Psalms

How to Have an Honest Conversation with God

A Series of Sermons on Select Psalms

By

Dr. Robert W. Kellemen

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Seeing Life with Christ-Tinted Lenses: Psalms 1, 2, and 27

The Big Idea: We Face Life Either Face-to-Face with Christ or with Our Faces Turned Away from Christ

The Big Picture: The Post-Tribune Quickly Column

If you subscribe to the Post-Tribune, then you are aware of the reader-generated column called Quickly. If you have a thought, question, quote, or quip related to happenings in NW Indiana, then you can call the Quickly hotline and leave a one-to-two sentence comment.

If you’ve read the Quickly quips, then I’m sure you’ve discovered what I’ve noticed. Two people can comment on the identical issue, and have completely opposite perspectives. It might be diametrically opposed viewpoints on vital issues affecting our Region such as race relations. Or, it might be drastically different ideas about less vital issues such as the size of trash cans in Hobart.

Even if you’ve never read a single Quickly quip, you know what I’m talking about. We could do an experiment after the service. We could walk into Fellowship Hall, get a snack, sit at one of the tables, and bring up a political issue—like The Affordable Care Act. If you had five people at that table, you would likely have six different perspectives, right?

Regardless of the issue, whether it’s Quickly comments or a discussion after church, we all know that everyone looks at life through a certain lens, a particular perspective, or a personal worldview. This is even more important when it comes to life issues deeply impacting us.

We’ve all known people in our lives who have received a very distressing diagnosis—like cancer. One person with that diagnosis, while they will be deeply saddened by it, will look at that diagnosis through Christ-tinted lenses and will cling to Christ even on their worst days. The other person, with the same diagnosis, might sink into despair and shake an angry fist at God or turn their back on God.

All of this illustrates something that is vital for our spiritual lives. What happens to us and around us, while important, is not what is most important. Instead, what is most important is how we view, perceive, and interpret what happens to us. In our series in the Psalms: How to Have an Honest Conversation with God, we’ll learn it like this:

We Face Life Either Face-to-Face with Christ or with Our Faces Turned Away from Christ

I. The Central Message of the Psalms: When Life Is Knocking Us Down, Do We Look at Life with Spiritual Eyes or with Fleshy Eyes?—Psalms 1-2

In our first message in this series, we’ll apply to our lives the central message of the Psalms:

We look at life either with spiritual eyes or with fleshy eyes.

Let me explain that in the context of the Psalms. The Psalmists are brutally honest. They face the fact that life will knock us down. And when it does, the Psalms show that we can either be disappointed with God or disappointed without God. Let that sink in for a minute.
To be disappointed with God means I invite God into my disappointment. Even more than that, it means that I walk through my disappointments hand-in-hand with God. With my eyes focused on God because I am wearing Christ-tinted spiritual lenses.

Or, when life knocks us down, we can be disappointed without God. That means we try to handle life’s difficulties on our own, with our faces turned away from God and our fists raised angrily at God because we look at life without Christ-tinted spiritual lenses.

Last week we talked about how Satan attempts to crop Christ and the cross out of the picture. Here what Satan says, “Life is bad. God is in control of everything. So God must be bad, too!”

The writers of the Psalms refused to buy that lie! They candidly admitted that life was bad, but they clung to the truth that God was good. Consider Psalm 13:1 where David forcefully asks God, “How long, O LORD, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” That’s raw.

But think about that. David felt forgotten, but he did not forget God. David felt like God was hiding His face from him, but David still turned his face to God. David did not simply talk about God. And he didn’t talk behind God’s back. David talked to God. David cropped God into the picture. In Psalm 13:5, he says, “But I trust in your unfailing love.”

God and His loyal love were the lens through which all the psalmists saw life—no matter how horrible life was treating them. We see this truth in Psalms 1 and 2.

A. When Life Knocks Us Down, We Can Either Wisely Look to God or Foolishly Look to Ourselves: Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:5-8

Many people often read Psalm 1, but they typically forget its purpose. Psalm 1 introduces all the psalms with a focus on whether we look at life wisely or foolishly. Since the Psalms look at life candidly, Psalm 1 teaches us that as we look at life with brutal honestly, we can either look to God or look to ourselves. Let’s read Psalm 1, within this context of two ways of perceiving life.

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Psalm 1:1-3).

That’s the first way of looking at life—through the lens of God and His Word. Is life knocking you down right now? Maybe it’s a work or financial issue? Maybe it’s a health issue? Maybe it’s a relationship issue. As you endure this, are you, are we, wisely delighting in God and His Word—cropping Christ back into the picture?

When life knocks us down, there’s a second way to look at life—the foolish way.

“Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (Psalm 1:4-6).

Jeremiah 17:5-8 is like a divine commentary on Psalm 1:4-6. In Jeremiah, we see this contrast between God-trust and self-trust even more clearly.
“This is what the LORD says: ‘Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the LORD. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives” (Jeremiah 17:5-6).

That’s how the foolish person handles life—by depending on his or her own strength and turning his or her face away from the Lord. When life knocks us down, Satan tempts us to doubt God and to trust ourselves. Jeremiah says that approach to life is like a wasteland, a desert, hopeless.

Jeremiah shows us what it’s like to crop God into life’s difficulties and handle them with wisdom and spiritual eyes—by trusting in the Lord.

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit’” (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

Jeremiah, like the Psalmists, is honest. Heat will come. Drought will come. Jeremiah and Psalm 1 remind us that we will only flourish in a desert when we face life’s heat face-to-face with God.

We will spend the next three months in the Psalms—in honest conversations with God about grief, loss, enemies, depression, anxiety, envy, sin, guilt, peace, and forgiveness. As we do, let’s remember the message of Psalm 1—*we each have a clear choice* when bad things happen to us as God’s people. Psalm 1 is like the reader’s guide at the beginning of a book. It’s saying, “Here’s how you read the book of Psalms and here’s how you read the book of life—either wisely with eyes and hearts that look to and trust God, or foolishly with eyes and hearts that look to and trust self.”

B. When Life Knocks Us Down, We Can Either Wisely Take Refuge in Christ or Foolishly Fight Against Christ: Psalm 2

If Psalm 1 is the reader’s guide to the Psalms, then Psalm 2 is the introduction to the Psalms. It introduces all the Psalms with a focus on either *taking refuge in God’s Anointed One*, or *fighting against God’s Anointed One*.

“Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against *his Anointed One*. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters’” (Psalm 2:1-3).

Who is being talked about here? Who is being predicted and promised in this Psalm as the Anointed One? Christ Jesus. The coming Messiah. Remember that the Psalms were written 1,000 years before Christ was born. And remember that every faithful Jewish person longed for the coming Messiah. But in that day, just like in our day, many refused to trust in the coming Messiah.
“Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Psalm 2:10-12).

Psalm 2 is saying, “Here’s the focus of all the Psalms. When life knocks us down, we each have a crystal clear choice to make. We take refuge in the Anointed One—the Messiah, or we raise angry fists at God’s Anointed.

Let’s be honest, when bad things happen to us, we come to a choice point—a faith point. In last week’s message, I shared that my dad died on my 21st birthday. I came to Christ when I was 14. So for 7 years I witnessed to my dad. He often came to church with me. He heard the gospel clearly. I prayed for his salvation faithfully every day for 7 years. Yet, I do not know if my dad ever accepted Christ as his Savior. Maybe in his heart, privately he did so. But he died without my having assurance of his salvation.

That entire next year was a choice point in my life. Like the psalmists, I wrestled honestly with God. I asked God, “What’s the use of witnessing and praying?” God and I, like Jacob in Genesis 32, had some fierce wrestling matches. But God won those wrestling matches. Because when Satan tempted me to raise an angry fist at God and turn my back on God, God’s Spirit drew me back to Christ, back to the cross. God’s Word cropped Christ and His grace back into the picture. Christian friends cropped the hope of Christ’s return and Christ’s victory back into the picture.

You’ve had some choice points in your life, haven’t you? Some faith points? Times when you’ve wrestled with God about life, dashed dreams, or broken relationships. And Psalm 2 urges us, when life is bad, to take refuge in the Anointed One, in the Messiah. The Jews read the Psalms and they lived their lives, no matter how horrible their lives were, in light of the promise of Christ’s first coming. They took refuge in Him and the future hope He promised.

For us, we read the Psalms and live our lives, no matter how horrible our lives may be, in light of the truth of Christ’s first coming and the sure hope of His second coming. We take refuge and shelter in Christ and the future hope He promised us.

Last week we talked about the gospel as a victory narrative. We shared how we have read the end of the story and Christ wins! In the Psalms, the psalmist are honest about the fact that sometimes, this side of heaven, it does not look like and does not feel like we are on the winning side. But Psalm 2 tells us that no matter what life looks like today, the godly live on earth with wisdom—with spiritual lenses that constantly remember the future when Christ will return victorious over all sin, Satan, evil, sickness, and suffering.

II. The Central Message of Psalm 27: When the Whole World Is Against Us, Do We Fearfully Focus on Our Foes or Confidently Cling to Christ?—Psalm 27

What Psalms 1-2 introduce, Psalm 27 illustrates. When our fallen world falls on us, we can either fearfully focus on our foes, or confidently clinging to Christ. When the whole world is against us, the only way to see life clearly is to focus on Christ.
A. What Does It Feel Like When the Whole World Is Against Us?: Psalm 27:2-3, 5-6, 10-12

To understand this, we have to get a glimpse at everything David, who is the psalmist who penned Psalm 27, was going through. Here’s a summary taken directly from Psalm 27:

- Evil men were advancing against him to devour his flesh—that’s serious!
- Enemies and foes were attacking him.
- An army is encircling him.
- War has broken out against him.
- His whole life is one big day of trouble. Ever felt like that?
- Enemies are surrounding him—if this sounds repetitious it’s because David keeps repeating and emphasizing that everything is arrayed against him!
- His father and mother are forsaking him—it’s bad enough when enemies attack, it’s even worse when family forsakes…
- He faces oppressors and foes.
- He is being slandered—false witnesses rise up against him.
- He is being threatened—people breathe out violence against him.

That’s a lot. It would be like you and me writing a Psalm that said:

- Evil people are abusing me.
- My former friends are all out to destroy me.
- My vindictive boss is unjustly trying to fire me.
- So much is going wrong that I feel like everyone is at war against me.
- Every day is the same—trouble, trouble, trouble.
- Even my family—my parents, my spouse, my children—are forsaking me.
- Foes and enemies are everywhere I look.
- People are lying about me and ruining my reputation.

B. What One Thing Do We Ask God When Our World Is Falling Apart?: Psalm 27:4, 7-8

So, put yourself in David’s place. If all of this was your lot in life, your daily grind, your continual struggle, what would you pray? If you had just one prayer request, what would you ask? I don’t know about you, but I know what I would pray!

“Lord, make it stop!”

My constant prayer would be for my constant struggles to end…immediately and forever!

Now, don’t look at me like that. Like I’m abnormal. And like your constant prayer would be so very much more spiritual than mine!

Remember, I’ve counseled hurting people for three decades. And I can summarize the number one prayer of all of those folks. Ready? Here’s the prayer of hurting people:

“Lord, fix my circumstances and change my feelings!”
Let’s be honest. That’s how we are. If we had just one prayer we could pray, it’s natural to ask the Lord to make our situation better and to help us to feel better.

It’s natural. But it’s not supernatural.

David had one prayer to pray and his prayer was not natural, it was supernatural. Let’s listen in together on his honest conversation with God.

“One thing I ask of the LORD, this is what I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4).

What? When everything in the world was crashing down around him, David, instead of praying, “Lord, make it stop!” prayed, “Lord, may I see Your beauty.” When faced with the ugliness of life, David’s one prayer was to gaze upon the Lord’s beauty.” Instead of praying, “Lord, fix my circumstances and change my feelings,” David prayed, “Fix my spiritual eyesight so I can behold your beauty!”

In case we think we heard him wrong, David prays the same prayer a second time, with only slightly different wording, but with the identical request.

“Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, ‘Seek his face!’ Your face, LORD, I will seek” (Psalm 27:7-8).

Unbelievable. Unnatural. Supernatural belief! He begs the Lord, “Hear me!” He begs the Lord to be merciful and to answer him. And what does he beg for? For the removal of his suffering—like I would pray for? No. He begs to see God face-to-face! When facing a faith point, David sought the face of God.

Something seems bizarre here. Weird. How does he get so spiritual? And remember. This is not someone pretending that everything is wonderful. We just read how candid David was about all his problems. He’s facing his problems and saying that all he wants is to see the face of God.

C. When Life Is Bad, It Is Good to Be Near Our God: Psalm 27:1, 9, 13

In the midst of our suffering, how do we get to this point in our lives? How did David become this God-focused? Because he knew his theology. Let’s listen to what he said:

- The LORD is light and salvation (Psalm 27:1).
- The LORD is the stronghold (Psalm 27:1).
- The LORD is helper, God, and Savior (Psalm 27:9).
- The LORD is good (Psalm 27:13).

That sounds, good, doesn’t it? But do you see what I left out? Do you see the crucial part that I omitted? Let’s look at those verses again, adding back in what I left out:

- The LORD is my light and my salvation (Psalm 27:1).
- The LORD is the stronghold of my life (Psalm 27:1).
- The LORD is my helper, my God, and my Savior (Psalm 27:9).
- I will see the goodness of the Lord (Psalm 27:13).
I left out the personal stuff, didn’t I: My and I. My light and my salvation. The stronghold of my life. My Savior. I will see God’s goodness. When life is bad, it is good to be near our God!

Yes, David knew his theology—that was his vital foundation—and he personally related theology to his own life and situation. Theology—truth about God from God’s Word—was never meant to be mere academic facts. Our knowledge about God is to lead to personal trust in and worship of God. David did not just know facts about God. That would never have sustained him in his suffering. David knew God. And because David knew God personally, fear would not overwhelm him.

“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?” (Psalm 27:1).

His words remind us of Paul’s words in Romans 8:31-32.

“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31-32).

In Christ, no one, including Satan, can be victorious against us. Satan and others can be arrayed against us—but they cannot win the final victory. Christ won the final victory for us on the cross and through His resurrection. In His goodness, He will graciously give us everything we need. Not everything we want, but everything we need.

It was because of David’s confidence in God’s goodness that his one prayer was to gaze upon the beauty of God. The only thing that sustains us in this wicked world is nearness to our good God. It’s just like what the psalmist in Psalm 73 said when he, too, was being crushed by this fallen world:

“But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge” (Psalm 73:28).

He didn’t just say, “As for me, it is good to know theological facts about God.” He said, “As for me, it is good to be near God—the Sovereign Lord who is my refuge.” Yes, he knew theology about God—about His sovereignty, Lordship, goodness, and refuge. And he related those truths to his soul.

I think you all know me well enough by now to know that I am all about deep theology—but it must be deep theology that we personally and intimately apply to our lives. That’s exactly what Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4:24. “God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.” Christianity unites spirit and truth, life and knowledge, relationship and Scripture. People seem to want to make Christianity one or the other: theology or life; truth or love. The Bible says we speak the truth in love. It says we worship in spirit and in truth.

We can’t apply the Word of God, if we do not know the Word of God. We can’t truly worship God, if we don’t know the truth of God from God’s Word.

Everything we do at Cornerstone Community Church, we need to be sure that it is done both in spirit and in truth. That means that our preaching must relate truth to life. That means that in our small groups we study God’s Word deeply and we relate God’s Word’s to one another’s
lives relevantly. That means in our worship music selection, we continue to be sure that the lyrics of the songs we sing are richly theological and richly relevant to our lives. That means that as we select our next pastor, that his preaching and his counseling are all about truth and love—rich theology personally applied to our lives.

1. **Our Problems Are Big, But Our God Is Infinitely Bigger!**: Psalm 27:1; 18:2

Now, let’s go back to David and look at some of his rich theology personally applied to his life. First, we might summarize his wise perspective like this:

"My Problems Are Big, But My God Is Infinitely Bigger!"

David is not naïve; he’s not pretending. He admits that life is bad and that the badness of life is big—huge. Now, he could look at those big problems like a fool—like Satan wants him to look at problems—and crop his big God out of the picture.

But David doesn’t do that. He crops his infinite God into his life story. He knows God personally as his stronghold. The same word “stronghold” is used in Psalm 18:2 along with similar words like rock, fortress, deliverer, shield, and refuge. David pictures all these enemies coming against him all at once, and then he pictures God surrounding him as his place of safety, his personal protector, his bodyguard, his soulguard.

Is God your place of safety, your personal protector, your bodyguard, your soulguard?

In response to that question, we might think, “Well, yeah, those heroes of the Bible could do that, but not people like us after Bible times.” I understand that question. That’s why I love to study church history to see how people like us—after Bible times—clung to Christ as their place of safety.

On February 9th, I’ll preach a sermon for Black History Month where we will see how enslaved African Americans, even during the horrors of enslavement, saw their inhumane suffering in light of God’s greatness and goodness. But we don’t have to wait until Black History Month to learn from our African American brothers and sisters about moving beyond suffering.

Listen to how the Christian, Olaudah Equiano, cropped Christ into the picture of his kidnapping and enslavement. Equiano was born free in 1745 in the kingdom of Benin on the coast of Africa. The youngest of seven children, his loving parents gave him the name Olaudah, meaning *favored one*. Indeed, he lived a favored life in his idyllic upbringing in a simple and quiet village where his father served as the “chief man” who decided disputes and punished crimes, and where his mother adored him dearly.

At age ten, it all came crashing down.

“One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, tied our hands, and ran off with us into the nearest wood: and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night.”

His kidnappers then unbound Equiano and his sister. Overpowered by fatigue and grief, they had just one source of relief. “The only comfort we had was in being in one another’s arms all
that night, and bathing each other with our tears.” During the trip to the coast to board the slave ship, Equiano and his sister were separated. He never saw her or his family ever again. After a harrowing three-month trip across the Atlantic, he was sold into slavery where he was despicably treated for decades.

Years later, Olaudah Equiano, now free, wrote a book about his suffering and about his trust in God. Listen to the words he started his book with.

“I . . . acknowledge the mercies of God in every occurrence of my life.”

Equiano’s suffering was worse than anything any of us will ever endure. And yet, in the midst of those evils, when you and I would be tempted to crop Christ out of the picture, Equiano crops Christ back into his picture. He acknowledges the mercies of God in every occurrence of life. Can you and I look at every life event, no matter how evil, and see God still merciful and still at work in our lives? Equiano ended his book about his life just like he started it.

“I early accustomed my self to look at the hand of God in the minutest occurrence, and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion; and in this light every circumstance I have related was to me of importance. After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God!’”

In every life occurrence, Equiano disciplined himself to look at the hand of God. Can you and I do that? When our spouse, parent, child, or friend is on our case or in our face, do we only see their treatment of us, or do we also see the hand of God at work in us giving us opportunities to respond to them like Christ?

Did you notice how the final sentence in Equiano’s book mirrors how we started our sermon this morning? I began with these words:

“What happens to us and around us, while important, is not what is most important. Instead, what is most important is how we view, perceive, and interpret what happens to us.”

Equiano ended with these very similar words:

“After all, what makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn ‘to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God!’”

Regardless of how great the adversaries or the suffering, Equiano, like David, looks at the greater greatness of God. Like them, we can say, “Our problems are big, but our God is bigger!”

