant you your heart's desire,  
and fulfill all your plans! {Psa 20:4 RSV}**

When our hearts have been cleansed by the word of God and by prayer, then what is left is what God wants for us. Basically, every believer in Jesus Christ wants what God wants. We are one spirit with him. And what do we want? What do you want in 1970? If you were to put it into words, what do you want, more deeply than anything else? Immediately, of course, you would eliminate from consideration all the things that you might like to have, because they are not really what you want, are they? What you really want is to be a happy, whole person. You want to be confident, courageous, able to cope with situations, able to handle what comes, and to be trusting and loving. Is that not what you want? That is what I want. That is my heart's desire. And if I could read your hearts, I think that I would see that this is the desire of your hearts, too.

Well, there is God's promise. He will grant you your heart's desire, and he will fulfil your plans. What are your plans? They are the ways by which you will achieve your heart's desire. Have you made any plans for 1970 to achieve your heart's desire, to be the kind of person you want to be?

These plans are really the day-by-day choices that you and I must make. They are not made at a crisis point but are the day-by-day carrying out of those basic decisions which may have been made in a moment of crisis. On New Year's Eve you may have taken a look at your life. You may have said, "Lord, there are some things in my life that I want to be different. I'm going to keep my temper in 1970. I'm going to be more outgoing toward others. I want to be more obedient to your will and your word in 1970." You were caught up in the spirit of the moment and in the glory of it. And in the emotion of that moment you laid your life on the line again and said, "Lord, here I am, available to you."

Well, that is great. No one disparages the value of those moments. But that is not when your character is built. When you make a decision in a moment of crisis, that is just a beginning. When your character really begins to be built is the next morning when you wake up, and you don't feel like you did when you made the big decision. You feel quite differently. You feel like being your same old nasty self. But then you remember your decision that you are going to commit yourself anew to the Lord, and so you do, right then, no matter how you feel. You do the same the next morning, and the next morning, and the next. And that is fulfilling your plans to achieve your heart's desire -- what God is saying -- that he will grant your desire by fulfilling your plans, by giving you the grace to present yourself to him day by day.

In Verse 5 we have the fellowship of rejoicing, which God's help always produces:

**May we shout for joy over your victory,  
and in the name of God set up our banners! {Psa 20:5 RSV}**

This is a gathering of believers. May we shout for joy over your victory." Victory is never a one-man accomplishment. You do not win your victories by yourself. You might think you do, but you don't. Others have had a part in it. They have entered into the battle with you, sharing the blood, sweat, and tears. Therefore they have a right to share in the joy when the victory comes. You are going to be fighting battles in 1970, tough, difficult ones -- maybe all the more difficult because of the world situation around us. But remember this! Others who love you, right here among us, are going to be praying for you and with you in these battles, and encouraging and strengthening you. So when you come to a victory, share it with us. That is why we have sharing meetings. Whenever we have them we want you to be there and to share some of the things God has taught you and the victories he has brought you. Then we can rejoice together.

The Psalmist pictures a group that has gathered together and "set up their banners". When I read that I think immediately of the scene at the Rose Bowl game. Over on one side was a great crowd of partisans, fanatics ("fans" for short), that were supporting Michigan. On the other side were those supporting USC. They all had fancy little banners, pennants, and pompons, and they waved them with great excitement and shouted for joy whenever there was a gain for their side down on the field. That is exactly what David is describing here. That is what a church meeting should be -- a time when we set up our banners and rejoice with somebody who has

gained a victory through Jesus Christ. Written on the banners were these words: MAY THE LORD FULFIL ALL YOUR PETITIONS. That is the sharing of the body of Christ.

In Verses 6-8 we have the response of the king. It opens with this note of sturdy confidence:

**Now I know that the lord will help his anointed;  
he will answer him from his holy heaven  
with mighty victories by his right hand. {Psa 20:6 RSV}**

Why, he has not even gone to battle yet, and yet here he is declaring with confidence what is going to happen! That is the mark of a Christian. A Christian is one who is completely fearless, continually cheerful, and constantly in trouble. The king is declaring that he is not afraid. "Now I know," he says. "You have reminded me of all his promises, and now I know that the Lord will help his anointed." Now, that word "anointed" means the king, the one anointed king. And since we are kings, we are God's anointed. But it also is the very word that is translated "Messiah". You are God's messiah in this day. Did you ever think of yourself in this way? "We pray you in Christ's stead," says Paul, "that you might be reconciled unto God," {cf, 2 Cor 5:20}. Here is the confidence begotten by a reminder of these great promises of God:

**Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed;  
he will answer him from his holy heaven  
with mighty victories by his right hand. {Psa 20:6 RSV}**

I never tire of reading those wonderful words of Paul to his friends in Philippi when, though he is in prison and chained to a Roman guard, and things look discouraging because he has to appear before Nero and it does not look as if there is much chance that he will survive, nevertheless he writes,

**Yes, and I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage, now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. {Phil 1:19-20 RSV}**

That is, I do not care what comes. I do not care what happens. know this -- that God will express himself through me, and whatever happens to me he will be honored and glorified." What a marvelous sense of confidence the king has. Along with it he rejects the false:

**Some boast of chariots, and some of horses;  
but we boast of the name of the Lord our God.  
They will collapse and fall;  
but we shall rise and stand upright. {Psa 20:7-8 RSV}**

The world has its sources of confidence, too. But they will not suffice. There is nothing wrong with them, as such, except that they are not adequate for the task. This Psalmist well knew that horses and chariots are needed in battle, but he also knew that if they are all you are going to trust in, you will not have much of a chance. Horses and chariots are not enough without the Lord of glory behind them. These things are not wrong, nor are they to be thrown aside. It is just that they are not where you place your trust.

As you face 1970, what do you trust in? What are you relying upon? There are many modern equivalents to these horses and chariots. You could say, some trust in missiles and tanks but we shall rely upon the name of the Lord our God. "Some trust in ancestry and education; but I will rely on the Lord my God for power." "Some trust in tranquilizers and charm schools but I will rely upon the Lord my God." Here is the note of faith, the quiet, confident expression of a man who has learned where true power lies, the only source of power in the world. And so he says, "I am not going to trust in anything secondary, but I will trust ultimately in the working of the Lord my God."

Finally we have the wonderful expression of benediction, a triumphant shout:

**Give victory to the king, O Lord;**

answer us when we call. {Psa 20:9 RSV}

We see there an implied promise of continued prayer. The people are saying, "Give victory to the king, as we keep calling upon you, O Lord." This is the promise to pray for one another. As we pray for one another, God will continue to supply us with that which is needed to take us through the problems, the perils, the dangers, and the battles of the years that lie ahead. Who knows what you are going to face in 1970? I do not. But I will pray for you. I will pray in the words of this psalm for you. Will you pray for me in these same words? Let us pray for one another in this way.

**Prayer:**

**The Lord answer you in the day of trouble!  
The name of the God of Jacob protect you!  
May he send you help from the sanctuary,  
and give you support from Zion!  
May he remember all your offerings,  
and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices! Selah. {Psa 20:1-3 RSV}**

**May he grant you your heart's desire,  
and fulfil all your plans!  
May we shout for joy over your victory,  
and in the name of God set up our banners!  
May the Lord fulfil all your petitions! {Psa 20:4-5 RSV} Amen.**

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## **THE SHEPHERD PSALM**

**by David H. Roper**

I memorized the twenty-third psalm when I was a small child, but I have never had an opportunity to study it in detail. It has been a wonderful experience for me this past week to look through this familiar psalm and to have the Lord speak to me again out of this passage. It is a great psalm, one I am sure you have turned to many times in periods of trial. It ministers to our deepest spiritual needs.

This, of course, is a psalm of David. We know something of the circumstances of its composition. In the fifteenth chapter of Second Samuel there is recorded the instance in David's life when his own son rebelled against him and toppled him from the throne. David was forced to flee into the Judean wilderness with his family and servants, and for a period of time he was unable to reclaim his throne. His life was in jeopardy and he was hunted and hounded for a number of months. Perhaps, because so much of his early life had been spent as a shepherd in that same wilderness, the circumstances recalled his shepherd life. The images in this psalm are drawn right out of his experience as a young shepherd.

This is a psalm for people who, like David, are experiencing a major upheaval in their life. Perhaps you too have children who are rebelling, or your home is in turmoil, or some long-standing relationship in your life is breaking up. This psalm is written for you. It is a psalm for people who are shaken and in turmoil.

David begins with a statement of the theme of the entire passage:

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; {Psa 23:1 RSV}**

Because the Lord is my shepherd, I do not lack anything. He satisfies my needs. That is the place to which God wants to bring us. He wants us to be independently dependent upon him, to need him alone. It struck me as I was studying this psalm that there are really only two options in life. If the Lord is my shepherd, then I shall not want; but if I am in want, then it is obvious that the Lord is not my shepherd. It is that simple. If there is emptiness and loneliness and despair and frustration in our lives, then the Lord is not our shepherd. Or, if anyone or anything else is shepherding us, we are never satisfied. If our vocation shepherds us, then there is restlessness and feverish activity and frustration. If education is our shepherd, then we are constantly being disillusioned. If another person is our shepherd, we are always disappointed and ultimately we are left empty. If dope is our shepherd, as one rock artist said recently, then "we are wasted". But if the Lord is our shepherd, David says, we shall not want.

It occurs to me that if Jehovah is to be our shepherd, then we have to begin by recognizing that we are sheep. I don't like that analogy, frankly, because I don't like sheep. I come by my dislike honestly. I used to raise sheep. In high school I was in the 4-H club, and I had a herd of sheep and goats. Now goats I can abide, because they may be obnoxious, but at least they're smart. Sheep are, beyond question, the most stupid animals on the face of the earth. They are dumb and they are dirty and they are timid and defenseless and helpless. Mine were always getting lost and hurt and snake-bitten. They literally do not know enough to come in out of the rain. I look back on my shepherding days with a great deal of disgust. Sheep are miserable creatures.

And then to have God tell me that I am one! That hurts my feelings. But if I am really honest with myself I know it is true. I know that I lack wisdom and strength. I'm inclined to be self-destructive. As the song says, "I'm prone to wander." Isaiah said it best: "We are all like sheep who have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way," {cf, Isa 53:6}. I know my tendency toward self-indulgent individualism, going my own way and doing my own thing. That's me. I'm a sheep. And if Jesus Christ is to be my shepherd, I have to admit that I need one. It is difficult, but that is where we must start. Once we admit that need we discover the truth of what David is saying. We shall not want.

In this psalm David enumerates the ways in which the Good Shepherd meets our needs. The first is found in Verse 2 and part of Verse 3:

**he makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters;  
he restores my soul. {Psa 23:2-3a RSV}**

The first thing he does is to meet the needs of the inner man, the basic needs that we have for nourishment within. The basic needs of a flock of sheep are grass and water. Here is the very picturesque scene of sheep bedded down in grassy meadows, having eaten their fill and now totally satisfied, and then being led by still waters. Sheep are afraid of running water; they will drink only from a quiet pool. A good shepherd, particularly in a semi-arid region such as Palestine, knows where the watering holes are. He knows where the grassy meadows are. And so he leads the sheep into places where they can rest and feed, and where they can drink. The picture is one of calm and tranquility, because the basic needs of the sheep are met.

The counterpart in our lives is obvious. It is God who restores the inner man through his word. As we feed upon the word of God we see the Lord Jesus there. We draw upon him and our inner man is satisfied. Jesus uses the same figure in John 6:

**"Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal."  
Then they said to him, "What must we do to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent." So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'" Jesus then said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread**

**from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world." They said to him, "Lord, give us this bread always."**

**Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." {John 6:27-35 RSV}**

The Word of God does this for us. It brings us, first, to the person of Christ. "Beyond the sacred page," the hymn says, "we see thee, Lord." We see him, and we eat and drink of him, and we discover him to be the resource that we need. As Paul says, "Though the outward man perishes, the inward man is renewed day by day," {cf, 2 Cor 4:15 KJV}. Our souls are restored. How? As we feed upon him. As we come to know him, believe what he says, and act on his word, we discover that the inner man is fed.

I have a Bible study Wednesday nights in a fraternity house at Stanford. Our basic assumption there is that the Bible is the authority. No one really teaches the class; we simply open up the Word and the men in the group make observations. Last Wednesday night a student from Austria sat in with us, a fine young law student who is traveling in this country and is visiting Stanford for a few weeks. He shared some of his thinking with us and made a real contribution to the group. Afterward, as we were leaving, he made this comment: "I'm so thankful I could be here tonight, because I discovered that you men have found direct access to God through this book."

Have you discovered that access? In times of deep, dire need, when we cast about for help, it is no farther away than God's word. Everything we need to nourish the inner man is right there. As Peter says, "In Christ all things are given unto us that pertain to life and godliness," {cf, 2 Pet 1:3}. Everything we need which relates to life and to living godly lives in the world is available in him. I wonder if we are employing that resource.

The second thing the Good Shepherd does is to give direction in life:

**He leads me in paths of righteousness  
for his name's sake. {Psa 23:3b RSV}**

Or, as the margin indicates, "he leads me in right paths." The Hebrew word translated "paths" means "a well-defined, well-worn trail." That indicates again how stupid sheep are, because even when the trail is well laid out, they still need a shepherd. They are still inclined to wander away, no matter how obvious the path may be. The shepherd knows the trails. He has been there before, and the sheep trust him.

I think the most anxiety-producing factor in the world today is uncertainty about the future. What is going to happen tomorrow, and the next day? There are decisions we must make which bear, not only upon our own lives, but upon the lives of everyone with whom we are associated. My life touches my family and my neighbors and my business associates; so does yours. We are constantly making decisions. How do we know that we are making the right ones? Decisions can be crucial, and frustrating!

There is the classic story about a man undergoing basic training in the army. He was pulling KP and was given the assignment of sorting potatoes. There was a huge mound of them and the mess sergeant told him to put all the bad ones in one bin, and all the good ones in the other bin. He came back about two hours later to find the man just looking at one potato. There was nothing in the bins. The sergeant said, "What's the matter, don't you like the work?" The soldier said, "It's not the work; it's the decisions that are killing me."

I often feel that way and I know you do too. We have to make countless decisions, day after day, which touch the lives of our children and our wives and husbands. We need wisdom. We need a shepherd. We need someone who knows the trails, someone whom we can trust. There is a young man who left Stanford this quarter, and who is on his way to Tibet to live in a monastery for a year, because of a small decision that he made last quarter. It has affected his whole life. None of us know if he will ever come back to Christ. He made a wrong decision and it affected his life dramatically.

We all need a decisive word from someone who knows the way. Now, the Lord knows the way. But the



question arises -- "How can I discover his will for my life?" May I suggest these steps:

First, submit wholeheartedly to the leadership of the shepherd. That is the basic attitude we must maintain. Unless we are willing to admit that we don't know the way through the wilderness, and to submit to his leadership, we will never find the way.

Jesus said, "If the eye is single, then the whole body will be full of light. If the eye is dual (or evil), how great is that darkness," {cf, Luke 11:34}. He is saying, in a very picturesque way, that if our eye is fastened on Jesus Christ, if our eye is single, then our whole body will be full of light. We will know what to do. We will know the truth, and we'll act on it. We'll have understanding and wisdom. But if we have one eye on Christ, and the other on the world or on our circumstances or our boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever, if the eye is dual, how great is that darkness! We never know where we are to go. We will have no sense of direction, and will wander in darkness.

We have to be willing to submit wholeheartedly to the leadership of the shepherd. We must be willing to say, "I'll go anywhere. I'll do anything. I'll be anything. I'll carry any load, live anyplace you want me to live, do anything you want me to do." Once we're willing to say that, then God can reveal his will. Paul said it another way: "...present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship...and you will know what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God," {cf, Rom 12:1b-2 RSV}.

The second thing we must do is to obey what we know now to be God's will for us. Probably 95% of God's will is already revealed in his Word. We have to begin by obeying the truth that we have. If we are disobedient to our parents, we cannot expect God to give us wisdom concerning our next step. If we are not raising our children in the nurture and admonition of Christ, we cannot expect God to direct us. If we as men are not loving our wives as Christ loved the church, the Lord will not reveal more of his will. If your wives are not in submission to your husbands, God's leadership will not come to you. But when we obey the 95% of the truth that we have, then the 5% that is indefinite simply follows along as a matter of course.

Now, that does not mean that we have to be sinless, because who of us is? But it does mean we have to be willing to face and put away sin as God points it out to us. If we are willing to be brought into conformity to Jesus Christ in every area of our life, and we are allowing him freedom to work, then he will reveal more truth to us. But he won't if we are consciously holding out, and defending sin. He reveals additional truth only to men and women with open, obedient hearts.

But what about other areas of life where the Scriptures do not give specific information? There we are led through the peace of God. As we spend time in prayer and waiting upon God there comes the sense of peace, an inner conviction, about the correctness of a certain direction. The peace of God will umpire in our life and will let us know what to do. I have discovered that we can trust that peace. When we move out on the basis of it we discover that God supports and undergirds our actions and, through confirming circumstances, further strengthens our sense of peace.

Now, having stepped out in faith, we sometimes discover that things don't work out as we had anticipated. But even at that point we can't second-guess God. We cannot say that he did not give us wisdom. James says, "If anyone lacks wisdom let him ask of God, who gives to all men liberally." We can believe that his wisdom will be given. There is often a tendency to second-guess ourselves and to think that perhaps we missed God's will if things don't go as we had planned. But God wants us to know his will even more than we do. He is not trying to play games with us. He is not trying to be obscure and to hide the truth from us. He wants us to know! And as we step out on the basis of his peace, we can believe that this is the direction God wants us to go.

