

Joy of Living

Bible Studies

Enriching lives through the study of God's Word.

Of Living

Free Sample Study

Psalms from the Heart

a 4-lesson study containing
Weekly Commentary and Daily Study Questions



Commentary by

Ray C. Stedman

Daily Study Questions by
Nancy Collins

Psalms from the Heart

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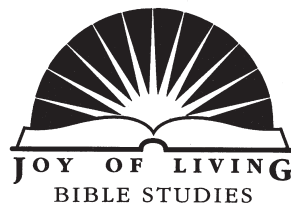
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Weekly Commentary
and
Daily Study Questions**

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Published by Joy of Living Bible Studies

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We hope you enjoy this study, and look forward to serving you in the future.

About Joy of Living

For over 35 years Joy of Living has been effectively establishing individuals around the world in the sound, basic study of God's Word.

Evangelical and non-denominational, Joy of Living reaches across denominational and cultural barriers, enriching lives through the simple pure truths of God's inspired Word, the Bible.

Studies are flexible, suited for both formal and informal meetings, as well as for personal study. Each lesson contains historical background, commentary and a week's worth of personal application questions, leading readers to discover fresh insights into God's Word. Courses covering many books in both the Old and New Testaments are available. Selected courses are also available in several foreign languages. Contact the Joy of Living office for details.

Joy of Living Bible Studies was founded by Doris W. Greig in 1971 and has grown to include classes in nearly every state in the Union and many foreign countries.

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How to Use Joy of Living Materials for Groups

This unique Bible study series may be used by people who know nothing about the Bible, as well as by more knowledgeable Christians. Many find a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as they study. Each person is nurtured and disciplined in God's Word and in the small group.

Joy of Living is based on the idea that each person needs to open their Bible and let God speak to them by His Holy Spirit, to interpret the Scripture's message in relation to that person's needs and opportunities, in their family, church, job, community, and the world at large.

Only a Bible is needed for this study series. While commentaries may be helpful, it is not recommended that people consult them before answering the daily study questions. It is most important to let the Holy Spirit lead a person through the Bible passage and apply it to his or her heart and life. If desired, the student may consult additional commentaries after answering the questions on a particular passage.

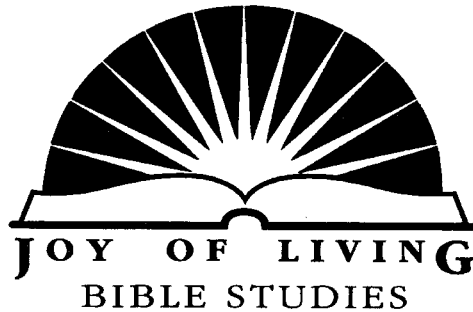
In the first lesson of a series, the student receives an Introduction to the Bible book, plus the first week's daily study questions. Some questions are simple, and some are deeper for the more advanced student. The person works through the Bible passages each day, praying and asking God's guidance in applying the truth to their own life.

After the daily personal study of the passage, the students then go to a small group where they pray together and discuss what they have written in response to the questions about the passage, clarifying problem areas and getting more insight into the passage. The small group leader helps the group focus on the Bible's truth, and not just on discussing their own problems.

After groups meet for discussion and prayer, they often go to a large group meeting where a teacher gives a brief lecture covering the essential teaching of the Bible passage which was studied during the prior week and discussed in the small groups. The teacher may clarify the passage and challenge class members to live a more committed daily life.

At home, the student begins the next lesson, containing commentary notes on the prior week's passage and questions on a new Scripture passage.

Psalms from the Heart Lesson 1



Introduction to the Psalms¹

For centuries the Psalms have been read and loved by people from many backgrounds and viewpoints, largely because, being poetry, they speak to the heart directly. They laugh, they sing, they weep, they rail, they cry out in pain, fright, derision, joy, and the sheer delight of life. Consequently, many read them solely to find an answering spirit to their own mood.

But the Psalms are much more than poetry (see 2Timothy 3:16). Many of the psalms bear the title *Maskil* or teaching psalm. They are thus intended to instruct the mind as well as to encourage the heart. They are designed not only to reflect a mood, but to show us also how to handle that mood, how to escape from depression, or how to balance exaltation with wisdom. This quality is the mark of their divine character. They are not merely human songs, reflecting the common experience of men, but they relate also the wisdom and release that ensues when a hurt or a joy is laid at the feet of God.

There is no book like the Psalms to meet the need of the heart when it is discouraged and defeated, or when it is elated and encouraged. This book is absolutely without peer in expressing these emotional feelings.

In her classic, *What The Bible Is All About*, Henrietta Mears said Psalms is "the book for all who are in need, the sick and suffering, the poor and needy, the prisoner and exile, the man in danger, the persecuted. It is a book for the sinner, telling him of God's great mercy and forgiveness. It is a book for the child of God, leading him into new experiences with the Lord. It tells of God's law in its perfection and pronounces blessings upon the one who will keep it."

Mears continues, "Hold your Bible in your hand and turn to the middle of the book. Most often you'll open to the Psalms. Not merely is this true physically. There is a deeper truth. The Psalms are central also in human experience.

"This book is used by Hebrew and Christian alike even in our day. The Psalms were for use in the Temple, for which many were prepared. They were written for the heart to worship God out under the open heavens or in the pit of despair or in a cave of hiding. When you find yourself in deep need you can always find a psalm which expresses

your inmost feeling. Or, if you have an abounding joy, the words are there for you too."²

Who Was David?³

The psalms we will be studying in this course were all written by David. But who exactly was David and what is his significance? Can his struggles, his joy, his questions, his longing for God compare with ours?

God's Call and Promise: Genesis 11-35

Although David was born in roughly 1,000 B.C., his story and his relationship with God began over a thousand years earlier with another man, his forefather, in the city of Ur of the Chaldees (located in modern day Iraq). At that time the descendants of Noah had spread out, multiplied and populated the earth; and—like the generations before Noah—they had abandoned the God who created them.

Yet God had not abandoned humanity. He called one man, Abram, and told him that if he would leave his country and go to a land God would show him, He would make of Abram a great nation, give him that land and through him all the world would be blessed. (It would be through Abram's descendents that the Savior of the world would come.) In faith Abram—later called Abraham—obeyed God. Abraham had a son, Isaac, to whom the promise was given and he in turn had a son, Jacob, to whom the promise was given.

From Family to Nation: Genesis 46—Exodus 18

Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel, had 12 sons. When Jacob was an old man he, his sons and their families (70 people in all) went into Egypt to escape starvation during a great famine. One of the sons, Joseph, was already there and in great power. He was second only to the Pharaoh and because of this Jacob's family was well cared for.

However generations passed and the children of Israel grew in number. A new pharaoh arose and was fearful of this great number of people living within the borders of his land. To protect himself and his country he placed the Israelites in bondage, where they remained for nearly 400 years.

1. Except where noted, this section, "Introduction to the Psalms," is by Ray Stedman.

2. Henrietta C. Mears. *What the Bible Is All About*. Ventura: Regal, 1997. p194.

3. The remainder of the commentary for Lesson 1 is by Nancy Collins.

As always God was faithful and in His time raised up a man named Moses. With great and mighty miracles God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians and led them to the land He had promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Covenant: Exodus 19—1 Samuel 7

Prior to entering the Promised Land, the general area of Israel today, God made a covenant with the Israelites. At Mount Sinai they agreed to serve the Lord and obey His commands. He gave them His Law and promised to bless them as long as they served Him. But even as God gave them His glorious Law they were rebelling against Him and worshipping other gods. And so began the cycle of God's blessing, Israel's rebellion, God's disciplining, their repentance, and God's deliverance and blessing again.

The Israelites were told to drive the heathen nations from the land. They were to make no covenants with them, but they disobeyed and were led into idolatry by them.

The Kingdom: 1 Samuel 8—2 Chronicles 36

Israel had the perfect government with the Lord Himself as King, and the Law of the Lord as the law of the land, yet they weren't satisfied. They wanted to be like the nations round about them. They wanted a man as their king. God granted their desire.

Saul, their first king, didn't fully obey the Lord, so God gave the kingdom to David [our psalmist], a shepherd who loved the Lord. God promised David that one of his descendants would have a kingdom without end. He was referring to Jesus Christ, the coming Savior, who would pay the price for the sins of the world and redeem mankind.

How can the life experience of the great King David compare with ours? Although a key figure in the Bible and known as a mighty man of God, David was a human, just like us and experienced those emotions common to mankind.

During his youth David was a nobody, a shepherd, caring for his father's sheep. As the youngest of the eight sons of Jesse of Bethlehem, his brothers looked down on him and mocked him (see 1 Samuel 17:28). Although David was anointed by Samuel to be the next king after God rejected Saul (see 1 Samuel 16:13), this was done secretly—no one but his family knew of it.