2. Even When Our Lives Are Bad, Our God Is Good—He’s Good All the Time!: Psalm 27:4, 13

We can also say: “Even when my life is bad, my God is good—He’s good all the time!
David told us that his one prayer was to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. When we gaze upon God’s beauty, what do we see? We see His goodness to His people in forgiving them. That’s what Moses experienced in Exodus 34:5-7 when the beauty of the LORD passed by him.

“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with Moses and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin’” (Exodus 34:5-7).

When Paul leads us in singing, “You’re Beautiful,” we are praising God for the beauty of His grace. God’s beauty is most clearly seen in our sinless Savior dying to cleanse us from our sin. David talks more about God’s goodness in verse 13. The King James Verses translates the Hebrew accurately:

“I would have fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Psalm 27:13).

Think about that wording. “I had believed to see.” We often say, “Seeing is believing.” The truth is, “believing is seeing.” That’s what I mean by spiritual eyes, faith eyes—eyes that see life through Christ-tinted lenses. Sometimes—many times—when life is knocking us down, when we see with eyeballs only—with eyes of the flesh—we can’t see God’s hand and we don’t trust His heart. We need our spiritual eyes opened as God opened the eyes of Elisha’s servant in 2 Kings 6. Remember the story? The King of Aram sent horses and chariots and a strong force to surround Elisha and his servant in the city of Dothan. Then we read:

“When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. ‘Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?’ the servant asked. ‘Don’t be afraid,’ the prophet answered. ‘Those who are with us are more than those who are with them’” (2 Kings 6:15-16).

Now at this point, Elisha’s servant is likely thinking that Elisha needs some psychiatric help. He’s seeing things. But the truth is, it’s the servant who needs help—because he is not seeing things clearly. So:

“Elisha prayed, ‘Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.’ Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:17).

We need to pray for each another that could see life with spiritual eyes. We need to pray that we could see that God is good, even when life is bad. He’s good all the time. We need to pray that we will all face life face-to-face with God in Christ.
The Big Question: How Will We See Our Cornerstone Community Church Life Together?: Psalm 27:14

I’ve read Psalm 27 many times. Taught on it before several times. But it wasn’t until this past week that I noticed something very interesting in the last verse. There’s a shift in the verse from David talking to himself and God, to David talking to others—to us! “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD” (Psalm 27:14).

It’s like David is doing for his people and for us, what Elisha did for his servant. He’s praying that we would all have spiritual eyes.

As one of your elders, and as your preaching pastor for the next three months, I want to speak similar words to all of us at Cornerstone Community Church. We could easily look around as a church and think or feel, “We’re a small church. We’ll never make it. We have so many obstacles stacked against us. We have that church property in Crown Point that we can’t sell. Our pastor has taken a new ministry. Our giving has been down. Our attendance has been down. It’s been several months and we still don’t have a pastor. Our church building and grounds need a lot of repairs. We’ll never make it.”

I don’t deny any of those realities. Just like David did not deny any of the obstacles he was facing. But, like David, we can’t look only at our obstacles. Instead, we could see life at Cornerstone Community Church with Christ-tinted lenses. How might we as a church family be changed if we faced our church life face-to-face with Christ? What might it do to our attitudes if we saw our CCC situation through spiritual eyes rather than through fleshly eyes? What if, when life tries to knock us down at CCC, we wisely looked to Christ instead of foolishly looking to ourselves? What if when life tries to knock us down as a congregation, we wisely took refuge in Christ and refused to foolishly fight against Christ?

As we ponder our church situation, are we fearfully focusing on our foes, or confidently clinging to Christ? When it feels like the whole world is against us as a church, what if the one thing we all asked was that we could gaze together on the beauty of Christ—on His grace? What if when church life seems to be bad, we knew that it was good draw nearer to God? What if when we see big problems at CCC, we rejoiced that our God is infinitely bigger? How would our congregation change if even when life was bad for us, we said together, “God is good. He’s good all the time”?

I am not encouraging us to be naïve, to pretend, or to be in denial. I am encouraging us to encourage one another by seeing Cornerstone Community Church through Christ-tinted lenses. If God is for Cornerstone Community Church, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also along with him, graciously give Cornerstone Community Church all things? (Romans 8:31-32).

Note: For Sermon Resources (Including the Sermon Audio/MP3) on This Message, Visit: http://bit.ly/SermonResPs27
Great Is Thy Faithfulness: Psalm 6:1-10

Big Idea # 1: Satan Uses Our Guilt Over Sin and Our Grief Over Suffering to Tempt Us to Squeeze God Out of Our Souls

Big Idea # 2: God Uses His Forgiveness of Our Sin and His Compassion for Our Suffering to Draw Our Souls Closer to His Faithful Heart

The Big Picture: Overcoming the Vice Grip of Sin and Suffering

Like many of you, a couple of weeks ago Shirley and I went calendar hunting for a 2014 calendar that we could place prominently in our kitchen. Also, like many of you, we sought and bought a calendar that has biblical verses and Christian promises displayed each month.

I’m guessing that most of us did not buy a Christian promise calendar that highlighted part of John 16:33, “In this world you will have trouble!” That’s a promise, from Jesus, but most of us would prefer that it not come true.

The Greek word that Jesus uses for “trouble” is thilpis. It’s a fascinating word that literally means to press, squash, hem in, squeeze on all sides, pressure, and compress. It’s used in a spiritual sense of oppression, harassment, affliction, distress, hostility, and tribulation.

Now, at this point, I’m guessing you’re thinking two main thoughts about today’s message. First, “This message is going to be a real downer!” And second, “I thought we were going to talk about Psalm 6, not John 16?”

First, the message is not intended to be a downer. However, like the Psalms, this message will be real and raw, it will not pretend that life is easy. Second, we are going to focus on Psalm 6, a psalm all about how we respond victoriously to thilpis—to pressure, squeezing, and squashing.

So, let’s place Psalm 6 in the context of all the Psalms so we can see where this squashing and squeezing comes from. Many psalms are psalms of lament over our suffering. Several psalms are psalms of remorse for our sins. Some psalms are psalms about the silence of God where we feel as if God has abandoned us. Many psalms are psalms of thanks and praise for who God is and what He has done for us.

Psalm 6 is all of these compressed into one psalm. In fact, compressed is a great word picture for Psalm 6. Picture it—it is to be co-pressed. To be pressed and squeezed together by two forces—like the two sides of a vice.

In Psalm 6, David is squeezed and squashed by two factors: his sense of guilt over his own sin on the one side, and his sense of grief over his personal suffering on the other side. It’s hard enough, right, when you or I deal with one of these. Perhaps we feel guilty over a sin that just keeps defeating us. That’s hard. Or, perhaps we feel grief over being sinned against—someone hurting us, rejecting us, abusing us, or simply living in a fallen world with suffering and sickness. That’s hard.

I don’t know about you, but in my life, when those two forces come together—guilt over my sin and grief over my suffering—that’s really difficult. It’s like a double blow. It’s like a hard jab and a strong punch.

And here’s when it’s really, really difficult—when those two punches never seem to stop. We keep struggling with sin and guilt that squeezes the life out of us. And, we keep struggling with suffering and grief that squashes the hope out of us. That’s like jab, after jab, after jab. And
body blow, after body blow, after body blow. Eventually it feels like a knockout blow. And then we start wondering, “Where is God? Why is He silent?”

And here’s where Satan comes in. He uses our unrelenting guilt over our sin and our unrelenting grief over our suffering to tempt us to squeeze God out of our souls.

That’s exactly what’s happening to David in Psalm 6. In 6:1-2, he’s being compressed by his sin. In 6:5-8, he’s being compressed by his suffering. Right in the middle of the psalm, 6:3-4, David starts feeling like God is silent, that God has abandoned him. It’s a triple blow, a three-fold assault: sin, suffering, and silence. Its three strikes against David and he feels knocked out.

Now, I claimed that this message was not going to be a downer, so I want you to know that Jesus doesn’t leave us squashed and Psalm 6 does not leave us squashed. In John 16:33, Jesus goes on to say, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Now that’s a promise we want prominently displayed on our kitchen calendars.

And Psalm 6, shows us how we, like David, can defeat Satan’s temptation. Psalm 6 shows us how God uses His forgiveness of our sin and His compassion for our suffering to draw our souls closer to His faithful heart.

I. When Beaten Down by Sin, We Cry Out to Our Gracious Savior and He Hears Our Cry for Mercy: Psalm 6:1-2, 9a

The first side of the vice that attempts to squeeze the life out of David is his own sin. Beaten down by sin and guilt, David cries out to God like this in Psalm 6:1-2.

“O LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath. Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony” (Psalm 6:1-2).

A. Satan Uses Our Guilt Over Our Sin to Tempt Us to Doubt God’s Mercy: Psalm 6:1-2

Satan used David’s guilt over his sin to tempt him to doubt God’s mercy and grace. Psalm 6 does not indicate the context for David’s prayer, and David never identifies the exact nature of his sin. Perhaps it was when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then had her husband killed, but we really do not know. Whatever the sin was, David was not saying that God should not rebuke him or discipline him. David understood that God was holy and that He disciplines His children.

But Satan was tempting David to think that God would rebuke him in anger or discipline him in wrath. David’s language is very strong here. We could paraphrase it like this:

“Jehovah, Yahweh, don’t wink at my sin, but please don’t shut Your eyes to me. Do not punish me in red hot displeasure. Don’t chastise me and treat me like an outcast. Please don’t yell at me. Don’t hold a grudge against me. Please don’t reject me.”

Ever felt like that? Jeremiah did and he prays a very similar prayer in Jeremiah 10:24.

“Correct me, LORD, but only with justice—not in your anger, lest you reduce me to nothing” (Jeremiah 10:24).
David could identify with that phrase, “reduce me to nothing.” In verse 2, David describes himself as faint. “Faint” pictures a leaf that has withered and a fortification that has been destroyed. It means to be weak, feeble, and frail. Think about that—David, who had slain the giant Goliath, now feels puny, childlike, and crushed by sin.

He also says his bones are in agony. “Agony” pictures shaken and trembling. His whole being—body, soul, and spirit—are in panic, terrified that God would destroy him. He feels brittle and fragile.

Theologically, David knew better. Just like we know better. While we know that God is holy, we also know that He is loving and forgiving. But in the midst of our sin, that theological knowledge sometimes evaporates. You may recall last summer when I preached on Hebrews 10. I shared about a committed Christian woman who said to me, “Pastor Bob, some sins are so deep that even the love of God can’t touch them.” Though she knew that was theologically false, she believed it at the moment.

You and I have been there, right? Maybe it’s a secret sin that no one knows about, but we know. And it gnaws at us. We ask God for the victory over it. We repent of it. We promise never to commit that sin again. But it seems to defeat us time after time after time. After a while we begin to wonder if God will lose His patience with us. We see God like some impatient, harsh, vindictive parent, instead of like our forgiving Father.

What are we to do when our sin, our guilt, and Satan’s temptation unite to cause us to doubt God’s grace and mercy? Sometimes what we do is give up—on ourselves and God. I’m convinced that a primary reason that many people no longer follow Christ and no longer commit to church is that they’re convinced they’re beyond forgiveness.

Another option that a lot of people take is to try harder—self-effort. We depend on our good works to gain God’s acceptance. But God’s Word teaches that all our works of righteousness are like filthy rags. We cannot work our way into God’s favor.

B. God Uses His Forgiveness of Our Sin to Draw Us Closer to His Merciful Heart: Psalm 6:2, 9

So what are we to do with our sin and guilt? David shows us through his prayer in Psalm 6:2.

“Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony” (Psalm 6:2).

Notice who David turns to—the LORD. Notice that LORD is all caps—that Jehovah. Yahweh. David uses God’s personal name—Yahweh—eight times in these ten verses. Yahweh is the name that God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14. “I Am Who I Am.” It means the Almighty, eternally existing One.

Think about that name the next time Satan tempts you by saying, “God might want to forgive you, but He’s not powerful enough.” David turns to Yahweh—the all-powerful, eternal, almighty God. The God who is powerful enough to forgive our sins because He is powerful enough to raise His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ from the dead.

Now, Satan is persistent. So next he may say to you, “Okay, maybe your God is powerful enough, but is He loving enough, merciful enough? Remember last week when we looked at Exodus 34:5-7. Moses asked God to reveal Himself to Moses. God responds by declaring His name to be Yahweh and then by defining His name. Let’s listen in…
“Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with Moses and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, ‘The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin’” (Exodus 34:5-7).

So, LORD—Yahweh, means the all-powerful God and it means the all-loving, all-forgiving, gracious God. God is both infinitely powerful enough and infinitely loving enough to forgive. When you feel like God is rebuking you in red hot anger, turn to God’s Word and remind yourself that God is slow to anger, abounding in love, and faithfully forgiving. Christian—there is no sin so deep that the love of God can’t touch it. There is no sin so deep that Christ’s grace won’t forgive you. Yahweh—our God in Christ—is forever faithfully forgiving.

David understood God’s mercy and grace—that He is forever faithfully forgiving—that’s why he prays:

“Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am faint; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony” (Psalm 6:2).

“Merciful” is a beautiful word picture in the Hebrew. It means to bend down to look at me with kind, tender affection of a loving parent to a child. That’s how David saw God. Is that how we see our God—as a loving, forgiving parent?

Martin Luther, the great Reformer, saw God that way. In fact, when Satan tempted Luther to doubt God’s forgiveness, Luther would talk back to Satan. Listen in…

“You say that the sins which we commit every day offend God, and therefore we are not saints. To this I reply: Mother love is stronger than the filth and scabiness on a child, and so the love of God toward us is stronger than the dirt that clings to us. Although we are sinners, we do not lose our family relationship on account of our filthiness, nor do we fall from grace on account of our sin.”

Luther understands that the central question in our lives is, “How do we see God?” Do we believe Satan’s lies about God, or do we believe that our God loves us more than any earthly mother or father ever could?

Does David find forgiveness? Does he find the mercy and healing he prays for? Listen to 6:9:

“The LORD has heard my cry for mercy” (Psalm 6:9).

The word “heard” is instructive. It means to hear certainly, diligently, and attentively. Because of Christ, God is always attentive to our prayers for mercy and our pleas for forgiving grace.

I’m going to do something now that I’ve done before when I’ve preached at CCC. Though I’m not quite half way done with our message on Psalm 6, I want to stop to pray for you, for us—that we would grasp and receive our faithful Father’s forgiving grace in Christ. Please pray with me.
“Heavenly Father, as Christians who have been forgiven in Christ, we sin daily. We confess our sin to You. We pray for Your strength to have victory over our sin. And we pray that You would defeat Satan’s lies. When He tempts us to believe that our sins are so deep that even Your love cannot touch them, empower us to defeat Satan. Help us to see You through the cross of Christ. Help us to see You as Yahweh—our forever faithful forgiving Father. Like David, we claim your mercy and your healing. Like David, we believe that you certainly, diligently, and attentively hear our prayer for forgiveness and that in Christ you eternally forgive us. Right now, this very second, heal hearts that feel unforgiven. Right now, help us to experience the amazing grace of Your forever forgiveness. In Christ’s gracious name we pray, Amen.”

II. When Beaten Up By Suffering, We Cry Out to Our Compassionate Savior and He Hears Our Weeping: Psalm 6:5-8, 10

Remember that there are two sides to Satan’s vice. First he tries to squeeze God out of our souls due to guilt over our sin. Next, Satan tries to squeeze God out over grief from our suffering. Remember Job’s wife? Job was not guilty of sin, but he certainly was enduring horrendous suffering—the death of all his children. Job’s wife became the voice of Satan’s temptation in Job’s life when she said to her husband, “Curse God and die” (Job 2:9). In other words, “Give up on God and give up on life.”

A. Satan Uses Our Grief Over Our Suffering to Tempt Us to Doubt God’s Compassion: Psalm 6:5-8, 10

David can relate. He felt like dying. Notice Psalm 6:5-7:

“No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow; they fail because of all my foes” (Psalm 6:5-7).

Again, in David’s life, we don’t know what suffering he is going through as he talks honestly with God about all his foes. It could have been when Saul—his mentor and father figure—wanted him dead. It could have been when Absalom—his son—wanted him dead. It could have been any number of deeply distressing life events. We don’t know, but David knew suffering. David knew grief. And Satan was using David’s grief to tempt Him to doubt God’s compassion.

Here’s how I would paraphrase what David felt like and what he shared with God in verses 5-7.

“I’m no good to you dead, am I? I can’t sing in Your choir if I’m buried in some tomb! But I feel like I’m dying, may as well be dead. I’m worn out, weary, exhausted. I can’t sleep. All I do is sob like a baby. My bed has been floating 40 days and 40 nights on the flood of my tears, my mattress is soaked with my tears. I’m drowning in grief. My eyes are sunken sockets of sadness. My soul is racked with grief—emotional turbulence, mental agitation. And it’s all because of my foes—people who abuse me, my enemies who attack me, my family who reject me!”
Have you ever felt anything like that? If you’re suffering like that, and feeling what David felt, the first counsel I would share with you is, “It’s normal to hurt. You have permission to grieve.”

The second word of counsel I would share is, “It’s okay to express your deep hurt to your compassionate God.” It’s healthy and wise to express our all our grief, all our feelings, and all our thoughts to God.

Why would I give that counsel? First, God knows everything, right? It’s not like we’re keeping a secret from Him by not putting into words what we feel.

Second, I introduced our series on the Psalms saying they the Psalms model honest conversations with God. Whatever is in our heart, let’s bring it to God’s throne. Our sins, bring to His throne of grace. Our suffering, bring to His throne of compassion—like David does in Psalm 6.

Third, there are more psalms of lament—expressions of grief, then there are psalms of praise and thanks. If you don’t believe that, do what I’ve done. Read every psalm and categorize them. You may be surprised, as I was, when I discovered that there are more psalms of lament than psalms of praise. David and the other psalmists were honest with God about their suffering. We can and should be honest also. As a biblical counselor, I always encourage grieving people to pen their own psalms of lament and grief—we put on paper what we feel in our heart as a psalm to God.

B. God Uses His Comfort in Our Suffering to Draw Us Closer to His Compassionate Heart: Psalm 6:8

Satan wants to use our grief over our suffering to tempt us to doubt God’s compassion. He wants us, like Job’s wife, to say, “Curse God and die.” But God uses His comfort in our suffering to draw us closer to His compassionate heart. Listen to what David prays in verse 8:

“Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping” (Psalm 6:8).

David uses the same word for “heard” that he used in verse 9. Yahweh has certainly, diligently, and attentively heard his weeping. The King James Version translates this beautifully. “He has heard the voice of my weeping.”

Even when we can’t put our grief into words, God understands our tears. It’s similar to Romans 8 where Paul tells us that sometimes life beats us down so much that all we can do is groan to God.

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26).

God’s Spirit translates our groans into language—the voice of weeping. God’s Spirit prays our prayers to the Father. Even when we can’t fully express our pain, God compassionately understands the cry of our soul.

Think about why people go to counselors. They want to be heard. They don’t want to be alone in their grief. They long for someone to join them in their sorrow. Shared sorrow is endurable sorrow. And when we share our sorrow with the God of the universe, and He comforts us, then we can endure anything. We long to know that God compassionately listens to us, that
He cares and comforts us. And David reminds us that God listens attentively to the voice of our weeping.

Psalm 30 is a parallel psalm of David. There David describes in even more detail the impact of being heard by God.