In a small way I have been tempted to second-guess myself in a decision I had to make a few weeks back. My Volkswagen was totally wrecked in an accident and I had to replace it. The insurance company gave me a generous settlement and I went out to purchase another car. I didn't want to spend much time because I didn't have any. In the newspapers about 40 Volkswagens were advertised for sale. I knew that I couldn't look at every one, and so my wife, Carolyn, and I prayed together, "Lord, we've got to find a car. It's your car, and

so we're not going to worry about it; please lead us to the right situation."

After looking at half-a-dozen or so, we finally settled on one. It seemed good. I'm not much of a mechanic but I kicked the tires and slammed the doors and it seemed all right to me. I talked to the owner. He seemed ethical and claimed he'd just rebuilt the engine. So I bought the car and brought it home. Now we've discovered that it has a lot of problems. It's using oil, and a number of other things are wrong. It's going to cost money to fix it up. My first thought was, "Oops, the Lord led me astray." But then I had to remember that we prayed for wisdom, and James says if we pray for wisdom we'll receive it. We acted on that promise when we bought the car. I don't know what God has in store for me in this matter, but I know that car is God's will for my life, right now.

That is what I mean by confidence in God's ability to lead us. David says that he will lead us in the right path. That is a promise! And he does this for his name's sake. It isn't our name which is at stake, it is his name. It's his character, his reputation that is at stake. He has promised to give us wisdom. I believe that; I act. You believe it; you act. And it has to be true. God must fulfill his promise, otherwise his own reputation is impugned. His name is Faithful, and he has promised that he will lead us in the right paths. To me that is a tremendous source of encouragement. I know that the decisions I make today and tomorrow, as I walk under his shepherding, will be correct. Even though the events which follow may not necessarily be all that I expect, the decisions will be right. That is his promise, and we can count on it.

The third thing David says that a good shepherd does is to provide protection:

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I fear no evil;  
for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff,  
they comfort me. {Psa 23:4 RSV}**

This again is a very picturesque scene. The shepherd is leading the sheep back home at evening. As they go down through a narrow gorge the long shadows lie across the trail. In the Hebrew this is a "valley of deep shadows". The sheep, because they are so timid and defenseless, are frightened by their experience. But they trust the shepherd, and therefore they are comforted. They will fear no evil, because the shepherd is with them. We are reminded of the Lord's words quoted in the book of Hebrews, "I will never leave you nor forsake you," {cf, Heb 13:5}. Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not fear what man can do to me," {cf, Heb 13:6}. I do not know what your experience has been, but whenever I'm in a situation like this, when there is a great deal of pressure, I begin to wonder if the Lord hasn't abandoned me. But he says he never leaves us, never forsakes us. He is always there. Therefore we have no reason to fear. That is a great comfort.

And then David writes, "Your rod and staff comfort me." The rod was a club which was used to drive off wild animals. It was never used on the sheep but was a heavy instrument used to protect the sheep from marauding predators. The staff was a slender pole with a little crook on the end. It was used to aid the sheep. The crook could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull him from harm. Or it could be used as an instrument to direct, and occasionally to discipline the sheep, with taps on the side of the body.

Understanding how the shepherd tends his sheep has helped me so much in understanding the character of God. When I go wandering away he doesn't say, "There goes that stupid sheep, Dave Roper!" and -- WHAP! down comes that big club! No. His attitude is, "Well, there's Dave, wandering away again. How can I help him? How can I move in to bring him back into line? How can I comfort him, and supply what he needs?" He may have to discipline, but he always does it in love. He reproves, corrects, encourages, and instructs in righteousness, dealing with us firmly and gently.

The rod and staff are also used against the two greatest enemies we have to face. The rod is for the enemy without, Satan, who is working through the world system to destroy us. Jesus said, "He is a liar and a murderer." He's out to devour us, and so the Lord uses the club on him. But the other enemy is me, the enemy within. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." I know that. The shepherd's

staff is used to chasten, and to subdue the enemy within. But the confidence he gives is that I have nothing to fear, either from the enemy without, or from the enemy within.

In Verses 5 and 6 David changes the metaphor a bit -- from the good shepherd to the gracious host:

**Thou preparest a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies;  
thou anointest my head with oil,  
my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me  
all the days of my life;  
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord  
for ever. {Psa 23:5-6 RSV}**

Jehovah spreads a sumptuous meal before him, a great banquet, in the presence of his enemies. This figure encompasses all the figures David has used before. That God feeds and provides, leads and protects, is all bound up in this symbol of a gracious host.

Interestingly enough, this figure grows right out of the historical situation in which David wrote. When David was driven into the wilderness by his son's rebellion he found himself out in the desert, hungry and weary, his army in disarray. As recorded in Second Samuel 17, three men who were not even Israelites, Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai,

**brought beds, basins [so they could wash and refresh themselves], and earthen vessels,  
wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds and sheep and  
cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, "The  
people are hungry and thirsty in the wilderness." {2 Sam 17:28-29}**

David saw in this that God, as a gracious host, was preparing a table before him in the presence of his enemies. Paul said it this way: "My God will supply all of your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus," {cf, Phil 4:19 RSV}.

A final note is that the word "follow," in Verse 6, literally means "pursue". David says that God's goodness and mercy shall pursue him, in contrast to the pursuit of his enemies who are out to dethrone and destroy him. David's desire was to go back to the tabernacle and to worship there. God's mercy and kindness ought to evoke the same response from us. We worship, not in a tabernacle, but, as Jesus said, "in spirit and in truth," {John 4:24}. We worship in the inner man, where God dwells. When we see that the Good Shepherd does feed us and does lead us and does protect us, our response ought to be worship -- a recognition of all that Jehovah is, a word of thanks for what he has done, and the statement, "Here is more of myself for you to put to your intended purpose." That is true worship.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we realize that the only reasonable act of worship is for us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. It is the only response we can make to your goodness. You are the Good Shepherd. You are utterly trustworthy. We discover that you do feed us continually, you do lead us, you do guard us and protect us, and we want to say thank you this morning for that. We want to say again that our bodies are yours to fill and use. This is the only reasonable thing that we can do. We thank you for all that you are to us, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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## OPENING THE BOOKS

by Ray C. Stedman

Of late, controversy has swirled around the decision of the California State Board of Education to modify its guidelines for textbook selection so that the faculties of our schools will have references from which to teach the theory of creation, along with the theory of evolution, or Darwinism, as an approach to understanding the origin and development of life as we have it on earth. This decision has evoked considerable reaction, both pro and con. Some of us are following developments and are even engaged in them to some degree. The nineteenth Psalm speaks right to the point of that controversy. We have already sung it this morning in that great hymn by Isaac Watts, "The Heavens Declare Thy Glory." Now we want to look at it more closely.

Behind all the arguments being set forth the basic issue is whether or not it is right to acknowledge that God is involved in the universe whether the study of nature and of science has a spiritual aspect or not, whether or not we are confronted with God in these realms, as well as in the study of the social sciences like psychology and sociology, and in the humanities. That is really the fundamental issue and this psalm deals directly with it.

It tells us that the knowledge of God has been written for us in two volumes, and that it takes both volumes to know God. There is the revelation in nature, and there is the revelation given in a Book, in the written Word. Both are essential to the knowledge and understanding of God. In the first part of this psalm the Psalmist, David, sets forth the book of nature:

**The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. {Psa 19:1-4a RSV}**

That is a declaration of the greatness of God as seen in the world of nature. No wonder these verses were referred to by the astronauts on their recent trip to the moon. Every night since time began the stars have come out. and they spell out to man the message of the power and the wisdom of God. This is becoming especially vivid today. We are starting to read some of the fine print in this book of nature. We have now been able to step outside the envelope of atmosphere which surrounds the earth and to see the stars in new glory, to see still more of the orderliness of the universe, of the procession of the heavenly bodies and of the marvelous mystery of gravitation which holds them in suspended balance, keeps the stars and planets in place with relationship to one another. All this is designed to speak of God and of his intelligence, wisdom, and power.

In the first verse the clarity, the plainness, of this revelation is underscored. Literally, "The heavens are 'narrating' the glory of God." They are telling forth a story which, when read, will reveal the glory of God. That is what they are for. And the firmament, i.e., the "stretched-out-ness" of space, the infinity of space, proclaims or "shouts about" his handiwork.

In Verse 2 the abundance of this revelation is emphasized:

**Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge. {Psa 19:2 RSV}**

The day pours out information about God and the night spreads the knowledge of God before us. In other words, truth about God is pouring in to us from all dimensions. if we only have our eyes open to see it. I never read this psalm without thinking of these words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush aflame with God;  
But only those who see take off their shoes,  
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.

It takes a seeing eye to perceive what God has said in nature, but that which can be seen is pouring out upon us. We have all felt this. This is why a hush falls upon a group of people who step out under the stars in a night sky, when the moon is riding high and the stars glow with glory. We feel the mystery of the infinite, reaching, calling out to our spirits, and a silence descends upon us. This is why men fall silent before the ebb and flow of the sea, as they sense the resistless, surging power of the sweeping tides. They understand something of the power of God in nature through that. This is why we feel a sense of loneliness and an intimation of infinity when we hear the wind howl, or we watch a storm rage, the thunder and lightning crashing around us. There is something of the voice of God which gets through to us on these occasions.

The Islamic prophet Mohammed wrote about the God whom he saw in nature, out in the sands of Arabia, back in the sixth century. This is perhaps the first time the Koran has been quoted from this platform:

The marvels of the starry heavens, the day that follows the night, the rain that gives life to the dead earth, the ship that sunders the sea, the bird that flies, the horse that gallops, the motionless rose and the still stone, the winds, the clouds, the fire, water, the glance of a woman, the smile of a child, the palm tree that bends, the date that ripens; here O believers are the proofs of the power of God. The trees sing of his power, flowers waft their perfume towards him. He is the Lord of the pink morning, the white noon, and the blue evening.

This is the way it ought to be. God has designed that nature should teach man of His being, of His power and wisdom.

Verses 3-4 declare the universality of this revelation:

**There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. {Psa 19:3-4a RSV}**

No men live anywhere who have not been exposed to this witness of God in nature. In the fourteenth chapter of Acts there is the account of how the apostle Paul and his traveling companion, Barnabas, came into a pagan city and were received as gods because they performed a miracle. The people thought they were Jupiter and Mercury and began to worship them. Paul and Barnabas stopped them and said, "Don't do that; we're nothing but men, just like you! But we have come to declare the true God unto you, the One who made heaven and earth. He does not need to dwell in temples of stone, and he rejects these idols. But he has not left himself without a witness among you. He has given you rain and food, has done good to you," {cf, Acts 14:15-17}. They were referring, of course, to the witness of nature, to its remarkable testimony that behind the universe which we see is a Designer, a Planner, a great and wise Being of infinite power and might.

Why is it that men do not get this message? Why is it obscured or distorted? In the next two verses the Psalmist uses the sun to give us a specific illustration of this testimony of nature:

**In them he has set a tent for the sun,  
which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,  
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.  
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,  
and its circuit to the end of them;  
and there is nothing hid from its heat. {Psa 19:4b-6 RSV}**

To the observer on earth the sun appears to go across the sky. And as men see it they are exposed to its testimony. But we know that somehow that testimony is clouded. Men do not see it clearly. Instead of seeing that the sun is the greatest symbol of God in nature, that just as the sun is needed to give light and strength to all living things on earth, so God is needed to give moral light and spiritual strength to men. Men have missed

the message and instead of worshipping the God who made the sun, they worship the sun.

I have here a print of a famous painting by the great cowboy artist, Charles M. Russell. It shows the Sioux Indians facing the sun in the early morning and worshipping it. Why do men, especially children of nature like these Indians, worship the sun? Because the message which comes to us in nature is beclouded. Men do not understand it clearly. And, as a result, that which has been designed to teach the deity and the power of God is being missed, overlooked.

This is the great issue at stake in this whole controversy over creation and evolution, and is the reason why I am disturbed about it. I have no quarrel with scientists who want to come up with hypotheses as to the processes by which the universe was formed and life was developed. This is perfectly proper and is their sphere. The theory of evolution is an attempt at this, based upon certain types of evidence which have been construed to support it.

But what is so desperately wrong is that Darwinism, as it is largely taught in our schools and our popular communications media today, is a means of removing God from his creation. It is a means of teaching that this whole process just happened, apart from any exercise of creative intelligence. Thus the testimony of nature is rendered silent, and the message which God has designed it to speak to man is not heard, and man does not know that there is a God in the universe. That is why man thinks God is dead, if indeed he ever existed at all. Darwinism is one of the major reasons why that idea has seized upon the popular mind in our day.

Something is happening to us as a people because of that. In the first chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul says that men are exposed to the truth about God which is evident in creation, and they deliberately reject it. And, because they do, God lets certain things take place. Paul lists them for us. One is that because men do not like to retain God in their knowledge he gives them over to a reprobate mind, i.e., their thinking becomes distorted. This is what is producing the twisted applications of some of the discoveries of science, resulting in some of the tremendously complex, insoluble problems we are facing today.

Because men do not want to retain God in their knowledge, because there is this conspiracy of silence to eliminate God from his creation, because there is an unwillingness to acknowledge that God is in the laboratory, as well as in the church building or in the home, God gives men over to a demented science which produces not only helpful technological achievements but also those which blast and ruin us. Science and technology, once regarded as our benefactors, are now appearing to us more and more as our destroyers, having polluted the atmosphere, ravaged the forests, and destroyed many forms of life in various ways. Now they are confronting us with the possibility of the total pollution and destruction of our environment. This is the judgment of God upon a world which twists and distorts the revelation of nature.

Nature is designed to tell us not only how things happened but who is behind them. It is perfectly proper for a scientist to investigate the realm of nature. Man has made some wonderful discoveries about how God put things together. They are fascinating, exciting, opening up whole new vistas of life, and properly so. What is wrong is the attempt to exclude God from that realm and not to allow nature to carry us on to that end for which it was designed -- to bring us to an understanding that behind this universe, behind ourselves and the mystery of our own being, is the great intelligence and wisdom and power of a living God. That is why we feel so lost and lonely, alienated and forsaken in a mechanistic universe.

But the book of nature is only Volume 1. There is also another book, Volume 2, designed to answer the other pressing questions we humans ask: "Why? What is behind all this? What is the meaning of it all? Where are we headed, and why are we involved in this whole process? Nature can never answer those questions. That is why those who work exclusively in the realm of nature can never state a satisfactory purpose for life. Nature simply does not embody that knowledge. If this great, throbbing question, "Why?" is ever to be answered, the answer must come from the lips of God himself. So he has given us a Book, and now the Psalmist presses on to that. In the next few verses he outlines for us the effect of the Word, the written revelation of God, and what it can do in human life:

**The law of the Lord is perfect,  
reviving the soul;**

**the testimony of the Lord is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the Lord are right,  
rejoicing the heart;  
the commandment of the Lord is pure,  
enlightening the eyes;  
the fear of the Lord is clean,  
enduring for ever;  
the ordinances of the Lord are true,  
and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
even much fine gold;  
sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb.  
Moreover by them is thy servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward. {Psa 19:7-11 RSV}**

There is the resource of God designed for the inner life of man. Nature ministers to and feeds and strengthens and supports our outer life. But here is that which touches the inner life, makes for the conquest of that inner space which is so all-important to human life. The Psalmist takes its characteristics one by one and shows us what they can do.

First, "the law of the Lord." That is the widest term for all the written revelation God has given us. "The law of the Lord is perfect." It is complete, there is nothing left out. It is comprehensive, it does everything that we need it to do. There is no part of your life, no problem that you will ever face in your life, no question with which you will ever be troubled, that the Word of God does not speak to.

Second, "the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple." Sure means "dependable, reliable." You can count upon this word to be true. Therefore you do not need to know a lot about everything else. The Word of God is not against knowledge; it is only against knowledge which does not begin at the right place. But even if you do not have a lot of knowledge, even if you are "simple" in terms of education you can still be made wise by trusting Scripture because it is sure, it is reliable. That is why we are exhorted:

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight. {Prov 3:5 RSV}**

**There is a way which seems right to a man,  
but its end is the way to death. {Prov 14:12, 16:25 RSV}**

You can be deluded and deceived by some of these alluring, gossamer-like philosophies which float around today, suggesting, for example, that pleasure is the reason for which you exist, that to enjoy yourself is the supreme object in life, that anything you do toward that end is right. But the Word of God says, "No, that is not right!" God is the One who ultimately will give pleasure. It will be beyond anything you ever dreamed. But to follow pleasure for pleasure's sake is the way of death, and it will lead you on to that. The testimony, the Word, is sure.

Then, "the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart." Do you not rejoice in your heart to know that you are right about something? When you get into a controversy with somebody and he argues with you but you have the solid assurance that you are right -- what a feeling! Well, that is the way it is with the Word of God. The glorious thing about this Book is that when the story is all told, when everything is said and done it will all end up just as it is written here. This Book is right, it is the way things really are.

And, "the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes." The charge is sometimes made that the Bible is a dirty book because it speaks of incest and adultery and fornication and perversions like homosexuality and other ugly things. It also speaks of malice and bitterness and is filled with slaughter and bloodshed. It is often described as an immoral book, and there have been attempts to classify it with some of the immoral and obscene literature which is so widely abroad today.

But there is one great difference. It is true that the Bible contains these things, because it is a realistic book which deals with life as it is. But the one great difference is that it never shows evil as though it were good. It never makes adultery look attractive. It always looks like what it really ends up to be -- sordid and shameful. And it never makes homosexuality appear to be inconsequential. It reveals it to be a terrible distortion of human nature, and reveals that those engaged in it are pathetic beings who need to be prayed for and helped and delivered from the clutch of its awful hold over them, which is destroying their manhood or their womanhood. It is pure, enlightening the eyes, showing you the truth. That is what David has found.

Also, "the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever." The word "fear" is sometimes read as though it meant cowering in terror before some awful being who is about to strike you dead. But that is not what this means at all. It means respect, honest respect for God. That, says the Psalmist, is clean, and it will keep you clean, too. It is "enduring for ever." Once you enter into the fear of the Lord in its rightful sense you find that this produces a quality of life which keeps you from defiling yourself.