Because of David's skill with the harp, King Saul frequently requested that David play for him to relieve his tormented mind. Then, while still a teenager, David—by faith—single-handedly fought with a giant of a man, Goliath of Gath, and spearheaded a great victory for the Israelites over the Philistines. This brought David into the limelight. Saul gave him a high rank in the army, and David was successful in every assignment.

Because of the adulation of the people of Israel for David, Saul became jealous of him and attempted to kill him several times. Although God had promised him the kingdom, David had to flee for his life. Men from various parts of Israel eventually joined him, but for many years David and his men lived "on the run" from Saul. He was misunderstood. He was lied about. He had to wait for years for the

fulfillment of God's promise to him. He made huge mistakes. He had marital problems. He fell into great sin and received great grace and forgiveness. He eventually reigned over a great kingdom but couldn't rule over his own family—even his own son tried to kill him.

Yet, in spite of it all God said of him, "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart" (Acts 13:22). David experienced the joys and sorrows of this life and discovered that knowing the Lord was what truly mattered. To the Lord he said, "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 for ever" (Psalm 73:25-26).

The three Psalms covered in this study were written at various times in David's life, and each expresses the cry of David's heart. Psalm 23, known as the Shepherd's Psalm, ministers to our deepest spiritual needs. Psalm 34 is written for those who are riddled with fear and are facing seemingly insurmountable difficulties. And Psalm 139 addresses what some might perceive as our insignificance. Throughout all three we revel with David in God's magnificence and the awesome revelation that God truly loves and cares for us as individuals.

Preparing For This Study

As you prepare for this study, consider how very important it is to study your Bible and make time to develop a relationship with God. John 17:3 tells us, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." How can we truly know Him if we don't listen to what He has to say in His Word?

Second Peter 1:3 tells us that that God has "given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness." How can we live an abundant, godly life if we don't take heed of His Word?

If you are serious about knowing and walking with God, make a daily appointment with God. Find a quiet spot. Take your Bible and your Bible study material with you. Remember how very important your appointment with God is and make time to be with Him daily. Ask yourself the following things:

1. *How much time will I spend alone with the Lord each day?* Set a specific amount of time and write it on your calendar to set that time aside.
2. *What will I put aside in order to spend this time with the Lord?* Some examples might be watching television, casual telephone conversations, surfing the internet, or reading for entertainment. Each person will have to decide what his or her priorities are and what can be changed in their daily schedule to make time to spend with God.
3. *What is the best time for my appointment with God?* Consider whether you are a "morning" person or an "evening" person, and when you are least likely to be interrupted.

4. *Where is the quietest place for me to pray and study?* Look for both physical quiet, and visual quiet—a place that won't constantly remind you of all the other things urgently awaiting your attention.
5. *Do I really want to spend time with God?* If your answer is “yes,” God will bless you as you work out the details of how and when to do it. If your answer is “no,” pray that God will give you a desire, a hunger to spend time with Him. He will do this for you!

We hope you will be blessed as you journey with us through these psalms and that you complete this course with a new confidence in God's eternal, intimate love for you!

Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- Use only the Bible for your answers.
- Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- Challenge questions are for those who have the time and wish to do them.
- Personal questions are to be shared with the class only if you wish to share.
- As you study begin to look for a verse to memorize this week.

First Day: Read the Introduction to Psalms.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the introduction to Psalms, or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its "address" (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Psalm 23, concentrating on verse 1.

1. Who is the author of this psalm? (This information may be listed in your Bible as a subtitle below the psalm number and above the verses.)

2. a. What does David say the Lord is to him? (Psalm 23:1a)

b. What result does this bring? (Psalm 23:1b)

3. a. To protect and provide for his sheep, the shepherd must keep them with the flock. Read Luke 15:3-7. How does the shepherd in this parable show his care for the sheep? (verses 3-6)

b. What might happen to a lost sheep if the shepherd didn't find it and return it to the flock?

c. What spiritual truth do you learn from Luke 15:7?

4. a. Read Isaiah 53:6a. How does the Lord describe each of us?

b. Personal: Have you ever thought of yourself in this manner—like a sheep, going your own way, doing your own thing apart from God and His way?

5. Challenge: Read Luke 19:10 and John 10:10-11. What do these verses tell us about the Lord Jesus?
6. a. Personal: The Bible tells us that all people are sinners in need of repentance (see Romans 3:23). Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, gave His life so that our sins might be forgiven and we might not die spiritually but have eternal life with Him (see Romans 6:23). Have you turned from going your own way and turned to God, putting your faith in Jesus Christ to take away your sin? If you haven't, now is the time. If you have turned to Jesus in faith, write Psalm 95:7a, inserting your name.
- b. Personal: Perhaps you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior but you have strayed from His path. Remember how the shepherd in the parable rejoiced when he found his lost sheep? God loves you. What promise does he give you in 1 John 1:9?

Third Day: Review Psalm 23, concentrating on verses 2-3a.

1. The basic needs of sheep are for food and water. Put in your own words what you think of when you read Psalm 23:2-3a.
2. Review John 10:10. Describe the type of life the Lord would like to provide for you.
3. Too often when people think of life "to the full" they focus mainly on the outward person and attaining the fleeting pleasures of this world, which leaves them empty, lonely, frustrated and in despair. From the following verses, what are some ways God provides for and satisfies His people?
- Psalm 16:11
- Psalm 103:2-5
- Matthew 11:28-29
- 2 Corinthians 4:16
- Philippians 4:6-7

Philippians 4:19

4. Personal: Have you experienced these things as you walk with the Lord? Or have you strayed from His path and suffered want? What need are you experiencing today? Why not pray now and ask Jesus to return you to His path and meet your need?

Fourth Day: Review Psalm 23, concentrating on verse 3b.

1. The Lord knows the way we should go, the paths we should take to be fulfilled. But the question arises—how are we to know His will and way? According to Psalm 23:3b, on what type of paths does the Shepherd lead us?
2. Challenge: Will the Good Shepherd ever lead us on unrighteous paths? How could you use this principle to give you direction in your life? Proverbs 4:14-15 will help you answer this question.
3. Read Psalm 119:105. What is one of the primary ways the Lord leads us?
4. From the following verses, what are some additional steps we need to take to know God's will?
Mark 4:23-25

John 7:17

Romans 12:1-2

5. Personal: Are you truly seeking to know God's will for your life, so that you can be obedient to His will and walk in His paths? Is there a particular area mentioned in the above verses that you need to work on? What specifically will you do about it?

Fifth Day: Review Psalm 23, concentrating on verse 4.

1. a. Where does the shepherd's path take the sheep in Psalm 23:4a?

b. God has promised to lead and guide us. Many people expect life to be easy for the Christian. What does John 16:33 say regarding this?

2. a. What action are we to take in both Psalm 23:4 and John 16:33?

b. Why can we take heart and not fear according to these verses?

3. Challenge: What instruction and promises about this has God given us in the following verses?

Romans 8:28

Matthew 6:34

Philippians 4:6-7

4. a. From Psalm 23:4, how is David comforted?

b. The rod was a club that was never used on the sheep but was used to protect the sheep from marauding predators. The staff was a slender pole with a crook on the end. It was used to aid the sheep. It could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull him from harm. It could also be used as an instrument to direct and occasionally to discipline the sheep. How do the following verses explain God's personal loving care for us?

Psalm 139:1-6

Hebrews 12:6-10

5. Personal: God is not a distant, uninterested creator! He loves us and is involved on a very personal level with our lives. Which of the verses in the previous question brought the most comfort to you, and why?

Sixth Day: Review Psalm 23, concentrating on verses 5-6.

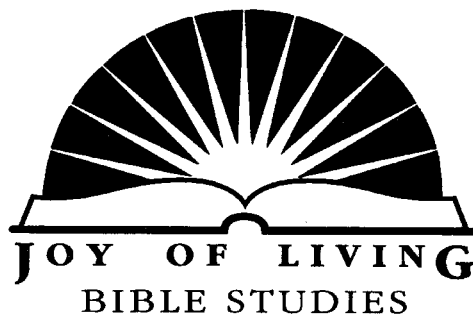
1. In Psalm 23:5, the psalmist changes the metaphor from the good shepherd to the gracious host. How does verse 5 describe the abundance of God's provision for us?
2. Read Philippians 4:19. How thorough is God's provision for you?
3. Read Psalm 23:6 carefully. How long will you experience God's goodness and love?
4. Those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ are given the sure promise of dwelling with the Lord forever. From the following verses, describe what eternity with Him will be like.

Psalm 16:11

Revelation 21:1-5

5. Personal: Are you certain about where you will spend eternity? Perhaps you're not sure, but you hope it's with the Lord? Well, you can know! Have you received Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior? If you have, write down John 1:12 and 1 John 5:11-13, inserting your own name.