“Weeping may remain for a night, but joy comes in the morning. Hear, O LORD, and be merciful to me; O, LORD, be my help. You turned my mourning into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy” (Psalm 30:5, 10-11).

When I think about turning mourning into dancing, I often think about Joni Eareckson Tada. You know Joni. In the summer of 1967, she was a beautiful high school senior. Then she dove into the Chesapeake Bay. When she awoke hours later, she found herself straggled to a gurney, paralyzed from the neck down. To this day, Joni is quadriplegic. But listen to how God’s compassion in her suffering drew Joni closer to God’s comforting heart.

“This tragic interruption in my life presented me with an opportunity for a relationship with God deeper than I had ever dreamed. Through my suffering, God took a self-centered teenager and catapulted her into a place of influence I could never have imagined. Years later I can say that few of us have the luxury—it took forever to think of it as that—to come to ground zero with God. Before the accident, my questions had always been, ‘How will God fit into this situation? How will he affect my dating life? My career plans? The things I enjoy?’ All those options were gone. It was me, just a helpless body and God. I had no other identity but God, and gradually He became enough. I became overwhelmed with the phenomenon of the personal God, who created the universe, living in my life. I could not live without Him.”

As you and I suffer, are we surrendering to God so He can turn our mourning into dancing. Are we seeing suffering as an opportunity to know God better and cling to Christ deeper? Again, we’re not done yet, but join me as we pray to God honestly, humbly about our suffering.

“Compasionate Father, caring Lord Jesus, comforting Holy Spirit, like David and Joni, we bring You our suffering. We share with You the voice of our weeping. Life is hard. It knocks us down and beats us up. But You are good. You’re good all the time. For those who are here this morning and they are ready to give up—ready to curse God and die—help them to say with David, ‘You have heard my weeping.’ Help them to say with David, ‘Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning. You turned my mourning into dancing.’ Help them, help me, help us, to say with Joni that we learn that we cannot live without You and that we don’t want to live without You. Draw us nearer to Your compassionate heart, we pray, in Christ’s comforting name, Amen.”

III. When Beaten by the Silence of God, We Cry Out to Our Forever Faithful Shepherd and He Honors Our Prayers with His Presence: Psalm 6:3-4, 9

Remember the vice Satan uses: unrelenting guilt from our sin and unrelenting grief from our suffering. Those two alone are horrible enough. But what’s worse is when we feel like God is
silent. Like He’s not there. That doesn’t just beat us down or beat us up. That beats us; it defeats us.

Now, what do I mean, what does the Bible mean, by the silence of God? It’s when we pray to God and He asks us to wait. Throughout church history, the silence of God has been called “the dark night of the soul.” It’s also been called “spiritual depression.” Both phrases emphasize the loneliness and despair that we feel when God calls on us to wait on Him in silence.

Israel in Egypt waited on God for 400 years before they were rescued by the Passover. Israel at the end of the Old Testament waited 400 years to the time of Christ. Enslaved African Americans waited on God 400 years before they experienced emancipation.

The silence of God—we know He’s there, He cares, and He’s in control, but He asks us to wait. No end is in view. No answer is imminent.

A. Satan Uses Our Anguish Over the Silence of God to Tempt Us to Doubt God’s Shepherding Heart: Psalm 6:3

When God asks us to wait, Satan uses our anguish over God’s silence to tempt us to doubt God’s shepherding heart. David expresses it in one verse, two short sentences:

“My soul is in anguish. How long, O LORD, how long?” (Psalm 6:3).

David used a similar word for “anguish” when talking about his bones, but now he puts a modifier in front of the word. His bones were vexed, but his soul is sore vexed. He’s in mega-anguish, he’s exceedingly disturbed with panic. He’s in a spiritual panic because at the moment he prays this prayer, he has not experienced the forgiveness or the compassion of God. He feels sinful and unforgiven. He is suffering and feels alone. That’s why he cries out, like so many saints have:

“How long, O LORD? How long will You be silent, unresponsive, invisible? How long will You disregard my human frailty.”

We may not be as honest as David to admit it, but we feel like that. We wonder why God is waiting so long to rescue us. We wonder why God seems so unresponsive to our prayers. We wonder why God’s timing feels so different from our timing. We become exhausted, so exhausted from waiting.

B. God Uses His Forever Faithfulness to Draw Us Closer to His Shepherding Heart: Psalm 6:4, 9

What do we do? Take matters into our own hands? Curse God and die? David models a better option—a godly response. He humbly, yet boldly, comes before God’s throne and prays:

“Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love” (Psalm 6:4).

Since David feels like God has turned away from him, he asks God to return, to turn back, to face him again, to have eye contact with him. When our children, Josh and Marie, were very young, we would play a game called “Eye Contact.” They would be in another room and I would
bellow, “Josh, Marie, let’s play *Eye Contact!*” They’d come running into the room and we wouldn’t just make eye contact. We would place our eye sockets in each other’s eye sockets and we would *make* eye contact.

David, who told us earlier that his eye sockets were sunken, longed to make eye socket to eye socket contact with God. He longed for soul contact.

And he longed for deliverance. The word “deliver” means *both* powerful liberation *and* gentle rescue. Think about that: *powerful liberation with gentle rescue*. Remember what we learned from Martin Luther: *the most important thing about us is our view of God*. In our portrait of God, is He in control *and* caring? Is our God almighty *and* loving, Lion *and* Lamb, sovereign *and* shepherd?

Isaiah 40:10-11 paints an amazing portrait of our God as our *Sovereign Shepherd*.

> “See the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young” (Isaiah 40:10-11).

Do we see God like this—as our *Sovereign Shepherd*? Powerful to save us *and* tender to comfort us? When you and I feel the silence of God, we need to cry out to our *Sovereign Shepherd* to come and rescue us. To give us victory that removes our misery and restores our peace.

To cry out boldly like this, we have to be convinced of another vital aspect of God’s character—his *unfailing love* that David prays about in Psalm 6:4:

> “Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me *because of your unfailing love*” (Psalm 6:4).

“Unfailing love” translates one of the most powerful words in the Bible—the word *hesed*. It means loyal love, loving kindness, forever faithfulness, grace love. When we’re waiting on God, while we may not hear God and while we may not experience His felt presence, we can *always* know that He is forever faithful. Jeremiah says it like this in Lamentations 3:19-24:

> “I remember my affliction (suffering) and my wandering (sin), the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them and my soul is downcast within me (silence of God). Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord’s great love (*hesed*) we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him” (Lamentations 3:19-24).

That summarizes Psalm 6 perfectly, including the concluding emphasis on the Lord’s goodness. How does the Lord show His goodness? David answers:

> “The LORD accepts my prayer” (Psalm 6:9).
The word for “accepts” means to honor us with His presence. David had felt the silence of God, even the absence of God. And God responds by honoring David’s humble prayer of brokenness with His presence. God is there, and He is not silent!

**The Big Question: Whose View of God Will We Believe—Satan’s or Christ’s?**

Jesus is honest. Life is hard. In this world we will have trouble—thilpis—squashing and squeezing. And Jesus is hope-giving. We can be of good cheer because He has overcome the world.

David is honest. Our sin, our suffering, and the silence of God all combine to make life hard—sometimes excruciating. And David is hope-finding. He teaches us that God’s forgiveness draws us closer to His merciful heart; God’s comfort draws us closer to His compassionate heart, and God’s forever faithfulness to draw us closer to His shepherding heart.

David teaches us that when sin, suffering, and the silence of God visit us, we have a choice to make. We can buy Satan’s lie and squeeze God out of our souls—giving up on God or trying to make life work on our own. Or, we can believe Christ. We can look to the cross which is the ultimate revelation of God’s forever faithful forgiving heart.

**Note: For Sermon Resources (Including the Sermon Audio/MP3) on This Message, Visit:**
How to Talk to God When Life’s a Mess: The ABC’s of Prayer—Psalm 13

The Big Idea: We Don’t Need a Ph.D. to Pray. All We Need Are the ABC’s:

- **Ask God:** “Why?”
- **Beg God:** “Help!”
- **Celebrate God:** “Thanks!”

The Big Picture: The Kindergarten Cookbook

When our son, Josh, was in kindergarten, his teacher helped the class to produce a Kindergarten Cookbook. The introduction explains the assignment well:

“This cookbook is compiled with your children’s favorite dishes. The recipes were written according to the way your child has seen you prepare these dishes.”

Let’s see how childhood perception compares to reality.

- **Hotdogs:** Put 3 hotdogs in the microwave on a paper towel. Cook for 60 minutes. (They like their hotdogs well done!). Put on a bun with mustard and ketchup.
- **Fruit Cocktail:** Buy fruit cocktail at the store. Put it in a pan and cook for 14 hours. Put on plate and eat.
- **Mashed Potatoes with Gravy:** (Potatoes): Peel 10 potatoes and put in a pan with 10 inches of water. Put on stove for 13 seconds and warm them up (not too warm, apparently). Mash them, add a whole stick of butter. (Gravy): Take a flat black pan (nothing else will do), add 3 inches of water. Add enough salt to cover the water (how tasty and healthy). Add 2 inches of flower. Cook for 3 hours. Add to the potatoes.
- **Peas:** Take 1 bag of peas and put them in a big bowl. Put in them in the microwave for 64 minutes on a pretty hot setting. Put one stick of butter on it. Pour into little bowls and eat.
- **Shredded Wheat:** Put medium size milk in a bowl (figure that one out!). Heat in the microwave until you count to 5 two times (wonder if counting to 10 one time works…). Put the square of wheat in and a little half of butter. Add one medium spoon of sugar.
- **Fried Eggs:** Put 2 cups of grease in a pan. Crack 1 egg in the pan. Flip it over. Let it cook for 1 minute. Put it on a plate.
- **Fried Chicken:** Take a chicken and cut the fat and skin off. Take 3 crackers and roll them. Put chicken into the crackers. Put the chicken in the pan. Bake for 20 minutes at 20 degrees (mmm, chewy chicken).
- **Chocolate Pudding:** Pour 4 gallons of milk into a bowl. Add 2 boxes of chocolate putting. Mix for 2 minutes. Put in oven for 30 minutes at 150 degrees. Put in refrigerator for 2 minutes until it gets cold.
- **Chocolate Milk:** Put ½ cup milk into a cup. Add ½ cup of chocolate. Stir it and drink it.

There you have it. Proof that author Robert Fulghum was correct when he wrote the book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Well…perhaps cooking takes some advanced lessons.
While cooking may take some advance training, prayer does not. Somehow we have been given the idea that we need a Ph.D. to pray. What would that be, a doctorate in prayology? Psalm 13 teaches us the truth:

All we need to learn to pray are the ABC’s: Ask, Beg, Celebrate.

- **Ask God:** “Why?” Lamentation
- **Beg God:** “Help!” Supplication
- **Celebrate God:** “Thanks!” Celebration

For centuries the church learned to pray by praying the Psalms. Psalm 13 offers an elementary school lesson on prayer when our life is a mess. We say: “Why?” “Help!” “Thanks!”

Before we learn more about the ABC’s of prayer, it will be helpful to connect Psalm 13 to our first two messages on the Psalms. In Psalms 1, 2, 6, and 27, we asked, When life’s a mess, whose view of life and whose view of God will we believe? Will we look at life through Satan’s foolish lens or through Christ-tinted lenses?

If we believe Satan, who tries to crop Christ out of the picture, then when our life’s a mess we won’t even pray, won’t even talk to God. But if we believe Christ, then even when life is bad, we’ll know that God is good—He’s good all the time. And because we know God is good, we’ll talk to God in prayer by asking God, begging God, and celebrating God.


In Psalm 13, David begins his prayer life with the A of Asking God “Why?” and “How Long?” Now, immediately, some of us might respond, “No! You can’t ask God ‘Why?’ or ‘How long?’ That would be disrespectful.”

That’s a fair question, so let’s ponder it biblically. Students of the Bible call Psalm 13 a psalm of lament or complaint. I briefly mentioned in our sermon on Psalm 6, that there are more psalms of lament and complaint than psalms of praise and thanks. The first person I ever heard that from was the Christian songwriter, Michael Card. I love his music, but I had my doubts that he was right. I was sure there were more psalms of praise and thanks than psalms of lament.

So, I checked out one of the world’s leading Christian experts on the Psalms, Tremper Longman, III. Even his name sounds impressive! Here’s what Dr. Longman says.

“Our spiritual songbook of Psalms does not contain 150 hymns of joy. As a matter of fact, a close look shows that the psalms of complaint and songs of accusation—the music of confusion, doubt, and heartache—significantly outnumber the hymns of joy. We may seek to flee from the feelings inside of us, but a look at the Psalms exposes them to our gaze.”

I still wasn’t convinced. So, I read and categorized every psalms. You know what I found? There are more psalms of lament, complaint, and asking God “Why?” than there are psalms of praise and thanks. I’d encourage you to do the same and see what you discover.

In Psalm 13:1-2, we discover David’s lament where he asks “Why?” and “How long?”
“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Psalm 13:1-2).

If you forget everything else this morning, remember this: David models for us that it is okay to be honest with God. It’s okay to lament. It’s okay to ask God “Why?” and “How long?” Listen to how pastor and Hebrew scholar, Eugene Peterson, describes praying like the psalmists.

“The Psalms are not churchy, nice, gentle prayers. The Psalms are not the prayers of nice people couched in cultured language. Rather, in the Psalms we find God-directed expressions of anger, lament, and praise. Psalm-like prayers use mind-jolting language filled with savage anger, ardent passion, and brutal, gut-level honesty spoken with terrific energy. The Psalms give voice to the entire human experience teaching us that there is no insider language necessary to get God’s attention.”

We have forgotten that in prayer God invites us to candidly and forcefully verbalize our questions to Him. He is the Almighty—He can handle anything and everything about us.

The Psalms are the cry of the soul. In just two verses of Psalm 13, David’s soul cries out four times, “How long?” And David did not cry out quietly. Michael Card, who I mentioned a moment ago, has put Psalm 13 to music—attempting to recreate the Hebrew/Jewish style. Let’s listen to the intensity of Michael Card’s version of Psalm 13. Let’s allow it to teach us that it is okay to ask God “Why?” and “How long?”

How long will You forget, O LORD?
How long? How long?
How I long to see Your face, O LORD.
How long will You hide?

How I struggle with my thoughts, O LORD.
How long? How long?
Suffer sorrow in my heart, O LORD?
How long will You hide?
How long? How long?

Look on me, give an answer, LORD.
How long? How long?
Give me light or I can live no more;
How long will You hide?

My foes rejoice when they see me fall.
How long? How long?
“We have overcome him now,” they call
How long will You hide from me?
How long? How long until You set me free?
How long?
Hear, O LORD, You’re ever good to me.
    How long? How long?
My heart rejoices how You set me free!
    How long will You hide?

LORD I sing for what I’m hoping of.
    How long? How long?
How I trust in Your unfailing love!
    How long will You hide?
How long? How long? How long? How long?
    Will You wait forever? How long?


In Psalm 13:1, David focuses his lament on God by saying:

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


David uses an intriguing word for God’s perceived forgetfulness. The Hebrew means to leave something behind due to forgetfulness.” I’ve translated it as, “misplace me.” We’ve all been there, right? We laughed about it a couple of weeks ago, “Diane, have you seen my glasses?” Or, it happens every week in our homes, “Honey, do you remember where I left my keys?” We lay things down and we forget them, misplace them.

David felt like God had laid him down and misplaced him. “Lord, have you misplaced me like a set of keys, a pair of shoes, or my watch? God, do I mean nothing more to you than an old glove you put away and forgot forever?”

That word “forever” has the idea of continually. David is saying, “Do you intend to ignore me and my problem permanently?” David is also saying, “Lord, I don’t have forever. I won’t live that long. I can’t survive. How long?”

There’s a French proverb that echoes David’s heart and ours.

“Our problems come on horseback, but they go away by foot.”

We could modernize this by saying:

“Our problems arrive as quickly and frequently as 747s landing at O’Hare, but they leave as slowly as a slug.”
How do we pray when our life’s a mess and God does not seem like He’s ready to intervene? We authentically ask God how long he intends to leave us in our mess. We tell God exactly what we feel about His apparent inactivity.


David’s not done with his lament to God about God. He also says in Psalm 13:1:

“How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). I’ve translated it like this, “How long will you play hide-and-seek with me, God?”

In the ancient Near-Eastern culture of David’s day, hiding the face is a profound concept. To not look someone in the eyes is to disregard them, disrespect them, and shame them. The famous Old Testament blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 pictures the opposite of hiding the face:

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).

When God faces us and shines His face on us, He blesses us, keeps us, and is gracious to us. When it feels like God is hiding His face from us, we feel abandoned, rejected, and shamed. We see it in our culture or lives. There are relatives in a family who refuse to even talk to each other. So, at a family wedding, Aunt Susie sits on the other side away from Uncle Billy. They won’t go near each other, they won’t shake hands, they won’t make eye contact.

In the middle of David’s mess, he feels like God refuses to make eye contact with him. He feels like God is playing hide-and-seek. But it’s no game to David. This is serious life business.

And it’s serious life business for us. When we feel forgotten by God and rejected by God, God invites us to authentically ask Him, “How long?”


God also invites us to ask “how long” about ourselves. Here’s how David asks in Psalm 13:2.

“How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and everyday have sorrow in my heart?” (Psalm 13:2).

When life’s a mess and it never seems to stop, we get worn out mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. David pictures it as an endless mental wrestling match. Most of you know that I wrestled, beginning in middle school and continuing until I graduated from college. I also coached wrestling for a quarter century. There’s a reason a high school wrestling match is only six minutes—wrestling is intense. It is one-on-one combat that is physical, fatiguing, and fierce.

David feels like his mental wrestling match never ends. It’s not six minutes. It’s six years. When life’s a mess, our minds get like that. It’s a jumble. We get confused. Our thoughts get distorted. In counseling, I often say it like this:

*Life is a mess and it often messes with our minds.*
That’s why it’s vital to get our thoughts out of our minds and onto our lips and shared with others—especially with God. Prayer is admitting to God, “I’m a mental mess right now, Lord, how long before this stops?”

David not only feels like a mental mess, he also feels like an emotional wreck.

“Everyday I have sorrow in my heart” (Psalm 13:2b).

“Sorrow” means grief, emotional affliction, and emotional pain. Let’s get something very clear right now from this verse and many others. As Christians, we are not immune to mental and emotional confusion and pain. And as the Body of Christ, we should be able to talk authentically and candidly with each other about our struggles. And, God invites us to share our mental and emotional pain with Him. That’s what prayer is all about.


Back to David. He has questions about God—how long will you forget me and reject me? He has questions about himself—how long will my mind and my emotions be churning? And, he has questions for God about others. David says it like this in Psalm 13:2 and 4:

“How long will my enemy triumph over me? My enemy will say, ‘I have overcome him, and my foes will rejoice when I fall’ (Psalm 13:2b, 4).

You see in the notes how I paraphrased this: “How Long, O LORD, will my opponent be allowed to keep trash talkin’ before You eject Him?” Now, I’m not just making that up. The Hebrew word for “triumph” means to exalt over. And verse 4 pictures exactly how David’s enemy is doing that. It’s not just that David has an enemy. It’s not just that this enemy is defeating David. It’s that the enemy is standing over David and taunting him.