Then he sums them all up: "the ordinances of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether." They are also wealth-producing, enriching, "more to be desired than gold," he goes on to say. And they are wonderfully pleasant, marvelously pleasure-producing:

**sweeter also than honey  
and drippings of the honeycomb.  
Moreover by them is thy servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward. {Psa 19:10b-11 RSV}**

You might say, "I don't see these things in the Bible. I read my Bible and it's supposed to do that for you, but when I read it I don't find these things." Do you know why? The Psalmist will help us with this, too. We need to notice as we go through this list that when David talks about various aspects of revelation he always uses the phrase, "of the Lord." The law "of the Lord," the testimony "of the Lord," the precepts "of the Lord," the commandment "of the Lord" -- all the way through.

This, of course, means that these aspects in themselves are not what we need; they are channels by which we find the Lord. It is he who does all these wonderful things for us. It is the Lord who forgives and revives and cleanses and enlightens and makes us to rejoice. It is God, it is the Lord Jesus. And as we find him in the pages of Scripture these wonderful things happen to us.

The only things which can interfere are given in the next few verses. David asks,

**But who can discern his errors? {Psa 19:12a RSV}**

That is the problem. If you cannot read the book of nature, or you cannot read the book of the Word, it is not because there is anything wrong with the book. It is the reader who is the problem. "Who can discern his errors?" What a question that is! It indicates that we are all victims of hidden failure in our lives. If we examine ourselves we usually look fine. The book of Judges says that at times in that period of Israel's history "...every man did what was right in his own eyes." That permitted just about anything, and the resulting chaos was terrible.

Everybody thinks that what he does is right. We cannot see our own errors. Yet these errors, these twists, these distortions of attitude and thought, are constantly affecting us so that we cannot see truth the way it is. We do not understand it in nature and we do not understand it in the Word. Therefore we desperately need to be delivered from hidden errors. In the New Testament the Apostle Peter says,

**So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander. [Then you will be] like newborn babes [who] long for the pure spiritual milk [of the Word], that by it you may grow up to salvation. {1 Pet 2:1-2 RSV}**

That is what is wrong, that is what hinders our desire for the Word -- these hidden errors. The Psalmist faces the fact that something is wrong with the reader. So he concludes this Psalm with a wonderful prayer:



**Clear [or cleanse] thou me from hidden faults,  
Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins;  
let them not have dominion over me!  
Then I shall be blameless,  
and innocent of great transgression. {Psa 19:12b-13 RSV}**

"Cleanse thou me from hidden faults." Is that your prayer? Do you know what will happen when you pray that way? You might think that God will take a sponge and wipe around inside you so you will not even know what those hidden faults were. But God does not do that. His way of dealing with hidden faults is either to send somebody to point them out to you or to bring them out through some circumstance in which you are suddenly confronted with what you have done or said and you find that it is ugly and you do not like it. That is the way God cleanses us from hidden faults. He opens up the secret places.

Usually he does it through other people because, as God well knows, we cannot see ourselves but other people can see us. These faults are hidden to us but not to others. They see them very plainly. And we can see their hidden faults better than they can. You know that you can see the faults of somebody you are thinking about right now, better than they can. You say, "I don't see how they can be so blind." Well, someone is thinking that very same way about you. We do not see ourselves. That is why it is always proper to say, "Lord, cleanse thou me from hidden faults. Help me to see myself through the eyes of a friend who loves me enough to tell me the truth."

And then "Keep me back from presumptuous sins." Presumptuous sins are those in which you are confident that you have what it takes to do what God wants. Self-confidence is presumption. God never asks us to do anything on that basis. If we depend upon ourselves we are acting presumptuously, and any activity which stems from self-confidence is a presumptuous sin. "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." For me to act as though there is anything that I can contribute is to be guilty of this kind of sin. The cure for this is dependence upon the activity of God in you as a believer. So David is praying, "Lord, keep me back from this kind of activity. Let me realize that without you I can do nothing. Help me to depend upon you to work through me. Then I will be blameless and innocent of great transgression."

Then he closes with these often-quoted words which are so wonderfully, marvelously penetrating that we should say them together this morning as our closing prayer:

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in thy sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. {Psa 19:14 RSV}**

"Let the words of my mouth what I say, and the meditation of my heart -- what I think, be the kind of words and thoughts that have sat under the judgment of your word, Father, reflecting the instruction, the light, and the love of your heart, so that what I am, both inside and outside -- be acceptable before you." That is a wonderful prayer, is it not? That is what opens the books. When you pray that kind of prayer before you read either the book of the Word or the book of nature, then you will find that God will speak to you in a marvelous way.

I think of George Washington Carver, that brilliant scientist who was such a warm-hearted, humble Christian. He came to God and said, "Lord, there are so many secrets in the universe. Please show me your secrets." God said, "The universe is too big for you. I want you to take a peanut and start with that." And so George Washington Carver prayerfully began to investigate the mysteries of the peanut. He discovered over 150 new uses for it and thereby revolutionized the technology of the South. He was a tremendous benefactor to mankind, and was especially a blessing to the Negro people, because he began with this prayer:

**Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
be acceptable in thy sight,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. {Psa 19:14 RSV}**

**Prayer:**

Thank you, Father, for this word of instruction to our own hearts and lives. We pray that we may follow through on this truth and live in the humble understanding that you have revealed yourself to us, Lord. Let us be ready to listen and see, ready to search and find out and discover. We ask in your name, Amen.

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## **THE SUFFERING SAVIOR**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

We will conclude this series on the psalms with a study of the twenty-second psalm. In many ways this is the most amazing of all the psalms. In it we have a picture of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, painted by David the Psalmist one thousand years before Jesus Christ was born. It constitutes one of the most amazing predictions of all time.

At least nine specific events or aspects of the crucifixion are described here in minute detail. All of them were fulfilled during the six hours in which Jesus hung upon the cross, from nine o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon. Moreover, the latter part of the psalm clearly depicts the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The probability that the predictions of these nine events would be fulfilled by chance in one person, on one afternoon, is inconceivably small. The chance that all this could occur by accident is beyond any realm of possibility our minds could imagine. Yet all was fulfilled as predicted in this amazing psalm.

All the world knows that on November 22, 1963, President John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, while riding down a Dallas street in a motorcar. Suppose there had been in existence a document which predicted this event and which we knew to have been written in A.D. 963. That was about the time of the height of the Byzantine empire, when most of the Western World was ruled from Constantinople, much of Europe was only sparsely inhabited by barbarian tribes, and America was not yet discovered.

Suppose that a document had been prepared in that ancient day which predicted that a time would come when a man of great prominence, head of a great nation, would be riding down a street of a large city in a metal chariot not drawn by horses, and would suddenly and violently die from the penetration of his brain by a little piece of metal hurled from a weapon made of wood and iron, aimed at him from the window of a tall building, and that his death would have world-wide effect and cause world-wide mourning. You can imagine with what awe such a document would be held today. Such a prediction would be similar to what we have in Psalm 22. That hypothetical prediction would have been made even before the invention of the motorcar, or of firearms, and five hundred years before the discovery of America. It would be regarded as fantastically accurate. Yet we have that very sort of thing in this psalm.

The psalm has two major divisions. The first twenty-one verses recount for us the sufferings of an unknown sufferer who is all alone and is crying out unto God in his agony. Many scholars assert that these first twenty-one verses represent the thoughts which went through the mind of the Savior as he hung upon the cross, the full range of his thoughts as he was suffering there. From verse twenty-two to the end the sufferer is no longer alone but is in the midst of a large company and is praising God and shouting in victory. It ends with his claiming the worship of the entire world.

The best and simplest way to approach this psalm is simply to read it through, making certain observations. It

is so clear, so unmistakable, that it hardly requires comment. It starts, very strikingly, with the words Jesus uttered on the cross:

**My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? {Psa 22:1a RSV}**

and the Psalmist goes on to add,

**Why art thou so far from helping me,  
from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but thou dost not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest. {Psa 22:1b-2 RSV}**

These opening words have been called "the cry of dereliction," i.e., the cry of abandonment as the sufferer becomes aware that he is forsaken by his God. As we know from the New Testament, Jesus uttered these words at the end of a strange period of darkness which settled upon the land. For the first three hours as he hung upon the cross the sun shone brightly and there was normal daylight. But at high noon a strange and disquieting darkness settled upon the whole land around Jerusalem. No one has ever been able to explain it. It lasted for three hours. It was not an eclipse of the sun, because eclipses do not last that long.

There have been similar periods at other times in history. In 1780, for instance, there was a strange dark day which settled upon the New England states when for some still unexplained reason the light of the sun failed in only that particular portion of earth, so that it passed into a period of darkness in the middle of the day. Something like that happened at Jerusalem. Notice how the Psalm reflects this. It says that the sufferer cries out in the day and in the night -- in the light and in the dark -- but still God does not answer.

So here we have the strange mystery of the abandonment of the Son of God -- what some have called "Immanuel's orphaned cry" -- "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus actually spoke these words in Aramaic. Because he cried out with a loud voice, passersby misunderstood him. He said, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani? When the bystanders heard the words, "Eloi, Eloi," they thought he was crying for Elijah. But he was calling out for God, from the depths of his being, because of his sense of abandonment. The strangeness of that rejection by God is highlighted for us by his stated awareness of the faithful character of God:

**Yet thou art holy,  
enthroned on the praises of Israel.  
In thee our fathers trusted; they trusted,  
and thou didst deliver them.  
To thee they cried, and were saved;  
in thee they trusted, and were not disappointed. {Psa 22:3-5 RSV}**

He is remembering the history of men of faith in the past, and the fact that a faithful God never abandoned one of them. Even though they were sinful men, God saved them when they cried out to him. "But," he says, "I am a worm, and no man." For some strange reason God is treating him differently. Even the spectators reflect that difference of treatment:

**But I am a worm, and no man;  
scorned by men, and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock at me,  
they make mouths at me, they wag their heads; [they say,]  
"He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him,  
let him rescue him, for he delights in him!" {Psa 22:6-8 RSV}**

He is treated like a despised and hated criminal, as though he had lost his right to live in human society. Matthew records for us the fact that the crowd actually used these very words. The unthinking multitude passing by, looking at the sufferer on the cross, said, "He trusts in God; let God deliver him now," {Matt 27:43a RSV}. What an amazing prediction this is! The very words of a multitude which could not have been controlled, and who had no intention of fulfilling prophecy, are clearly foretold.

We are faced with the strange mystery of why the Son of God was abandoned by his Father. He goes on to press the point himself. He shows us that there are no grounds for abandonment in himself:

**Yet thou art he who took me from the womb;  
thou didst keep me safe upon my mother's breasts.  
Upon thee was I cast from my birth,  
and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God.  
Be not far from me,  
for trouble is near and there is none to help. {Psa 22:9-11 RSV}**

How utterly forsaken he is! His friends have rejected him and fled. His disciples and family have left him alone; all have gone. Only God is left and now he senses that God himself is forsaking him. He knows no explanation for this. He says that from the very moment of his birth he was in fellowship with God. He was always the delight of God's heart, kept by his Father right from birth. And, you recall from the New Testament, as he began his public ministry the Father spoke from heaven and put his seal of approval upon his life, saying, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," {Matt 3:17b, cf, Mark 1:11}. There is absolutely nothing in himself to merit abandonment, and yet here he is, forsaken.

In his human weakness he does not even understand it, and so he cries out this strange cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Now we know, of course, that it was because he was being made an offering for the sins of the world. All the ugliness and meanness and defilement and filth of our sin was laid upon him.

**But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
he was bruised for our iniquities;  
upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,  
and with his stripes we are healed. {Isa 53:5 RSV}**

He goes on to describe the scene from the cross:

**Many bulls encompass me,  
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;  
they open wide their mouths at me,  
like a ravening and roaring lion. {Psa 22:12-13 RSV}**

In the beautiful method of the Old Testament poets he uses these figures to describe the onlookers. Like bulls, powerful, unopposable, they seem to be strong. Remember that Jesus said to his enemies at that very time, "... this is your hour, and the power of darkness," {Luke 22:53b RSV}. They seemed to be irresistible, like great, powerful bulls. Then he changes the figure and says they are like lions, fierce, ravening, threatening, their fangs dripping with anxiety to be at him and tear him apart. He is surrounded by his enemies. Then he describes his own reaction:

**I am poured out like water,  
and all my bones are out of joint;  
my heart is like wax,  
it is melted within my breast;  
my strength is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue cleaves to my jaws;  
thou dost lay me in the dust of death. {Psa 22:14-15 RSV}**

What a description of the exhaustion of the cross! Having hung there for five to six hours, his body suspended by the nails in his hands and feet, his bones are pulled out of joint. There is an awful sense of weariness and fatigue. His heart feels like melted wax within him. And he is gripped by a terrible, terrible, ravaging thirst. His body, dehydrated in the hot sun of that spring day, is gripped now by awful thirst. He cries out from the cross, "I thirst," {John 19:28b}.

Then we have a most amazing and unmistakable description of death by crucifixion, written at a time when

crucifixion was simply unknown. This was set down when no one, so far as history tells us, put anyone to death by crucifixion. Certainly the Jews did not, for their method of execution was to stone someone to death. But here is One who clearly describes his own crucifixion:

**Yea, dogs are round about me;  
a company of evildoers encircle me;  
they have pierced my hands and feet --  
I can count all my bones --  
they stare and gloat over me;  
they divide my garments among them,  
and for my raiment they cast lots. {Psa 22:16-18 RSV}**

It is absolutely impossible to explain that verse on any natural basis. It is clearly a God-given picture of the crucifixion. The Psalmist says that he is surrounded by "dogs". This was the common Jewish term for Gentiles, and especially for the Romans. Roman executioners are all around the cross here. He decries the fact that he is surrounded by these alien people. They have stripped him; he is naked. He can see all his bones and, worse yet, he can feel them. And the crowning indignity is that at the foot of the cross they are actually casting lots for his garments. The calloused, hardened Roman soldiers were trying to divide the spoil of his clothing {Matt 27:35, Luke 23:34, John 19:34}. Because they did not want to rip his seamless robe apart, they cast lots for it. It is impossible that this could have been fulfilled by the collusion of the Roman soldiers. Yet here it is, clearly described 1000 years before, so that Jesus' death by crucifixion is unquestionably in view.

Now we get the final prayer of this sufferer:

**But thou, O Lord, be not far off!  
O thou my help, hasten to my aid!  
Deliver my soul from the sword,  
my life from the power of the dog!  
Save me from the mouth of the lion,  
my afflicted soul from the horns of the wild oxen! {Psa 22:19-21 RSV}**

The "sword" would be a symbol for the authority of the Roman government. The "mouth of the lion" would be the picture of the invisible powers, the satanic forces. In the figure of the "horns of the wild oxen" it is as though he were impaled upon two great, widespread horns, and he is crying out now in final extremity for help from God. And you recall, this is exactly what the Savior did in his last words as he hung upon the cross. He cried out, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" {Luke 23:46b RSV}. "If anyone is going to save me, it has to be you, Father. If anyone is going to lift me out of the dust of death, raise me up again, it will be you. I trust myself to you". And so, in this closing prayer we have reflected his commitment at last to the hands of the Father.

Verse 22 constitutes a clear change. Without a word of explanation the same speaker goes on and says,

**I will tell of thy name to my brethren;  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee: {Psa 22:22 RSV}**

Well, what is this? Here, unquestionably, is the resurrection. The same one who has just suffered and died is now in the midst of a company whom he calls his brethren. The writer of Hebrews picks up this theme. In chapter two he applies these very words to Jesus. He says that it was the will and purpose of God the Father to bring many sons to glory, and that it was fitting that he should make the captain of their salvation perfect through suffering. And, he continues,

**That is why he is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying,  
"I will proclaim thy name to my brethren,  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise thee." {Heb 2:11b-12 RSV}**

What a wonderful picture of the result of the resurrection -- the calling out of the people of God who are one with him and share his life, and who are joint heirs with Christ, members, like him, of the family of God. And

so he says to them,

**You who fear the Lord, praise him!  
all you sons of Jacob, glorify him,  
and stand in awe of him, all you sons of Israel! {Psa 22:23 RSV}**

Why? Because this is the One who has answered the prayer of a dead man and raised him from the dead. The resurrection is the ground of Christian worship, he says,

**For he has not despised or abhorred  
the affliction of the afflicted;  
and he has not hid his face from him,  
but has heard, when he cried to him. {Psa 22:24 RSV}**

Again, the writer of Hebrews says to us, at the end of his letter,

**Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great  
shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the everlasting covenant, equip you with  
everything good that you may do his will, {Heb 13:20-21a RSV}**

This is what constitutes the ground of praise for all Christians: we have a living Lord who has been raised from the dead and whose life is now shared with us so that his life is ours, and ours belongs to him. He goes on to tell us just that:

**From thee comes my praise in the great congregation;  
my vows I will pay before those who fear him. {Psa 22:25 RSV}**

That is, "I will fulfill my word to them. I will do for them what I have promised to do." What is that?

**The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;  
those who seek him shall praise the Lord!  
May your hearts live for ever. {Psa 22:26 RSV}**

Is that not great? His promise is that, out of the resurrected power which he holds, he will give us everything we need. So we will be satisfied. And, as Peter puts it in his second letter,

**His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, {2 Pet  
1:3 RSV}**

There is not one thing more that we need than what already has been made available. Thus it is true, as Hebrews 7:25 tells us, that, "he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them."

The next verse goes on to trace out the effect of this power, as it moves out across the face of the whole earth.

