

Blessed Is The Man - Psalm 1

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

The word “blessed” here has an interesting point: it’s plural. It’s an artistic touch by one who knew how the Lord blesses such a man. It reminds one of a story told by a former pastor. He said that when he asked people who did not tithe, “why not?” they usually had a very precise answer. When he asked those who did tithe why they did, they usually did not. They just look at the ground, shuffle their feet and begin with, “Well, the Lord has blessed us so much...”

Bad to worse The Psalmist gives us a picture of the progression of sin in the unsuspecting.

- First, you walk in the counsel of the wicked. Have you ever taken “good advice” that turned out to be anything but? If you’re listening to those who are evil, you become more like them as they “show you the ropes.” Good advice comes from good people.
- Next, you stand in the way of sinners. Ever been in the wrong place at the wrong time?
- Finally – note well – the progression ends with pride. The mocker, the cynic, has everything figured out. He knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. It is a point of pride that I can sneer at you. And pride is Satan’s own sin

Meditate The word meditate in the Scripture means, according to Noah Webster, “To dwell on anything in thought; to contemplate; to study; to turn or revolve any subject in the mind.” One aspect which we must see is that this is not a five-minute exercise; rather, it is a continuing habit of mind. The Psalmist correctly says that we should do this day and night. Please understand that this is not Zen meditation, so popular these days. It is very different. It involves conscious study; it requires bringing your mind into focus on individual truths of the Scripture. It is the character of the Scripture that its truths can be treated this way. It is not simply mindless repetition of a thought – a mantra. And what are we to meditate on? God’s Law – for us contained in the precepts of Christ. You will know you are successful when you meditate on his words and hear yourself responding, “That is so true.”

It is always important to distinguish results from causes. If you do these things, the results will be as promised. But the results are not the cause; the meditation causes, and these things result.

- “A tree planted...” Notice the verb – “planted.” God chooses where he wants you; if you are his true follower, it will be a good place. (I will admit to some difficulty in knowing a good place when I see one.)
- “Fruit in season...” Think of the fruits of the Spirit. Each of those fruits is a good thing – but each has a proper season. Patience is most cherished in affliction, for example. These things will be there when you need them.
- “Leaf does not wither...” It’s not just the important stuff, the fruits, that God provides. Even in the trivial matter of a leaf, God sustains the righteous man who contemplates God’s words. God cares for the hairs on your head, and all other small and scarce items too. Such a man prospers. For some, that’s monetary prosperity; for others, it’s much deeper than that.

Not So The Wicked Psalms 1:4-6 NIV Not so the wicked!

- They are like chaff that the wind blows away. (5)
- Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. (6)
- For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Have you ever seen a dust devil? There are two things these are noted for: first, they produce confusion. Stuff gets picked up, whirled around and eventually dropped someplace else. Next, you can be sure the dust devil has no destination, no orbit – it's just going along at random. The comparison is to that stuff the dust devil picks up. Bricks are immune.

But there is more. Like its World War II synonym, chaff also has the function of concealing that which is behind it. So often we make the mistake of assuming that the dust devils of the church really are harmless. We should ask what they conceal as well as what they reveal.

Ultimately, however, like the chaff of the desert, the wicked are gone. In the church in every age there are those who cause chaos. But where are the chaos makers of yesterday? Man is designed to be eternal, not whirling garbage.

Ultimately, God is just. He is righteous. Therefore, we know two things about the wicked:

- They will not be able to stand on the Day of Judgment. The righteous judge will give them what they deserve. (Remember, you're eternal.)
- Wherever the righteous wind up in the end, the wicked won't be there.

The Lord, He Knows

We have, as a church, forgotten what our ancestors knew well: the Providence of God. God the all-knowing is also the sustainer of the universe.

Romans 8:28 NIV

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. The Lord knows the wicked and the righteous, and he has told you what he will do. God is righteous; that righteousness will be brought home to the wicked. His righteousness applies to all of us; those who accept Christ for salvation, those who reject him for everlasting judgment.

The Heavens Declare - Psalm 19

One of the most neglected areas of Christian thought today is that of the glory of God. Our present thinkers are far too busy revising God's words to fit the world in which they find themselves to be bothered with such an obsolete concept. Reality, however, has not changed – and we shall see how that affects us.

Glory of God in Nature Psalms 19:1-6 NIV For the director of music. A psalm of David.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. (2) Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. (3) There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. [1] (4) Their voice [2] goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, (5) which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. (6) It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

The concept of glory

The story is told (so far unconfirmed) that when the Voyager probes were being prepared for launch the scientists asked a music professor at Cal Tech what he thought ought to be on the records included with man's first expedition beyond the solar system. "Bach – nothing but Bach. We can apologise for the rest later." To anyone who loves classical music the expression is understandable. Bach's music is glorious.