Four weeks ago in our CCC Vision Sermon, I talked about how I’m a big-time Chicago Bulls fan. And I mentioned their first of six world championships. Some of you will remember that before the Bulls won their first championship, they were beaten in the conference finals several times by the Detroit Pistons. You may recall that Dennis Rodman was on those Piston teams (Rodman, of course, later joined the Bulls). I remember in one tightly-contested game, the Bulls all-star forward, Scottie Pippen, was going for a dunk when Dennis Rodman rammed Pippen with his shoulder knocking him violently to the hard wood floor. It was a flagrant foul. To make matters worse, Rodman then stood over Pippin, first glaring at him, then pumping his arms and taunting Pippen.

People love to taunt us when we’re down. That’s what David was experiencing. And he teaches us what to do when it happens to us. We ask God to make it stop.

When we explored Psalm 27, we saw how David’s number one prayer request was to see the beauty of God. You may remember that I said, the number one prayer request of most of my counselees and my number one request is, “Fix my feelings and change my circumstances.”

Well, consider David’s prayer so far in Psalm 13. His number one request was to see God’s face again. “Lord, how long are you going to hide your face from me?” So, once again, David starts his focus on knowing God intimately.
But notice his number two prayer request. Number two: change my feelings—stop my mental wrestling match. And consider his number three request: change my circumstances—make my enemies stop.

So here’s a very practical prayer lesson. It’s okay to ask God to fix our feelings and change our circumstances as long as we embed that request in our primary request: to know God better whether or not our circumstances every change and our feelings are ever fixed.

II. Beg God: When Life’s a Mess, Beg God—“Help!” (Supplication: Psalm 13:3)

In the ABC’s of prayer, David has taught us to authentically ask God “Why?” and “How Long?” In the “B” of prayer, David teaches us to beg God. Prayer is not only honest lamentation. It is also persistent and specific supplication—asking, requesting, begging.

When life’s a mess, we beg God for “Help!” In Psalm 13:3, David begs God with two specific requests. First, he begs God to look on Him and answer, then he begs God to give him wisdom and strength. Here’s how David begs:

“Look on me and answer, O LORD my God. Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death” (Psalm 13:3).

A. Beg God to See and Act Strongly On Your Behalf: Psalm 13:3a

When David starts by begging for God to look on him and answer, he’s asking for more than God’s comforting presence. Yes, he needs God’s comfort, but David is now asking for God’s active presence. “Look on me and answer. Look on me and do something! For God to look is for God to act strongly on our behalf. Consider Isaiah’s similar request in Isaiah 63:15.

“Look down from heaven and see, from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us” (Isaiah 63:15).

Isaiah asks God to look down from heaven and do something. Show us Your zeal and Your might. Show us Your tenderness and compassion. Do not withhold Your Sovereign Shepherding from us. Give us Your compassion and Your mighty action!

It’s the same idea we find in the story of Hagar in Genesis 16. Hagar is a slave to Abraham and Sarah. First she’s forced to bear a child for them. Then Sarah horrible mistreats Hagar, and finally Hagar ends up deserted in a desert. But then the angel of the LORD appears to Hagar and tells her that the LORD has heard her misery and taken action by leading her to a spring in the desert. We’re then told concerning Hagar that:

“She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me’” (Genesis 16:13).

What is prayer? Prayer is begging God to see us and to do something about our situation. Prayer is begging God to hear our misery and to do something about our misery. Prayer is begging God to look and answer.

Is your life a mess? It’s okay to beg God to see and act. To care and to change things. To act strongly on your behalf.
B. *Beg God for Sight and Strength to Act Strongly on God’s Behalf: Psalm 13:3b*

So, in the “B” of prayer, we start by begging God to see and act strongly. Next we beg God for *sight and strength*. We want God to see and be strong on our behalf. We also want God to give us sight and strength to be strong *on His* behalf. David begs God like this:

“Give light to my eyes or I will sleep in death” (Psalm 13:3b).

Here’s my paraphrase.

“Shine your flashlight on my problems so I can look at life wisely. Otherwise, in the darkness, I’ll wreck and be left in critical condition.”

Our family has a tape—yes, a tape—not a CD, not an MP3, not a file on our computer, but a tape. We used to listen to it all the time on vacations. It’s called “Wacky Weirdo’s” and it has many of the nutty songs of the 50s and 60s. Songs like “Witch Doctor” by David Seville, and “Monster Mash” by Bobby Pickett, and “The Purple People Eater” by Sheb Wooley. One of our favorites is “Transfusion” by Nervous Norvus. Listen to the first stanza.

“Toolin’ down the highway doin’ 79,
I’m a twin-pipe papa and I’m feelin’ fine,
Hey man, dig that, was that a red stop sign? (Crash noises!)
Confusion, transfusion, and I’m just a solid mess of contusions,
Never, never, never gonna’ speed again…”

Paul volunteered to lead us in singing that next week! It will be CCC’s song of lament! Maybe not. However, it could have been David’s psalm of lament. David knew that song. “LORD, give me light, or I’ll sleep in death—I’ll crash in the dark.”

So, first, we ask God “Why?” and “How Long” with the implied request that God would change things—that He would help us to experience His presence, He would fix our feelings, and He would change our circumstances. But, we know that sometimes God in His Sovereign wisdom allows difficult times to continue. That’s when we beg God for light and life, for wisdom and strength to respond in ways that glorify God *even* when our life is a mess.

As a biblical counselor, I always pray for the people I’m counseling that their emotions would change and their circumstances would improve. But, knowing there’s no guarantee, I also always pray and help them to seek God’s wisdom and strength. It may be a marriage issue that seems like it will continue forever. It may be a parenting issue that seems insurmountable. It may be a health issue that seems incurable. Whatever it is, we pray, we beg God for wisdom and strength to glorify Him even when our lives are a mess.

III. *Celebrate God: When Life’s a Mess, Celebrate God—“Thanks!”* (Celebration: Psalm 13:5-6)

What is prayer? What are the ABC’s of prayer? Prayer is *asking, begging, and celebrating*. Prayer is talking to God honestly and saying, “Why?” “Help!” “Thanks!” Prayer is lamentation, supplication, and it is celebration. David invites us into his celebration of God in Psalm 13:5-6.
“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me” (Psalm 13:5-6).

David starts with two vital words: “But I.” David knows that God does not promise that life will be easy. David has asked and begged, but at the moment he prays, nothing has changed in his circumstances. “But I…” Regardless of what happens, I will continue to trust God. David’s “But I” reminds me of the beautiful and powerful words from Habakkuk 3:17-19.

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights” (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

It would be like David praying:

“Even if it feels like God is still forgetting me and hiding from me, even if my mental confusion and my emotional pain continues, and even if my enemies keep taunting me, even if God does not answer my prayers the way I want, I will rejoice in the LORD!”

It would be like you and me praying:

“Even if it feels like God is misplacing me like an old pair of shoes, even if it still feels like God is playing hide-and-seek with me, even if my mental wrestling match seems endless and my sorrow bottomless, even if my enemies are doing a Dennis Rodman on me, even if my family mess, my work mess, my financial mess, my health mess does not change, I will trust in God’s unfailing love; I will rejoice in God my Savior; I will thank the Lord for His goodness to me!”

A. Thank God for His Loyal Love: “I’m Throwing Myself Headlong into Your Arms, Secure in Your Loyal Love!”—Psalm 13:5

What is it that can empower us to say, “But I?” For David, it was his awareness of and thankfulness for God’s loyal love, His unfailing love, as we see in Psalm 13:5.

“But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation” (Psalm 13:5).

“Unfailing love” is the same Hebrew word we looked at in Psalm 6—hesed. God’s forever faithfulness. It is God’s promise, His pledge that He will always love us. God’s love will never leave us or forsake us.

David is indicating that there are two places we can place our trust: either in this messed up world, or in God’s forever faithful loyal love. David looks at the world and says, “Man, I can’t trust the world. It will only let me down.” Then He looks at His God, and sees His loyal love, and says, “I’m throwing myself headlong into Your arms, secure in Your loyal love!”

When we focus our minds on God’s loyal love, then our spirits focus on and rejoice in His salvation. Like David, we say, “My heart rejoices in your salvation.”
To rejoice means to celebrate with a joy that expresses itself vocally and physically. It’s like a fan at a game who jumps up, pumps his fist, and says, “Yes! Yes!”

That’s David, and it can be us—if we keep our minds renewed by and focused on our salvation, like David does. God may or may not choose to deliver us from our earthly enemy. But God has forever finally delivered us, saved us from our ultimate enemy—Satan, sin, and death. So no matter what happens, we say, “But I will celebrate God; I will thank God for my eternal salvation because of His loyal love.

B. Thank God for His Gracious Goodness: “I’m Singing Endless Hymns to Honor Your Endless Goodness!”—Psalm 13:6

David’s final prayer is a song that we listen to in Psalm 13:6.

“I will sing to the LORD, for he has been good to me” (Psalm 13:6).

David is singing *endless hymns to honor God’s endless goodness*. Think about that. Nothing has changed yet in David circumstances. His enemies are still standing over him singing their own evil hymns. Yet David sees right through them all the way to God and says God has been good to me. He’s not saying, “I know you will be good to me by defeating my enemies.” He’s saying, “You have been good to me, even while my enemies are still being bad to me!”

That’s remarkable. That’s amazing. David can only get to that place, and we can only get to that place, by focusing on God’s amazing grace. That’s what the word “good” means. It pictures undeserved goodness. Goodness that we could never earn. Goodness that is by pure grace.

Many times we picture God as a Hoarder and not as a Rewarder. Think about that. God as a Hoarder may give us meager gifts every once in a while if we have given him everything. But God as a Rewarder, as this word “good” pictures, means God gives us not thimbles of goodness but the Grand Canyon of goodness. He deals bountifully with us—graciously and infinitely beyond what we could ever deserve.

It reminds me of an old hymn we used to sing at Grace Baptist Church in Gary: “He Giveth More Grace.”

He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,
He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;
To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
To multiplied trials His multiplied peace.

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
Our Father’s full giving is only begun.

His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
His power has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.
The Big Question: When Life’s a Mess, Will We Practice the ABC’s of Prayer?

Any good elementary school lesson has a practice time—seatwork in school and homework at home. So, in just a moment, I want each us to privately, silently, do some prayer seat work. I want to ask you to think about an area in your life that feels like a mess—we all have them. Life’s a mess. And when life’s a mess, will we practice the ABC’s of prayer? Will we:

- **Ask God:** “Why?”
- **Beg God:** “Help!”
- **Celebrate God:** “Thanks!”

So, thinking about a messy area of your life, let’s bow our heads, and do some elementary school praying. Take that messy issue and ask God “Why?” Beg God to “Help!” Celebrate God’s goodness by saying “Thanks!”

**Note: For Sermon Resources (Including the Sermon Audio/MP3) on This Message, Visit:**
http://bit.ly/Psalm13ABCs
Finding Life in the Shadow of Death: Psalm 23

The Big Idea: When We Find Ourselves in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, We Survive and Thrive by Clinging Confidently to Our Good Shepherd Who Is the Resurrection and the Life

The Big Picture: Two Shepherds Teach Us to Turn to the Good Shepherd

Imagine that your siblings were jealous of you. You were your father’s favorite, and they didn’t like it at all. Imagine that their jealousy led them to refuse to speak a kind word to you—ever. You receive nothing but criticism and biting remarks. No matter what you did, what you said, what you tried—they would not reconcile with you. In fact, the harder you tried, the deeper their hatred, the more entrenched their jealousy. Their greatest joy was crushing your most cherished dreams.

So intense was their hatred that they plotted to kill you. Throwing you into a pit and leaving you to die. But just in the nick of time, instead of killing you they sold you into slavery, where you lived for decades.

What would your image of God be at this moment in time? How would you view God? As good, kind, and forever faithful? Or, would some other images creep into the crevices of your mind? Of my mind?

I’ve been describing Joseph from Genesis 37, and here’s the image of God that Jacob said Joseph maintained even when his life was literally in the pits:

“I remained strong because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel. Because of my father’s God, who helps me. Because of the Almighty, who blesses me with blessing of the heavens above and blessings of the earth below” (Genesis 49:24-25).

What an amazing image of God from the valley of the shadow of death.

Now, you may be thinking, “Bob, why are we talking about Joseph? I thought you were preaching on David, Psalm 23, and the LORD is my Shepherd.”

As I studied Psalm 23, I discovered that the first reference to the LORD as our Shepherd was in Genesis 49:24 in relationship to Joseph. And Genesis 37:2 informs us that Joseph was 17 and was “tending the flocks.” Joseph was a shepherd. And when the world screamed at him, “The Great Shepherd has abandoned you!” Joseph’s soul screamed back, “No! He has not! The LORD is my Shepherd! Just like I guided and guarded, provided for and protected my sheep, so the LORD my Shepherd has guided and guarded, provided for and protected me…even when my life was in the deepest pit.

Psalm 23 is a psalm of David. Do you recall the first reference we have to David’s occupation before he became King of Israel? Here’s what we read in 1 Samuel 16:11, when Samuel was speaking to David’s father, Jesse:

“Then Samuel said to Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ And he said, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep’” (1 Samuel 16:11).
We’re also told in Psalm 78:70-72 that God chose David from tending the sheep and brought him to be the shepherd of his people. Joseph and David are both shepherds who point us to the Good Shepherd. They also have something else in common—enemies in their family.

Given the descriptions in Psalm 23 of David in the valley of the shadow of death, needing water and food, and being in the presence of enemies, most commentators link this psalm to one of two situations in David’s life. It could have been when David was on the run in the wilderness from his mentor and father-figure, Saul. Or, it could have been when David was on the run in the wilderness from his own son, Absalom.

So, let’s think about Joseph and David. Between them, they were forsaken and attacked by their father-figure, their brothers, and their son. By their family—by those who should have been shepherding them. Their family members were like wolves in sheep’s clothing—false shepherds. Both these shepherds clung to the image of God as their Good Shepherd when those closest to them were false shepherds.

As you hear this, you may be thinking, “Not another psalm of lament. We’ve seen a couple of those already. I’m ready for something new!” Today is your day. Psalm 23 is not a Psalm of lament. Instead, it is a Psalm of trust and triumph, of confidence and comfort.

Here’s David’s triumphant message to us in Psalm 23:

When we find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death, we survive and thrive by clinging confidently to our Good Shepherd who is the Resurrection and the Life.

I. **Because the LORD Is My Good Shepherd, I Shall Not Want: Psalm 23:1-3**

While in the valley of the shadow of death, David begins his Psalm of triumphant trust with some of the most comforting words ever spoken:

“The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).

David does not simply say, “The LORD is a shepherd.” David personalizes his message of triumphant trust: “The LORD is my Shepherd.”

David’s language reminds us of John 10:3-4, where Jesus speaks of Himself as our “Good Shepherd”:

“The sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3-4).

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, invites each one of us into the most personal relationship. So, before we go any further in this message, we must realize that we cannot claim the promises of Psalm 23, if we have not surrendered to Christ as our Savior Shepherd. Listen further to what Jesus said about Himself and about His followers—His sheep—in John 10:9-11.

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:9-11).
Today, is Jesus your Savior Shepherd? Have you come to the place in your life where you’ve realized that Jesus is the only Gate, the only Way to relationship with God? Have you come to the place where you realize that Jesus is the only Good Shepherd and that He alone has laid down His life for you—to save you from your sins that separate you from God? If Jesus is not your Shepherd, then He is not your Savior, and you cannot claim this psalm for your life.

You might be thinking, “Bob, that seems exclusive?” It is exclusive. Listen again to how absolutely exclusive Jesus is in John 10:9.

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved” (John 10:9).

You also might be thinking, “Bob, that sounds harsh. Your other messages have been so sweet and encouraging.” I don’t think it’s harsh at all to speak gospel truth in love. The most loving thing we can do is to invite people to surrender to Christ the Savior Shepherd who says in John 10:10:

“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

I want us all to leave here this morning surviving and thriving, trusting and triumphing. I want us all to leave here having eternal life and abundant life. That comes only through clinging confidently to Christ as our Savior Shepherd.

So, I’m going to do something that we typically think of happening at the end of some sermons. I’m going to invite everyone to close their eyes and bow their heads. If you have never surrendered yourself to Christ as your Savior Shepherd, I’ll go on to ask you to pray in your heart the following prayer.

“Lord Jesus, Savior Shepherd, I know I’m a sinner. I know I cannot save myself. I know that You are the only Gate, the only Way to forgiveness from God the Father. I know that my sins can be cleansed only by trusting in You as My Savior Shepherd. Right now, in the middle of this sermon on the Good Shepherd, I confess my sin of trying to be my own shepherd and my own savior. I ask You to cleanse and save me from my sin. I ask you to shepherd me into the forgiving and loving arms of God my Father. Thank You for giving me eternal life and abundant life forever. In Jesus’ name as Saving Shepherd I pray, Amen.”

If you made that commitment to Christ as your Savior Shepherd, please let me know after the service so I can rejoice with you. I also understand that not everyone is ready in the middle of a sermon to make an eternal commitment like this. So, if you are unsure about your relationship to Christ, please talk to me after the service or call me anytime.

A. I Shall Not Want Because in My Good Shepherd I Lack Nothing I Need to Survive and Thrive: Psalm 23:1-2

Now, with the realization that we can only claim the wonderful promises of Psalm 23 if Jesus is our Savior Shepherd, we are ready to look specifically at these promises. So, back to David’s opening words:

“The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not want” (Psalm 23:1).
When the Lord is our Savior Shepherd, then even when we are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, we can say, “I shall not want.” The Hebrew word for “want” means to not lack anything we need to survive and thrive. After Israel finished wondering in the desert wilderness for 40 years, Moses summarized those times by saying in Deuteronomy 2:7:

“The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God has been with you and you have not lacked anything” (Deuteronomy 2:7).

The phrase “not lacked anything” is the same in the Hebrew as “shall not want.” Moses was not naïve in Deuteronomy. David in Psalm 23 is not naïve, or pie-in-the-sky, or so heavenly minded that he’s of no earthly good. David and Moses both experienced God’s provision in the desert. David says it like this:

“He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters” (Psalm 23:2).

When David was a shepherd, he would often lead his sheep all over the countryside in search of food. And, even when they found green pastures—grass to eat—it was often in short supply and they would have to move from place to place.

By saying the Good Shepherd makes him lie down in green pastures, David is saying that God’s provision is so rich, so full, so fulfilling, that we don’t have to keep moving from place to place to be satisfied. It’s exactly what Jesus promises in John 10 when He told us that He has come to give us life and that abundantly.

David highlights that abundant provision with his phrase, “he leads me besides quiet waters.” These were either the slowly flowing streams or the quietly bubbling brooks and springs of fresh, cool water.

David was saying that food, water, and God his Good Shepherd were more than enough to survive and thrive. Jesus says something very similar to us in Matthew 6:25-32.

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will He not much more clothe you? But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:25-32).

What do we really need to survive and thrive? Food, clothing, shelter, and Jesus.

I know, we think those Bible people were just plain weird or wired differently than folks nowadays. Well, remember Aunt Charlotte Brooks from the heroes of Black Church history? Her children were sold away from her, and she still trusted triumphantly. Remember what she said?

“You see, my child, God will take care of his people. He will hear us when we cry. True, we can’t get anything to eat sometimes, but trials make us pray more…. I tell you, child,
Christianity is good anywhere—at the plow-handle, at the hoe-handle, anywhere. If you are filled with the love of my Jesus you are happy.”