**All the ends of the earth shall remember  
and turn to the Lord;  
and all the families of the nations  
shall worship before him.  
For dominion belongs to the Lord,  
and he rules over the nations. {Psa 22:27-28 RSV}**

It is the fulfillment of Jesus' great commission that his Gospel shall be preached to all nations. And out of every tribe and nation shall come those who respond, who fear him, because God is the ruler of all and he will see to it that his message reaches all men. We are living in the very days when men from every tribe and nation are coming to Christ.

The final picture encompasses the utter subjection to him of all peoples and all creatures everywhere in the

universe:

**Yea, to him shall all the proud of the earth bow down;  
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,  
and he who cannot keep himself alive. [i.e., the poor, obscure, weak, and helpless]  
Posterity shall serve him;  
men shall tell of the Lord to the coming generation,  
and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,  
that he has wrought it. {Psa 22:29-31 RSV}**

Those last words are amazing! In the Hebrew the last phrase is literally, "It is finished." So what is really said here is that "there shall be proclaimed deliverance to a people yet unborn, that it is finished." It is striking that this psalm both opens and closes with a word of Jesus from the cross. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34 RSV}. And, as he cried with a loud voice just before he died, "It is finished!" {John 19:30}. All is done. There is nothing left to do.

**His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness. {2 Pet 1:3 RSV}**

Is that not tremendous? What a psalm! What an anticipation, and what a fulfillment, of this amazing event!

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we can only bow in worship and adoration of a God who plans like this, and who carries through his plans against all the opposition of men and devils, who fulfills in history what he has predicted long before and brings to pass all his words. And we, who have been made the recipients of this amazing work of grace, who have profited by the death and the resurrection life of the Son of God, gather now, Lord, to give thanks to you out of the fullness of gratitude in our hearts for all that has been given to us. We ask that you will lead us now in the sharing together of the Table of the Lord, so that every heart may be obedient, worshipping, awe-struck -- bowing before the greatness of our God and the love of our Savior. We ask in his name, Amen.

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## **THE PRESSURE OF PROBLEMS**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

Through the centuries the Psalms have been read and loved by Christian people largely because they reflect the experience of men and women in the life of faith. In times of struggle and persecution, in times of deep personal distress, in times of great overflowing joy, there is nothing like the Psalms to match the experience of the heart. That is why this book has been the most loved of all books of the Old Testament. I have chosen Psalm 77 for our study because I have found so many people today facing exactly the same problem that this psalm faces.

We are all religious people here, at least that is what the world would call us. There is, of course, a sense in which everyone in the world is religious, even though they may reject that term for themselves. But we

particularly believe in the unseen dimension of life. We believe that life can never be adequately explained by what one can see or taste or touch or hear or smell; that there are realities beyond these and those realities are more important than the things of sight and taste and touch. We are, in that sense, religious people. We believe God touches life at every phase and every facet of our experience. As such we are hearing continual testimonies being given of prayers that are answered and victories that are won in the life of faith.

But I suppose that even the youngest Christian here has had at least one experience of turning to God in some moment of desperate need, of praying and asking God to help, and finding nothing happening; an experience of finding all the doors apparently shut, of no response even to the most urgent and ardent plea from our hearts. When we do not get the help we crave and need so desperately, our hearts ask, Why? Doubts flood our minds and we wonder what is wrong, either with God or with us.

There may be some that are going through this experience even today. You have been crying to God for help, but no help is given. That is the problem that is faced in the 77th Psalm. This Psalm was written in order to help people who have that kind of a problem. The psalm relates the story of a man who experienced the seeming unresponsiveness of God to his prayers, and it drove him almost to the point of despair. Then he saw what was wrong, changed and corrected his thinking. and thus came at last to the place of trust, of peace, and of strength again. From despair to peace: that is the story of the 77th Psalm.

I suggest that this Psalm, with its emphasis on experience, can help us even when New Testament teaching cannot help. Many of us have had the experience of being so tired, so emotionally battered, that we cannot respond to teaching. Someone tries to help us by pointing out some truth and we know that what he is saying is true but it does not seem to grip us, it does not do anything for us. There are circumstances when even the language of the New Testament, rich and glorious as it is, seems to be flat and hard, and we realize that though the truth is there, somehow we cannot grasp it. At times like that, battered and beaten by the storms of life, many turn to the Psalms and read the experiences of men and women of God who have gone through exactly the same struggles and the same pressures. Somehow this speaks to their need, gets hold of their hearts, helps them to know that at least they are not alone in this struggle, that others have had it before them. As the New Testament puts it, "There has no temptation taken us but such as is common to man," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13}. Even that point alone helps, and that is why the Psalms have been such a tremendous book in times of really serious emotional problem and distress. Thus this psalm rings a bell with many. Have you ever felt like this?

**I cry aloud to God,  
aloud to God, that he may hear me.  
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;  
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;  
my soul refuses to be comforted.  
I think of God, and I moan;  
I meditate, and my spirit faints.  
Thou dost hold my eyelids closing;  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak. {Psa 77:1-4 RSV}**

There is a note of desperation about that. Here is a man who is faced with a deep and serious problem. We are never told in this psalm what the trouble is, specifically, but the effect of it is very clear. Perhaps it is some deep disappointment, as many of us experience from time to time; something he had set his heart on, but in the course of events it all fell through and, absolutely crushed with disappointment, he comes to God in his distress. Perhaps it is a sorrow that has come into his life; the death of a loved one, the parting of a friend, something that has utterly crushed his heart with sorrow. Perhaps it is only a fearful possibility he seems looming on the horizon of his life and it looks unavoidable. Or perhaps it is some defiling experience that he has gone through, something that he stumbled into without realizing what he was doing, and he found himself caught up in things that made him utterly ashamed of himself afterwards. All these experiences can produce this kind of reaction. The psalmist only refers to it as "the day of my trouble."

But notice how it strikes him. He cries to God again and again. Here is a man who is pouring out his heart in prayer, pleading with God, crying out for help, stretching out his hand in entreaty to God. Those of you who have had an experience like this know how it is. There is an involuntary sense of pleading with God, praying,



crying out to him, asking him to help.

He seeks to comfort his soul, like many of us have done. He says to himself, "I mustn't get carried away like this. Look how distressed, how upset I am. I'll only make things worse this way. I mustn't do this. I'll just forget this for awhile, get busy with something else, and let it go." But, as he says, his soul refuses to be comforted. The problem, whatever it is, haunts him. He cannot take his mind off it. Every time he tries to do something else he is derailed by his mind returning again to this noxious problem that irks him, eats at him, haunts him, and tortures him, and never will let him go.

Then the problem gets even worse. He thinks of God, and the thought of it does not help a bit; it only makes him moan; it increases his anguish, and he cries out all the more. He tries to think about God, but his spirit faints within him and he feels himself growing weak, almost despairing. He tries to sleep, but his eyelids refuse to close. All night long he tosses and turns in restless anguish and sleeplessness. Finally, he is rendered absolutely speechless. He cannot even describe his problem to someone else.

What a marvelously honest description we have here of a man in trouble! This is the wonderful thing about the Word of God. It never glosses over human problems; never treats them as writers of human literature often do. The Scriptures plunge right into the depths, right into the heart of the circumstances. Here is the psalmist, holding nothing back, describing exactly how he feels. And some of you are saying, "That is my experience, exactly. That's just what I have been going through."

To understand this we must take note of certain factors in this man's experience. It is evident, first of all, that he is obviously a believer in God. He has brought his trouble to the Lord. He realizes there is help in God and that is where he has come. He is a godly person. This is true of all the psalms; they represent the struggles and problems of godly people. Perhaps that will surprise many. Many of us in our innocence, especially at the beginning of the Christian life, think that once we become a believer everything will take care of itself, there will be no more problems. But the whole book of Psalms is testimony to the contrary. There are many problems in the life of faith. There are many distressing, puzzling, perplexing experiences that a believer can go through.

You find that, even in the New Testament, in our Lord's experience in the Garden in Gethsemane. There he is puzzled, perplexed, troubled by what is happening to him. crying out to the Father and saying, "I don't know what it is that is happening; if it be possible, let it pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but thine be done," {cf, Luke 22:42 KJV}. You see it in the apostles as they are constantly under pressure. Paul speaks of being so crushed, so pressed upon with problems that he despaired even of life. It is not wrong to be faced with these kinds of problems. It is superficial to think that the life of faith cannot have circumstances like this. Here is a godly man, yet he is confronted with this terrible circumstance that makes him cry out like this to God.

Further, it is evident that he is not a mere beginner in the faith. He is not an immature believer. He seems to be quite well acquainted with the Scriptures. He knows the history of God's people, and has obviously been instructed in certain techniques to employ when he is seeking help from God. He mentions two of them here: prayer and meditation. He knows that it is important to bring his problem to God. He knows the way to approach him, the techniques to use, and he is sincerely attempting to do these very things.

Yet, as a second factor for our consideration, it is evident that he is confronted here with two problems, not just one. There is, first of all, the distressing circumstances that have brought him to God, reflected in Verses 1-2; but, in Verses 3-4, there is a second kind of problem that grows out of the first: there is the apparent failure of God to respond to his plea for help. Of the two problems, this is the greater one. That is why he says in Verse 3, "I think of God, and I moan..." It only makes him feel worse. Why does not God do something? This is the cry that comes welling up out of the depths of his anguish. "I think of God and it makes me ask, Why doesn't he help me? I moan, I meditate, and my spirit just melts away."

It is bad enough to endure the circumstances that he has to go through, but what really troubles this man is that he is facing the possible collapse of his faith. He sees the possibility of not only losing this battle, but losing all battles. What is really troubling him is the gnawing feeling down underneath that if prayer does not work, then God is not real. And if God is not real, then faith is a delusion, life is a nightmare of hopelessness, and man is

but a helpless victim of forces too great for him to control. That is his major problem. That is what is really bothering him.

If we are honest, this is often what distresses us. It is not so much the fact that we must go through difficult times, pressing circumstances. But what gets to us in moments like this is that when we pray and ask God for help, nothing seems to happen. The skies are brass; there is no response. We have to struggle with the specters of the mind that tell us that perhaps we have been kidding ourselves all along, that faith is all a delusion and God is not real. Distress opens the door to temptation. Every time we enter a period of struggle, of pressure, of unhappy circumstances, we are exposed to severe and pressing temptation to doubt, to disbelieve. It all seems to come at us so logically. That is the experience this man had. Like a drowning man he grasps at every straw that comes by. He has tried prayer and it does not seem to work. God is unresponsive and nothing within lifts the burden of his heart. He decides now to try something else, something that very likely has been suggested to him by some well-meaning counselor. He decides to meditate, to think about God. to think through on his problem. All right, he says. I'll do this,

**I consider the days of old,  
I remember the years long ago.  
I commune with my heart in the night;  
I meditate and search my spirit: {Psa 77:5-6 RSV}**

The Authorized Version has, perhaps a little more accurately, the phrase, "my spirit searches." I'm looking for answers, he says. I go back over the past, I commune with my heart, I meditate, I remember the years long ago. He remembers past blessings, he recalls God's favor.

Verse 6 is translated in the RSV, "I commune with my heart in the night." This is quite possible as a translation, but the Hebrew literally says, "I remember my song in the night," i.e., I remember times when I have been troubled before in the night (when all these problems come upon us) and I remember how God has given a song in my heart. Though the circumstances were distressing, I have been kept strong by an inner song.

What is the result of this kind of approach? Questions fling themselves at him. Doubts assail from every direction. All of them are asking in one way or another, why doesn't God respond? In fact, instead of being helped by his search, he is only made worse, because he faces seemingly unanswerable questions.

**Will the Lord spurn for ever,  
and never again be favorable?  
Has his steadfast love for ever ceased?  
Are his promises at an end for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he in anger shut up his compassion? {Psa 77:7-9 RSV}**

Are you familiar with this kind of thing: Do you know these searching, probing questions? They all seem so logical. If God has blessed in the past, then why doesn't he bless now? Why do I seem so abandoned? These are the questions that press upon him. Finally, the terrible conclusion comes. It seems to be irresistible in the light of what he is experiencing, in the light of the facts as he sees them. Slowly, almost painfully, the psalmist states his conclusion, trying desperately to be honest.

**And I say, "It is my grief  
that the right hand of the Most High has changed." {Psa 77:10 RSV}**

Here is a man who is really trying to be honest. He says, "I have analyzed my situation: I tried prayer all night long. In the past I have been given help, but no help has come now. God has made my heart to sing in the past, but it is empty, barren, and cheerless, now. Why is this? I have thought about it: I searched my own life, my own heart, and these questions have come at me and I cannot answer them. My conclusion must be: I have misjudged God. I have thought that God was changeless, that he would always respond every time I came to him but he has not. Therefore, I am driven to the irresistible conclusion that God has changed, that he is like a man, and you cannot count on him. He is capricious. God has changed. This is what is really troubling me."

This man is facing the possibility of losing his faith. He sees the terrible tragedy of it. All this he has once rested on, which has been such a comfort to him, which has strengthened him and given him character and power among men. seems to be nothing but a crumbling foundation that is disappearing fast. Soon he must lose all that he has held onto in the past. That is his "day of trouble" and his present distress. Is that not the hidden problem with many of us? I have lost track of the times people have called me up and said, "I just don't know what to do. I've tried prayer, I've tried reading my Bible, I've tried to think through. but nothing seems to help. I don't know what to do. What's happening to me?"

But that is exactly why this psalm was written. This man found what was wrong. He found it very quickly, and he began to change. He worked his way through on a different approach, and it soon brought him out to a place of peace and trust. We shall leave the secret of deliverance for our next study.

First, apparent unresponsiveness from God is not unusual. All of God's saints have experienced this from time to time. This is part of the standard program God has for disciplining and training his own. "There has no temptation taken you that is not common to man: but is God is faithful," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13a KJV}. The faithfulness of God is deliberately put into contrast with the statement, "no temptation has taken you but such as is common to man," because every one of us tends to suffer from the feeling that what is happening to us is unique. But many have if they are seeking to live the life of faith. That is one of the great things we can learn from this psalm right at the beginning.

The reason why this is true is declared by the prophet Isaiah. (It is found in many places in Scripture, but most clearly there.) Isaiah reveals that God says. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither my ways, your ways," {Isa 55:8}. That is, my reason is above yours. You understand so little of life compared to what I see in it. "My thoughts are not your thoughts," therefore you can expect there will come times when you will not understand but will be perplexed. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts, as the heavens are above the earth, so much greater is his vision of what reality is. If we are limited then to but the tiny section of life that we can grasp with our puny understanding, it is only to be expected that there will come times when we will be perplexed, when we do not understand what God is doing. So, do not be troubled by these times of perplexity. They are not sinful in themselves. They are normal experiences coming to all in the life of faith.

Second, the power to resist doubt does not lie in certain techniques, e.g., prayer or meditation. That is clear from what we have already seen in the psalm. How this unmasks the glib and superficial advice we Christians often give to one another in times of difficulty or hardship! Have you ever had someone say to you, when your heart was torn with some pressing circumstances, "Well, pray about it"? There is nothing wrong with saying that, but it is so futile. It is not that it is wrong; it is simply useless advice. Prayer (as we will see further on in the psalm) is not the first thing to do when you are in trouble.

That may surprise many. Many feel that the first thing to do in trouble is to pray. But we will learn from this psalmist that this is not the case; there is something else first. That was the problem with this man. He thought that prayer would automatically solve his problems and that the technique of prayer is provided to solve problems. But that is not the purpose of prayer. Prayer, as a technique, and meditation, as a technique, is not the answer to the doubts that come flooding into the heart when you are under the gun, under pressure from God. That is what this man was to learn.

And that is what we need to learn. There are so many who are ready with a quick answer: "Think it through," they say, or, "Go home and pray about it." And many a Christian has gone home, plunged deeper into distress because of that advice. They have already tried prayer and, like this man, there was no response; they did not know what to do next.

That brings us to the third point that this psalm teaches us, even this early in our study: We must and can learn to deal with this kind of temptation. This psalmist has given us his experience (which answers to the experience of many of us) in order to teach us how he found the answer, how he found the way to deal with temptation of this sort. For it can be dealt with. God has provided an answer, and the psalmist went on to find it. And we too must learn how to find these answers. We must not be content with having these kinds of experiences and somehow muddling through them, then going on to repeat them a few months later, as though

these were experiences in the midst of which we could not help ourselves. No. Each one is designed to teach us something, and we must learn how to handle these experiences and these problems, even these distressing kind that seem to pull the ground right out from under our faith and make it almost impossible for us logically to believe any longer in the existence and faithfulness of God. That is what this man did.

Let me stress again this fact: It is not sinful to be confronted with this kind of a circumstance. It is not unusual to have to go through a time of apparent unresponsiveness on the part of God. This is part of God's disciplining program, of which we will see more later. But we need not be overthrown by these experiences. They seem unanswerable, and that is the way it appeared to this man, but God has provided a way. This whole psalm is nothing more than a wonderful commentary, told through the experience of one man, on that verse I have already quoted to you from the New Testament. "There has no temptation taken you but such is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape [not to escape from the pressure, but to escape from the defeat caused by the pressure], that you may be able to bear it," {cf, 1 Cor 10:13 KJV}. May God grant that we will search and seek to understand that his Word has been provided for these very purposes, to learn these answers.

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we are so grateful that the things we talk about here on Sunday morning out of your Word are not remote from our experiences; that you are the God who is interested in life. And not simply life on Sunday only, but life on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and all through the week. Teach us that these great truths which we learn here are to be worked out and tested in the proving ground of Monday through Saturday. We pray, Lord, that we may be attentive, therefore, and listen carefully, and realize that here are the vital answers that we need. Grant to us searching minds and searching hearts and believing spirits. We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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## **THE UNTHINKABLE THOUGHT**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

We have discovered that the man who wrote Psalm 77 went through an experience which many of us have had, or will have at some time or another in living the life of faith. Here is a man who faced a very distressing circumstance (which is never named for us) which sent him flying to God for help. He tells how he prayed and wept and tried to meditate on God all night long, but, to his great distress, he received no help at all from God. Apparently the lines were all down; the skies were as brass. As a consequence, doubts began to rise in his heart. Suddenly he realized that the problem which he faced in the circumstances that brought him to God in the first place was being dwarfed by a much greater problem, that he was really being faced with the question, Is God real? Can he be depended on? Is faith valid? He realized suddenly that he was facing the possibility of losing his faith completely, and this frightened him.