Psalms from the Heart Lesson 2



Psalm 23: The Shepherd Psalm

Because many of us have memorized the twenty-third Psalm as small children, we often neglect the opportunity to study it in detail in our adult life. Yet it is a great psalm. It ministers to our deepest spiritual needs.

This, of course, is a psalm of David. We know something of the circumstances of its composition. In the fifteenth chapter of 2 Samuel there is recorded the instance in David's life when his own son, Absalom, rebelled against him and toppled him from the throne. David was forced to flee into the Judean wilderness with his family and servants, and for a period of time he was unable to reclaim his throne. His life was in jeopardy and he was hunted and hounded for a number of months. Perhaps, because so much of his early life had been spent as a shepherd in that same wilderness, the circumstances reminded him of his shepherd life. That could be why the images in this psalm are drawn right out of his experience as a young shepherd.

This is a psalm for people who, like David, are experiencing a major upheaval in life. Perhaps you too have children who are rebelling, or your home is in turmoil, or some long-standing relationship in your life is breaking up. This psalm is written for you. It is a psalm for people who are shaken and in turmoil.

We Shall Not Want

David begins with a statement of the theme of the entire passage:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. (Psalm 23:1)

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I will not lack anything. He satisfies my needs. That is the place to which God wants to bring us. He wants us to be independently dependent upon Him, to need Him alone. There are really only two options in life. If the Lord is my Shepherd, then I shall not want; but if I am in want, then it is obvious that the Lord is not my Shepherd. It is that simple. If there is emptiness and loneliness and despair and frustration in our lives, then the Lord is not our Shepherd.

Or, if anyone or anything else is shepherding us, we are never satisfied. If our vocation shepherds us, then there is restlessness and feverish activity and frustration. If education is our shepherd, then we are constantly being disillusioned. If another person is our shepherd,

we are always disappointed and ultimately we are left empty. If alcohol or drugs is our shepherd, as one rock artist said, then "we are wasted." But if the Lord is our Shepherd, David says we shall not want.

It occurs to me that if Jehovah is to be our Shepherd, then we have to begin by recognizing that we are sheep. I don't like that analogy, frankly, because I don't like sheep. I come by my dislike honestly. I used to raise sheep. In high school I was in the 4-H club, and I had a herd of sheep and goats. Now, goats I can abide, because they may be obnoxious, but at least they're smart. Sheep are, beyond question, the most stupid animals on the face of the earth. They are dumb and they are dirty and they are timid and defenseless and helpless. Mine were always getting lost and hurt and snake bitten. They literally do not know enough to come in out of the rain. I look back on my shepherding days with a great deal of disgust. Sheep are miserable creatures.

And then to have God tell me that I am one! That hurts my feelings. But if I am really honest with myself I know it is true. I know that I lack wisdom and strength. I'm inclined to be self-destructive. As the hymn says, "I'm prone to wander."¹ Isaiah said it best: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way" (53:6). I know my tendency toward self-indulgent individualism, going my own way and doing my own thing. That's me. I'm a sheep. And if Jesus Christ is to be my Shepherd, I have to admit that I need Him. It is difficult, but that is where we must start. Once we admit that need we discover the truth of what David is saying. We shall not want.

Nourishment for the Inner Man

In this psalm David enumerates the ways in which the Good Shepherd meets our needs. The first is found in verse 2 and part of verse 3:

*He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he restores my soul.* (Psalm 23:2-3a)

The first thing He does is to meet the needs of the inner man, the basic needs that we have for nourishment within. The basic needs of a flock of sheep are grass and water. Here is the very picturesque scene of sheep bedded down in grassy meadows, having eaten their fill and now feeling totally satisfied, and then being led by still waters. Sheep are afraid of running water, they will drink only from a quiet pool. A good shepherd, particularly in a semi-arid region such as Israel, knows

1. Robert Robinson, 1758. "Come, Thou Fount Of Every Blessing," verse 3.

where the watering holes are. He knows where the grassy meadows are. And so he leads the sheep into places where they can feed and drink, and where they can rest. The picture is one of calm and tranquility, because the basic needs of the sheep are met.

The counterpart in our lives is obvious. It is God who restores the inner man through His Word. As we feed upon the Word of God we see the Lord Jesus there. We draw upon Him and our inner man is satisfied. "Beyond the sacred page," the hymn says, "I seek thee, Lord."¹ We seek Him, and we eat and drink of Him, and we discover Him to be the resource that we need. As Paul says, "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). Our souls are restored. How? As we feed upon Him. As we come to know Him, believe what He says, and act on His Word, we discover that the inner man is fed.

I once had a Bible study Wednesday nights in a fraternity house at Stanford University. Our basic assumption there was that the Bible is the authority. No one really taught the class, we simply opened up the Word and the men in the group made observations. One night a student from Austria sat in with us, a fine young law student who was traveling in this country and visiting Stanford for a few weeks. He shared some of his thinking with us and made a real contribution to the group. Afterward, as we were leaving he made this comment: "I'm so thankful I could be here tonight, because I discovered that you men have found direct access to God through this Book."

Have you discovered that access? In times of deep, dire need, when we cast about for help, it is no further away than God's Word. Everything we need to nourish the inner man is right there. Everything we need, which relates to life and to living godly lives in the world, is available in the Word.

Direction in Life

The second thing the Good Shepherd does is to give direction in life:

*He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake. (Psalm 23:3b)*

Or, as an alternate reading indicates, "he leads me in right paths." The Hebrew word translated "paths" means a well-defined, well-worn trail. That indicates again how stupid sheep are because, even when the trail is well laid out, they still need a shepherd. They are still inclined to wander away, no matter how obvious the path. The shepherd knows the trails. He has been there before, and the sheep trust him.

The most anxiety-producing factor in the world today is uncertainty about the future. What is going to happen tomorrow, and the next day? There are decisions we must make, which bear, not only upon our own lives, but upon the lives of everyone with whom we are associated. My life touches my family and my neighbors and my business associates; so does yours. We are constantly making decisions. How do we know that we are making the right ones? Decisions can be crucial, and frustrating!

There is a classic story about a man undergoing basic training in the army. He was pulling KP and was given the assignment of sorting potatoes. There was a huge mound of them and the mess sergeant told him to put all the bad ones in one bin, and all the good ones in the other bin. He came back about two hours later to find the man just looking at one potato. There was nothing in the bins. The sergeant said, "What's the matter, don't you like the work?" The soldier said, "It's not the work; it's the decisions that are killing me."

We have to make countless decisions, day after day, which touch the lives of our children and our wives and husbands. We need wisdom. We need a shepherd. We need someone who knows the trails, someone whom we can trust.

Discovering the Right Paths

Now, the Lord knows the way. But the question arises, "How can I discover His will for my life?" May I suggest these steps: First, submit wholeheartedly to the leadership of the Shepherd. That is the basic attitude we must maintain. Unless we are willing to admit that we don't know the way through the wilderness, we will never find the way.

Jesus said, "If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:22b-23). He is saying, in a very picturesque way, that if our eye is fastened on Jesus Christ, if our eye is "good," then our whole body will be full of light. We will know what to do. We will know the truth, and we'll act on it. We'll have understanding and wisdom. But if we have one eye on Christ and the other on the world or on our circumstances or our boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever, if the eye is "bad," how great is that darkness! We will never know where we are to go. We will have no sense of direction, and will wander in darkness.

We have to be willing to submit wholeheartedly to the leadership of the Shepherd. We must be willing to say, "I'll go anywhere. I'll do anything. I'll be anything. I'll carry any load, live any place you want me to live, do anything you want me to do." Once we're willing to say that, then God can reveal His will. Paul said it another way: "Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship... Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is" (Romans 12:1-2).

Following the Right Paths

The second thing we must do is to obey what we know now to be God's will for us. Probably 95 percent of God's will is already revealed in His Word. We have to begin by obeying the truth that we have. If we are disobedient to our parents, we cannot expect God to give us wisdom concerning our next step. If we are not raising our children in the nurture and admonition of Christ, we cannot expect God to direct us. If we as men are not loving our wives as Christ loved the church, the Lord will not reveal more of His will. If you wives are not in submission to your husbands, God's leadership will not come to you. But when we obey the 95 percent of the truth that we have, then the 5 percent that is indefinite simply follows along as a matter of course.

1. Mary A. Lathbury, 1877, "Break Thou The Bread Of Life," verse 1.

Now, that does not mean that we have to be sinless, because who of us is? But it does mean we have to be willing to face and put away sin as God points it out to us. If we are willing to be brought into conformity to Jesus Christ in every area of our life, and if we are allowing Him freedom to work, then He will reveal more truth to us. But He won't if we are consciously holding out and defending sin. He reveals additional truth only to men and women with open, obedient hearts.