Aunt Charlotte didn’t even have food sometimes. For her it wasn’t, “All I need to survive and thrive is food, clothing, shelter and Jesus. For Aunt Charlotte it was, “Jesus is all I need to survive and thrive!” It’s reminds me of how one young girl in a Sunday school class misquoted Psalm 23:1, but really got the essence right.

“The LORD is my Shepherd, He’s all I want!”

**B. I Shall Not Want Because in My Good Shepherd I Have Everything I Need for Strength and Wisdom: Psalm 23:3**

There’s another reason David does not want. He says it like this.

“He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3).

I summarized it this way in your notes: “I shall not want because in my Good Shepherd I have everything I need for strength and wisdom.”

David knew about needing his soul restored. When he was on the run from Saul, he and his men came to Ziklag and found it destroyed by fire and their wives and children all taken captive. Can you imagine that? We’re told that:

“David and his men wept aloud until they had no strength left to weep” (1 Samuel 30:4).

Have you ever been there? Weeping until there is no strength left to weep? I’ve been there. That’s not all, next we’re told that:

“David was greatly distressed because the men were talking of stoning him; each one was bitter in spirit because of his sons and daughters” (1 Samuel 30:6).

I’d be greatly distressed, too! David is at the end of his rope, at the end of his strength, and then we’re told:

“But David found strength in the LORD his God” (1 Samuel 30:6).

The Hebrew word for strength is hazaq—it even sounds strong—hazaq! It means to be encouraged in the sense of having courage placed into our soul by having someone powerful and courageous fight with us and for us. David looks up to God and says what you and I can say:

“I’m dis-couraged; en-courage me. I’m empty; fill me. You are the Breath of Life; breathe life back into me. I am weak and feeble; You are Almighty and Infinite. You are forever faithful; strengthen me to be forever faithful to You. I shall not lack strength because You restore my strength.”
When life knocks the breath out of us, we turn to the One who is the Breath of Life. We ask Him to restore us—to do CPR on us. Our Good Shepherd gives us soul-to-soul spiritual resuscitation.

God gives David life and strength to go on, and He gives David light and wisdom to move in the right and righteous direction. Now imagine that your wife, sons, and daughters have all been taken captive. The men you lead are ready to stone you. You’re about ready to give up hope, but God fills you with strength. But guess what? Those men are still holding stones over your head and your family is still in captivity. You not only need strength; you need wisdom and direction. And God gives it:

“He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3).

David receives exactly that type of direction in 1 Samuel 30:7-8.

“Then David said to Abiathar the priest, ‘Bring me the ephod.’ Abiathar brought it to him, and David inquired of the LORD, ‘Shall I pursue this raiding party? Will I overtake them?’ ‘Pursue them,’ he answered. ‘You will certainly overtake them and succeed in the rescue’” (1 Samuel 30:7-8).

David and his men did as God said and rescued all their wives, sons, and daughters. And the men did not stone David!

We might wish that we had an ephod, if we only knew what an ephod was. It was an article of clothing that the Old Testament priest wore that was used at times in prayer to discern God’s will.

Guess what? We have an ephod, but it’s not an article of clothing we wear. It is the Word of God, the Spirit of God, and the people of God. When we need discernment of God’s will, we go to His Word, we pray to His Spirit, and we seek counsel from His people. That’s better than any ephod.

Even more than that, Jesus our Good Shepherd is our ephod:

“The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:3-4).

Do you need guidance? Are you confused? Do you need to understand God’s will? Listen to the voice of Jesus your Good Shepherd. Follow His leading as He guides you through His Word, His Spirit, and His people.

II. Because the LORD Is My Good Shepherd, I Will Fear No Evil: Psalm 23:4

David, finding himself in the valley of the shadow of death, first says, “Because the LORD is my Good Shepherd, I shall not want.” Next he tells us that, “Because the LORD is my Good Shepherd, I will fear no evil.” He says it like this in Psalm 23:4:

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4).
David is not saying that there is no evil. He’s facing great evil. He’s also not saying he won’t feel any fear. Fear is a normal, God-given, emotion when we’re confronted with a threat. He’s saying that he will not be overwhelmed by fear to the point of giving up. He will not be overcome by evil to the point of surrendering to temptation.

David says this as he’s in the middle of “the valley of the shadow of death.” Jeremiah uses this phrase in Jeremiah 2:6, where he says:

“The people did not ask, ‘Where is the LORD, who brought us up out of Egypt and led us through the barren wilderness, through a land of deserts and ravines, a land of drought and utter darkness, a land where no one travels and no one lives?’” (Jeremiah 2:6).

“Utter darkness” translates the phrase in Psalm 23, “the valley of the shadow of death.” It’s used with synonyms like a barren wilderness, a land of deserts and ravines, a land of drought, a land where no one travels and no one lives.

David lived this experience as a shepherd. He would lead his flock through the ravines where the steep, narrow slopes kept out the light and kept vegetation from growing. It was a dark, barren land.

The “valley of the shadow of death” is any life experience where we feel all is dark and deserted. We’re alone, confused, and fear is stalking us. We feel as if the casket is closing on our life. Now what? How do we survive and thrive? How do we trust triumphantly?

A. I Will Fear No Evil Because My Good Shepherd Comforts Me with His Guarding Presence: Psalm 23:4a

We trust triumphantly by seeing God as our Good Shepherd who comforts us with His guarding, protective presence. David says, “I will fear no evil for You are with me.” Four words: “You are with me.” The God of the universe is with you. Let that sink in. You may be feeling alone. The Good Shepherd is with you. You may be feeling deserted and rejected. The Good Shepherd is with you.

And He is with you to comfort you. The Hebrew word means to console, to have empathy, to feel with. Imagine that—the God of the Universe empathizes with you. In Hebrews 4:15, we’re told that:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus understands. Remember that in the Garden, Jesus:

“Began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’” (Matthew 26:37-38).

And remember on the cross, Jesus cried out, in Matthew 27:46:

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).
Jesus, our Good Shepherd, understands what it feels like to be sorrowful, troubled, overwhelmed and forsaken—to the point of death, in the valley of the shadow of death.

Because He understands and cares, He acts powerfully on our behalf. He comforts us with His guarding presence—His Shepherd’s rod which all shepherds use to defend the flock against attack. In fact, Jesus protects us to the point of dying for us:

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it” (John 10:11-12).

False shepherds protect themselves. Jesus protects us. When Satan came to claim us for his dominion, Christ laid down His life to protect us and save us. And God raised Him to life for our salvation.

As we face fear, we can see Jesus taking His wooden Shepherd’s rod and turning it into a wooden cross where He laid down His life to save us. If the cross will not comfort us, then nothing will.

B. I Will Fear No Evil Because My Good Shepherd Comforts Me with His Guiding Presence: Psalm 23:4b

Our Good Shepherd also comforts us with His guiding presence—with His staff. As a shepherd, David had used his staff many times to nudge and guide his sheep—keeping them from going astray, and leading them to those green pastures and still waters we already discussed. Again, from John 10:4:

“When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice” (John 10:4).

Sometimes we get that idea that Jesus saved us and then left us to ourselves. But remember again from two weeks ago and the heroes of Black Church history. The Rev. Absalom Jones reminds us from Exodus 3 that:

“But our text goes further: it describes the Judge of the world to be so much moved with what he saw and what he heard, that he rises from his throne and he comes down from heaven in his own person, in order to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians. Glory to God for this precious record of his power and goodness.”

Is evil stalking you? Fear crouching on your doorstep? Remember that your Good Shepherd comes down, almighty rod and all-powerful staff in hand—guarding you and guiding you—to deliver you from evil.
III. Because the LORD Is My Good Shepherd, I Will Live Face-to-Face with Him Forever: Psalm 23:5-6

Because the LORD is our Good Shepherd, we shall not want, we will fear no evil, and we will live face-to-face with Him forever. David describes this third aspect of God’s shepherding care in Psalm 23:5-6.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:5-6).

The phrase “dwelling in the house of the LORD forever” means dwelling in God’s presence—living face-to-face with God continually. David was in the wilderness, so there was no way he was physically able to go to the temple to worship Yahweh. But Yahweh, our Good Shepherd God, is everywhere present. So, David is not waiting to get out of the wilderness to worship God. He’s worshipping God in the wilderness.

It reminds me again of Aunt Charlotte:

“I tell you, child, Christianity is good anywhere—at the plow-handle, at the hoe-handle, anywhere. If you are filled with the love of my Jesus you are happy.”

We can worship Christ anywhere—at the plow-handle, at the hoe-handle, at the Ford plant, at the mill, at the mall, in the classroom, on the sports field, in our homes—in our heart. We can worship God just as well in the wilderness as we can in the church sanctuary. In fact, our time in church is meant to empower and equip us so that when we go into the wilderness of the world, we are worshippers.

Of course, our face-to-face worship now is simply a small taste of the eternal worship we will experience in the new heaven and the new earth. Revelation 7:15-17 paints the picture for us.

“They are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. ‘Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,’ nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; ‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’ ‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes’” (Revelation 7:15-17).

The Good Shepherd is also the Lamb of God who leads us to the eternal springs of living water.

A. I Will Live Face-to-Face with My Good Shepherd Forever Because He Deals with Sin Against Me: Psalm 23:5

In light of our future hope, we live today face-to-face with our Good Shepherd continually because he deals with those who sin against us. That’s the message of Psalm 23:5:

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5).
In this fallen world, we suffer at the hands of others. Three weeks ago in Psalm 13, we read about how our enemies like to taunt us. They stand over us, mocking us. We described that as “doing a Dennis Rodman on us.” Like Rodman did years ago to Scottie Pippen, knocking him down, standing over him, and mocking him, so our enemies do to us.

Here’s what our Good Shepherd promises. He’s going to take the Dennis Rodmans of our lives, and he’s going to make them sit down, shut up, and watch as He prepares a feast for us—in their presence. Do you think Scottie Pippen would like to see that!? Would you like to see that!? It is one thing to survive a threat. It is another to turn it into a triumph. And it’s still another to do it right in front of your enemies. Talk about from surviving to thriving!

In ancient Near-Eastern culture, the primary way that you honored someone was to prepare a feast for them, and, as they entered your home, you would take the most expensive, perfumed oil, and anoint them. Everyone knew that this was your honored guest.

When we suffer for Christ, God promises to honor us—right in the presence of our enemies. We don’t have to take revenge on our enemies. In fact, we should pray for them that they repent so that they do not have to stand before our Good Shepherd who will hold them accountable for sinning against us.

B. I Will Live Face-to-Face with My Good Shepherd Forever Because He Deals with Sin Inside Me: Psalm 23:6

Of course, we’re not guiltless when it comes to sin or sinning against others. In fact, the only reason any one of us can live face-to-face with God is because our Good Shepherd deals with the sin inside us. David says it like this in Psalm 23:6:

“Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6).

“Goodness” pictures God’s gracious care, His abundant care, His grace-giving forgiveness to us that is undeserved and cannot be earned. “Mercy” is the word we’ve seen in almost every psalm so far—hesed—God’s forever faithfulness, God’s forever forgiveness.

David is in the valley of the shadow of death, but He is not alone. He walks hand-in-hand with his Good Shepherd because his Good Shepherd is a Grace Shepherd who forever forgives his sin.

God not only has your back. God has your soul. He not only has your soul. He has forgiven and cleansed your soul. And He says to us:

“Even in the valley of the shadow of death, My goodness, grace, and forgiveness are forever. I Am the Forever Faithful One. Come dwell with Me, come live in My home—forever—by grace.”

The Big Question: When You Find Yourself in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Will You Trust Your Good Shepherd Triumphantly?

So, when you find yourself in the valley of the shadow of death, will you trust your Good Shepherd triumphantly? To help us to meditate on that question, let’s listen to Michael Card’s song, The Lord Is My Shepherd. Several weeks ago we listened to his song on Psalm 13, How
Long. It maintained a riveting Hebraic, Jewish beat, that was appropriate to the rawness of Psalm 13. Today’s song could not be more different in beat, as it peacefully invites us to trust triumphantly.

*Michael Card: The Lord Is My Shepherd*

The Lord is my Shepherd  
And so I lack nothing  
In meadows of green grass  
He lets me lie down

Beside the still waters  
He patiently leads me  
Restoring my soul  
Restoring my soul

For His holy namesake  
He guides me by right paths  
Though I may stray to  
The vale of deep darkness

I fear no evil  
For You are there with me  
Beside me Your rod and staff  
They comfort me

You prepare a table  
Before my enemies  
My head You’ve anointed  
My cup’s overflowing

Your goodness and mercy  
Will follow me all the days of my life  
And I’ll make my home place  
In the house of the Lord  
And I’ll make my home place  
In the house of the Lord

*Note: For Sermon Resources (Including the Sermon Audio/MP3) on This Message, Visit:  
“I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins”: Psalm 32

The Big Idea: We Will Each Experience the Hand of God—Either His Holy Hands of Judgment, or Christ’s Pierced Hands of Forgiveness

The Big Picture: We Will Each See Ourselves Either as Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God, or as Sons and Daughters in the Palms of Our Forgiving Father

By now most of you know that last week we had a church sign mistake. Our sign was supposed to say, “Finding Life in the Shadow of Death.” Instead, it said, “Ending Life in the Shadow of Death.” Well, that was a bit embarrassing. However, we are not alone in sign mistakes.

- Here’s a church sign that says: “God Does Not Make Misteaks” and misspells mistake!
- The next sign is not as much a mistake as confusing wording: “Don’t Let Anxiety Kill You. Let the Church Help.” You have to let that one sink in a bit...
- This next church sign could also be misunderstood: “We Love Hurting People.” Hmm. Two very different ways of understanding that sign!
- And then there’s this: “Do You Know What Hell Is? Come Hear Our Preacher.” I hope you don’t feel that way about my sermons!
- It’s not only church signs. How about these three that each say: “Entrance Only, Do Not Enter.”
- And it’s really bad when you misspell words, especially related to schools and spelling bees! Like these three examples: 1.) Congradulation on a spelling bee sign. 2.) Shcool on a school sign, and 3.) Seconnd misspelled on another school sign.
- This one is interesting (two signs). I wouldn’t take my pet there and I wouldn’t eat at that dinner!


The much more profound question, and the one we address today in Psalm 32, is, “What do we do with our guilt and sin?” Let’s consider some options...

Marghanita Laski was one of England’s best-known novelists, a secular humanist, and avowed atheist. Shortly before she died, in a moment of candor, Laski said this in a television interview:

“What I envy most about you Christians is your forgiveness; I have no one to forgive me.”

Imagine what it would be like to “have no one to forgive you…”

Everyone wants to know, “What do I do with my guilt and sin?” I introduced you to Tullian Tchividjian in a previous sermon. He’s a pastor and happens to be Billy Graham’s grandson. A non-Christian psychologist was talking to Pastor Tchividjian and said:

“I could dismiss half of my patients tomorrow if I could assure them that they are forgiven.”

As a pastor who has provided counseling to 100s and 100s of people, I say a hearty “Amen!” to that.
It’s not just non-Christians who need to hear the good news of forgiveness. I’ve counseled 100s of Christians who feel like they have committed such horrible sin that God could never forgive them, never accept them. As Christians, we need to understand the forgiving heart of our heavenly Father. I’ve shared with you before about the Christian woman I was counseling years ago who said:

“Pastor Bob, some sins are so deep that even the love of Christ can’t touch them.”

Theologically, this guilt-ridden Christian women knew better. But in her soul she felt unforgiven and unforgivable.

Theologically, we know that our God is a forgiving God. In fact, one of the earliest statements of faith of the church—*The Apostles’ Creed*—includes the following truth as a central doctrine of Christian belief:

“I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

Let that phrase sink in and hit home. Do you and I believe it, not only theologically, but personally?

“I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

King David believed in the forgiveness of sins. However, there was a time in his life when he refused to confess his sin. Psalm 32:3-4 tells us the result:

“When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:3-4).

When David kept silent about his sin, he experienced God’s heavy hand of conviction.

But we also read in Psalm 32:5 what happened when David finally relented and repented:

“That’s why I worded the big idea, the main point, of today’s message like this:

We will each experience the hand of God: either His holy hands of judgment, or Christ’s pierced hands of forgiveness.

That may sound “harsh,” however it is the truth of God’s Word. And it is the most loving truth we could ever believe for ourselves or share with someone else.

Every one of us in this sanctuary struggles with sins we have committed in our past. We each can stop and think about the guilt and shame that haunts us. In fact, some of us don’t have to stop and think—because the haunting rarely stops.

And many of us struggle with besetting sins that seem to overwhelm us right now. Satan is all too thrilled to whisper his lies to us, “Your besetting sins are so deep and they come back so often that even the love of Christ can’t touch them!”
We have a choice: we can either remain guilt-ridden, or we can confess our guilt and receive God’s forgiveness in Christ. We will each see ourselves either as sinners in the hands of an angry God, or as sons and daughters in the palms of our forgiving Father. Today, through understanding and applying Psalm 32 to our lives, let’s each leave here experiencing the tender touch of Christ’s gracious forgiveness.

I. 3 Horrors of Sin and 3 Blessings of Forgiveness: Psalm 32:1-2

Before David shares his personal testimony of guilt, confession, and forgiveness, he starts by applying forgiveness universally—to all of us—to everyone who confesses their sin to God.

“Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose iniquity the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit” (Psalm 32:1-2).

David begins with the word “blessed” which is actually in the plural. C.H. Spurgeon translated it as “blessednesses,” and described it as “bundles of inner peace, mountains of soul delights.” “Blessed” means to experience bliss. Think about the phrase we used at weddings—“marital bliss.” The intention of that phrase is to picture the loving harmony, union, intimacy, and closeness of husband and wife.

That’s a perfect picture of the blessedness and bliss of forgiveness. We experience peace, shalom, nothing between us and God. All is well with our souls spiritually. We can look God in the eyes and not have to feel a speck of shame or an ounce of guilt.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, expressed the wonders of forgiveness like this:

“For who is able to express what a thing it is, when a man is assured in his heart that God neither is nor will be angry with him, but will be forever a merciful and loving Father to him for Christ’s sake? This is indeed a marvelous liberty to have the most high and sovereign Majesty so favorable to us”

Are you assured in your heart that God is not angry with you? That His favor shines on you?

A. 3 Portraits of the Horrors of Sin: Psalm 32:1-2

When I ask that, you might be thinking, “But Bob, you have no idea about the depth of my sin.” That’s fair. So let’s talk about the horrors of sin so we can fully grasp the wonders of forgiveness. David refuses to wink at sin. He provides a trilogy of words for sin to depict how comprehensively ugly sin is:

- Transgressions, Sins, Iniquity

“Transgression” means acts of rebellion, disloyalty, breaking lose, tearing away. “Sin” means to miss the mark of God’s will, to deviate from what pleases God.

These two words are pictured well in the New Testament image of the prodigal son who rebelled against his father, breaking his relationship with him in the process. In our sin, we are all prodigal sons.
“Iniquity” means to turn away in the heart from our first love. It’s pictured powerfully in the Old Testament book of Hosea by the idea of spiritual adultery—loving anyone or anything more than we love God. In our sin, we are all spiritual adulterers.

Sin is always relational. Sin is not just breaking the law; it’s breaking our Father’s heart. Sin is not just a thief caught in a crime; it is an adulterer caught in the act. God sees sin as a prodigal son who dishonors Him, and as an adulterous wife who is unfaithful to Him. That’s what makes sin so horrible.