Glory – what style is to the artist, glory is to God. If your ear is only attuned to the latest recordings, then consider an other view. Bach's motto was always sola Deo Gloria, "To God alone be the glory." You can see the glory of God as well in the physical world as well. If you have ever camped overnight in the Mojave desert, you have seen it. First there are the stars; then at dawn the long shadows - the magnificence of the mountains combined with the subtlety of the colors. God's style – magnificent, as it should be.

Nature shows the glory of God

As we shall see in the next section, nature's revelation of the glory of God parallels the revelation of the Scripture itself. The poem gives us its thought rhymes.

- Heavens and skies. The phrase here accounts both for the atmospheric sky and the spatial heavens above that. They show us the glory of God – this is how God does things, not sparingly but lavishly, in power. The Christian will find them a source of knowledge – a remarkable statement in a time 2500 years before modern science. But it is so; in the orderly movement of the stars we can see the utter consistency to God; he is true to himself, and his works reflect this.
- Day and night. It does not matter when you are looking; nor, for that matter, where. The physical and natural universe show the character of God at all times – a reflection of the constancy of God. There is no "shadow of turning" with God.
- Pour forth speech. It's plain and evident – anyone who wants to look will see the glory of God. But in no sense can you say it's forced on you; God does not yell at you in nature. You have to listen, for nature has no words – only signs of triumph. You must learn to listen.

Dominating element – the sun

To an observer in Palestine one physical fact would be most obvious: everything feels the heat of the sun. David will shortly match this up against God's law, in particular the Ten Commandments. If you've ever been in the Mojave in August, you know the feeling. Even indoors, under the air conditioner, lemonade in hand you know it's hot. The sun is the dominant fact of life; its effects are felt everywhere. It is the one agent from whom nothing can hide. As such, it is the symbol of the Ten Commandments and a forerunner of the Christ.

A note about poetry

You should note that David makes a sharp transition in verse seven. He's expecting the listener to make the connection. This description of the glory of God revealed in nature will now have its echo in the glory of God revealed in the Scripture, particularly the commandments. (I told you to watch out for the thought rhymes; this one in particular is perhaps subtle at first, but once you see it, the parallel is powerful indeed).

The Glory of God in His Law Psalms 19:7-11 NIV

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. (8) The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. (9) The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. (10) They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. (11) By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. (The reader will note that there is not a verse-by-verse thought parallel. Verses were added much later, and they do not always reflect the real structure of the Psalm).

Glory of God in His Word

David now takes us through the glory of God as shown in the Scriptures:

- Law and Testimony. David starts with something that would have been a very present fact to him: the Ark of the Covenant, or as it is sometimes referred to, the Ark of the Testimony (Exodus 25:16). In doing this he reminds his hearers of the giving of the Ten Commandments – a list so profound that three thousand years later it still stands as the definition of Judeo-Christian morality. It also reminds the Israelites of the way God delivered them from Egypt – with a mighty hand. But God's glory is shown not only in his might and power, but also in his forgiveness and forbearance. The Ark contained not only the tablets of the Law, but also manna – a reminder of God's providence for his people. It had Aaron's rod, the reminder of the power of God used to rescue his people. Commandment, mercy and power – still reminders of God's glory to us today.
- Statutes and commandments. It's easy for us to focus on concise statements like the Ten Commandments. But we must also remember that God gave far more instruction than that, both in the time of the Israelites and in our own. The sign of God's glory is this: unlike man's laws, God's laws always fit together. If you've ever done your taxes by hand, you'll understand this one.
- Fear and judgments. We are reminded here that God is still awesome; what he did to Pharaoh and Egypt he can do to anyone. He is not the kindly grandfather who wants you to be blessed; he is the Father who wants you to be like him. To that purpose he tells you to fear him (as Pharaoh didn't) and beware of his judgments. The parallel to the desert sun is fairly obvious. The sun scorches everything in the desert – but is also the source of life and energy. The Word of God searches us out:

Hebrews 4:12 NIV

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. As the sun seems to seek out every living thing in the desert, so the word of God seeks out every living human being.

Carrot and stick

You cannot train a man without penalties for failure, nor without rewards for success. The striking thing about the word of God is how desirable is the study thereof. This author has been teaching the Scripture for over thirty years as of this writing, and it is clear: reading the word, studying it and taking it into the heart, these things are actions of joy. I read through the Bible each year; each year I discover new things, new insights that bring light to my mind. This is not to say there is no negative to it. The stick is there with the carrot; you need to know that there is such a thing as sin, and that it has consequences. It is much better to be guided away from trouble than to be able to say that you went through it. Ultimately, though, the study of the Scripture reveals the glory of God and provides its own reward. Most of those who complain of how hard the Scriptures are to read are those who have never tried it.