The Peace of God

But what about other areas of life where the Scriptures do not give specific information? There we are led through the *peace of God*. As we spend time in prayer and waiting upon God there comes the sense of peace, an inner conviction, about the correctness of a certain direction. The peace of God will umpire in our life and will let us know what to do. I have discovered that we can trust that peace. When we move out on the basis of it we discover that God supports and undergirds our actions and, through confirming circumstances, further strengthens our sense of peace.

Now, having stepped out in faith, we sometimes discover that things don't work out as we had anticipated. But even at that point we can't second-guess God. We cannot say that He did not give us wisdom. James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all" (James 1:5). We can believe that His wisdom will be given. There is often a tendency to second-guess ourselves and to think that perhaps we missed God's will if things don't go as we had planned. But God wants us to know His will even more than we do. He is not trying to play games with us. He is not trying to be obscure and to hide the truth from us. He wants us to know. And as we step out on the basis of His peace, we can believe that this is the direction God wants us to go.

In a small way I was once tempted to second-guess myself in a decision I had made a few weeks before. My Volkswagen was totally wrecked in an accident and I had to replace it. The insurance company gave me a generous settlement and I went out to purchase another car. I didn't want to spend much time because I didn't have any. In the newspapers about 40 Volkswagens were advertised for sale. I knew that I couldn't look at every one, and so my wife, Carolyn, and I prayed together, "Lord, we've got to find a car. It's your car, and so we're not going to worry about it, please lead us to the right situation."

After looking at half-a-dozen or so, we finally settled on one. It seemed good. I'm not much of a mechanic but I kicked the tires and slammed the doors and it seemed all right to me. I talked to the owner. He seemed ethical and claimed he'd just rebuilt the engine. So I bought the car and brought it home. Now we've discovered that it has a lot of problems. It's using oil and a number of other things are wrong. It's going to cost money to fix it up. My first thought was, "Oops, the Lord led me astray." But then I had to remember that we prayed for wisdom, and James says if we pray for wisdom we'll receive it. We acted on that promise when we bought the car. I don't know what God has in store for me in this matter, but I know that car is God's will for my life right now.

That is what I mean by confidence in God's ability to lead us. David says that He will lead us in the right path. That is a promise! And He does this for His name's sake. It isn't our name that is at stake; it is *His* name. It's His character, His reputation that is at stake. He has promised to give us wisdom. I believe that, I act. You believe it; you act. And it *has* to be true. God must fulfill His promise; otherwise His own reputation is impugned. His name is Faithful, and He has promised that He will lead us in the right paths. To me that is a tremendous source of encouragement. I know that the decisions I make today and tomorrow, as I walk under His shepherding, will be correct. Even though the events that follow may not necessarily be all that I expect, the decisions will be right. That is His promise, and we can count on it.

Providing Protection

The third thing David says that a good shepherd does is to provide protection:

*Even though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. (Psalm 23:4)*

This again is a very picturesque scene. The shepherd is leading the sheep back home at evening. As they go down through a narrow gorge the long shadows lie across the trail. In the Hebrew this is a "valley of deep shadows." The sheep, because they are so timid and defenseless, are frightened by their experience. But they trust the shepherd, and therefore they are comforted. They will fear no evil, because the shepherd is with them.

No Reason to Fear

We are reminded of the Lord's words quoted in the book of Hebrews, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (Hebrews 13:5). Hence we can confidently say, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" I do not know what your experience has been, but whenever I'm in a situation like this, when there is a great deal of pressure, I begin to wonder if the Lord hasn't abandoned me. But He says He never fails us, never forsakes us. He is always there. Therefore, we have no reason to fear. That is a great comfort.

Discipline with Love

And then David writes, "Your rod and staff comfort me." The rod was a club that was used to drive off wild animals. It was never used on the sheep but was a heavy instrument used to protect the sheep from marauding predators. The staff was a slender pole with a little crook on the end. It was used to aid the sheep. The crook could be hooked around the leg of a sheep to pull him from harm. Or it could be used as an instrument to direct and, occasionally, to discipline the sheep with taps on the side of the body.

Understanding how the shepherd tends his sheep has helped me so much in understanding the character of God. When I go wandering away He doesn't say, "There goes that stupid sheep, Dave Roper!"¹ and—WHAP!—down comes that big club! No. His attitude is, "Well, there's Dave, wandering away again. How can I help him? How can I move in to bring him back into line? How can I comfort him, and supply what he needs?" He may have to discipline, but He always does it in love. He reproves, corrects, encourages, and instructs in righteousness, dealing with us firmly and gently.

The rod and staff are also used against the two greatest enemies we have to face. The rod is for the outside enemy, Satan, who is working through the world system to destroy us. Jesus said, "He is a liar and a murderer" (see John 8:44). He's out to devour us, and so the Lord uses the club on him. But the other enemy is me, the enemy within. In the immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."² I know that. The shepherd's staff is used to chasten, and to subdue the enemy within. But the confidence He gives is that I have nothing to fear, either from the enemy without, or from the enemy within.

The Gracious Host

In verses 5 and 6 David changes the metaphor a bit—from the good shepherd to the gracious host:

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

(Psalm 23:5-6)

Jehovah spreads a sumptuous meal before him, a great banquet, in the presence of his enemies. This figure encompasses all the figures David has used before. That God feeds and provides, leads and protects, is all bound up in this symbol of a gracious host.

Interestingly enough, this figure grows right out of the historical situation in which David wrote. When David was driven into the wilderness by his son's rebellion, he found himself out in the desert, hungry and weary, his army in disarray. As recorded in 2 Samuel 17, three men who were not even Israelites, Shobi, Machir, and Barzillai, "brought bedding and bowls, and articles of pottery. They also brought wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from cows' milk for David and his people to eat. For they said, 'The people have become hungry and tired and thirsty in the desert'" (2 Samuel 17:28-29). David saw that God, as a gracious host, was preparing a table before him in the presence of his enemies. Paul said it this way: "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19).

1. The commentary portion of this study is by David H. Roper, once associate pastor at the Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California, now pastor of Cole Community Church, Boise, Idaho.
2. "Pogo" was the title of a long-running daily comic strip (1948-1975) created by Walt Kelly, as well as the name of its principal character.

A final note is that the word *follow*, in Psalm 23:6, literally means, "pursue." David says that God's goodness and mercy will pursue him, in contrast to the pursuit of his enemies who are out to dethrone and destroy him. David's desire was to go back to the tabernacle and to worship there. God's mercy and kindness ought to evoke the same response from us. We worship, not in a tabernacle, but, as Jesus said, "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). We worship in the inner man, where God dwells. When we see that the Good Shepherd does feed us and does lead us and does protect us, our response ought to be worship—a recognition of all that Jehovah is, a word of thanks for what He has done, and the statement, "Here is more of myself for you to put to your intended purpose." That is true worship.

Prayer

Our Father, we realize that the only reasonable act of worship is for us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. It is the only response we can make to your goodness. You are the Good Shepherd. You are utterly trustworthy. We discover that you do feed us continually, you do lead us, you do guard us and protect us, and we want to say thank you for that. We want to say again that our bodies are yours to fill and use. This is the only reasonable thing that we can do. We thank you for all that you are to us, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- Use only the Bible for your answers.
- Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- Challenge questions are for those who have the time and wish to do them.
- Personal questions are to be shared with the class only if you wish to share.
- As you study begin to look for a verse to memorize this week.

First Day: Read the Commentary on Psalm 23.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the commentary on Psalm 23, or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its "address" (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Psalm 34. Today we will focus in the background for this psalm.

1. Who wrote this psalm? (This information may be listed in your Bible as a subtitle below the psalm number and above the verses.)

2. What was the occasion of the writing of this psalm? (see Psalm 34 subtitle)

3. Read 1 Samuel 20:30-33; 21:10. What prompted David to flee to Gath, the city of Israel's enemies? (Note: *Achish* is the personal name of the king of Gath. In the subtitle of Psalm 34, Achish king of Gath is called *Abimelech*, the traditional name for the Philistine kings.)

4. Read 1 Samuel 18:6-12. What had created the problem between Saul and David?

5. Challenge: Read 1 Samuel 21:10-15; 22:1a. When David fled from Saul, he fled to Saul's enemy, King Achish of Gath. What transpired there and what was the final outcome?

6. Personal: This must have been a time of intense loneliness and fear for David. He had been anointed king by the prophet Samuel (see 1 Samuel 15:10-11; 16:1,13), but was unable to sit on the throne. He had been abandoned by his own people as well as targeted by his enemies. Here he was, hiding in a cave, frustrated, discouraged and scared. This psalm is an account of what he learned during this difficult time. Share with the class a difficult time the Lord brought you through and what you learned by going through this time. Or, perhaps you're going through one right now. Will you choose to trust God in the midst of this hard time?

Third Day: Review Psalm 34, concentrating on verses 1-7.