B. 3 Portraits of the Wonders of Forgiveness: Psalm 32:1-2

It’s also what makes forgiveness so wonderful and grace so amazing. Thankfully, as Spurgeon says, “The trinity of sin is overcome by the Trinity of heaven.” Just as David chose three words for sin, so he selects three words for forgiveness:

- Forgiven, Covered, Not Count Against

“Forgiven” pictures a burden being lifted off and carried away. Our holy God can only forgive us because in Christ our sins are taken off of us and placed onto Christ, who then bears the guilt and penalty for our sin. And then Christ’s righteousness is taken and placed on us. So that:

*The God who is infinitely holy, judges our sins in Christ and sees us as holy in Christ.*

“Covered” means to cloak, to conceal, to put in the past so the Lord no longer brings it up as grounds for displeasure. It literally means to conceal from sight. So that:

*To the God who sees all, our sins are invisible because of Christ.*

“Does not count” means the refusal to number, to recount, and even the refusal to remember. So that:

*To the God who knows all, our sins are forgotten because of Christ.*

Think about whatever sin and guilt you struggle with. That big sin in your past—the one that Satan brings up repeatedly. Or that besetting sin that seems to win the victory all too often—maybe anger, or impatience, or lustful thinking, or pride, or pornography.

Now, remember this trinity of truths:

- The God who is infinitely holy, judges your sin in Christ and sees you as holy in Christ.
- To the God who sees all, your sin is invisible because of Christ.
- To the God who knows all, your sin is forgotten because of Christ.

This is a communion Sunday, and we’ll take communion after the message. Let’s prepare our hearts now as we each silently and privately meditate on these truths about grace and take our sins to the cross.
II. 2 Choices We Can Make to Deal with Our Sin: Psalm 32:2b-5

If forgiveness is so wonderful, and grace is so free, then why would I summarize our sermon on Psalm 32 with these words?

We will each experience the hand of God: *either* His holy hands of judgment, or Christ’s pierced hands of forgiveness.

We have two choices when it comes to dealing with our sins. We can try to cover up our sins on our own. That’s what Adam and Eve did in the garden when they tried to make fig leaves for themselves to cover their shame. Or, we can confess our sin and then God will cover us with the blood of Christ.

These were the choices David faced in Psalm 32:3-5.

“When I *kept silent*, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I *acknowledged my sin* to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:3-5).

A. Our Horrible Choice: Trying to Cover Our Own Sin: Psalm 32:3-4

David’s first choice was just like Adam and Eve and just like every human being who has ever lived. Like David, we all foolishly attempt to cover our sin on our own. There are many ways we can try to hide our sins. David tried to ignore it, deny it, and keep silent about it. We don’t know what David’s particular sin was. It could have been his sin of adultery, lying, and murder. It could have been when his daughter, Tamar, was raped by his son, Amnon, and David did *nothing* about it.

Whatever the sin, David tried to keep it hidden. The phrase “kept silent” pictures chosen, voluntary silence where David was trying to suppress the truth. It’s like trying to force a beach ball to stay submerged under the water—we have to exert constant effort to keep it from coming to the surface.

But notice how futile David’s efforts were. *His bones wasted away through his groaning all day long.* “Groaning” is a word used of a roaring lion, of a raging warrior in the heat of battle, and of persons in extreme pain. David’s pent up guilt was a bubbling cauldron in his soul. David’s suppressed sin was a brewing volcano overflowing in his soul. Picture it like this:

The quieter David’s heart was, the louder his conscience roared. David’s mouth was silent, but he could not silence his guilt.

One way or the other, *we will speak.* We will either speak words of confession and repentance, or we will scream words of guilt, grief, and groaning. Our souls do not remain silent about our sin, even if our lips keep silent about our sins.

One of the reasons our souls will not remain silent is because God speaks words of conviction to our souls. David says it this way:
“For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer” (Psalm 32:4).

“Heavy” was used in the Old Testament for being buried under tons of dirt and sand, and of being weighed down and immovable because of heavy chains.

Think about that applied to the infinite, almighty, all-heavy hand of God. God’s all-powerful hand is pressing down on David, burdening him and convicting him to come clean about his sin.

Picture knowing you messed up, and being called into the principal’s office. Picture knowing you blew it at work, and being called into the boss’s office. Multiply that infinitely and picture knowing you sinned against the God of the universe and being called face-to-face with Him in his Throne Room.

That was David’s situation. David’s own guilt plus God’s heavy hand of conviction crushed him body and soul. His physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual strength were sapped, dried up like a plant in a drought in a desert.

Have you ever been there? Maybe some of us are there right now. We’re caught in the spider web of sin and we can’t find a way out. We keep trying to pretend, to hide, to cover up. But it’s no use. Our hidden sin crushes us body, soul, and spirit—day and night.


What do we do instead of self-covering? We do what David finally did. We uncover our sin to God:

“All I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32:5).

David uncovers his sins in three ways:

- Acknowledged His Sin, Did Not Cover Up His Iniquity, Confessed His Transgressions

To “acknowledge” pictures making known in the most personal and intimate way. So:

*David exposed his sinful shame to God and experienced the peace of Christ.*

To “cover” is the same word used in the Old Testament for atone—to make payment for, to cover over the penalty of sin. So:

*David uncovered his sin to God and God covered over his sin with Christ.*

To “confess” pictures holding out or extending hands with a bowed head in a posture of surrender. So:

*David held out his hands in surrender and God wrapped His loving arms of forgiveness around him.*
In response, David received those wonderful words, “And you forgave the guilt of my sin.” David could say personally, “I believe in the forgiveness of my sins.” “Forgiven” is the same word we saw in verse one. When we confess our sin, God lifts our guilt off of us, carries it away, places it on Christ, and then places Christ’s righteousness on us.

The words of the great hymn, *Rock of Ages*, beautifully and powerfully picture this truth:

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me, *Let me hide myself in Thee*; Let the water and the blood, From Thy wounded side which flowed, Be of sin the double cure; Save from wrath and make me pure.”

God invites us to take our sin to the Rock of Ages who hides us in His righteousness. He invites us to remember, meditate upon, and apply these truths:

- When we expose our sinful shame to God, we experience the peace of Christ.
- When we uncover our sin to God, God covers over our sin with Christ.
- When we hold out our hands in surrender, God wraps His loving arms of forgiveness around us.

On this communion Sunday, let’s invite God’s truth to minister to our soul. Let’s each silently and privately meditate on these truths about grace, take our sins to the cross, and receive Christ’s forgiveness.

C. A Mirror Contrasting Our 2 Choices: Psalm 32:6-11

David concludes his Psalm of Confession and Forgiveness with a mirror contrasting the two choices we have regarding our sin.

1. Mirror Image 1: Surrounded by Woes, Drowning in Sorrow: Psalm 32:9-10a

We’ll consider the negative image, the negative choice, first:

“Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Many are the woes of the wicked” (Psalm 32:9-10a).

David is blunt. You’ve heard of the KJV—The King James Version. Here’s my KPV: The Kellemen Paraphrased Version of David’s blunt words:

“Look, you can uncover your sin and be covered in God’s grace, or you can try to cover your sin and be covered in guilt and groaning. Duh! Don’t be like a stubborn mule! God has given you a will to make a choice. Choose repentance and receive freedom! If not, you’re going to end up surrounded by woes and drowning in sorrow. Your life will be like mine was—full of inner turmoil, never finding peace, and never able to quiet the shame of your guilty conscience.”

Thankfully, we do not have to end our sermon with that mirror image because David does not end his psalm like that. Here’s David’s final image:

“Therefore let everyone who is godly pray to you while you may be found; surely when the mighty waters rise, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance. The LORD’s unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!” (Psalm 32:6-7, 10b-11).

Here’s another KPV: Kellemen Paraphrased Version:

“Based on the universal truth that God forgives sin and based upon my personal experience of the joys of forgiven sin, pray to God right now! Don’t waste your life like I was doing. Pray. Now. Confess. Now. Receive forgiveness. Now. When you do, Christ the Rock of Ages will be your hiding place. When the flood of judgment comes, Christ will be your ark of safety. Not only that, but when Satan is singing songs of condemnation, God the Father will surround you with His heavenly choir singing songs of salvation. Even more than that, God Himself will surround you with his forever faithful forgiveness. So, what are you waiting for?!  Confess. Be forgiven! Then celebrate! Rejoice! Be glad! Sing with all your heart praises to our forgiving Father!”

Celebrating Communion: “I Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins”

In a moment, Jon Becker will lead us in communion. As we’re about to reflect on Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection on our behalf—to save us from our sins, to forgive us from our sins, I pray that Psalm 32 has prepared our hearts.

If we have unconfessed sin, we should do as David exhorted us: Pray. Now. And in confessing our sins, we should celebrate the truth that the church has always confessed: “I believe in the forgiveness of sins.”

Before I close in prayer, take time once again to uncover your sin and to receive the covering of forgiveness because of Christ’s blood shed for your sin.

Note: For Sermon Resources (Including the Sermon Audio/MP3) on This Message, Visit: http://bit.ly/Ps32CCC2014
The View from the Sanctuary of God: Psalm 73

The Big Idea: The Only Place Where Life Makes Sense Is at the Foot of the Cross

The Big Picture: Perspective Changes Everything

*Perspective changes everything.* That’s true in the silly stuff, and it’s true in the serious matters of life. Let’s start with the silly. David Heller interviewed children seeking to find their views of everyday life. His book, *Growing Up Isn’t Hard to Do If You Start Out As a Kid*, offers classic examples of the power of perspective.

Keller asked kids, “When does a child officially become an adult?”

- Pierce, age 7, said, “I’m grown-up right now…I’m just short for a grown-up!”
- Roland, age 10, explained, “If the guy at the bank is nice to you, that probably means you have moved up to being grown-up.”
- Emma, age 7, noted, “You aren’t really grown-up unless you have your own hair dryer!”
- Valerie, age 9, shared some interesting insight, “At twenty, you become instantly awesome, and you might even have a house to show for it!”

Keller also asked children, “What do you think it feels like to be a grown-up?”

- Evan, age 8, said, “Ask our teacher, Mr. Reynolds, he might be grown-up!”
- Marie, age 7, didn’t sound very interested in adulthood. “It might be okay being grown-up, but I wouldn’t give up being a kid to try it.”
- Harold, age 7, had wisdom beyond his years. “You might feel big for a while, but then you would run into your mother and that would change everything!”

Keller asked, “If you saw a person you didn’t know, how could you tell if the person was grown-up?”

- Harold, age 9, had a way to figure it out. “Take a look and find out if they got kids hanging on their backs—then they’re probably grown up.”
- Hilary, age 8, explained, “If they’re Italian they probably are grown up. My grandparents are Italian and they’re pretty grown up.”
- Regina, age 8, was adamant. “Grown-ups definitely won’t be chewing gum no more, and they might not eat candy either…That’s why I’m staying put!”

*Perspective changes everything.* It’s true with silly questions for kids, and it’s true with the serious questions you and I ask about life. No question is more perplexing than:

> “Why do bad things happen to God’s people, and good things happen to those who hate God?”

In Psalm 73, Asaph asks that age-old question. He summarizes his perspective in Psalm 73:3 and 13:
“For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:3). “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence” (Psalm 73:13).

Asaph looks at life with “eyeballs only,” seeing life from an earthly perspective. It seems to him that it is pointless to live a godly life, purposeless to follow God. As a result, Asaph becomes envious of the ungodly, hosts a pity-party for himself, and doubts the goodness of God.

We might be quick to judge Asaph. But let’s be honest—at times we struggle with the same questions.

“Why does the godly person get cancer and die young, when the ungodly person lives a long, healthy life? Why is my Christian child bullied at school all day long, and the non-Christian kids are the most popular? Why does God allow the unethical business owner to become successful, when I’m struggling to make ends meet as I follow Christ? Why does my unsaved sibling who hates Christ seem to have an easy life, when my Christian family seems to struggle constantly?

Like Asaph, we struggle to put together the puzzle pieces of life in our fallen world. Like Asaph, we’re tempted to envy the ungodly, to pity ourselves, and to doubt God’s goodness. When the wicked prosper, Asaph teaches us that the only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the cross. Psalm 73 teaches us that when the wicked prosper, we have to shift our perspective by turning our gaze to the cross.

I. Trusting God Theologically: Looking at Life with a Bible Lens—Psalm 73:1

We might assume that Asaph’s problem is theological. “If he only had a better understanding of what the Bible says about God, then he would have been fine.” However, Psalm 73:1 tells us that Asaph would have received an A+ on his theology final exam. Let’s listen to his insight into God.

“Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (Psalm 73:1).

Last week, I shared quotes from the KPV version of the Bible—The Kellemen Paraphrased Version. This week I’ve translated and paraphrased all of Psalm 73. Listen to the paraphrase of verse 1.

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt I know theologically that God only, always, and in every way is good to His children. God continually prospers His people with what is eternally best for them.”

Asaph begins with great wisdom. “God is good—He’s good all the time. Asaph teaches us to look at life through the Bible. Look at our good God through The Good Book! God’s Word says that God is good all the time and we believe it. End of message. Shortest Kellemen sermon ever!!!
II. Doubting God Personally: Looking at Life with Eyeballs Only—Psalm 73:2-3

Not so fast. Something intrudes on our view. Life gets between us and the Bible. Bad stuff happens to good people. Good stuff happens to evil people. As a result, while we trust God theologically, we are tempted to doubt God personally. Here’s how Asaph expresses it.

“But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:2-3).

Let’s listen again to the Kellemen Paraphrased Version:

“But as for me personally and emotionally, my faith was tottering on the brink of doubt and despair. My mind was burning with envy and my emotions fuming with anger at the arrogant fool. The wicked man praises himself, boasts about himself, and raves about himself. It seems to me that God does good to those who praise themselves, and God does bad to those who praise Him. I looked with eyeballs only at the wicked who war against God and I saw that the wicked have peace and prosperity. This makes no sense to me!”

Asaph is looking at life with eyeballs only. He factoring in only what he can see from a temporal, fleshly perspective. He’s focusing on the material and on the here-and-now.

A. Doubting God’s Goodness When My Eyeballs See the Lifestyle of the Rich and Famous: Psalm 73:4-5

What is it that Asaph is seeing and experiencing that causes this conflict between what he knows about God theologically and what he feels about God personally? We find the answer starting in verses 4-5 where Asaph begins to doubt God’s goodness as he observes with eyeballs only the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

“They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills” (Psalm 73:4-5).

Here’s how we could paraphrase these verses.

“You would think it would be the godly who are exempt from troubles, but as I look around, I see the ungodly having no physical troubles or pain. Instead, their bodies are healthy and well-nourished. They don’t endure the toilsome labor and burden of work that the rest of us are cursed with. The ungodly have health and wealth while the godly have sickness and poverty. Is the good God blessing those who curse Him and cursing those who bless Him? Is the good God good to the bad and bad to the good? I envy the lifestyle of the rich and famous!”

We’re going to learn later in Psalm 73 that none of this is true from an eternal perspective. But it felt true to Asaph from an earthly perspective.

If we look at life from a temporal perspective, we might feel the same way. Microsoft co-founder, Bill Gates, is often listed as the wealthiest person in America. He lives in a 66,000...
square-foot house. His charitable efforts have made him one of the most generous people on the planet, but don’t expect him to donate to religious organizations. Gates said in a *Time* magazine interview that:

“There is no evidence of anything divine about the human soul. Just in terms of allocation of time and resources, religion is not very efficient.” Gates told Charlie Rose in an interview that, “The specific elements of Christianity are not something I’m a huge believer in.”

Looking at life with eyeballs only, we might easily wonder, “Why is Bill Gates blessed with billions and I’m blessed with unpaid bills?” If we look at life with eyeballs only, we might start to wonder why God blesses the ungodly with health and wealth.


Asaph struggles with that. He also struggles with doubting God’s goodness when he sees life going smoothly for God-haters. He shares his struggles in Psalm 73:6-8.

“Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression” (Psalm 73:6-8).

Here’s our KPV:

“Everything goes so smoothly for the God-haters. They’re decked out in self-importance with necklaces of pride and garments of violence. Their hearts are fatty and bloated with sin, yet their evil hearts have more than anyone could ever wish for. Their tongues rule with intimidation, bullying, oppression, and abuse of the less fortunate.”

Asaph is not done. Listen in as he vents further in Psalm 73:9-11.

“Thereir mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, ‘How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?’” (Psalm 73:9-11).

Here’s a summary what Asaph is saying:

“The wicked declare how things should be done on earth and what God can do in heaven. The wicked revile God and beguile men. A rabble gathers around them—bootlickers, brownnosers, and lapdogs who lap up every word they speak as if they’re words of life. But they’re really words of death and blasphemy. The wicked declare that God is clueless! They say, ‘Since we’re bad and our lives are blessed, God must be ignorant! He’s a puny god. Bad people can get along just fine without God because He doesn’t know what they’re doing. God doesn’t know what He’s doing!’”
When I think of arrogant blasphemy like this, I think of Ted Turner—the billionaire founder of CNN. As a child, Turner wanted to be a missionary. But he lost his faith after he watched his little sister, Mary Jean, die of complications from a rare form of lupus. Turner later explained:

“She was sick for five years before she passed away. And it just seemed so unfair, because she hadn’t done anything wrong. What had she done wrong? And I couldn’t get any answers. Christianity couldn’t give me any answers to that.”

As he climbed the corporate ladder, Turner infamously described Christianity as “a religion for losers.” Now age 75, Turner describes himself as an agnostic. He says he prays for his sick friends, praying to “whoever is listening.” We should pray for Ted Turner’s conversion.

Ted Turner illustrates Asaph and he illustrates the people Asaph is describing. Like Asaph, Turner looked at life with eyeballs only when his sister died and he lost his faith. Like those Asaph describes in Psalm 73:6-11, Turner mocks God’s people as following “a religion for losers.”

C. Doubting God’s Goodness When My Eyeballs See Bad Things Happening to God’s People: Psalm 73:12-16

There’s a third reason Asaph struggles with doubts about God’s goodness. Asaph looks with eyeballs only and sees bad things happening to God’s people. Here’s how he words it in Psalm 73:12-16.

“This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued, I have been punished every morning. If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me” (Psalm 73:12-16).

Here’s what Asaph is saying.

“Let me recap: the wicked live the lifestyle of the rich and famous while the godly live the lifestyle of the poor and nameless. So…here’s my quandary. When I look around with eyeballs only from a fleshly, temporal perspective, beyond a shadow of a doubt it seems like I keep my heart true to God in vain. What’s the use! How purposeless to purposefully be true to God since day and night I’m in turmoil inside and in pain outside. Until now, I’ve been terrified to admit this to anyone because I didn’t want to cause God’s children to doubt God’s goodness. But I can’t take it anymore! I can’t keep silent! Life is an unsolvable riddle that confuses me without end and without answer. Trying to figure out why bad things happen to God’s people is an intolerably painful puzzle that can never be pieced together!”

So…do we end our sermon now—with a painful puzzle that has core pieces missing?
III. Seeing Life with Cross-Shaped Eyes: Psalm 73:17-26

Asaph does not end Psalm 73 this way. Instead, he takes a major turn in verse 17. He shifts his focus from looking at life with eyeballs only to looking at life with cross-shaped eyes. Let’s listen to the most important verse in this entire Psalm:

“Till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny” (Psalm 73:17).