As we read the first ten verses of this psalm, we saw that this man sought to face these questions honestly. The apparent logic of the questions that arise in his heart, growing out of his circumstances, however, seems to drive him to a conviction that he does not wish to come to. But he can find no way out. Evidently, his thoughts went something like this: "I am desperately in need of help. The problem that is before me is tearing me apart."

So he has come to God. Then he says to himself, "All the promises of God are to the effect that God offers help in times of need like this. Yet I've called upon him all night long, I've wept before him, I've pleaded with him, I've thought about what he has said, but no help has been given." The only apparent conclusion to which he can logically come he expresses in Verse 10. "And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'" God is changeable; he cannot be depended upon. Thus, in great affliction of heart and mind, he expresses what the logic of his circumstances has driven him to.

Many of us have had, or perhaps are having, this very problem. Every time we get into circumstances of great pressure, we find ourselves facing an open door of temptation to doubt and to question the foundations of faith. But in Verses 11-12 we have a sudden change of direction in this man's thoughts. He says,

**I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;  
yea, I will remember thy wonders of old.  
I will meditate on all thy work,  
and muse on thy mighty deeds. {Psa 77:11-12 RSV}**

As you read, on it is very apparent that this man, at this point, has experienced a great change in his thinking. Instead of doubt and despair, as was expressed in the opening verses, there is now voiced a growing sense of confidence and of peace, which he expresses in prayer to God. The psalm concludes with a statement of trust and rest.

**Thou didst lead thy people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron. {Psa 77:20 RSV}**

This is reminiscent of the words of the 23rd Psalm,

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; {Psa 23:1a RSV}**

To understand what is happening in this man's experience, we must ask ourselves certain questions about this psalm. I urge this as a standard procedure when reading the Scriptures. Ask yourselves questions about the writer, his circumstances and background, and just what it is he is facing, then seek to answer those questions. This is the way to get something out of the Word of God. There are many people who treat the Psalms, especially, as though they were some kind of tranquilizing drug. It is comforting to pick out a psalm when you are a little depressed, or unhappy, read it, and simply enjoy its quieting, soothing effect upon you. That is all you really want from it. It is possible to use the Psalms this way because they do have this soothing effect. They consist of beautiful words, beautifully put. But it is never the intent of Scripture to be only a soothing emollient for the distresses of life.

Many people use church in this way. They like the service and the beautiful music; it has a soothing effect upon them. They like the temporary relief of their feelings which comes when they gather as a congregation and sing these songs and hear the prayers. They can then go away, feeling for awhile a little better. But that is really no different a basis than the worldling lives on. You can read a book or go to a secular meeting and sing some inspiring songs, encouraging you; you can get a lift for your spirit in that way. You can go to the bottle you have hidden in a closet at home and get a temporary lift, or take a drug of some kind. But the Scriptures are not provided for the temporary relief of feelings.

I love the closing verse in the first letter of John: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding," {1 Jn 5:20a RSV}. That is what the Book is all about. It is to give us an understanding of life. We are to see things as they are. This is also the glory of the psalms. If you ask yourselves questions about what you read you will see behind the circumstances of life and, in following through what happens to these writers of the psalms, you will come to the understanding of life which is the intention of God in giving us the Scriptures in the first place. Thus, learn to ask yourselves questions about the psalms.

At this point there are three questions we need to ask about what happens to this man here. The first question is, "What changed him so drastically, so suddenly, from his attitude of despair, of almost hysteria, to a quiet determination to take a new line of thought? What happened between Verses 10 and 11 that changed this

man?" The second question we must ask is, "What did he do next, after the change had come, which launched him on the path that led back to trust and peace?" And the third question is, "Why did this whole circumstance of unresponsiveness on the part of God occur?" Then do not stop with merely asking the questions. Seek out the answers yourself, and, in doing so, you will get at the very point God wants you to learn.

Let us take this first question: "What changed this man?" Why does he suddenly revert from expressions of despair, grief, and affliction, to the determination expressed in Verse 11: "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; yea, I will remember thy wonders of old."

Here he is, almost swept away by a flood of doubt. He has been caught up in a wild torrent of emotions that has brought him to the very brink of despair. He has even put the terrible thought into words. "This is my grief," he says, "this is my affliction, that, as I see the circumstances, I am driven to the conclusion that God has changed, that the right hand of the Most High has changed." But then he stops, and completely reverses his direction. Why?

Is it not because he saw where he was heading and he drew back from it? He had been forced to conclude that God could change and he suddenly saw that the next step would be, inescapably, that God is not really God? If God can change then he is no more than a man. And if God can change and is no more than a man, then perhaps there is no God. Maybe he is but an expression of the desire of man everywhere for a father image, as we are so often told, and that image has been projected into eternal proportions, and there really is no God. When he saw that, as the next inevitable step, he drew back.

The fundamental declaration of Scripture about God is that God cannot change. He is immutable, changeless. He cannot change. As James puts it, "with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning," {Jas 1:17 KJV}. He is absolutely reliable, and that is fundamental to the whole idea of God. If you have a being who can change, then you do not have a God at all. That is what the pagans discovered, and why the pagan world is always a world of uncertainty, doubt and fear. Changelessness is fundamental to the idea of a God who is truly God.

As this man was driven by his emotions and his thoughts to the conclusion that God can change, he was suddenly appalled, arrested by the thought, "the next step is to deny God exists." That stopped him, and gave him pause. He was faced with what was to him (at the moment, at least) an unthinkable thought. He could see that it was a plunge back into darkness, back into fear, into uncertainty, back into the anxiety that constantly arises in man when he thinks himself to be a creature alone in the universe, with nothing beyond, in the grip of powers and forces greater than he can control.

Do not misunderstand. It did not answer his doubts; it did not solve his major problem at all: it simply stopped him for the moment in his downward course. It made him change his approach. He saw over the edge into the abyss below. He decided to reexamine his position, to come at it from a different point of view. He was forced to broaden his view and that is what eventually saved him.

There is a similar situation to this in the 73rd psalm. In Verse 2 the psalmist declares,

**But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,  
my steps had well nigh slipped. {Psa 73:2 RSV}**

Here is a man in the same position, almost on the verge of a complete loss of faith. His problem was envy at the prosperity of the wicked, the question of how they could live such untroubled lives. This question had thrown him. Why do the godly suffer and the wicked live such apparently untroubled lives? He says in Verse 13 that his thought was, "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence," {Psa 73:13 RSV}. That is what he was about to say. He had thought this but he had not said it yet. But in verse 15 he is stopped by that thought.

**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
I would have been untrue to the generation of thy children. {Psa 73:15 RSV}**

What stopped him was the idea that he would do someone else harm by expressing his doubt, so he kept it to himself. It was a sense of responsibility which made him stop for a moment. But, as in Psalm 77, this did not answer his problem. It did, however, change his direction enough that he began to find the answer. This man in Psalm 77 has gone even further. He has said what is in his heart. He put it into words: "It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High is changed," {Psa 77:10 RSV}. But then he is stopped by his view of where this is taking him, and so he pauses for the moment.

This is a very good thing to do in a time of doubt. It is a good idea to look on to the end where you are heading. When you are confronted with doubts about the Christian faith, drain the cup of doubt to the dregs. I find many Christians afraid to do that, especially young Christians. They are afraid that if they trace their doubt out to the end they will be driven to lose their faith; they fear they will discover that faith is but a psychological trick. They have received great blessing from their faith; it has been a comfort to them, and they are afraid to look squarely at their doubts. But do not be afraid of this. The psalmist was driven by his circumstances to this. But it is a good thing to do it deliberately, because when you see the end it will appall you, and make you stop to see if you have overlooked something. It will make you realize that the end is a serious matter, involving you in a fundamental change of philosophy that is going to affect everything in your life. And when you see the end it will make you stop and take another look at where you are going, and how you are arriving there.

In the New Testament this was evidently the experience of the Apostle Peter. In the 6th chapter of John, Jesus said some very severe things to his disciples, things that were harsh to their ears, demanding things. As a result we are told that "many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him," {John 6:66 KJV}. (Incidentally, we make so much of the attractiveness of the Lord Jesus, and how he drew the crowds to him, but you cannot read the Gospels honestly without seeing that there were times when he deliberately said things that drove people away. He was always sending men home.) When he saw the crowds leaving he said to the twelve disciples, "Will you go away also?" {cf, John 6:67}. The implication is, "If you want to go, I'm not going to hold you; go ahead. If, in thinking through what I have said, and feeling the full force of it, you want to go, go ahead." Do you remember Peter's reply? It is a wonderful word: "Lord, to whom can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life," {John 6:68}. That indicated that Peter had been thinking about this. He was saying, in effect, "Lord, you're a very difficult man to live with. You say things that upset us, disturb us. We think we have you all figured out and then you come up with the most outrageous statement. We have thought about going back. We've looked into the matter and examined the alternatives. But, Lord, we're always faced with this question: to whom can we go?"

That is a great word. If you are not going to go with Christ, whom are you going with? You have to go with someone. You are not going to invent a new system of religion which the world has never heard of before. I run into people constantly who think they are going to do this. But when you ask them what it is, it turns out to be the same tired ideas that have been set forth for centuries. No, you are not going to come up with anything new. And if you leave Christ, to whom will you go? What leader are you going to follow, what philosophical school, what line of thought will you pursue? Peter's word is a great one.

That is where this psalmist came. "To whom can I go?" he said to himself. "Where is this taking me? There's only one possibility: this whole line of thought is taking me right back into uncertainty, into despair, into confusion, into darkness, into a world in which there is no God, into all the accompanying emotional pressures that that kind of belief brings upon a man -- that is where it is heading." And that made him stop for a moment, to pause and rethink his position.

I once talked with a Christian leader who was facing this very pro<

But it did not solve his problem, and so we must come to the second question: How did he proceed from this point on?

That is a very important question. It is one thing to be stopped momentarily in your slide into defeat; but the really important thing is, what do you do once you are stopped? If you do nothing, in a moment, you will start sliding again. This has been the story of many Christians. They do not take any positive action. But this man does. He immediately decides to try another line of approach: he decides to begin his thinking with God.

**I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;  
yea, I will remember thy wonders of old.  
I will meditate on all thy works  
and muse on thy mighty deeds. {Psa 77:11-12 RSV}**

The crucial words there are the introductory words, "I will." They indicate that he has caught hold of himself. He is no longer the victim of his feelings, that is the point. The mind, the will, has come into the picture again. The control of his life shifts from his heart to his head, and that is the way God intended it to be. The minute he does this he sees that the place to begin is not with himself, as he has been doing, or with his circumstances, but with God. And the proper order is not with prayer and then meditation: first with petition, crying out to God, and then trying to think about him, but the reverse: to begin with meditating about God which leads to petition based on an understanding of who God is.

That is the way out, and it points up the trouble this man has had before. His trouble was, he began his prayer with himself at the center. You can see that in his words. This problem that has brought him to God occupies his mind. He is relating everything to that God is there, but only peripherally. This man's whole thought is: what is happening to me? Look how I am affected, look how I am afflicted, look how I cry and nothing happens.

The result of that is always the same. When self is at the center, then the heart takes over and the mind is governed by the feelings. We then find ourselves limited to what the Bible calls "natural" thinking, i.e., thinking on a limited narrow plane, which does not take into consideration all the facts. There is a very profound psychology involved in this whole account. Here is a picture of a man who is giving way to his feelings, allowing them to drive him step by step into increasing distress and despair. He finds himself attempting to be logical, but only on this one plane of thought, related to self. That is why he misses the point so completely.

The heart is a powerful factor in human thinking. The heart, the emotions, the feelings, when they get hold of us, bludgeon us, control us, and make us stupid. That is what this man is doing. When the feelings control our thinking then we discover that we are helpless to reason properly. But when something stops us, even as in this case when this man saw where he was heading and the terribleness of the conclusion he was facing made him pause, then the head and the will can assert themselves and take over.

Perhaps you say, why is that the place to begin? What is wrong with beginning with myself? The answer is obvious. Man is a limited being, so when you begin with man your thinking is necessarily limited. But when you start with God, you are starting with the great fact which includes all other facts. You have broadened your vision to take in every phase, every aspect of truth. Someone has described that kind of thinking as "cubical thinking." Truth is not a single level of thought; it is a cube. It has sides, it has other aspects that need to be considered. We know by experience how this is. All truth is related to other truth. You will discover that as you relate a fact to other truth that touches it on every side, this fact must be seen in a different light than when it is considered alone.

This is the whole problem with prejudice. Prejudice is the power that prejudges every condition, limits it, shuts out all aspects of truth but one, and then judges the whole thing on that one. That is why prejudiced people dislike having their thinking broadened. They want only certain lines of thought that agree with what they have already concluded. "Don't bother me with the facts; I've already made up my mind." That is prejudice.

You can see how this infiltrates all the thinking of humanity. This is the problem with Communism, which operates only on one level. It views man as merely a material being, concerned with economics and material things, and that is all. It shuts out the whole range of human reaction and interaction that relates to the spirit. Consequently it is prejudiced, lopsided, out of focus.

I have noticed that Christians are given to spiritual thinking on most things but when it comes to politics they frequently drop right down to the level of natural thinking. They rule out of their thought all that God has said about human life, the nations of the world, and what is going on in the world, and they start talking like any



worldling around, as to which party is best, and which candidate can do this, etc.

This man was prejudiced by his emotions, and they almost drove him into despairing unbelief. But he began to return when his head took over and he remembered to start with fact number one in life: the existence and being of God. That is where the Bible starts. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," {Gen 1:1}. Where else would you start if you want to take in all the facts of life? That is the only program that faces everything fairly and squarely, rightly related to everything else. You must start with God. We shall go on to see how this man traces this all out, how his beginning with God leads him step by step to a growing reassurance that God is there and God is at work. He learns that things are not as he saw them originally.

But I want to ask one more question of ourselves at this point: "Why was God so unresponsive at first?"

Why this silence on God's part? Why is this man permitted to cry out all night long like this and nothing happens? Why cannot God say something to him, to encourage him? This is the question we ask ourselves at times like this. The answer is quite clear. This sort of thing is always a deliberate action on God's part. This man had not always experienced unresponsiveness from God like this. I think he had never had this kind of experience before. In the past he had come to God and found instant help, and naturally he came to think that this is the way God would always react.

I find many young Christians have this difficulty. When they are first Christians they get into some difficulty or pressure, and they come to God, and cry out to him. They find God responds instantaneously as the Lord Jesus did with Peter when he began to sink in the water and cried out, "Lord, save me!" {Matt 14:30}. Many a Christian has had the experience of God giving immediate inward peace, a sense of assurance, a quietness within which gives strength to face the situation. This man had thought this would be his experience now, but when he comes he finds God is not there. Then he remembers the years of long ago, thinks back over the olden days, and all this adds to his despair.

There is only one answer to that, and that is that God has deliberately done this. He does it because it is an integral part of the discipline by which he forces us to grow. If he always responded to us instantaneously we would remain children. spiritually. forever: we would always be governed by our feelings; we would be mastered by our moods. This is why the mark of maturity in a Christian's life is that he becomes freed from moods. The sign of a Christian's growing up is that he becomes stable, steady, dependable. He still has the feelings, but they do not govern him any longer. His is no longer an up-and-down experience, up one moment and down the next, but he becomes steady, stable, dependable, faithful, reliable as God is.

We would never get to that place if God instantly responded to us. We would depend upon our feelings for everything. So God deliberately hides himself at times. If you are going through an experience like that it will help to realize that it is because God is teaching you a lesson you need to know. Thus he forces us to operate as man was intended to operate: from the head, not from the heart; with all the facts, not merely a part of them; beginning with God in our thinking, and not with man, or ourselves; moving from meditation to prayer, and not the reverse; realizing that the way we were intended to operate was first, to think about God and then on that basis, to pray unto him with confidence and quietness and expectation. That is the way God intended man to live.

Have you found this way?

Are you doing this in your Christian life?

Some of you have been Christians for ten or twenty years, and you are still as much the victim of your moods, mastered by your feelings, as you were at the beginning. That is the kind of experience to which the writer of Hebrews refers. He says, "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need some one to teach you again the first principles of God's word," {Heb 5:12 RSV}.

Have you grown up?

Have you begun to learn how to handle the temptations to doubt that come to you; how to systematically,

thoughtfully, and carefully begin where God wants you to begin, and work through from that basis? Have you risen above the limitations of natural thinking, and begun to think spiritually, having "the mind of Christ" {1 Cor 2:16}, facing every issue on this basis? That is the sign of whether you are growing up as a Christian or not.

**Prayer:**

Our Father, we ask you to teach us this by the Holy Spirit as we go. We are so conscious of the fact that we cannot learn this merely by intellectual instruction; we must be taught by the Spirit. We must have our minds open to the reality of these truths, and we ask for this as we go on. We pray that the experiences that we have will confirm what we have learned here. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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## THE CURE FOR DOUBT

by Ray C. Stedman

In the 77th Psalm we have a report, given for our benefit, by a man who almost lost his faith, but who found his way back eventually to greater faith and trust in God than ever before. He tells us just how he did it. That is the helpful thing about this psalm, and all the psalms, for in these wonderful poetic passages, so beautiful in their language, so soothing in their effect, so true to the experience of the heart, we have the reports of men and women who have faced the problems we must face in the spiritual life and have recorded for us, step by step, the way they were led to the solution of these problems.