1. a. What does David say he will do in Psalm 34:1-2a?
 - b. What does David say might be the response of those who are afflicted when they hear of all God had done for him? (Psalm 34:2b)
 - c. Challenge: Why do you think they might respond this way?
 - d. What does David invite all who hear to do? (Psalm 34:3)

2. What reasons does David give for his praise? (Psalm 34:4-7)

3. In this day and age people want to be tough, strong, and handle things on their own. They say that calling on God is a “crutch.” Yet David, who had fought against the giant Goliath, acknowledged he had fears, and he admitted his dependency on God. What does the apostle Paul say regarding his own weakness and God’s strength in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10?

4. Challenge: What do the following verses tell us about calling on the Lord?

Psalm 50:15

Isaiah 55:6-7

Hebrews 4:16

5. Personal: Is there some need in your life that you haven’t yet called upon the Lord for help with? Why not do it now. If you would like to, ask those in your group to pray with you.

Fourth Day: Review Psalm 34, concentrating on verses 8-14.

1. a. After telling of his own experience what does David encourage us to do in Psalm 34:8?
 - b. Challenge: David wants us to experience God for ourselves. How do the following verses help you understand that God desires a relationship with you?

John 14:21,23

John 17:3

2. What does David say are the benefits for those who fear and seek the Lord? (Psalm 34:9-10)

3.
 - a. What does David say he will do if we will just listen? (Psalm 34:11)

 - b. How does Proverbs 8:13 define the fear of the Lord?

 - c. What specific actions does David say to take in Psalm 34:12-14, and how do these actions correspond to Proverbs 8:13?

4.
 - a. One action David recommends is to “seek peace and pursue it.” Read Romans 4:23—5:1. How does Romans 5:1 say we may have peace with God?

 - b. Read Philippians 4:6-7. How can we rest in the peace of God day by day?

5. David has encouraged us to see how wonderful it is to have a personal relationship with God. What does Acts 20:21 say we must do to obtain this?

6. Personal: Have you done this? If you have, your sin is forgiven and God counts you as righteous. Write one or two lines to God expressing how thankful you are.

Fifth Day: Review Psalm 34, concentrating on verses 16 and 21.

1. Sometimes it seems that those who are wicked—who do evil things—are the ones who succeed in this life. And it leaves those who seek to walk with the Lord bewildered. What do Psalm 34:16 and 21 say regarding those who do evil?

2.
 - a. Challenge: Read Psalm 73. What was the psalmist struggling with? Briefly summarize verses 3-14.

 - b. Challenge: What did the psalmist finally come to understand? Put Psalm 73:16-20 into your own words.

3. Read Revelation 20:12-15, which talks about the final judgment of those who have not accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and had their names written in the Book of Life. Put these verses into your own words.

4. Read Psalm 37:7-8. What should be our response when the wicked succeed in their ways?

5. Personal: Have you been struggling because of those who do evil and yet seem to succeed? Have today's Scriptures helped you? In what way? Write 2 Corinthians 4:18, inserting your name.

Sixth Day: Review Psalm 34, concentrating on verses 15-22.

1. We are counted as righteous if we have accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior. Which verses from Psalm 34:15-22 express how intimately the Lord watches over us? Write out those verses.

2. Some people have preached that if you accept Jesus Christ as Savior your life will be easy. What does Psalm 34:19 say regarding this?

3. Challenge: What do the following verses add to this?
Matthew 5:11-12

John 16:33

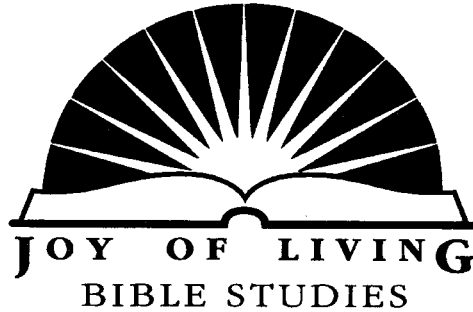
4. a. What blessed hope is given to us in Psalm 34:22?

b. How is this same promise expressed in Romans 8:1?

5. Personal: David's life is an object lesson for us. He had times of great triumph and joy. He had times of fear and depression. He had times of great danger and loneliness. He had great deliverances. He sinned. He was forgiven. He was a mighty man, yet realized his dependency on God. But through it all, David found his joy and hope in a personal relationship with the Lord. Life is difficult—we live in fallen world. But because of Jesus Christ we can have forgiveness of the past, strength and help for today, and hope for the future. What are you seeking in your life? Is it intimacy with the Lord of the Universe? He and He alone can fulfill the longing of our souls. Why not write a prayer here to the Lord, telling Him what you seek and asking Him to help you find it?

Psalms from the Heart

Lesson 3



Psalm 34: Facing Fear

I once worked with college students. The more time I spent with these people and came to love them and to understand them, the more I became convinced that their greatest needs are not intellectual, but emotional. As they honestly shared their hearts with me without trying to pretend anything, I sensed that what really bothered them were problems of guilt, fear, loneliness, and lack of motivation and real direction in life. In thinking back on my contacts with students I would conclude that the greatest dilemma they eventually have to face is how to handle their fears.

Yet this is not something that is unique only among students. We can all identify with them because we are there ourselves. Many in the world turn to one method after another to try to get rid of their fears. But so often the world's attempts to deal with fear treat just the symptoms. Their approach is superficial and short range and it does not meet the deep needs of the heart. Only the Word of God speaks to the real needs of people and that is why I turn your attention to this psalm. In this psalm David teaches us a way to face fearful circumstances in our lives and the emotions of fear that are a consequence of those circumstances.

The title of this psalm gives us the occasion for its writing, "Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelech, who drove him away, and he left." The historical background of this psalm is found in 1 Samuel 21. The setting is in David's life when he was a part of King Saul's court before he himself became king. Some jealousy broke out between Saul and David. People were beginning to think that David was the greater person. They were writing folk songs about him, saying, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Samuel 21:1). Saul became so jealous that he tried to kill David.

So David fled south, from the frying pan right into the fire, into the country of the Philistines where he was captured. The Philistines recognized him immediately as their enemy who had killed Goliath. He was dragged before King Achish (in the title of the psalm he is called Abimelech, the traditional name for the Philistine kings, but his personal name was Achish). At this point, David feared for his life. In order to escape, he pretended to be mad by falling down and groveling in the dirt, drooling down the front of his beard and making a fool of himself. Evidently Achish was touched with pity for this man or he thought he already had enough madmen around him, so he drove David away. David then went down into the wilderness where he found a

cave, the cave of Adullam, and hid there for a number of months until his men joined him.

It was a time of intense loneliness and fear for David. He had been anointed king, but was unable to sit on the throne. He had been abandoned by his own people as well as by his enemies. Here he was hiding in a cave, frustrated, discouraged—and scared to death. These were the experiences that produced this psalm, which is his account of what he learned about facing fears.

Yielding to His Authority

Now let's look at the psalm itself David begins with a call to united expression of praise for his deliverance. In the opening phrase, "I will extol the LORD at all times," the words are literally, "extol the Lord *in* all times"—in that circumstance, in this frightening situation, standing before the face of King Achish. **Please read Psalm 34:1-3.*¹

Our English word for extolling usually means to praise him. But the Hebrew word for extolling is taken from the word for knee and means literally to bend the knee. So what David is saying is, "In this frightening situation, I will bend the knee to Jehovah. I will acknowledge Him as Lord. I will yield to His authority in my life. I will accept this circumstance not as something capricious that has happened to me but as a part of His right to rule in my life. I will acknowledge His lordship and yield to Him." David emphasizes the depth of this attitude in the answering refrain of verse 1, "his praise will always be on my lips."

Acknowledging His Lordship

The overall message of the psalm and the key to deliverance is, first of all, to acknowledge the lordship of Jehovah God in our lives. Have we learned to accept any circumstance in our life as from the hand of the Father? Even the most terrifying circumstances come to us not just as acts of chance but also as events strained through the fine screen of the love of the Father. They happen because God wants them to happen. We experience them because God wants us to experience them. He expects us to acknowledge His right to do as He pleases in our lives. This is where we have to begin. Paul says in Philippians 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness [this can also be translated as *patience*] be evident to

1. Due to space limitations in some lessons, we are unable to print the full text of Scripture passages that the author quotes. Please read the passage in your Bible, and then continue reading the commentary.

all. The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:4-5). This realization that the Lord is present in every circumstance is what makes it all work. He has not abandoned us. We are not shut up to our own resources. We are to acknowledge His presence, His sovereignty in our lives.

A Lord of Compassion

Now why do we do this? Because of who the Lord is. What kind of a Lord do we have? What kind of Lord did David have? Well, the Scriptures are very clear. He is a Lord of compassion, and He understands us. He knows our circumstances much better than we do. He knows our hearts. He knows our fears, He knows our feelings of frustration, and He is infinitely merciful and compassionate. He is a Lord of power, able to act. He is not immobilized by my fears. I may be, but He's not. He is not inhibited in any way by my circumstances or by my fears. And if I turn away from myself—and my own attempts to be something before God—and lay hold of Him, then I discover that He is there to deliver.