And now, our paraphrase:

“That’s what I thought about the God-haters, about my life, and about God until I entered the sanctuary of God. Nothing made sense until I shifted my perspective to look at life through the eyes of God’s temple. In God’s sanctuary, I finally saw life with spiritual eyes, with eternal vision, with redemptive eyes, with Cross-eyes, with Christ-tinted lenses.”

You may be wondering, “Bob, this is the Old Testament. Christ hadn’t died yet. How could Asaph have been looking at life with Cross-eyes and with Christ-tinted lenses?” Great question. Glad you asked.

When Asaph says he “entered the sanctuary of God,” he’s talking about the Temple in Jerusalem that Solomon built for God. We’re told in 1 Kings 6-7 that Solomon modeled the sanctuary temple after the Tabernacle built by Moses and described in Exodus and Leviticus. The Old Testament sanctuary is where Israel worshipped God and made daily sacrifices to God for their sins.

Hebrews 8-10 tell us that the Old Testament sanctuary sacrificial system pictures and foreshadows Christ’s perfect sacrifice for us. What Asaph witnesses in the Old Testament sanctuary is a powerful picture foreshadowing the cross of Christ.

- The Courtyard: The Ten Basins and the Large Laver/Large Basin

So, picture with me what Asaph experiences as he journeys to and into the sanctuary of God—the temple of God—and how it points us to the cross. As Asaph approaches the sanctuary, he first arrives at the courtyard where he sees the Ten Basins and the Large Laver. The Ten Basins were used for washing and rinsing the burnt offerings. The Laver or Larger Basin was used for the washing or cleansing of the priests. Immediately Asaph’s mind goes to his sinfulness and God’s holiness. If even the priest has to be cleansed before entering the sanctuary, what does that say about Asaph and about us?

- The Courtyard: The Brazen Altar of Sacrifice

Before Asaph, or anyone else, could even think about entering the sanctuary—the Holy Place (not the Holy of Holies), he had to go to the Brazen Altar of Sacrifice outside the sanctuary. “Altar” literally means “place of slaughter.” Asaph would not have come to the sanctuary empty-handed. Instead, he would have chosen a lamb without blemish as a guilt offering to be slaughtered at the altar of sacrifice to make atonement or a covering for Asaph’s sin—serving as Asaph’s substitute. This is a picture, a foreshadowing of Christ the spotless Lamb of God who died as the sinless substitute for our sin.
The Holy Place/The Outer Sanctuary: The Ten Golden Candlesticks

Cleansed because of the sacrifice of a substitute, now Asaph could enter the outer sanctuary—the Holy Place. This is not the Holy of Holies or the inner sanctuary. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year on the Day of Atonement.

As Asaph enters the outer sanctuary, he sees the Ten Golden Candlesticks, five on the right and five on the left. They illuminate the entire sanctuary. Their light communicates that God is the pure light of our dark and sinful world. They represent the holy purity of Yahweh. They foreshadow for Asaph, and for us, Jesus who came as the sinless, pure Light of the world.

The Holy Place/The Outer Sanctuary: The Table of Showbread/Golden Table on Which Was Placed the Bread of the Presence

Next Asaph would encounter the Table of Showbread—hollowed or holy bread. It held twelve loaves made from the purest flower. The number of loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The purity of the bread pictures all of Israel consecrated to God. It pictures for Asaph his full surrender to his holy God. It foreshadows for us Christ as the pure Bread of Life.

The Holy Place/The Outer Sanctuary: The Golden Altar of Incense

Directly before the curtain dividing the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, Asaph would have seen the Golden Altar of Incense. On this altar, sweet spices are continually burned with fire taken from the Brazen Altar. The smoke and smell rises up, symbolic of a holy God accepting the prayers of His people because of the substitutionary sacrifices.

The Veil Between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies

The last item Asaph would ever see in the sanctuary was the Veil that separated the Holy Place (outer sanctuary) from the Holy of Holies (inner sanctuary). The Veil was the constant reminder that no one could ever enter the presence of God without the shedding of blood—again foreshadowing Christ. It was this Veil that was torn in two when Christ died for our sin—indicating that we can now and forever enter the presence of our holy God because of Christ’s perfectly pure sacrifice on our behalf.

The Holy of Holies

Though Asaph could never enter the Holy of Holies, he knew exactly what was in it because the Bible describes it in detail. This interior portion of the sanctuary/temple was left in total darkness. Again, no one was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies except the high priest and that only once a year.

The Holy of Holies: The Ark of Testimony/Ark of the Covenant/Ark of God/Mercy Seat

Inside the Holy of Holies was the Ark of Testimony, also known as the Ark of the Covenant. Its upper surface or lid, the Mercy Seat, was surrounded with a rim of gold. The Hebrew root word for “Mercy Seat” means to cover—indicating both a lid or top, but also to atone—to cover
a debt, to pardon, forgive, and cover sin. At each end of the Mercy Seat there were two cherubim over the Ark, with their faces turned toward each other. Their outspread wings over the top of the Ark formed the throne of God, while the Ark itself was God’s footstool. God told His people in Exodus 25:22, “There above the mercy seat between the cherubim that are over the ark of the testimony, I will meet with you.”

- The Ark of the Covenant: The Two Tables of Stone, the Pot of Manna, and Aaron’s Rod that Budded

  Inside the Ark, God instructed His people to place the Two Tables of Stone—the two tablets that contained the Ten Commandments. They were a constant reminder of God’s absolute holiness and their inability to keep the law—and thus the need for a perfect substitute and pure sacrifice on their behalf.

  Also placed inside the Ark was the Pot of Manna. Manna was the bread that God provided for the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. It reminded Asaph both of God’s provision, but also of Israel’s sin because in spite of God’s provision, the people rebelled and longed for the food of Egypt instead of the Bread of God.

  The final object placed within the Ark of the Covenant was Aaron’s Rod that Budded. The chiefs of the twelve tribes had brought to Moses a rod bearing the name of his tribe. These, along with the rod of Aaron for the tribe of Levi, were laid overnight in the tabernacle. In the morning, they found that while the other rods remained unchanged, Aaron’s rod “for the house of Levi” budded, blossomed, and yielded almonds (Numbers 17:1-10). This rod was preserved in the tabernacle (Hebrews 9:4) as evidence of Aaron’s divine appointment to the priesthood.

- The Day of Atonement

  Prayerfully pondering the Holy of Holies, Asaph’s mind focuses on the Day of Atonement. First, Asaph pictures the high priest doing what was done 365 days a year—offering a spotless lamb as a sacrifice on the Brazen Altar of Sacrifice—picturing Christ, the spotless Lamb of God.

  Next, Asaph pictures the high priest securing three sacrificial animals for the Day of Atonement—starting with a bull he slaughtered for his own sin offering. Asaph pictures the high priest taking some of the blood of the bull into the Holy of Holies and sprinkling it on the Mercy Seat seven times—foreshadowing Christ’s blood shed for us.

  Then Asaph pictures lots being cast for the two goats—determining which would be slaughtered and which would be driven away. The goat for slaughter—the goat for the people’s sin offering—was sacrificed, and its blood was taken into the Holy of Holies and applied to the Mercy Seat, as the bull’s blood had been—picturing Christ’s blood shed for us.

  Now the second goat—the Scape Goat which was kept alive—had the sins of the nation symbolically laid on its head. It was then driven away to carry away the wickedness, rebellion, and sin of God’s people—picturing our sins placed on Christ.

- The High Priest

  Throughout his journey into the sanctuary of God, Asaph would have focused on the high priest—the only person who could enter the presence of God in the inner sanctuary. Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our merciful and faithful high priest who makes atonement for our sins.
Jesus, unlike the Old Testament high priest, does not have to make a sacrifice for Himself—for He is without sin.

“Such a high priest meets our needs—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (Hebrews 7:26-27).

Asaph entering the sanctuary of God shifts his focus to God’s holiness, our sinfulness, and God’s graciousness in providing a sacrificial substitute. Now we see why I paraphrase Psalm 73:17 like this:

“That’s what I thought about the God-haters, about my life, and about God until I entered the sanctuary of God. Nothing made sense until I shifted my perspective to look at life through the eyes of God’s temple. In God’s sanctuary, I finally saw life with spiritual eyes, with eternal vision, with redemptive eyes, with Cross-eyes, with Christ-tinted lenses.”

Asaph entering the sanctuary involves a dramatic foretelling and foreshadowing of everything Christ did for us. As Asaph journeys to and into the sanctuary, the veil covering his eyeballs-only perspective of life is ripped away. His fleshly eyes are transformed into spiritual eyes. They are now redemptive eyes, Messiah-tinted eyes, Cross-eyes. That’s why the main message of Psalm 73 is:

The Only Place Where Life Makes Sense Is at the Foot of the Cross

Are we confused, like Asaph was, about why a good God would allow bad things to happen to His people and allow good things to happen to bad people? Then we look to the cross. Are we confused about why God would allow loved ones to die? Then we look to the cross. Are we confused about why God would allow physical sickness and emotional pain into your life? Then we look to the cross.

When we wonder if God is fair, the cross shouts to us that “fairness” would have meant that we would die for our own sins and be separated from God forever. Was it “fair” that the sinless Christ died for our sins? It wasn’t fair, it was grace! Difficulties in life tempt us to doubt God’s goodness and fairness. It is Christ’s sacrificial death for us on the cross that declares once for all that God is not only good and fair all the time; God is gracious for all time and eternity.

A. A Cross-Shaped View of God-Haters: From Envy to Pity—Psalm 73:18-20


“Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes; when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies” (Psalm 73:18-20).

Here’s our paraphrase:
“I finally understood the final end of God-haters—their final state before a holy God. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, those who forever arrogantly and willfully reject God will forever plunge off the false foundation they built. In the end, everything they built turns into a desolate ruin. In the end, their souls experience constant terror. In the end, the lifestyle of the rich and famous is but a dream, an illusion—here today and gone tomorrow—forever.”

The view from the cross changes our mindset concerning those who reject God. We move from envy to pity; we move from resentment to compassionate prayer for their salvation.

B. A Cross-Shaped View of Myself: I Need Grace As Much as the God-Haters Do—Psalm 73:21-22

Asaph also gains a new cross-shaped view of himself—that he needed grace as much as the God-haters do! We read about it in Psalm 73:21-22.

“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you” (Psalm 73:21-22).

I translate it like this:

“My new sanctuary perspective—my new cross-shaped mindset—not only changes my thinking about God-haters. It also changes my thinking about me! I had been so self-righteous. Now I realize something as I reflect on my soured, sick, envious heart and on my embittered spirit. I was foolish and ignorant—looking at life with eyeballs only. In fact, I was looking at life like a brute beast, like a stupid animal, like a dumb, soulless ox! I wasn’t ‘good’ at all. And all the badness in me must be covered and forgiven by God!”

The view from the cross changes our mindset concerning ourselves. We move from self-righteousness to humble repentance; we move from arrogance to clinging to Christ’s grace.


This leads Asaph to a third renewed perspective: a cross-shaped view of God—that God’s goodness is grace-goodness. Asaph sings it like this in Psalm 73:23-26.

“Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:23-26).

Here’s wording for us today:

“But most importantly, my new sanctuary perspective—my new cross-shaped lens—changes my thinking about You God! Even while I was saying You were unfaithful to me, You were always faithfully with me. What grace—what great grace to forgive and love me even while I was speaking lies about You and doubting You! You hold me by my right hand—like a
tender, understanding, faithfully forever forgiving Father. In this life, You guide me like a Sovereign Shepherd with Your wise counsel. In the next life, You will receive me into glory—to Yourself—by grace alone! Without You, heaven with all its glory would be a vast wasteland, an empty void. And while I am here on earth, I desire nothing besides You. All the things of earth that I envied are less than nothing compared to You. Even when my flesh was failing and my heart was foolish, You are, were, and always will be the strength of my heart. You’re all I want. All I need. Just to be with You—forever!”

The view from the cross changes our mindset concerning God. We move from seeing God as unfair to seeing God as our forever faithfully forgiving Father. We move from desiring what the wicked have to desiring nothing but God.

IV. Trusting God Theologically and Personally: Psalm 73:27-28


“They who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds” (Psalm 73:27-28).

Are you ready for our final KPV?

“Now I finally realize the eternal truth—God-haters who choose to live far from God will perish. There is no life apart from the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. All who are unfaithful to the forever faithful forgiving Father will reap the consequences of their God-hatred. But as for me—both theologically and personally—it is good to be near my good God who is good to me all the time. I put my trust not in the counterfeit satisfaction of this life. Instead, I put my trust in my Sovereign Shepherd, my Savior Shepherd, who is my Refuge and Rock. Instead of complaining about the lifestyle of the rich and famous, I will live to make God’s name famous!”

What a contrast, what a change! Asaph shifts perspective from complaining about the rich and famous, to living his entire life with one goal—to make God’s name famous! Are we living to make God’s name famous?

The Big Question: Am I Living to Make God’s Name Famous?

Who is this Asaph we’ve been learning from? In 1 and 2 Chronicles we learn that Asaph was of the priestly line of the Levites. David commissioned him and his family to be the worship leaders in the house of Yahweh—in the sanctuary. Asaph even led worship at the dedication of Solomon’s temple. He was the worship leader for all of God’s people.

In our final message on the Psalms on March 30, we’ll explore Psalms 146-150. We’ll learn that we are the world’s choir directors. We’ll discover that all of us are God’s worship leaders.

As worship leaders, as the world’s choir directors, Asaph teaches us that:
• We will worship God’s graciousness instead of doubting God’s goodness and fairness—when we keep our eyes focused on the cross of Christ.
• We will live to make God’s name famous instead of envying the rich and famous when we keep our eyes focused on the cross of Christ.

_The only place where life makes sense is at the foot of the cross._


Note: The Next Two Pages Provide a Collation of the Paraphrase of Psalm 73
Psalm 73 is one of the most beloved Psalms in the Bible. The author, Asaph, asks the age-old question, “Why do bad things happen to God’s people?” But he adds to that question, “Why do good things happen to bad people who hate God?” Here’s an extended paraphrase of Asaph’s answer to that question in Psalm 73.

An Extended Paraphrase of Psalm 73

73:1: “Beyond a shadow of a doubt I know theologically that God only, always, and in every way is good to His children. God continually prospers His people with what is eternally best for them.”

73:2-3: “But as for me personally and emotionally, my faith was tottering on the brink of doubt and despair. My mind was burning with envy and my emotions fuming with anger at the arrogant fool. The wicked man praises himself, boasts about himself, and raves about himself. It seems to me that God does good to those who praise themselves, and God does bad to those who praise Him. I looked with eyeballs only at the wicked who war against God and I saw that the wicked have peace and prosperity. This makes no sense to me!”

73:4-5: “You would think it would be the godly who are exempt from troubles, but as I look around, I see the ungodly having no physical troubles or pain. Instead, their bodies are healthy and well-nourished. They don’t endure the toilsome labor and burden of work that the rest of us are cursed with. The ungodly have health and wealth while the godly have sickness and poverty. Is the good God blessing those who curse Him and cursing those who bless Him? Is the good God good to the bad and bad to the good? I envy the lifestyle of the rich and famous!”

73:6-8: “Everything goes so smoothly for the God-haters. They’re decked out in self-importance with necklaces of pride and garments of violence. Their hearts are fatty and bloated with sin, yet their evil hearts have more than anyone could ever wish for. Their tongues rule with intimidation, bullying, oppression, and abuse of the less fortunate.”

73:9-11: “The wicked decree how things should be done on earth and what God can do in heaven. The wicked revile God and beguile men. A rabble gathers around them—bootlickers, brownnosers, and lapdogs who lap up every word they speak as if they’re words of life. But they’re really words of death and blasphemy. The wicked declare that God is clueless! They say, ‘Since we’re bad and our lives are blessed, God must be ignorant! He’s a puny god. Bad people can get along just fine without God because He doesn’t know what they’re doing. God doesn’t know what He’s doing!’”

73:12-16: “Let me recap: the wicked live the lifestyle of the rich and famous while the godly live the lifestyle of the poor and nameless. So…here’s my quandary. When I look around with eyeballs only from a fleshly, temporal perspective, beyond a shadow of a doubt it seems like I keep my heart true to God in vain. What’s the use! How purposeless to purposefully be true to God since day and night I’m in turmoil inside and in pain outside. Until now, I’ve been terrified
to admit this to anyone because I didn’t want to cause God’s children to doubt God’s goodness. But I can’t take it anymore! I can’t keep silent! Life is an unsolvable riddle that confuses me without end and without answer. Trying to figure out why bad things happen to God’s people is an intolerably painful puzzle that can never be pieced together!”

**73:17:** “That’s what I thought about the God-haters, about my life, and about God until I entered the sanctuary of God. Nothing made sense until I shifted my perspective to look at life through the eyes of God’s temple. In God’s sanctuary, I finally saw life with spiritual eyes, with eternal vision, with redemptive eyes, with Cross-eyes, with Christ-tinted lenses.”

**73:18-20:** “I finally understood the final end of God-haters—their final state before a holy God. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, those who forever arrogantly and willfully reject God will forever plunge off the false foundation they built. *In the end,* everything they built turns into a desolate ruin. *In the end,* their souls experience constant terror. *In the end,* the lifestyle of the rich and famous is but a dream, an illusion—here today and gone tomorrow—forever.”

**73:21-22:** “My new sanctuary perspective—my new cross-shaped mindset—not only changes my thinking about God-haters. It also changes my thinking about me! I had been so self-righteous. Now I realize something as I reflect on my soured, sick, envious heart and on my embittered spirit. I was foolish and ignorant—looking at life with eyeballs only. In fact, I was looking at life like a brute beast, like a stupid animal, like a dumb, soulless ox! I wasn’t ‘good’ at all. And all the badness in me must be covered and forgiven by God!”

**73:23-26:** “But most importantly, my new sanctuary perspective—my new cross-shaped lens—changes my thinking about You God! Even while I was saying You were unfaithful to me, You were always faithfully with me. What grace—what great grace to forgive and love me even while I was speaking lies about You and doubting You! You hold me by my right hand—like a tender, understanding, faithfully forever forgiving Father. In this life, You guide me like a Sovereign Shepherd with Your wise counsel. *In the next life,* You will receive me into glory—to Yourself—by grace alone! Without You, heaven with all its glory would be a vast wasteland, an empty void. And while I am here on earth, I desire nothing besides You. All the things of earth that I envied are less than nothing compared to You. Even when my flesh was failing and my heart was foolish, You are, were, and always will be the strength of my heart. You’re all I want. All I need. Just to be with You—forever!”

**73:27-28:** “Now I finally realize the eternal truth—God-haters who choose to live far from God will perish. There is no life apart from the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. All who are unfaithful to the forever faithful forgiving Father will reap the consequences of their God-hatred. But as for me—both theologically and personally—it is good to be near my good God who is good to me all the time. I put my trust not in the counterfeit satisfaction of this life. Instead, I put my trust in my Sovereign Shepherd, my Savior Shepherd, who is my Refuge and Rock. Instead of complaining about the lifestyle of the rich and famous, I will live to make God’s name famous!”
Christians Are the World’s Worship Leaders: Psalms 146-150

The Big Idea: The World Takes Notice When Christians Revolve Their World Around God

The Big Picture # 1: “Hey, Amber, Look Out the Window!”