The opening verses of this 77th Psalm record for us the emotional distress the psalmist experienced when he faced a very troublesome problem in his life which brought him to God, crying out in heartache and anguish. Then the second problem, which grew out of the first, came upon him when he faced the fact that God seemingly ignored his prayer. He began to ask certain searching and probing questions which are the same questions you and I have asked in times of doubt and the trial of our faith.

Finally, this man saw where he was heading and for a moment his slide to despair was stopped. He was heading toward the total loss of faith. He saw in a flash what he had been doing and that he had begun in the wrong place. He had been caught up with himself and his circumstances and was therefore governed by his emotions.

This is always what happens. The minute we allow ourselves to be governed by our emotions we short-circuit the processes that God intended to govern in our lives. We begin on a narrow, limited plane and we are restricted to that plane. We can see no other facts but the ones to which we are reacting emotionally. This is the problem with many, many people. They are temporarily unable to see anything other than what is immediately before them and is affecting their feelings. Governed by their feelings, therefore, their judgment is distorted.

As we have seen, this is what prejudice is. These kinds of people are highly prejudiced people who often strongly resist any attempt to broaden their vision. That was what was happening to this man in the 77th Psalm. He suddenly realized what he was doing and what the answer was. He describes it for us in Verses 11-12.

**I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;  
yea, I will remember thy wonders of old.  
I will meditate on all thy work,  
and muse on thy mighty deeds. {Psa 77:11-12 RSV}**

We saw in a very general way that he learned that the place to begin in his thinking was with God. "I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord," he says. When you start thinking about God in relationship to these pressing emotional problems you soon discover that you have begun with the great fact which includes all other facts. Your vision is stretched to take in the whole range of truth. God is the great Being who encompasses all other facts within himself.

We must now take up those same verses and look at them more in detail. We must ask ourselves. "Where do you begin in thinking about God?" The answer is seen in this 11th verse. It is to begin with the deeds of the Lord, with his actions -- not his words, but his deeds.

That distinction is very important. The words of the Lord are tremendous words. The whole of the Bible we call the Word of God and those words of God are extremely important to human life. Jesus underscored that when he said, "No man can live [as God intended him to live] by bread alone," {}. If you think life is made up only of getting the things you need for your physical existence then you are living a very shallow and sub-human life. Man was never intended to live by bread alone but "by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God," {}. Life will never take on the dimension of depth and richness it should have if we do not give ourselves to reading and understanding the words of God.

But that is not the place to start with God! This is what the psalmist is making clear to us. The words of God are very helpful and very enriching, but they make their appeal to a faith that rests upon the deeds of God. That is the place to start in your thinking about God, especially if you are going through a trial of faith. Then the thing to do is to start your thinking with the deeds of God.

You can see how this is true even on the human level. Have you ever said to someone else, "Look, what you do speaks so loudly, I can't hear what you say." By that common expression we recognize that deeds are more fundamentally revealing of what a person is than his words. Deeds are far more fundamentally revealing of what people are than words. That is why we must begin our thinking about God in times of doubt with his deeds and not with his words. It is extremely important that we learn the lesson this psalmist learned and which he has recorded particularly for our benefit in times of doubt, to begin our thinking with the deeds of God.

You can see how this is true all through the Scriptures. Read these psalms and whenever you see an Israelite in trouble, shaken by doubt, you will see that his way of correcting it is to recite to himself the historic actions of God. The psalms are filled with this kind of thing, and it carries on throughout the whole Bible.

In the New Testament, when the first Christian martyr, Stephen, was about to be stoned to death outside the gate, he sought to bring home to the unbelieving Jews the fact that God was at work in their nation at that time and he attacked their unbelief by tracing the history of God's dealings with the people. Stephen simply went back through the history of the nation and revealed how God had been dealing with them, {cf, Acts 7:1-58}.

There was a day when John the Baptist temporarily lost his faith. It is an encouragement to some of us perhaps to realize that a man like John could lose faith; this man of whom Jesus said, "No man has ever been born of women greater than John the Baptist." He sent one of his disciples to Jesus with the question, "Are you the one who is to come or shall we look for another?" {cf, Matt 11:3}. Jesus answered him, "Go back and tell John what you have seen, that the blind are given their sight, the lame are being healed, the deaf are made to hear, the lepers are being healed, and even the dead are brought to life," {cf, Matt 11:4-6}. The deeds of God in history! This is where faith must rest.

On one occasion Thomas, the disciple, doubted the stories he had heard of the resurrection. For Thomas these were merely words. He had heard them from men and women whom he believed in, and yet these tales were so incredible that Thomas could not bring himself to accept them even when he heard them from people he

trusted. You remember that Jesus appeared to him when Thomas was gathered with the other disciples. Did he argue with him? No, He simply said, "Come, Thomas, put your hand in my side and feel the wounds in my hands. Handle me and see. It is I, the same one, risen from the dead," {cf, John 20:26-27}. Thus it was the deeds of God in history that convinced this man in his time of doubt.

This is why these historic facts of Christian faith are so continually under attack. This is the point where unbelief always makes its thrust. They seek to destroy the credibility of the deeds of God in history. They use every weapon they can to do this, from sneering ridicule, such as calling evangelicals "crass literalists" and "obscurantists," who give themselves to "primitive concepts" and other such sneering terms to what we might call ponderous pseudo-scholarship, giving themselves to immense scholastic labors and utilizing what they call scientific methods which ultimately seek to destroy the credibility of the Scriptures. All of this is simply an enormous attempt to break down the foundation of the activity of God in history, because that is where faith rests. That is the only solid ground on which faith can rest. As the 11th Psalm puts it, "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" {Psa 11:3 RSV}.

That is an unanswerable question. As Paul says in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, "If Christ be not raised, then our faith is in vain," {cf, 1 Cor 15:17}. He frankly and boldly acknowledges it. That is why it is so important to resist these attempts to destroy the credibility of the Scriptures, to expose the error of their arguments and the foolishness of these claims that are so widely accepted on every side today. Let us recognize that our faith rests upon unshakable facts, the great realities of God's actions in human history.

A pastor and I were recently discussing certain trends in theology and I mentioned something about the fact of the empty tomb. He said, "But I don't believe that is important." I said, "What do you mean? The empty tomb is not important to Christian faith?" "Oh, no," he said, "Our faith doesn't rest on that." "Well," I said, "what about the 15th chapter of First Corinthians where Paul says that 'if Christ be not risen, our faith is in vain?'" He said, "That is just the point. It isn't the empty tomb that is important. It is Christ risen that is important." I said, "Do you mean that you are drawing a distinction between the empty tomb and the risen Christ? I realize that the statement, 'Christ is risen' is an advance upon the statement, 'the tomb is empty,' but it certainly includes it." He said, "Not to my thinking. I think you can have a risen Christ, but not have an empty tomb." Then I said, "You are using language in a way no one else uses it, and quite opposite to the way it is commonly used in the normal course of human events." Paul makes a special point of identifying the risen Christ with the empty tomb. It is the fact that the tomb was empty which helped the disciples to believe in a risen Christ. These great articles of faith, these great doctrinal truths of Christianity rest upon these fundamental actions of God in human history.

Well, you ask, "Why is this true? What do deeds do to strengthen our faith like this?" If you think this through, you will see rather clearly why faith rests upon actions of God. In the first place, these deeds of God derive their value from the fact that they are objective evidence. They are something outside of us. As long as our faith is resting upon subjective feelings within, we are unsure and uncertain. We have all learned that our feelings are not very reliable, that sometimes they deceive us, and so we seek to find confirming evidence outside us, something that we can touch or look at and thus confirm and strengthen the inward feelings we have. That is the peculiar value of the deeds of God. These deeds do not lie in the realm of ideas, philosophies, or speculations but they are hard, stubborn, concrete, confirmable things that happened in human history.

They can be seen by others as well as us. That is the trouble with ideas, with philosophies, theories or feelings. The only one who can witness to what you feel is you. But when you have deeds and events that can be seen and witnessed by many, then there is a confirmation from various people, ruling out the possibility of hallucinations or imaginations. That is the value of deeds and especially the deeds of God.

For instance, take the events of the Exodus when God led the people out of the land of Egypt. This formed the basis of faith for the Israelites throughout all their history. In the Psalms they are forever referring back to these events when God opened up the Red Sea, led the children of Israel out, and brought the plagues upon Egypt that forced Pharaoh to open the door to them to go. He fed them in the wilderness, and took care of them in the desert, giving them water and food and going before them in a flaming pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day.

All these events, by and large, were events in which whole nations were involved. Thousands and even millions of people saw or participated in these things. The details were well known throughout the ancient world. When Israel came to the edge of the Jordan River and was about to enter in they found that the spies that had gone before them into Jericho found the people already dispirited, already defeated, so that it was an easy task for them to take over. What had dispirited them? They had heard the stories of the way God had opened up the Red Sea and taken the Israelites through. This miracle had been heralded abroad all over the land, and they could not deny that a god of great power was behind these people.

Take the great facts of the New Testament. As Paul puts it, "these things were not done in a corner," {cf, Acts 26:26}. Take especially the fact we have already mentioned, the supreme fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. He did not appear only to one or two people, one or two women who might perhaps be subject to hallucinatory concepts because of the power of their emotions. But he appeared to groups of two, and five, and several times eleven; and on one occasion he appeared to over five hundred individuals at once. These all saw him in his risen, resurrected body. They bore witness to this fact. Paul says that many of them were still alive when he was writing to the Corinthians {1 Cor 15:6}, seeking to convey these facts to them. All of these events were proof that God was at work and it was the kind of proof that could be tested by the evidence of the senses. That is one great advantage of deeds.

Furthermore, deeds are timeless. They are contemporary. Once having occurred, these facts remain in human history. The results remain and you can trace back through the course of centuries and confirm that these things actually happened.

When I was in the Holy Land, this kind of evidence surrounded me on every side. I went down to Hebron and went into the building built over the Cave of Machpelah. What is so noteworthy about that? There Abraham is buried. Think of that! This great pioneer of faith who lived two thousand years on the other side of Calvary's cross -- as far distant from the cross on that side as we are on this side. Yet, as we stood there, four thousand years of history rolled away for here was the exact place the Bible records as the cave where Abraham was buried. We had evidence that he had lived. He had walked through these places, as the Bible records.

When we went into the temple area we stood in the very place on which Solomon's temple had once stood, also the temple of Herod, the place where Jesus had walked. These stones cried out to us of the historicity of these events. The Wailing Wall contains the very stones that were once part of Solomon's temple in the heyday of the glory of Israel. Those stones are still there as a silent but powerful witness to the historic occurrence of these events recorded in the Old Testament. We walked on the paving stones where Jesus stood before Pilate. We saw the place where the Roman soldiers had scratched games in the rocks as they waited for the judgments to end in the court.

We stood at the foot of the hill where Jesus was crucified and saw that it is indeed shaped like a skull. We could see the eye-sockets and the shallow caves that form the mouth and knew why the Hebrew people called it "the place of the skull." We walked along the shores of Galilee and saw a synagogue where perhaps Jesus himself had taught. We saw many of the scenes that are mentioned in the Bible and all served as confirming evidence that this was not merely a dream. It was not an illusion. It is a fact. God has acted in history.

How different the Bible is, for instance, from the Book of Mormon. Here is another book that claims to be history. It claims to record historical evidence of a pre-American race that once lived on these continents. But every archaeological excavation in the Americas denies flatly the Book of Mormon. If you walk through these lands you can see that the civilizations that are being dug up by the archaeologists' spade are completely and entirely different from that recorded in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon mentions, for instance, the existence of cattle, sheep, camels, horses, and elephants, yet every archaeological excavation confirms the fact that not one of these animals were known on the American continent in the days of the Mayan, Incan and Aztec empires.

The Book of Mormon speaks of wars that were fought with metal weapons of brass, iron and steel. but not one of these metals were employed as weapons of war in the Americas. The Book of Mormon speaks of chariots with wheels but they didn't even know the use of the wheel in the American continent except for toys for children, but they had no wheeled carriages and no wheeled vehicles of any kind. Everywhere you look

there is a denial, from the evidence of the earth itself of these strange and spurious claims of the Book of Mormon.

But the Bible is grounded in history and that is why you can test the reality of these events today. Take again the resurrection of Christ. The presence of the Christian church itself confirms that this event took place. How else can you explain this strange group of people all through history who have been absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ rose from the dead? How do you explain the changes in the apostles, the tremendous psychological differences between their actions before the resurrection and afterward? You cannot unless the resurrection be a fact. Furthermore, how do you explain what happens to people all over the world and which has been happening for twenty centuries, if this resurrection is not a fact? Take some of the testimonies today. I clipped this out of Decision Magazine, where someone has written this account of her own story. She says,

For a long time I have been bitter about life. It seemed that it had dealt me a dirty blow, for ever since I was 12 years old I have been waiting for death to close in on me. It was at that time I learned I had muscular dystrophy. I fought hard against this disease, and exercised hard, but to no avail. I only grew weaker. All I could see was what I had missed. My friends went away to college. then got married and started having families of their own. When I lay in bed at night thinking, despair would creep from the dark corners to haunt me. Life was meaningless.

(That sounds like the opening words of the 77th Psalm. doesn't it?)

Whenever you [Billy Graham] came on television. I would be watching, and when you gave the invitation for the viewers to receive Jesus into their lives, I sat back and listened, but actually I heard nothing. In March of last year my mother brought home from our public library your book World Aflame. I started reading it. and as I read I realized that I wanted God. I wanted there to be a meaning to life. I wanted to receive this faith. this deep faith and peace. Then a strange thing happened. Suddenly there came a strong assurance that there was indeed a God. an assurance so powerful that it led to a deep conviction. An odd emotion struck me and I was numb for a week.

This was her experience of conversion, though it may not be the same for any other person. But now hear what she says,

I have never experienced anything like it. All I know is that now my life has changed and I now have joy in living. No longer is the universe chaotic. No longer does life have no goal. No longer is there no hope. I here is instead God. who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." I continue to grow weaker. I am close to being totally helpless and am in pain most of the time, but sometimes I am so glad I am alive that it is hard to keep myself from bursting at the seams. I can see for the first time the beauty all around me and I realize how very lucky I am. Despair is such a waste of time when there is joy, and lack of faith is such a waste of time when there is God.

What a testimony! But that is only one among millions who can testify to the change that is made by a resurrected Christ. If that isn't proof of the resurrection, what is? The deeds of God in history! Not only in the past but in the present. There is the cure for doubt. It is these unchangeable facts of God's actions.

We must note another thing before we close. The psalmist reveals also the process by which he saw the value of God's deeds. There are two steps to it. He says first,

**I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;  
yea, I will remember thy wonders of Old. {Psa 77:11 RSV}**

That is step number one. "I will remember -- call to mind," these things. Second,

**I will meditate on all thy work,  
and muse on thy mighty deeds. {Psa 77:12 RSV}**

Meditate, muse, what does that mean? It is not enough to recall what God does. One must also think through as to the significance. That is the important thing. "I will meditate on them, think about them, concentrate upon these, until I see the meaning of these events." That is the important thing.

Here is the trouble with many Christians. Many faint at the second step. They do the first, they think about what God has done in their life or in another person's life, or in the past, such as the resurrection or some other event of history. But then they expect some kind of an automatic reaction to occur. They feel just to think about the event should do something for them. But it isn't like that. "I will meditate on them. I will muse on them. I will think them through." There is need to ask, "What does this mean? How does it affect me? What is the significance of this event?"

When the writer began to do that, then the answer came. This is what we need so much today. I dare say that this is a major reason for the weakness of Christians today. We don't want to think about events. We don't want to take time to think about what God has said or what he does, and thus come through to a significant understanding of the meaning of God's action. Turn off your television sets and think about what God has said! You can think even while you are working. I find that some of the most valuable and glorious times of understanding of what God is doing come when I meditate on the Scriptures as I am driving on the highways or in the city. A certain part of my mind can handle the activities of driving, if I am not facing any traffic problem, and I can give myself to thinking about Scripture passages. I have discovered that this is far better than the radio in turning a long trip into a short one. Oftentimes I can spend an hour or two thinking about these things and the time goes by so fast that I arrive at my destination hardly realizing that an hour or so has gone by.

You can meditate like this while you are washing the dishes. I don't know a greater place for a woman to meditate than while washing the dishes. You don't need to think about washing the dishes! You can do that automatically. But if you have a verse of Scripture propped up on the window sill before you or a passage that you are trying to think through to an understanding of it, your kitchen sink can become the greatest altar you have ever experienced. Try it. This is what the psalmist is telling us here.

Let me quickly gather up the rest. In Verses 13-15 he gives us the results of his meditation. What did he see in these works of God? What were the results of his meditation and his musing? First, he gives it to us in a general statement.

**Thy way, O God, is holy.  
What god is great like our God? {Psa 77:13 RSV}**

That is the conclusion to which he finally came. Then he gives us certain details of how he arrived at that conclusion.

**Thou are the God who workest wonders,  
who has manifested thy might among the peoples.  
Thou didst with thy arm redeem thy people,  
the sons of Jacob and Joseph. {Psa 77:14-15 RSV}**

The conclusion that he ultimately comes to is the holiness and greatness of God. That is always the ground of faith. Faith is always strong when one is aware of these two mighty things. But the thing that led him to this was his understanding of the supernatural power and the redemptive love of God. These were the steps which brought him to his awareness of the greatness of God.

We shall leave it to our next study to examine what it was that he actually saw about the deeds of God that strengthened his faith, but I shall close with the great fact to which he finally came, the supreme understanding to which he arrived at last, declared in Verse 13:

**Thy way, O God, is holy.  
What god is great like our God? {Psa 77:13 RSV}**

His meditation on the works of God led him to stand at last before God himself and to feel something of the awe of spirit that comes to all who consider the moral perfections of God, God's holiness, his total absence of error, sin, or wrong in his life. He is a holy, perfect being, complete in every detail. Thus this man became aware of the incomparable greatness of God.