The writer of Hebrews says that we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in every respect tempted as we are, yet was without sin (see Hebrews 4:15). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus faced fear. He was emotionally shaken. He was tempted to give way to fear and to abandon the Father's purpose and will for His life and to turn from the cross. Therefore, it does not embarrass Him that I am afraid. He does not reject me; He has been there Himself.

The passage in Hebrews goes on to say that because we have this kind of high priest, we can come confidently to the throne of grace (*throne* here refers to the power of God; *grace* refers to compassion), that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (see Hebrews 4:16). There is all the power that we need. When we understand God to be like this, we can yield to His authority and acknowledge His lordship in every circumstance. We know that He loves us, that He seeks the best for us above all else, and that He has the power to act on our behalf.

Thanksgiving to God

In the latter part of verse 2 David states the purpose of the psalm: that “the afflicted hear and rejoice.” That is the way the Word ought to work in our lives. It is intended to be life-changing; not something just to be read and forgotten or held theoretically. The psalmist says that understanding these principles will set us free to be glad instead of depressed and inhibited by our fears. The final result is a unified exaltation of His name, as all the body of Christ together expresses a thanksgiving to God because of what He has done. In summary that is the psalm.

Responding to Our Needs

We want to look at it in detail beginning with the next paragraph, verses 4 through 7. This is a paragraph where David recounts his experience. **Please read Psalm 34:4.*

He is saying he longed for God and sought Him desperately. And God answered him and delivered him from fear. And we can expect

this, can't we, from a Lord such as ours? He will hear us. He will respond. He is not powerless or unable to move. I know from my own experience in our family that when one of our three boys cries out in the night, either my wife or I will get out of bed and hit that cold floor and go in to see what's wrong. Now certainly, with all our limitations and weaknesses as parents, if we're willing to do that, how much more our loving heavenly Father, who never sleeps, is ready at any moment to respond to our need?

Exposing Our Fears

Through the rest of the paragraph David spells out the three-step process of deliverance. The first is in verse 5, the second in verse 6, and the third in verse 7. **Please read Psalm 34:5.*

I think the psalmist is personifying his fears here, and that verses 4b-5 ought to be translated like this: “He delivered me from all my fears; in looking to Him they (my fears) were enlightened, and their faces shall never be ashamed (or literally, I will never put a veil over the face of my fears. I will never try to hide them.)” I think David is saying, “I took my fears and exposed them to God, and He shed light on them. And now I'll never again be ashamed of my fear. I'll never try to cover it up again. I'll never try to appear to be something that I'm not, in the face of others or in the face of God. I'm willing to admit that I'm fearful.” David discovered that the key to deliverance was in acknowledging his fear. And that is the first step in the process.

I don't like to acknowledge my weaknesses and I suspect that you don't either. Most of us are ashamed of our fears. We like to appear poised and cool. In our fantasies we are always the ones who will do the thing right when everybody else is falling to pieces. Yet we know that we don't have what it takes to be poised, but we don't want people to know that.

I will never forget an experience that my friend, Coach Jim Shofner, and I had in the Zeta Psi house at Stanford one year. We were going in for a meeting and Jim and I were both scared but we wouldn't admit it to each other. I had worked out my talk and it was going to be a masterpiece. I was going to boldly stand up at dinner and tell these men what was on my heart.

We got into the house and discovered that they had just lost the intramural football championship and practically everybody in the house was drunk. We walked into the dining room where they were throwing half-gallons of milk all over the room. As we sat down, the president of the house stood up, three sheets to the wind, leaning about 15 degrees to the left, hanging onto the edge of the table. We had coached him very carefully on what to say, but when he got up he couldn't remember what we'd told him. So he said, “There are two men here who are going to talk about God.” And then he sat down. There was a stony silence in the room as I got up and everything that I had planned to say just vanished. To this day, I don't know what I said, but I do know that my voice was quivering and my hands were shaking the whole time. When it was over, I sat down in relief. I walked away from there feeling embarrassed and convinced that I had failed. Fortunately, God overruled, but it was a good lesson for me.

Why was I so embarrassed? Because I didn't want those men to see that I was weak. I wanted to be a strong man, but God wants us to acknowledge our weakness at the very outset because weakness is the key to strength. Only the fearful and the weak and the helpless ultimately have the power of God. Paul stated the paradox in 2 Corinthians 12. He is talking about his thorn in the flesh, this physical affliction that was given to him. He calls it a messenger of Satan to harass him and keep him from being too elated.

He writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).

Recognizing Our Poverty

When we are weak and fearful, God is able to speak through us. The extent that we admit our weakness in a situation is the extent that we have God's ability for that situation. David picks this up in verse 6 by referring to himself as "this poor man"—not this strong man, not this resourceful man, but this poor man—this man who recognizes his poverty in the face of these circumstances. **Please read Psalm 34:6.*

The second step in the process of deliverance from fear is appropriating the power of God for fearful situations. It is not enough just to admit our weakness. We also have to appropriate His power. C. S. Lewis has said, "Down through the ages whenever men might need courage they might cry out, 'Billy Budd, help me!' and nothing very significant happens. But for nineteen hundred years whenever men have needed courage and have cried out, 'Lord Jesus, help me!' something has happened." They have laid hold of the resurrection power of Jesus Christ and His ability there to meet any demand.

There is an interesting word here in the sixth verse. The word translated "troubles" means to be restricted and tied up, to be limited, inhibited. That is exactly what fear does to us. It ties us into knots and robs us of our freedom. But in laying hold of Christ we are freed from our inhibitions. He sets us free and makes us whole men. That's the kind of Lord we have.

Fortified for Battle

The third step in the process of deliverance from fear is shown in verse 7. **Please read Psalm 34:7.*

Literally the verse implies that He equips them for war, He fortifies them. When we acknowledge our weakness (step 1) and we lay hold of Jesus Christ (step 2) He fortifies us (step 3). That is an interesting figure of speech. The "angel of the LORD" encamping "around those who fear him" speaks of God's omnipresence, His presence with us in any situation, no matter how potentially fearful or threatening it may be. Encamping around us means to fortify us, to deliver us.

Now the emotional symptoms of fear may continue. We may quake and shake and we may not have the poise before people that we would like to have, but we are not paralyzed by fear. We can move through any situation with inner security and confidence because God delivers His power to accomplish the task He has laid out before us.

Laying Hold of the Truth

In verses 8 through 10 David turns from his own experience to encourage others to lay hold of this truth. **Please read Psalm 34:8-10.*

"Taste and see that the LORD is good." God wants us to taste His goodness and experience it, because experience in the Christian life is what leads to knowledge. And we can never really know the goodness of God until we step out on the basis of the knowledge that we have. We may have "knowledge" in our mind but it is never really ours until we have stepped out by faith expecting God to act and we discover that He is true, that we can trust Him. Then we can truly say that we know. So the next time you are tempted to be fearful, don't call your psychiatrist, don't take a tranquilizer, don't take to your bed; taste and see that the Lord is good. Act on His principle and see if God does not set you free.

David says in verse 9 that those who fear the Lord have no want. "The lions may grow weak and hungry." He is speaking metaphorically here of those who rely on their own strength and brute force. "Those who rely on themselves will grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." God's promise is that we will lack nothing. Self-confident man finds himself in desperate need, but God's man never does. One of the best illustrations for this is from the life of the apostle Peter. He is a perfect illustration of the self-confident man. The Lord challenges Peter with the possibility of his falling away. Peter says, "Not I, Lord. I'll never forsake you!" And yet, when a little girl beside a fire confronted him, he forsook the Lord (see Matthew 26:34,74-75). He was the "young lion" counting on his own resources, and he grew weak. He didn't have what it took to face that situation. But if we seek the Lord and rely upon Him, we lack no good thing.

Excited About Life

Verses 11 through 18 are a teaching section very reminiscent of the book of Proverbs. David uses contrast to reiterate these same principles. **Please read Psalm 34:12.*

Who loves life? Who doesn't just exist but is excited about his life and its challenges? That is the person who sees every day as an adventure, and every challenge as an opportunity to be ventured into with confidence in God. That is the way it should be with us. We need never arise in the morning overwhelmed and discouraged by the responsibilities of the day. There may be fearful things coming up in our schedules and who of us knows the unforeseen events that lie ahead every morning. But despite the uncertainty of our futures, we have certainty in the adequacy of Jesus Christ for our lives. This security frees us to be excited about the next 24-hour period or the next year.