As many of you know, I grew up in “the Region.” Born and raised in Gary, Indiana, I accepted Christ as my Savior at Grace Baptist Church in Gary when I was a teenager.

About a year after I committed my life to Christ, our church youth group took a bus trip from the flat lands of Indiana to the mountains of Pennsylvania to visit Baptist Bible College. With us on that trip were Amber and her Mom. Neither Amber nor her Mom had ever been out of Indiana, so they had literally never seen mountains. In fact, Mt. Baldy at the Dunes was the highest “mountain” they had ever seen.

If you’ve taken that trek from Lake County through Indiana and into Ohio, then you know that just past Cleveland you start to see some decent hills and small mountains. Then as you enter and start to move through Pennsylvania, you encounter the Allegheny Mountain range and then the Poconos.

Amber and her Mom—did I mention they had never seen mountains—were amazed! Every time Amber’s Mom would spot another mountain peak on the horizon, she would yell, “Hey, Amber, look out the window!” After a while, each time our bus encountered another glorious vista, every person on our bus would yell, “Hey, Amber, look out the window!”

When our kids were young, I told them about Amber and her Mom. So, when we took a family vacation out west, even though none of us is named Amber, whenever we saw an amazing sight, we would yell, “Hey, Amber, look out the window!”

Psalms 146-150 each yell, “Hey, Amber, look out the window!” But they aren’t simply looking at God’s creation. They’re looking at God! They’re singing, “Hey, world, open your eyes and behold God!”

This picture of everyone joining together in a chorus of praise to God perfectly fits the history behind Psalms 146-150. Israel sang together these final five psalms as hymns of praise and daily prayers in the sanctuary. Every one of these final five psalms begins and ends identically: “Praise the LORD!” “Praise the LORD!” Ten times—“Praise the LORD!”—“Praise the LORD!”—like the opening and closing chorus of 5 hymns of worship. Echoing back and forth in Solomon’s temple: “Praise the LORD!” “Praise the LORD!” “Hey, Amber, look out the window!” “Hey, world, open your eyes and behold God!”

The Big Picture # 2: Don’t Pretend, Instead Depend

Before we focus on Psalm 146, let’s remember something vital about the Psalms. If we’ve learned anything in the past thirteen weeks in the Psalms, I pray that we’ve learned that the Psalms model brutal honesty with God. The Psalms do not pretend.

So imagine that you are time-warped back 2,500 to 3,000 years and you are a foreigner visiting Israel for the first time. And imagine that for 145 Psalms you’ve heard Israel being brutally honest about how life is bad—about suffering, about persecution, about the prosperity of the wicked. You’ve heard the Jews having honest conversation after honest conversation with God, saying, “Life is bad!”
And now, just before the end of your visit, just before you’re going to be time warped back to 2014 AD, you hear all Israel singing, “Life is bad, but God is good!”

Would that make an impression? You’re not watching a bunch of healthy, wealthy people thanking God for earthly blessings. You’re listening to a nation of beaten up and beaten down worshippers praising God...for God—for Who He is. “Life is bad, but God is gracious, God is great, and God is good!”

When I first started serving as a biblical counselor, one of the first people I counseled was a pastor whose wife had died giving birth to their first child. This pastor had not been like Israel. He had not been honest with himself, God, or others about his grief. He had been pretending. He believed that pastors should always and only show their strong side, never let people know when they were struggling. So, he never wept at the funeral. He preached the day after his wife was buried. He pastored as if nothing had ever happened.

But he was pretending. He admitted to me in counseling that he was devastated. In fact, he admitted that he was hallucinating. He was imagining that his deceased wife was talking to him. He was trying to suppress his grief, but it was bubbling to the surface.

My pastor friend only found God’s healing hope when he began to be honest with himself, others, and God about his great grief. He found healing hope when he moved from pretending to depending on God.

Something else happened when my pastor friend began to be honest with God and others about his grief. People, including non-Christians, were attracted to his testimony. He was saying with integrity and conviction, “Life is bad, but God is good.” People wanted to know a reason for the hope he had.

His life illustrates the theme of the Psalms and of Psalms 146-150 in particular:

- The world takes notice when Christians revolve their world around God.
- The world takes notice when Christians revolve their messed up world around their gracious, great, and good God.

I. Praise God Because He Is Gracious: He Is Our Savior/Redeemer Who Is For Us—Psalm 146:1-5

In Psalm 146:1-5, all of Israel begins their song of worship by praising God because He is gracious.

“Praise the L ORD. Praise the L ORD, O my soul. I will praise the L ORD all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save. When their spirit departs, they return to the ground; on that very day their plans come to nothing. Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the L ORD his God” (Psalm 146:1-5).

The Psalms end the way they began. In our first message in this series, we explored Psalm 1, which contrasts the blessedness of trusting in the L ORD versus the foolishness of trusting in man. The word “trust” in Psalm 146:3 means “to place confidence in, to depend upon for security, to rely upon for salvation.”
Psalm 1 and Psalm 146 each remind us that *the world is watching who we put our trust in*. Do we put our trust in ourselves—in mortal men who cannot save? Or, do we put our trust in the God of Jacob?

This phrase, “God of Jacob” is very important. Interestingly, we don’t find the Old Testament talking about “the God of Moses,” or “the God of Joshua,” or “the God of Solomon.” But 14 times in the Old Testament, we find the phrase, “the God of Jacob”—17 times if we count the three times where it says, “the mighty God of Jacob.” Why has God identified Himself 17 times with Jacob? What is it in the LORD’s dealings with Jacob that is of particular significance?

The God of Jacob is *the God of all grace*. Theologian Arthur Pink, says it like this:

“If ever there was a man who illustrated that grace of God, it is Jacob. According to the flesh there was nothing winsome, or attractive about him. Selfish, scheming, deceitful, treacherous, untruthful, he was a most unlovely character. What was there in him to attract the love of God. *Absolutely nothing.*”

Jacob is a self-centered schemer and scoundrel. In Genesis 32, Jacob learns that his brother, Esau, the brother whose birthright Jacob had stolen, was coming toward him with 400 armed men. In fear and distress, Jacob divides up his property and his people into several groups. He sends everyone, including his wives and children, *ahead* of him. Really brave dude. Instead of women and children first in order to be rescued; it was women and children first to be sacrificed so Jacob could be rescued. Really brave dude.

Jacob instructs his servants to tell his brother Esau that Jacob was giving him a gift of hundreds of goats, rams, camels, cows, and donkeys. Genesis 32:20-21 summarize the scene:

> “Jacob thought, ‘I will pacify Esau with these gifts I am sending on ahead; later when I see him, perhaps he will receive me. So Jacob’s gifts went on ahead of him, but he himself spent the night in the camp’” (Genesis 32:20-21).

Jacob is both self-protective and self-sufficient. He’s depending on the works of his hands for his deliverance instead of depending on God for his salvation.

Do you remember what happens next? Jacob is all alone…except for God. Here’s how Genesis 32:24-25 pictures it.

> “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled the man” (Genesis 32:24-25).

As you know, I wrestled in middle school, high school and college, and also coached wrestling for over twenty-five years. My favorite move as a wrestler and as a coach is “the Jacobs.” The Jacobs is a move where you grind your hip bone into your opponent’s hip bone while driving his shoulder to the mat. Years ago when I was in wrestling shape, there was no extra fat on my hip bone. So it was a true grinding of bone on bone. It hurt. It was a very effective move. The name of that move comes from this story in Genesis 32—the Jacobs—because it incapacitates an opponent, it breaks them.

Jacob the self-sufficient scoundrel is broken by God. Here’s how Genesis 32:30-31 describes his ongoing brokenness.
“So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared. The sun rose above him as he passed Peniel, and he was limping because of his hip’ (Genesis 32:30-31).

When you have an injury, what happens overnight? Does it get better at first? Nope. It gets worse, right? Stiff. Sore. You can barely move. This is the condition Jacob finds himself in the next morning. He’s broken by God and broken before God. And God is not done with the breaking process. Here’s what happens next:

“Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men” (Genesis 33:1).

I love it! Jacob the schemer, schemed to pacify Esau with his self-sufficient wealth. Instead, having spent the night face to face with God, Jacob now finds himself face to face with Esau—and 400 armed men.

Jacob is a broken man. And he is a new man. Instead of sending his wife and children to face Esau, Genesis 33:3 tells us:

“Jacob himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother” (Genesis 33:3).

Picture it. Don’t miss it. His hip is out of socket. It’s stiff. He’s walking with a limp. And Jacob is not bowing once at the waist. Jacob is bowing seven times face down to the ground. Jacob is a broken man. A humbled man. A God-dependent man. No more scheming. He’s surrendered all.

But Jacob is still at the mercy of Esau—the brother he sinned against. The brother with 400 armed men at his side. What does Esau gives his sinful, broken brother? He gives him…grace.

“But Esau ran to meet Jacob and embraced him; he threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. And they wept” (Genesis 33:4).

Put yourself in Jacob’s soul. As Esau runs to him, Jacob is helpless. Esau could be racing to him to kill him. But instead, Esau runs to him to grace him. The wording of Genesis 33:4 about Esau running to Jacob, embracing him, throwing his arms around him, and kissing him is almost identical to the wording in Luke 15 where the forgiving father runs to the prodigal son.

Jacob is the prodigal brother come home to Esau. More than that, Jacob is the prodigal son come home to God the Father. And more than that—God is the gracious Father. Esau’s grace to Jacob is simply a small human picture, a small taste, of God’s great grace to us.

God is the forgiving Father who is for us. Satan lies to us and says, “God is against you.” The story of Jacob shows and tells us the truth. The God of Jacob is for us. As Michael Vincent reminds us:

“On my worst days of sin and failure, the gospel encourages me with God’s unrelenting grace toward me.”

That’s the message of Psalm 146:5:
“Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God” (Psalm 146:5).

As the Psalms come to a close, the very first aspect of God’s character that they highlight is God’s grace—His help and hope to the helpless and the hopeless. They don’t start with God’s greatness—as great and awesome as God is. They don’t start with God’s goodness—as good and astounding as God is. The Psalms start with God’s grace—His great grace, His amazing grace.

In response to God’s amazing grace, Psalm 146 urges us to sing, “Praise the LORD.” Does our life sing and shout this praise song of grace?

“It’s there in a newborn cry; There in the light of every sunrise
There in the shadows of this life; Your great grace

It’s there on the mountain top; There in the everyday and the mundane
There in the sorrow and the dancing; Your great grace; Oh, such grace

From the creation to the cross
There from the cross into eternity
Your grace finds me, Yes, Your grace finds me

It’s there on the wedding day; There in the weeping by the gravesite
There in the very breath we breathe; Your great grace

It’s the same for the rich and poor; The same for the saint and for the sinner
Enough for this whole wide world; Your great grace; Oh, such grace

There in the darkness night of the soul; There in the sweetest songs of victory
Your grace finds me; Yes Your grace finds me

Your great grace; Oh such grace
Your great grace; Oh such grace

So I’m breathing in Your grace, And breathing out Your grace
I’m breathing in Your grace, Forever I’ll be breathing in Your grace

Your grace finds me; Yes Your grace finds me.”

The world takes notice when we revolve our world around our God of grace. People notice when our lives sing and shout, “Hey, Amber, look out the window and behold our God’s great grace!” They notice when our lives sing, “Hey family member, look at my life and see a broken, grace-dependent, grace-desperate person—and see my God of grace!”
II. Praise God Because He Is Great: He Is Our Sovereign/Creator Who Is Over Us—Psalm 146:6, 10

The most amazing attribute of God is His grace. However, grace is not God’s only attribute. We also praise God because He is great. He is our sovereign Creator who is over us. Psalm 146:6 and 10 sing it like this:

“The Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them—the LORD who remains faithful forever. The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD” (Psalm 146:6, 10).

“Hey, Amber, look out the window and behold God’s greatness!”

It’s significant that Psalm 146 connects God’s greatness to His graciousness. If the one true God of the Bible were great, but not gracious, then he would be a false god like…Allah. Allah is worshipped as great—Almighty, All-powerful. But Allah is not gracious. He is over as pure power—towering over and squashing under.

The one true God of the Bible—Jehovah, Yahweh—He is over us using His infinite power to faithfully care for us forever. The Hebrew word for “faithful” in 146:6 means “fidelity and firmness in constantly keeping one’s promises.” God is our promise keeping God.

When our children where young and in Children’s Church, they would sing and do the motions to:

“My God is so Big so Strong and so Mighty there’s nothing my God cannot do!”

It’s a great kid’s song, but it would better communicate the greatness of God if it went something like this:

“My God is so Great so Faithful and so Trustworthy there’s no promise my God will not keep!”

Jehovah is big, strong, mighty, great, faithful, and trustworthy. Jehovah uses His strength to provide for and protect His children.

This is exactly the message that Israel needed after 145 brutally honest Psalms about how life is bad. They needed, just like we need, the message that:

“The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD” (Psalm 146:10).

Notice in this verse that God is transcendent—that means He is infinitely above everything, infinitely greater than anyone. But the verse also says that He is our God. He is not a ruler like “the Great and Mighty Oz” who intimidates underlings. He doesn’t squash us with His strength. He uses His power to protect us and provide for us.

Another CCC worship songs captures this gracious greatness, this forever faithfulness of our God:
Give thanks to the Lord, our God and King; His love endures forever
For He is good; He is above all things; His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise

With a mighty hand and outstretched arm; His love endures forever
For the life that’s been reborn; His love endures forever
Sing praise, sing praise forever

Forever God is faithful; Forever God is strong
Forever God is with us; Forever and ever, forever.

Because God is graciously great, we sing, “My God is so Great so Faithful and so Trustworthy there’s no promise my God will not keep! The world takes notice when we revolve our world around our great God. They notice when our lives sing and shout, “Hey, Amber, look out the window and behold our great God of forever faithfulness!”

III. Praise God Because He Is Good: He Is Our Shepherd/Father Who Is Near Us—Psalm 146:7-9

We praise God because He is gracious—for us, because He is great—over us, and because He is good—near us. If “greatness” highlights the theological idea of “transcendence”—God is over us, then “goodness” highlights the theological idea of “immanence”—God is near us. Psalm 147:7-9 sings it like this:

“He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked” (Psalm 147:7-9).

That God is the “Father of the fatherless” is a constant theme throughout the Psalms. God is a God of compassion who feels the pain and responds to the suffering of His children. Consider just a few examples:

- Psalm 34:17-18: “The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”
- Psalm 56:8: “God collects our tears in a bottle and records them in his scroll.”
- Psalm 72:12-14: “For he will deliver the needy who cry out, the afflicted who have no one to help. He will take pity on the weak and the needy and save the needy from death. He will rescue them from oppression and violence.”
- Psalm 147:2-3: “The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

The theme of God’s fatherly goodness and nearness was a theme that Israel greatly needed. Throughout their history they were the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoners, the blind, the bowed
down, the alien, the fatherless, the widowed. Their God is the God of the oppressed, the prisoner, the blind, the bowed down, the alien, the fatherless, the widow.

Have you been oppressed? God upholds your cause. Have you been abused, mistreated? There is a coming day when your abuser will stand before God. Do you feel rejected, alone, abandoned? God is the Father of the fatherless. God, whose eye is on the sparrow, watches over you. God sustains, comforts, and encourages you. God is your Shepherd Father who is near you.

The biblical picture of God’s goodness is not only that He comes to our rescue in our pain. Even more than that, God’s goodness means that He feels our pain. Isaiah 63:9 tells us that:

“In all their distress, he too was distressed” (Isaiah 63:9).

Can we even begin to comprehend that? It’s amazing enough that God cares about our hurts. But it’s something almost unfathomable that God feels our hurt, shares our pain. Imagine the pain of 7 billion people in our fallen world—God is infinite enough and loving enough to be distressed when any and all of His children are distressed. As Hebrews 4 reminds us, we have a High Priest in Jesus who sympathizes with our weaknesses. God is good. He’s good all the time—He heals the brokenhearted.

The world takes notice when we revolve our world around our good God. They notice when our lives sing and shout, “Hey, Amber, look out the window and behold our good God—that Father of the fatherless!”

The Big Question: Do the Lyrics of Our Life Sing, “Hey, World, Open Your Eyes and Behold God!”

During Pastor McGill’s candidate weekend with us, one of the questions someone asked Kevin was, “What do you do for fun”? That’s a good question. If you were to ask me that question, I’d respond, “I play fantasy baseball with my son and nephew. In fact, last year I was in a fantasy baseball league with my son, my brother, and seven of my nephews. It was a blast.

To do well in fantasy baseball, you have to have a lot of time to research all the statistics of all the players, and you have to have a great memory. These days, I don’t have a lot of time and I don’t have the memory I once did. But back in the day, almost twenty years ago, I was really good at fantasy baseball because I knew every statistic of every player. I remember one vacation to Florida when we visited my brother Steve and his family. Steve’s son, Kyle, who was about 11 at the time, had a baseball magazine out, and he was trying to stump Uncle Bob. He picked the wrong Uncle!

Kyle started to ask me easy questions, like how many HRs a certain player had. Easy. Then he started going for more obscure stats, like how many doubles a player had. Still easy. By now, my other nephew, Ryan, who was about 15, heard this and was pretty impressed. So he grabs the magazine from his younger brother, and starts asking me about even more obscure stats. Hey, back then, I had the time and I had the memory—they couldn’t stump me.

After we did this for a while, we had a dozen people in my brother’s living room, all grabbing for the baseball magazine, all trying to stump me. They couldn’t. Then Kyle asked, “Uncle Bob, how do you know all this stuff?” My older brother, Steve, answered for me. “Kyle, your Uncle Bob has always loved baseball. When he was younger than you, 8 or 9, even then he knew every average of every guy on every team.” By now, I was like a “Baseball Statistical
God” to my nephew, Kyle. He was like, “Wow, you’re so cool!” I was feelin’ pretty cool about then.

I was excited about baseball, enthused about baseball, really, really into baseball, and my enthusiasm rubbed off on my nephews, my brother, and everyone else in the house. Enthusiasm is contagious. Celebration is contagious.

Enthusiasm for God is contagious. In fact, the word “enthusiasm” comes from a Greek word meaning to be filled with God. The idea is that we are so filled with God that His joy spills over and out of us onto others. Remember the main message of Psalms 146-150:

- The World Takes Notice When Christians Revolve Their World Around God
- The World Takes Notice When Christians Revolve Their Messed Up World Around Their Gracious, Great, and Good God

Just like my nephews were intrigued by my enthusiasm for baseball, so the world is enticed and intrigued when they see us enthused about and celebrating God.

We often worry about the world impacting the church—about the world’s ungodly worldview creeping into the church. That’s a legitimate concern. However, Jesus said that the gates of hell shall not prevail against His church. When He said that, Jesus wasn’t picturing hell and Satan attacking the church. Jesus was picturing the church assaulting Satan’s stronghold.

Jesus calls on us to impact the world; to conquer the world. We don’t defeat the world with the world’s weapons. We conquer the world with the weapon of worship. Not just the worship songs we sing on Sunday. But even more importantly, we conquer the world with the worship songs our lives sing 24/7, Monday through Sunday.

The world takes notice when Christians revolve their world around God. The church is the world’s worship leader. Let’s go out into the world this week singing, “Hey, world, behold our gracious, great, and good God!”

Note: For Sermon Resources (Including the Sermon Audio/MP3) on This Message, Visit: http://bit.ly/CCCPsalms146