Now this man has come to understand more fully the thought that stopped his downward decline. He was stopped by the thought, "Where is this line of thinking taking me? Where am I going in this despair and defeatism?" He saw that it was plunging him right back into uncertainty and confusion and the lack of an authoritative word about life. Now he realizes that he has come before one who is incomparable. There is no one like him. "To whom shall we go," said the Apostle Peter, "You alone have the words of eternal life. There is no one like you Lord," {cf, John 6:68}. That is where this man has come. There is no one like God. There is absolutely no other place we can turn. We human beings must have something, we must have some god to follow, some voice to obey, and the psalmist has arrived at the place where he is so struck by the power, the greatness and the love of God that says,

**Thy way, O God, is holy.  
What god is great like our God? {Psa 77:13 RSV}**

### **Prayer:**

Our Father, we pause at this moment to let our hearts express to you what our lips cannot, something of the awareness of the greatness of the Being whom we serve. How puny do the problems we have been concerned about this week appear now as we compare them with the greatness of our God! How futile and insignificant are the strutting pretensions of man; these great nations with their atomic bombs and hydrogen bombs in which they put such trust, how little they appear in the face of the greatness of a God like thee! Lord we pray that we may quiet our hearts and rest our faith where it ought to be resting; on One who is unchangeable, whose way is holy, and who can lead us step by step through all of life. We thank you for this realization, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Cure for Doubt  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Obtaining God's Help  
Scripture: Psalm 77:11-15  
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## **THE GREATNESS OF GOD**

**by Ray C. Stedman**

Anyone who has ever faced the question, "Is there a dependable God?" or perhaps, "Are there absolute values in life?" or even the question, "Is there meaning to life, is there any purpose to this existence?" will find tremendous value in this 77th Psalm. Here is a man who finds his way from the conclusion of despair, expressed in Verse 10, "And I say, 'It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'" (that is, God is changeable, he is capricious, he cannot be depended upon), to the triumphant declaration of Verse 13, "Thy way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?"

He does it, as he tells us here, by meditating on the deeds of the Lord. He thinks long and hard about certain actions of God in history, certain concrete, stubborn facts which cannot be forgotten or explained away, which have been witnessed by thousands and even millions of people, and the results of which have permanently altered the course of history.

He is thinking, of course, of such outstanding actions of God as the miracles that took place in Egypt, by which the heart of Pharaoh was melted so that he let God's people go. Also the subsequent ones, as the Israelites were led out of Egypt into the wilderness, especially the crossing of the Red Sea, when the waters were rolled back and the people went through, but the Egyptians trying to follow them were drowned. Further,



there are the accounts of the supply of God to this people in the wilderness. Well over a million strong, perhaps a million and a half, they were fed by the hand of God in the desert for over forty years so that they lacked nothing, and even their clothes were kept from wearing out. When they came to the borders of the land they were a people powerful and terrible in the eyes of their enemies. God ministered to them in the desert, making the rocks to gush with water, feeding them with manna from heaven. watching over them with a pillar of fire at night, and a cloud by day, ministering in most remarkable ways to them. He is thinking, too, of the miracles that had accompanied their entrance into the land -- the sun standing still as Joshua attempted to battle the forces of the Canaanite inhabitants of the land, and all the tremendous actions of God by which Israel was brought into the land. As he meditates on these and thinks about them the psalmist comes at last to this great conclusion:

**Thy way, O God, is holy.  
What god is great like our God? {Psa 77:13 RSV}**

You can hear the ringing, satisfying, positive assurance to which he has come after having been almost completely defeated by the despair he describes in the opening passages. For many people, to see how a man can think about what God has done and thus move from despair to renewed trust is enough alone to establish and strengthen them. Many are helped by thinking of what God has done in the past in human history or what he has done in the past in their own lives.

But there are many other people who are not so easily helped. They cannot accept these deeds as necessarily the actions of God. They ask questions like this: How do we know that these are God's actions? How do we know that we cannot explain these events on other terms? Perhaps it is all a hoax designed to make us feel a little better. Perhaps it is some kind of psychological phenomenon, or perhaps these are merely myths or legends that have accumulated through the years.

The psalmist was led to record his experience in order that he might satisfy all the questions of any who would be going through a time like this. He goes the whole length. He plumbs this experience to the very depths, and he faces all these questions in this psalm. That is why he goes on now, in Verses 14-15, to trace for us the way he arrived at his conclusion: what he saw in the deeds of God that made him absolutely confident that God was great, and that no god could be compared to him.

It is very important that we trace this. If these events can be explained as other than the actions of God, then perhaps, as we have already noted, we may be driven to admit that religion is but a very clever hoax designed to deceive many; that perhaps Karl Marx is right when he says that religion is the opiate of the people; it only serves to drug them, to reduce them to senselessness and make them unaware of reality. We may have to admit that at best it is nothing more than a pious mistake, some kind of an escape hatch invented by man to ease the burdens of life. So the psalmist traces the ground he took and reveals in these two verses, 14 and 15, the two characteristics about the events he was examining that convinced him that it was truly God at work, and lead him at last to declare, "Thy way O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?"

What did he find in his meditation on these events'? First, he found that these deeds reveal a tremendous power at work. Look at Verse 14:

**Thou art the God who workest wonders,  
who hast manifested thy might among the peoples. {Psa 77:14 RSV}**

"But," somebody says, "why is power a sign that God is at work? Man has released great power, too. He has discovered tremendous power in nature. Look at the hydrogen bomb, for instance, with its almost unbelievable release of power." But that is exactly the point that the psalmist makes! It was valid in the days in which this psalm was written (perhaps a thousand years before Christ), and is as valid today in this twentieth century. The point he is making is that, in these particular deeds, is revealed a power which no man can match and that man even today is not able to match -- a power that made men gasp in surprise and awe as they beheld it and which still makes men gasp when they realize the greatness of the power revealed. It is a power that is beyond man, what we call "supernatural" power; power that man cannot rival, accomplishing things that man cannot do.

I am very much aware of the contempt with which supernatural things are held in the thinking of many today. I fully realize that people look at these Old Testament miracles and, with an almost sneering smile, say, "Surely an educated person in this twentieth century cannot hold to this kind of superstition." Yet it is these very events which have convinced the men and women of faith for centuries that God is at work; and it is precisely because they are supernatural events that they are so convinced.

These are things which man cannot do. Even today, with all his advance and knowledge, man cannot equal them. Take, for instance, the crossing of the Red Sea. Here is that amazing event in which over a million and a half people participated, which was well known to all the peoples of the ancient world, and which shaped the course of ancient history, so that nations exist today as a result of the events that took place in connection with the crossing of the Red Sea. There the waters were rolled back so they formed a channel, as it is described for us. But when the Egyptians, attempting to go through in the same manner, were in the midst of the sea bed, the waters suddenly collapsed upon them and they were drowned. Consider that event. That kind of a thing has never been done by man and it cannot be done by man. Even today with all our vaunted power, even with the might of a hydrogen bomb, we cannot cause those waters to stand there for a long enough time to allow a million and a half people to make their way across. It is impossible; it is simply beyond us.

All that modern man can do is to belittle a story like that. I read the other day an account of a boy who had been sent to Sunday School. When he came home, his parents asked him what he had learned. He said, "We learned that Moses was sent by God to be the general to deliver the Israelites out of Egypt. He went down there and organized them into an army and led them out to the edge of the Red Sea. There he ordered his corps of engineers to build a pontoon bridge across the Red Sea. When all the people of Israel had passed over on the pontoon bridge, the Egyptians tried to follow. When they got out into the middle the Israelites blew up the bridge, the Egyptians were drowned, and the Israelites escaped." His parents were a little suspicious of this and said, "Is that what the Sunday School teacher taught you?" And the boy said, "Well, no, not exactly. But if I gave it the way she told it you'd never believe it!"

I rather think that represents the attitude that many take today. They simply dismiss these events without any consideration of them as possible occurrences in human history. It reveals the strange reasoning of many about the miracles of the Bible. As Matthew Arnold put it very bluntly: "Miracles cannot happen; therefore miracles have not happened." And that is that! Or perhaps their reasoning takes even a more circular form. Sometimes the arguments you hear about the miracles boils down to this: "There is no God: therefore there can be no miracles. Since there are no miracles, this is proof there is no God." That is the essence of the type of argument you often hear. But this is what logicians call "begging the question." It means to state, as a positive conclusion, that which is offered as needing to be proved. You cannot simply say, "Miracles cannot happen; therefore miracles have not happened." That is begging the question. The question is, Have miracles happened?

It is amazing to me to see how otherwise intelligent people simply dismiss with a wave of their hands the massive evidence that exists that miracles have happened, and refuse even to consider them as a possibility. If we look at the events of the Bible as a record of the eyewitness accounts of honest, sincere, intelligent, alert men and women who saw these things and recorded what they saw, then the Bible itself becomes the strongest kind of evidence that these things did occur. The interesting thing is that when we read in other ancient documents the account of eye witnesses, we do not discredit them. We accept the accounts of men like Flavius Josephus, who recorded the wars of the Jews. We read his account and take, without question, his recital of what he saw, what he did, where he went, and whom he went with. But when we read a similar account recorded in the New Testament, from trustworthy men whose characters are above reproach, we tend to dismiss it simply because it deals with the occurrence of supernatural events.

But if once we grant that there is a God, a God who desires to make himself known to his creatures, then how else would he do it except by supernatural deeds and wonders; things that man could not do? Knowing the tendency to doubt in the human heart, and knowing that man would explain every possible thing he could by so-called natural means, as a possible product of man's own ability, the only way God could reach doubting man would be to do things man could not do. That is why the Bible is so full of miraculous events: these great miracles of the Exodus, the miracles of the prophets, the healing of poisoned waters, the raising of the dead,

making iron to float, and many other strange things. Carrying right over into the days of our Lord, there are the miracles of Jesus himself: changing the water into wine, feeding the five thousand with a few loaves and fishes, opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf, making the lame to walk, raising the dead to life, and culminated by the greatest miracle of all, his own resurrection from the dead after he had been crucified and buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

The amazing thing is that in those days when these events happened, even hostile witnesses had to admit that they had occurred. Look, for instance, at the fourth chapter of Acts, where we have the account of the lame man who had been healed by Peter and John as they went up to the temple. It immediately created a furor in the city. The rulers of the Jews, who were very sensitive in those days because they had recently accomplished the death of Jesus and thought they had rid themselves of this superstition by so doing, were now confronted by another miracle done in the name of Jesus, and they were troubled by it. They called these disciples before them and examined them. In Verse 15 we are told.

**But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred with one another, saying, "What shall we do with these men? For that a notable sign has been performed through them is manifest to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem [that's quite a crowd of witnesses] and we cannot deny it [much as they would like to]. But in order that it may spread no further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to any one in this name." {Acts 4:15-17 RSV}**

The stupidity and blindness of vested interests and bureaucracy took over, and though they could not deny the miracle, they refused to adjust their actions accordingly. Unfortunately, this has been the attitude of many when faced with the Biblical accounts of miracles.

But the psalmist here has looked at these miracles, and in each one he has seen the manifestation of a power that no man could rival. Man simply cannot do these things. The psalmist does not question the authenticity of them. They were so well known, so widespread, so fundamentally woven into history, that he could not question these things. He has to face and does face the fact that each one is a manifestation of something that man cannot do. Who can duplicate these, even today, with man's prideful advance in knowledge? Even the commonplace things God does man cannot imitate. God promises us a body "not made with hands." That is characteristic of everything God does. "Not made with hands." In this room there are many things made with hands: clever things, ingenious things. Here is an electronic organ, a marvel of intricate electronics, probably the most complicated piece of machinery in this room. Yet there are in this room many things made without hands, our bodies, ourselves. And this electronic organ, compared with a human body, is a grossly clumsy, almost stupid, arrangement of wires and metal. It cannot compare with the body, with its delicate and intricate structure, made without hands. To this day science cannot duplicate the body, not in the least, not in even the simplest elements. That is the way God works. Take a simple flower and examine it, and its structure is absolutely breathtaking in its wonder. No wonder this psalmist cries out, "Thou art the God who workest wonders." He does things which man cannot do and before which man stands in awe and silence. He can neither explain nor imitate the working of God.

But that is not all that brought this man to declare, "What god is great like our God?" He also saw that the deeds of God had another inimitable quality about them: they were redemptive.

**Thou didst with thy arm redeem thy people,  
the sons of Jacob and Joseph. {Psa 77:15 RSV}**

What does it mean to "redeem"? It means to restore to usefulness something that has been rendered useless. When I was a seminary student I spent three years as a summer intern in two different churches in Pasadena. And, I suspect, like seminary students yet today, when I arrived in Pasadena in the spring of each year I arrived broke, with nothing to hold me over until the first paycheck came. The first time this happened I discovered a way of solving it which I used every year that I was a summer intern. As soon as I arrived in Pasadena I took my typewriter (which was the most valuable thing I possessed) down to the pawnshop and hocked it. That carried me over until I got my first paycheck. Then, when the first paycheck came, I would take the necessary money and go down and redeem the typewriter. When that typewriter was in the pawnshop

it was absolutely useless. I could not use it; the pawnbroker could not use it; no one had the right to use that typewriter. It was rendered utterly useless to anybody. It was only when it was redeemed that it was put back into functional service.

That is what redemption does, and that is God's special work. Everything he does in human life is aimed in this direction. These mighty activities of God, recorded as miracles, are all redemptive in character. They serve to buy us back. They restore us. They chip away at all the accretions of years of wrong living wrongful habits, hurtful attitudes and strip them off to restore us to useful functioning again.

Some time ago I spent several hours listening to and talking with a man who told me the story of his life. He had been, for all of his adult life, one of the most pitiable and miserable of people -- a homosexual. I do not think most of us can even remotely identify with this problem, to realize the shame that must be hidden under a bravado of acceptance, the fear that grips the heart, the anxieties, the guilt, the self-loathing which a homosexual goes through. As I talked with thiÅ

The events of the Exodus were redemptive. What is God doing down there in Egypt with these people, bringing plagues upon the Egyptians, eventually taking in death the firstborn of the land, sweeping through the land in terrible judgments? What are these? Miracles, yes, but designed to buy back a people. Here they come, bought back and brought out of the bondage of Egypt. All this is to picture for all time the purpose of God's activity. All the miracles of both the Old Testament and the New Testament have this quality about them.

In the New Testament we are told that everything associated with the life of the Lord Jesus is aimed in this direction. There is his incarnation. Recall that verse in Second Corinthians which says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich yet for your sake he became poor," {2 Cor 8:9}. He took on human flesh, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us," {John 1:14 RSV}. Why? "For your sake." That is redemptive love.

There is the crucifixion. How many times do you read throughout the whole New Testament. "Christ died for our sins"? {1 Cor 15:3}. "He who knew no sin was made sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him," {2 Cor 5:21}. "Those who live should henceforth no longer live for themselves," Paul says {2 Cor 5:15}. "But unto Him who for their sakes died and rose again," {1 Th 4:14}. Writing to the Romans he says that Christ was raised again "for our justification," {Rom 4:25}. There is his resurrection, the greatest miracle of all, which cannot be explained away or dismissed since it is grounded in history. What is its purpose? That we might be set free! As the writer of Hebrews puts it, "he is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them," {Heb 7:25}. He is forever alive for our sakes.

But notice something else about these events. These are the things that convinced the psalmist, but he also noticed something else about them. He says "Thou didst with thy arm redeem thy people..." Redemption is not just for anyone, indiscriminately. It is not applied to any human being without his knowledge, and certainly not against his will. It is for "thy people," i.e., for those who respond to the invitation of God, those who act upon God's word. As First Timothy 4:10 puts it. "He is the Savior of all men [potentially], especially of those who believe." The proclamation of God's redemptive love requires a response. Hebrews 11:6 says, "He who would come to God must believe that he is..." Everything around him is testifying to that: the orderliness of his own life, the orderliness of the universe in which he lives, the provision made for his welfare in the air he breathes, the sun that shines upon him, the water he drinks, the food he eats; everything about life is testifying that God is. "He that would come to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him," {Heb 11:6}. You say that you do not find God? Then, draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. That is always the offer of Scripture. The greatness of God is found only by those who respond to God's invitation, who step out to draw near to him. When they do they discover that God is a God of wonder and redemptive love.

I look back on my own youthful days when, as a college boy, I was callow, in the grip of hurtful habits, confused in my thinking, not understanding life, blaming everyone else for what was wrong with me -- and not able to understand how to be free from these things. Yet as I look back through the years I can see the redemptive love of Jesus Christ stripping off one by one the bad habits, setting me free, opening my eyes,

explaining life to me, leading me step by step into the wide and glorious place of experiencing the liberty that was intended for the sons of God.

Thou art the God who workest wonders,  
who has manifested thy might among the peoples. {Psa 77:14 RSV}

Thy way, O God, is holy.  
What god is great like our God? {Psa 77:13 RSV}

Can you say that?

Are you responding to God?

Or are you sitting there in sullenness, waiting for God to do something to you in spite of yourself? No, no. The way of God is holy and his greatness is evident to those who are his people, who move toward him, who respond to his invitation. They are the ones who ultimately cry, "what god is great like our God!"

**Prayer:**

Our Father, how pitifully weak are words to express the greatness of your deeds and actions among men! How little have we understood the wonders of life that surround us on every side! How blind we have been to the simplest things of our nature and of our lives! Lord, we pray that you will open our eyes to see something more of your greatness and the fact that you have been moving in history and in our own lives. Millions today can testify to your greatness, to your redeeming love, and to your supernatural activity. doing things that no man can do. When we see a man or a woman changed, released from habits of thought, and made over into a new creature, what greater testimony is needed that here is a supernatural thing! Man cannot do it. All our struggling, all our educative processes, all our attempts by legislation to change men have been of no avail. But this simple blessed word of the Gospel, how it changes human hearts and sets men free. We pray that any here who have never responded to that invitation may say, "Oh, Lord God, in the name of Jesus. deliver me. Set me free, enter my heart, be my God." We ask for thy name's sake. Amen.