If we want to look at life this way, says the psalmist in verse 13, we are to keep our tongues from evil, and our lips from speaking lies. We are to turn from evil and do good; we're to seek peace and pursue it. How do we usually react to fear? Very often with frustration and anger, grumbling and complaining, we lash out at people and circumstances. Or we become deceitful. When someone asks us to do something that is potentially frightening, we think of some other "appointment" for that particular time instead of laying hold of the power of Christ to get us through. But David said to turn from all of these things. Don't let your tongue speak evil and your lips lie. Put away the inner rebellion in your life and acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Help for the Helpless

Why? Well, in verse 15 he says, "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry." God sees us—He's aware of our need. He hears us—He's aware of our circumstances. **Please read Psalm 34:16-18.*

This reminds me of Isaiah's great words in Isaiah 66:1-2, "This is what the LORD says: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things, and so they came into being?' declares the LORD. 'This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.'"

God is not impressed by our bravado, by our assertions that we have what it takes, by our attempts to face into the wind alone. Heaven does not help those who help themselves; heaven helps the helpless. Heaven helps the man who is crushed in spirit, who is brokenhearted, who is not counting on himself; heaven helps the one who is willing to expose his fears and be what he is—a weak, fragile vessel greatly in need of the power of God in his life.

God's Deliverance

Now, there is a final section from verses 19 through 22, a series of promises that again are variations of the same theme. **Please read Psalm 34:19.*

Both of those are promises. We can expect to have troubles if we want to be men and women of God. That is SOP—Standard Operating Procedure. Paul said, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29). If you are going to be God's man or God's woman you can expect God to put you in the forefront of the action. You're going to be out where everyone is shooting at you. You're going to find yourself in terrifying circumstances. You're going to be where everything that is happening will test your strength. The righteous will have troubles, but "the LORD delivers him from them all." Three times in this chapter we find this refrain reiterating deliverance: in verse 4, deliverance from fear, and in verse 17, deliverance from troubles; and again in verse 19, deliverance from all troubles.

The point is clear: as far as God is concerned, there is no such thing as a hopeless situation.

Dominated by Fear

**Please read Psalm 34:20-21.* Verse 20 is a prophecy that came true at the crucifixion of our Lord. Verse 21 is simply statements of fact. The evil man, in the context of this chapter, is the one dominated by his fears. His own fears slay him. They are the things that frustrate him and inhibit him and keep him from realizing his manhood. Those who hate the righteous way—the way of total abandonment to the Lord—will be condemned to a life of fear and frustration and uselessness.

Freedom from Fear

Verse 22 is a postscript to the entire chapter. **Please read Psalm 34:22.* A literal translation of this would read, "The Lord keeps on redeeming His servants." He keeps buying us up, replenishing us, filling us, flooding us, supplying everything that we need. He keeps redeeming His servants; and the final promise is that we will never be paralyzed or dominated by fear.

One day I was driving to get our baby-sitter. My young son, Brian, was with me. Since it was a warm evening, he had short pants on and no shoes. As we came walking up to the house, there was a dog lying by the door. Without any warning, when I rang the doorbell, the dog jumped up, grabbed me by the right leg, and proceeded to gnaw away on my shinbone, while Brian started climbing up my left leg. You can imagine the predicament I was in, trying to get Brian around in back of me while, at the same time, trying to kick the dog. Brian, of course, realized that when the dog finished with me he was going to start on his bare leg, and he was really frightened.

Later on, after we finally got rid of the dog, I was sitting in the car driving home when Brian said, "Daddy, I'll go anywhere with you!" And I thought, "Boy, that's misplaced confidence. I'm never going back to that place again!" But I couldn't help but think how true it is of our heavenly Father, that He really is not afraid to go anywhere. I can honestly say I'll go anywhere with Him. I'm a very shy, timid person by nature. But I know from knowledge and experience that He is able, and I can trust Him to be the One I need in the most fearful circumstances.

Prayer

Father, how thankful we are that You're the One we can count on. We have learned to distrust ourselves, knowing that we're not the people we want to be. We've learned to rely upon Your strength, to lay hold of You and thus discover that in Your power we can be all that You ever intended us to be. And we thank You that we have tasted and that we can see that You are infinitely good. Thank You for that. And now as we look into the future, with all of its challenges and all the potentially frightening circumstances and all the good things that may come, although we don't know what is ahead, we know that You hold the future in your hands. And we know that as we walk with You, we can go anywhere. We thank You for that. In Jesus' name, Amen.¹

1. This study is also by David H. Roper, one-time associate pastor at the Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California, now of Boise, Idaho.

Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- Use only the Bible for your answers.
- Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- Challenge questions are for those who have the time and wish to do them.
- Personal questions are to be shared with the class only if you wish to share.
- As you study begin to look for a verse to memorize this week.

First Day: Read the Commentary on Psalm 34.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the commentary on Psalm 34, or from your teacher's lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its "address" (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Psalm 139, concentrating on verses 1-6.

1. a. Psalm 139 is another psalm written by David. What does David say in verse 1 about God's knowledge of him?

 b. How personally is God involved with each of our daily lives? (Psalm 139:2-4)

2. Read Luke 12:6-7. How intimately does God know us?

3. Challenge: What do the following verses tell us about God's knowledge of every person?

 1 Kings 8:39

 1 Chronicles 28:9

 Hebrews 4:13

4. a. In Psalm 139:5, how does David express God's involvement in our past, present and future?

 b. Challenge: What else do you learn about this in the following verses?

 Psalm 46:1

John 10:28-29

5. What is David's reaction to the knowledge that God knows him better than he knows himself? (Psalm 139:6)
6. Personal: What is your reaction to the knowledge that God knows you better than you know yourself?

Third Day: Review Psalm 139, concentrating on verses 7-12.

1. What question does David present to the Lord in Psalm 139:7?
2. What possible answers to his question does David suggest in Psalm 139:8-12, and how does he dismiss these answers?

Answers

Dismissals

3. How do the following verses express this truth?

Proverbs 15:3

Jeremiah 23:23-24

Acts 17:27

4. Challenge: Read Genesis 3:1-11. Why might a person want to flee from God's presence?
5.
 - a. Although God is present everywhere and He knows the thoughts of all mankind, we humans have been separated from a relationship with God because of our sin (see Isaiah 59:2). Yet God loves us, and has made a way for us to be in relationship with Himself. What does Romans 3:23 say regarding who has sinned?
 - b. What does Romans 6:23 say regarding the price of our sin and God's gift to us?
 - c. What does Romans 10:10-13 say regarding salvation and forgiveness of sin?

6. a. The presence of God was not a fearful thought to David. What comfort does David derive from God's omnipresence (present in all places at all times)? (Psalm 139:10)

- b. Personal: Nothing can separate us from God's presence. This can bring fear or this can bring comfort. How do you feel about God's omnipresence? Are you still trying to ignore Him because of the guilt of your sin or have you made peace with Him through faith in Jesus Christ? If you haven't already, won't you call on the name of the Lord today? Write a prayer asking God to forgive you. If you have done this, tell someone what God's forgiveness means to you.

Fourth Day: Review Psalm 139, concentrating on verses 13-16.

1. We know that God created Adam and Eve and that we all descended from them. According to Psalm 139:13,15-16a, how involved was God with your personal development?

2. Why does David praise God in Psalm 139:14?

3. a. What do you learn about your life from Psalm 139:16b?

- b. Challenge: What do the following verses say regarding this?
Psalm 25:12

Proverbs 16:9

Proverbs 20:24

4. Personal: The truths contained in Psalm 139:13-16 are profound and should impact the way we think about other people, ourselves and our society. Take a moment to review these truths. How do they change your view of yourself? Of other people? Of our society?

Fifth Day: Review Psalm 139, concentrating on verses 17-18.

1. As if the preceding verses haven't shown us how personally God is involved with us and our lives—from beginning to end—what does Psalm 139:17-18 tell us?

2. a. What does Isaiah 55:8-9 say regarding God's thoughts?

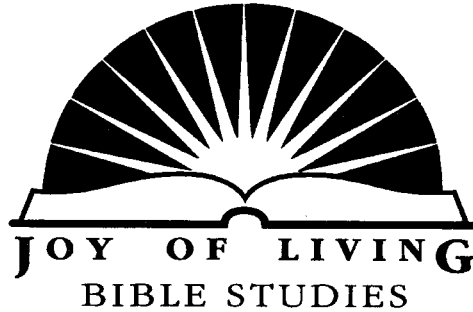
- b. Challenge: Sum up Isaiah 55:8-9 in your own words.
3. What does Jeremiah 29:11 say regarding God's plans for us?
4. How does Romans 8:28 fit in with Jeremiah 29:11?
5. Personal: Do you believe God's Word is true? Are you willing to trust that God's plan for your life is good, even if the way is difficult? Which of the above Scriptures have meant the most to you and why?

Sixth Day: Review Psalm 139, concentrating on verses 19-24.