Title: The Greatness of God  
By: Ray C. Stedman  
Series: Obtaining God's Help  
Scripture: Psalm 77:14-15  
Message No: 4  
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## OUT OF THE DEPTHS

by Ray C. Stedman

When the waters saw thee, O God,  
when the waters saw thee, they were afraid,  
yea, the deep trembled.  
The clouds poured out water;  
the skies gave forth thunder;  
thy arrows flashed on every side.  
The crash of thy thunder was in the whirlwind;  
thy lightnings lighted up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.

**Thy way was through the sea,  
thy path through the great waters;  
yet thy footprints were unseen.  
Thou didst lead thy people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron. {Psa 77:16-20 RSV}**

This psalm opened with a cry of doubt and despair. Here is a man who had almost lost his faith because of the thought that God had changed his mind, that God is capricious and cannot be trusted -- a thought that troubles many from time to time. But the psalmist traced for us his way back from despair so that at last he came to say, "Thy way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?"

He accomplished this, he tells us, by thinking and meditating on the actions of God in history, the unmistakable movings of God in human events. As he thought about these deeds, he saw two things about them that unmistakably marked them as God's actions, so that they could never be explained in terms of man's activity. First, he saw that these were supernatural actions. They were things beyond the power of man to do. And the amazing thing is, some thirty centuries after these words were written, it still remains beyond the power of man to duplicate these great actions of God. Second, he saw that they had a special purpose -- they were redemptive. They restored people, they bought them back. God's actions always have this characteristic about them.

In these verses before us the psalmist is focusing upon the specific action of God which helped him the most. He had thought through many of the things God had done in the past, but there was one thing that particularly helped him in his problem. We will discover that when we are up against emotional disturbances and pressures, and especially on those difficult days when everything seems to go wrong and our faith is tried to the utmost, as we think back through the activity of God in our lives and in the recorded acts of Scripture, we will always find one thing that helps us more than anything else. That is what this man found, and he records it for us. He thinks through the great deeds of God which he knew, and he chooses the crossing of the Red Sea as the thing that helped him the most. This is the event which cleared away his doubts and made him say at last, "Thy way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?"

He saw in this event certain great truths which were the final release to his spirit and which removed his doubts. As we look at these truths we will see that they not only helped him, but that they can help us as well. What did this man see in this event of the crossing of the Red Sea that particularly helped him in his time of distress? First, he recognized the sovereign control of God over all human events. This was most evident here in the crossing of the Red Sea. He puts these truths poetically, because poetry is often the best possible way to express deep emotion. But he sees two things about this event that made him realize that God is always sovereign over every human event, every force in life.

The first thing he saw was that whatever made the Israelites afraid when they crossed the Red Sea was itself, in turn, afraid of God. He puts it poetically in Verse 16:

**When the waters saw thee, O God,  
when the waters saw thee, they were afraid,  
yea, the deep trembled. {Psa 77:16 RSV}**

You can well imagine that when the Israelites came to the edge of the Red Sea in their flight from Egypt they were very much afraid of the waters that lay in their pathway. The Egyptians were behind them and there was no time to go around to the north. God had led them to this point, and yet before them was nothing but water. Then God acted; Moses stretched forth his rod and the waters parted and they were told to go through the Sea, but they were afraid as they went through. You would have been too! Here were these great walls of water, stacked up on either side, held by the hand of God. They were told to walk through the midst of this and that they would safely pass through. And so they did, but you can imagine that they did it with considerable fear.

But they noticed something strange about the waters. They seemed to be afraid, too. They were trembling. This is what the psalmist says. He puts it in this poetic form to express the fact that the waters seemed to be afraid of God. The thing that made the Israelites afraid was itself afraid of the greatness and might of God.

Thus the psalmist is expressing for us the great truth that he learned from this, that even these mighty forces, quite outside human control, were still under the control of God.

There is something like this in the New Testament as well. On the occasion when the disciples were sent by Jesus out into a storm while he remained on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, the storm blew, the waves grew higher and the wind beat down upon them in the darkness of the night, and they were afraid for their lives. Suddenly, looking out through the gloom, they saw a figure walking toward them upon the water, and the Scripture says they were terribly frightened. It was Jesus coming to them on the water, and his action was symbolic. He was saying to them, by his approach on the very waves that frightened them, that that which made them afraid was already under his feet. He was in full control.

As they looked out at him on the waves they thought it was a ghost and that struck additional terror to their hearts. But he said to them, "It is I" {Matt 14:27}, i.e., the thing that makes you afraid is I. This is the great truth that God is always seeking to impart to us. Behind every event, every force, every power that frightens us, is God's hand in control. That is what the psalmist learned as he thought through the crossing of the Red Sea; the very powers and forces that frighten men are themselves under the control and power of God.

Then he sees the same thing in a different way, in Verses 17-18. He learned that all the forces of life are but the instruments of God.

**The clouds poured out water;  
the skies gave forth thunder;  
thy arrows flashed on every side.  
The crash of thy thunder was in the whirlwind;  
thy lightnings lighted up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook. {Psa 77:17-18 RSV}**

Anyone who has ever been through an electric storm knows what the psalmist is describing here: lightning flashing all around, the sound of thunder crashing in response, the earth trembling and shaking at the might and power being released. But notice the personal pronouns here -- thy thunder, thy lightnings. These forces were all God's, they were in his control. That is what this man learned as he thought about the crossing of the Red Sea. These events that so frightened the Israelites at the time were under the control and authority of God at all times. No power, natural or human, can operate except by express permission of the Almighty. That is the great truth that helped to set him free as he thought these things through.

Some time ago I read an account of a Swiss-French pastor who was imprisoned by the Nazis. This man said, "I was not able to stand firm except by remembering every day that the Gestapo was the hand of God -- the left hand. The worst of tyrants and the last of cowards will only end by accomplishing Christ's will." That is what keeps men in days of pressure and times of trial, when everything seems to be going wrong and nothing is in accord with what is expected, the realization that every force, natural or human, is under the control of God.

There is nothing more magnificent in the New Testament than the story of the incident in the last week of Jesus when he stood forsaken by his friends, betrayed by his disciples, powerless and apparently helpless in the presence of Pilate, the representative of the imperial power. Pilate said to him, "Do you not know that I have the power to crucify you?" {John 19:10}. And Jesus looked at him and said, "You could have no power except it be given you from above," {cf, John 19:11}. Is there anything greater than that in the records of man? It is the recognition that all power is under God's control. Power belongs to God -- all power, every form of it -- and it is under his control. That is the first thing this man learned as he considered the event of the Red Sea.

Then there is a second truth he learned, in Verse 19:

**Thy way was through the sea,  
thy path through the great waters;  
yet thy footprints were unseen. {Psa 77:19 RSV}**

Here were the hosts of the Israelites being led out of Egypt. They knew they were being led by God for God had prepared the way. God had sent the plagues upon the Egyptians which had softened Pharaoh's heart so that he had let them go. Now they were being led by Moses and Aaron out into the wilderness and they had come to the edge of the Red Sea. They did not know where God was going, they could not understand what he was doing, but there they were. Yet the ultimate end of the experience was to prove and demonstrate that God knew all the time what he was doing. As the psalmist thinks about this, he learns a second great truth -- that inability to understand how God is working is no sign that he is not at work.

I wish there were some way to impart that truth to many today. We are so insistent that God explain to us everything he is doing. Unless we can see this, we get panicky; all excited and frightened, like the Israelites did when they got to the edge of the Red Sea. Here they were and they did not know what to do. They panicked, just as you and I do. They came to Moses and said, "What do you mean, leading us out here like this? Why, there's no place to go, no way to save us, we're doomed! The Egyptians are coming upon us and you've led us into a trap." How many times have you or I said something similar in like circumstances? "Lord, there's no way out. I'm in a trap, and there's nothing anyone can do." We hit the panic button, just as these men and women did. But as this psalmist thought this through, he realized that God's intention was to lead them through the sea. This was his intention when they left Egypt and he had it in mind all the way. "His way was through the sea, his path through the great waters." They could not see that. It never entered their minds. But God knew it. Though his footprints were unseen and they could not predict what he was going to do, nevertheless the outcome of it proved that God knew all the time what he was doing.

All this was a special help to this man. Remember that the psalmist's problem was the apparent inactivity of God. This is what brought him to the crisis that is reflected in the opening words,

**I think of God, and I moan;  
I meditate, and my spirit faints.  
Thou dost hold my eyelids from closing;  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak. {Psa 77:3-4 RSV}**

What is troubling is these questions he cannot answer:

**"Will the Lord spurn for ever,  
and never again be favorable?  
Has his steadfast love for ever ceased?  
and his promises at an end for all time?  
Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?" {Psa 77:7-9 RSV}**

God is doing nothing, he said. Here I am in deep trouble and God apparently is doing nothing. And now as he has thought through the event of the crossing of the Red Sea, he saw that it was a parallel experience. Here were these people brought to the edge of the Red Sea. There was no visible way out, no human alternative they could see. But God knew the answer all the time. His footprints were unseen, but his way was through the sea, his path through the great waters, and he led them on that way.

Have you ever had this kind of an experience? I think it is a rather common one among Christians. Annie Johnson Flint has captured this in a poem that gathers up the challenge of this incident for us. She asks,

Have you come to the Red Sea place in your life  
Where, in spite of all you can do,  
There is no way out,  
There is no way back,  
There is no other way but through?

Then wait on the Lord with a trust serene,  
Tell the night of your fear is gone.  
He will send the wind,  
He will send the floods.



But He will say to your soul, "Go on."

And His hand will lead you through -- clear through,  
Ere the watery wall roll down,  
No foe can reach you,  
No wave can touch,  
No mightiest sea can drown.

The tossing billows may rear their crests,  
Their foam at your feet may break.  
But over their bed,  
You may walk dryshod,  
In a path that your Lord will make.

In the morning watch, 'neath the lifted cloud,  
You shall see but the Lord alone.  
Where He leads you on,  
>From the place by the sea,  
To the land that you have not known.

And your fears shall pass, as your foes have passed.  
You shall be no more afraid.  
You shall sing His praise  
In a better place,  
A place that His hand has made.

That is the Red Sea. What a great lesson that has been for all the men and women of faith who have lived in the many centuries since. God's path leads through the sea, through the trouble, through the trial: not around it, but right **through** the middle! That is where he will take you, but he will take you through.

The third thing this man learned as he contemplated this great deed was that God is forever the Shepherd of his people,

**Thou didst lead thy people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron. {Psa 77:20 RSV}**

I do not think there is any figure so beautifully descriptive of the relationship of God to his people than that of a shepherd with his sheep. As the Shepherd, God supplies to us what we so desperately lack in ourselves. First, he supplies purpose. A shepherd always has a goal in mind for his flock. If he leads them to the mountain pastures it is because he has something he wants to accomplish there. If he leads them beside the still water he has some reason for it. If he leads them out in the midst of wolves it is because he wants them there. It is the shepherd who supplies the purpose.

If there is anything that is lacking in the day in which we live it is this one essential ingredient of life, this element of purpose, of meaning in existence. Suicide rates are skyrocketing today because men and women who have everything else lack this one essential: they have no reason for living. A man came into my study not long ago and told me that though he had everything he wanted, he didn't want anything that he had. He was suffering from "destination sickness," the sickness of having gotten all that he had striven for in life, but still having nothing that made life worth the living. But that is what a shepherd supplies. He supplies purpose, a goal ahead, a reason for existence, something beyond that makes all this meaningful and worthwhile.

And a shepherd supplies the other desperate lack in life, love: protection and supply, all that love involves. He cares for his sheep. Are not those wonderful words in First Peter where he urges Christians to watch for the coming of the Chief Shepherd, and then says, "Cast all your cares upon him, for it matters to him about you," {cf, 1 Pet 5:7}. Think of that! It matters to him about you. That is how a shepherd feels.

This is a common figure in the Scriptures. In the very next psalm, Psalm 78, Verses 51-54, the psalmist is again recounting these events of God in the past.

**He smote all the first-born in Egypt,  
the first issue of their strength in the tents of Ham.  
Then he led forth his people like sheep,  
and guided them in the like a flock.  
He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid;  
but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.  
And he brought them to his holy land,  
to the mountain which his right hand had won. {Psa 78:51-54 RSV}**

That is the activity of a shepherd. Again, the 80th Psalm begins with these words,

**Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
thou who leadest Joseph like a flock!  
Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh!  
Stir up thy might,  
and come to save us! {Psa 80:1-3 RSV}**

There are wonderful words in this psalm concerning the great Shepherd of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus came to his own and said, "I am the True Shepherd," {cf, John 10:11-15}. Later on in Hebrews, he is called the Great Shepherd {Heb 13:20}; and again, in First Peter, the Chief Shepherd {1 Pet 5:4}. He delighted in this role of a shepherd, who takes up his own, gathering his lambs to his bosom and leading those who are weary; gently, tenderly, as a shepherd does. This is forever God's chief relationship to his own people. Primarily and above everything else, he is the Shepherd of his own. This is what the psalmist learned, that through difficulties and trials, when it seemed that he was abandoned, he was not. He was still in the care and protective love of a Shepherd. God was shepherding his own.

The most beloved of all the psalms is the 23rd Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures," {Psa 23:1-2a RSV}. There have been thousands who have found the needed solace for their own hearts in that beautiful psalm which describes this great and underlying truth of the relationship of God to his own. "The Lord is my shepherd." Notice the personal pronoun. Not, the Lord is *a* shepherd; he is *my* shepherd. He is leading me this way. I stand in this relationship to him, and "I shall not want."

A few weeks ago I was in one of the local department stores and a lady sales clerk was waiting on me. When I signed the sales slip she noticed my name. "Oh, you are Mr. Stedman, are you, the pastor of the Peninsula Bible Church?" I replied, "Yes." She said, "I don't know if you would remember me, but my name is so-and-so." As soon as she spoke the name I recalled the incident when I had first met this family. They were moving into this area two or three years ago. They had come in, utter strangers to anyone in this community, and had rented a motel on El Camino Real. They went out one day looking for houses, but their 12 year old son had wanted to stay behind, so they left him in the motel alone. When they came back they found him hanging, dead, in the closet.

They did not know where to go for solace or whom to call but, thumbing through the phone book, they chanced upon my name. They had been raised as Christians and so they called me. I remember going over and finding a terribly grief-stricken family, numb with the awful thing that had happened. I did not know the family or anything about them, and at first I did not know what to say. But as we sat in the motel room together discussing what had happened, I felt led to turn to the words of the 23rd Psalm. I read them through and we prayed together, and it seemed to give them a bit of peace. Then at the funeral service I built the message around that wonderful psalm.

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; ... {Psa 23:1a RSV}  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil;  
for thou art with me. {Psa 23:4a RSV}**

In the store, this lady said to me, "You will never know the comfort that psalm brought to our hearts as a

family. We've all talked about it many times since. It brought peace when nothing else could, the realization that through this dark time of tragedy, when our hearts were torn with grief, we could lean upon the great fact: "The Lord is my shepherd."

That is what this man came to. He saw that underneath the apparent inactivity of God was a shepherd's love, protection, and care, and God would lead him safely through. And he did come through. He tells us he did. He came through to the great and glorious conclusion of Verse 13:

**Thy way, O God, is holy.**

**What god is great like our God? {Psa 77:13 RSV}**

Have you come to that place, through the time of doubt and pressure, or trial and temptation? Come at last through the difficulty, right through the sea, through the great waters, come out at last on the other side to the place where you could say, "What god is great like our God?" We have so much more to look back upon than this psalmist had. He had the record of God's activity up to his own day. He could look back upon the great events of Egypt and the wilderness and other unchangeable, unremovable events, but think how much more we have today. There is not only the record of the Exodus, but of the days of David himself, the days of the Psalmists, and the faithfulness of God to them. Then we have the record of the prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Elijah and Elisha. Then the glorious days of the appearance of the Son of God among men, the wonderful record of his days on earth. And then the stirring, exciting days of the explosion of the church out against a pagan world, and the faithfulness of God who worked with them to do signs and wonders that established their faith and made them strong. There are these great facts of our Christian faith, the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, that foundation stone upon which all faith ultimately rests. Also there are the long 1900 years and more of church history and the great events that took place throughout that time when God has repeatedly moved to awaken his people and turn them back to the truth: the stirring days of the Reformation under Martin Luther, when he challenged the entrenched tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church and delivered the people from the bondage of legalism and other false emphases. How much we have to look back upon! How God has moved; how he has fulfilled his word!

He has brought Israel back to the land, exactly as he promised. Through century after century it looked like the promise was absolutely impossible to fulfill, but there they are, back in the land today, possessing that ancient city, ready again to rebuild the temple, just as Scripture has predicted. How much we have to rest upon in these great activities of God. All of them are redemptive, all of them supernatural, utterly beyond the power of man; all of them revealing, in one way or another, the shepherd character of God in relationship to his own. Do we not have much reason to have faith in God in these days, to rest upon his love, to reflect upon his truth and his faithfulness, and to rest our faith there?" What god is great like our God?"

### **Prayer:**

We thank you, Father, for teaching us from this psalm the realities upon which faith can rest in any day of temptation or doubt. As we face such a day in our own time, when men are questioning the very foundations of life, and throwing overboard those foundations that have been proved through many centuries to be solid and true, forsaking them, turning the world into anarchy and revolt and rebellion, we pray that we may renew our faith and our confidence in you and, resting upon these unshakable things, remain true in the hour of pressure or distress. We ask to be made faithful to your word, and faithful to your love, ever remembering that great shepherd-heart that beats in your father's breast for your own. We ask in Christ's name, Amen.

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