1. David has declared how personally God is involved with each of us as individuals, yet David is faced with a problem—a question—that plagues many of us. What is his question, phrased as a statement, from Psalm 139:19?
2. How does David feel about the enemies of God? (Psalm 139:21-22)
3. Do you ever wonder why God doesn't just immediately destroy those who are against Him? What do the following verses say about this?
- Proverbs 16:4
- Ephesians 1:11
4. Even more than eradicating the evil in the world, what does David desire that the Lord do for him? (Psalm 139:23-24)
5. Personal: What about you? Do you want to eliminate everything in your life that might displease the Lord? Do you desire, more than anything, to please the Lord? If so, pray David's prayer in Psalm 139:23-24. How have the truths expressed in this psalm made a difference in your life?

Psalms from the Heart

Lesson 4



Psalm 139: Who Am I, Lord?

Everywhere today one hears of those who are passing through an identity crisis. That is a fancy way of saying what people have been asking for a long time, “Who am I?” We all ask this question occasionally but perhaps it is asked more frequently today because of the prevailing scientific view of the universe. That view tells us that our earth is but a tiny speck in a vast universe, and we are struggling mortals on an obscure planet located in a second rate galaxy among billions of other galaxies.

Such an outlook tends to make us feel most insignificant. It contrasts sharply with the biblical view of man and especially the view that deals with man in relationship to God. Psalm 139 describes a man who is thinking about himself and his relationship to God. If you are struggling with an identity crisis and you are not sure just who you are, then I suggest you read carefully as we look together at this marvelous psalm.

God Understands Us

It is divided into four paragraphs of six verses each. In each paragraph the psalmist faces a question about himself in relationship to God. In the first paragraph he asks, “How well does God know me?” The first sentence gives us his answer.

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

(Psalm 139:1)

The Hebrew word for “searched” is the word *to dig*. The word means, “You dig into me and therefore you understand me.” In what way does God understand us?

God Knows Our Thoughts

*You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.* (Psalm 139:2)

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

God Knows Our Ways

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

*You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.* (Psalm 139:3)

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

God Speaks Our Language

*Before a word is on my tongue
you know it completely, O LORD.* (Psalm 139:4)

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

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

God Knows Us Best

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

*You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.* (Psalm 139:5-6)

He is simply overwhelmed by the fact that God knows him better than he knows himself, better than anyone else knows him. That is amazing, is it not? God knows me better than I know anyone else, no matter how hard I have tried to communicate with that person, and better even than I know myself. For God knows me in the subconscious, the unexplorable part of my life, as well as in the conscious. What a wonderful revelation this is of God’s understanding of each individual human being. How desperately we need in this day of depersonaliza-

tion, to remember that, though science tells us how vast the universe is, and, thus, how great is the power of God, it takes God's self-revelation to tell us how important we are to Him and how well He knows us.

Is God Ever Absent?

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

Where can I go from your Spirit?

Where can I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7)

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

If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths ["Sheol" in the Hebrew],

you are there. (Psalm 139:8)

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

God Goes Before Us

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

If I rise on the wings of the dawn,

if I settle on the far side of the sea,

even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand will hold me fast. (Psalm 139:9-10)

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

When I was about 12 years old, we moved from Minnesota to Montana. The night before we left I got down by my bed and said, "Good-bye, God. We're going to Montana." I was sure I would not find Him there, but when we arrived, there He was. I have found Him everywhere since. That is what this writer is saying.

God Is but a Touch Away

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

*If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"*

even the darkness will not be dark to you;

the night will shine like the day,

for darkness is as light to you. (Psalm 139:11-12)

Remember when you were little and had misbehaved, you felt guilty and tried to hide from God by crawling under the covers or hiding under the bed or in the closet? You thought that God could not see you because humans couldn't. There are many grownups that are still trying to do that. They feel that if they do not think about certain things, then God will not think about them either. But He does. No darkness, physical or mental, can hide us from God's presence. He knows us and sees us, no matter how dark it is. Paul reminded the Athenians that God is not far from any one of us (see Acts 17:27). Whether we know Him or not, He is but a touch away.

God Made Us

In the third paragraph the psalmist is telling us how he knows all this. Someone might say, "Well, this is certainly beautiful poetry, all this about God's knowing me and being with me, but how do you know it is true?"

"All right," says the psalmist, "I'll tell you: First, because of deduction from the design of the body."

For you created my inmost being;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

(Psalm 139:13-14)

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

Have you ever stopped to think how much of your life is dependent upon forces at work in you? If any one of them stopped you would die very quickly. You are dependent on something over which you have no control. Your heart is thumping away right now, and it would be terrible if you had to control it with your mind or will. How would you like to have to keep saying to yourself now as you are reading, "Now, thump. Now, thump. Now, thump." Or if you had to say to your diaphragm, "Now, di, now, phragm. Now, di, now, phragm."

No, it is wonderful, is it not? Someone else is running our lives; that is obvious from the design of our bodies. This is what has struck the psalmist. He says, "You knit me together in a most amazing way in my mother's womb. I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

God Designed Us

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

*My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth...*
(Psalm 139:15)

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

That phrase “woven together” is one word in the Hebrew. It is really the word for “embroidered.” Some of you ladies know what embroidery is, the little fancy stitches that are added to cloth. I don’t know how you do it; most of us men never understand embroidery, but it adds beauty and is especially fancy. That is the word used here. It describes the delicate embroidery of the body, the things that tie us together so that one organ supports another. The lungs need the heart, and the heart needs the lungs; the liver needs the kidneys, and the stomach needs both; all the parts are amazingly embroidered together.

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

God Has Always Known Us

Then he uses this phrase, in verse 16,

Your eyes saw my unformed body. (Psalm 139:16a)

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

Whittaker Chambers wrote a book in which he tells how he became a Christian. He describes an incident one day when he was sitting with his little two-year-old daughter on his lap. His eye fell on her ear and it caught his attention. He was struck by the design of that ear. How beautiful, how shell-like it was, and how perfectly designed to catch every sound wave in the air to be translated into sound by the brain. Knowing something of the mechanics of the ear he began to think about it. He was so struck by the impossibility that anything so intricate, so complex, so beautifully designed could ever occur by

chance. That led him to other lines of thought and eventually he investigated the Christian position and became a Christian. The argument from design is a great argument and it is what the psalmist uses here.

God Determined Our Lives

But that is not all. In verse 16 he continues,

*All the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.* (Psalm 139:16b)

He is not only impressed by the argument from design, but by the evidence of determination. Evidently, he’d had certain experiences in his life when so many unrelated factors and incidents suddenly tied together that he knew it must have all been brought about by a mind greater than his own. To him this was evidence of the fruition of pre-made plans.

We have all had this feeling. Something that we did not plan nor expect suddenly takes place. Many varied factors all of a sudden fit together, dovetailing beautifully. Then we become aware that Someone else is planning our days and yet allowing us free will in experiencing them. Even before these days occurred they were recorded in the Book of God; He planned them.

This, of course, is the basis for all biblical prophecy. How is it that an event can occur in the life of our Lord that was predicted by the prophets 500, 600, sometimes 1,000 years before—predicted not only by one prophet, but by several? After the passing of years and even centuries there comes a moment when many factors suddenly fall together and our Lord fulfills an event that was foretold long before. All this impresses the psalmist, and he is made aware of God’s knowledge of him.

God Reveals Our Lives

The third thing that convinces him follows.

*How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand.
When I awake, I am still with you.* (Psalm 139:17-18)

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

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

Making Requests of God

The last paragraph seems to take a rather abrupt turn.

*If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
 Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
 They speak of you with evil intent;
 your adversaries misuse your name.
 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD,
 and abhor those who rise up against you?
 I have nothing but hatred for them;
 I count them my enemies. (Psalm 139:19-22)*

Many have asked: Why do these psalmists seem suddenly to interject these bloody thoughts? Why this sudden word of passion, "Lord, kill the wicked!" This has troubled many because it seems so far from the New Testament standard, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). How shall we understand these things?

Asking Against His Will

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

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

Short of His Standards

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

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

ing to do it, and do it right, God alone must do it. He is saying, "Lord, it's your problem; why don't you do it?"

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

The Way Everlasting

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

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my anxious thoughts.
 See if there is any offensive way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting. (Psalm 139:23-24)*

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

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

Prayer

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

This is the end of the study. There are no questions for Lesson 4.

PSALMS FROM THE HEART

by Ray Stedman with study questions by Nancy Collins

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Nancy Collins is a speaker, Bible teacher, author of the *Joy of Living* study of *Genesis*, and coauthor of *Psalms of Faith*, *Nehemiah*, *Job* and *Revelation*. She is also author of the *Joy of Living* preschool studies of *Luke* and *Acts & 2 Timothy*. A member of the *Joy of Living* staff she has taught the Word of God to adults and children for over 30 years.

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