Man's Response

Psalms 19:12-14 NIV Who can discern his errors?

Forgive my hidden faults. (13) Keep your servant also from willful sins; may they not rule over me. Then will I be blameless, innocent of great transgression. (14) May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

David points out something here that we have almost forgotten. We are so used to the “good buddy Jesus” religion of our day that we don’t like to deal with the awesome God. He asks us a question: if God made a mistake, how would you know it? It is the definition of futility itself. You can’t know it. It’s like saying gravity should have been weaker – it might help with your weight loss program, but it’s completely absurd even to make such a judgment. Let’s remember just who is God – and who is not.

Cleanse and keep

- What then is the proper reaction of man to the glory of God? First, as the sun seeks out all the living in the desert, so we should ask God to seek out all the secret faults we have – the ones we won’t share with anyone else. We should ask him to cleanse us from them – and keep us that way.
- Next, we must ask him to keep us from the dominion of presumptuous sin. Presumptuous? “Me and Jesus in the phone booth” is presumptuous. Do we treat God like our good buddy? If we do, that sin will soon gain dominion over us; we will come to enjoy treating God as our equal. That is so hard to break.
- Finally, we ask him to keep us from the “great transgression” – the unforgivable sin. What is that? The sin which you deny as being sin – is unforgivable. For first you must admit your sin – and if you will not take that first step, you will not be forgiven. Finis David ends with his prayer for himself.
- He summons up both word and thought – “words of my mouth” and “meditations of my heart” so that his plea will not be words only and hypocritical. He asks that these be acceptable to God. Note, he does not ask that they be perfect, for perfection belongs to

God alone. It is a note of humility in a great king. Finally, he acknowledges God for who he is. He is my redeemer, the one who forgives my sins and snatches me away from the penalty of hell. He is also my strength, ready to sustain me in the temptations and trials of life.

Imprecation - Psalm 109

It can be astonishing to discover the imprecatory (invoking evil or a curse upon someone) Psalms. It seems unimaginable that Scripture would contain such things – but it does. We shall examine one here and attempt to deal with the difficulties.

Complaint Psalms 109:1-5 NASB. For the choir director. A Psalm of David.

O God of my praise, Do not be silent! (2) For they have opened the wicked and deceitful mouth against me; They have spoken against me with a lying tongue. (3) They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, And fought against me without cause. (4) In return for my love they act as my accusers; But I am in prayer. (5) Thus they have repaid me evil for good And hatred for my love.

The nature of God

One of the principles found in the Psalms is the constant appeal to the nature and character of God. David points out two such characteristics – which also outline his complaint:

- First, God is the “God of my praise.” No reader of the Psalm could doubt that David praised God continually in his life. It is to that God that David makes his appeal, as if to say, “I praise you; you are worthy of it.”
- So then it makes some sense to ask God not to be silent in return. It seems that this silence is now grating, and David pleads for God to act. It’s “just do something.”

The nature of the righteous

David does not bring up his many sacrifices to God, nor his following the Law. His complaint comes down to this:

- He is being persecuted by the wicked without cause. He has done nothing to deserve any such treatment as this.
- Indeed, his actions are characterized not so much by obedience as by love. He has followed Christ’s dictum to “love your enemies.” (Matt 5:43-48)
- So much does David love them that he has done the ultimate in love: he has gone to the Almighty in prayer on their behalf.

Do you see the point? It’s not David’s obedience to the Law, but his following God in loving his enemies that counts.

The nature of the evil

This is a very penetrating analysis of the nature of evil people. This is not a description of David’s enemies in the field; rather, of those who surround him. See if any of this sounds familiar:

- First, there is false accusation. Something rises in the human heart which wants to point the finger. Often enough the accusation is so outrageous, so out of character that its very improbability argues for it. No one would accuse him of that unless it were true, so to speak. This is very difficult to defend against.
- Look at this phrasing: “surrounded by words.” It’s that halo of misrepresentation, misquotation, scorn and satire that makes such talk attractive. (This is why the Scripture calls gossip and slander sin). The attack is not legal but social.
- Worst of all, because I love, they hate. It’s a commonplace today. As C. S. Lewis once said of “moderns,” they hate. Period.

Imprecation

This is the hard part:

Psalms 109:6-20 NASB

Appoint a wicked man over him, And let an accuser stand at his right hand. (7) When he is judged, let him come forth guilty, And let his prayer become sin. (8) Let his days be few; Let another take his office. (9) Let his children be fatherless And his wife a widow. (10) Let his children wander about and beg; And let them seek sustenance far from their ruined homes. (11) Let the creditor seize all that he has, And let strangers plunder the product of his labor. (12) Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him, Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children. (13) Let his posterity be cut off; In a following generation let their name be blotted out. (14) Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD, And do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out. (15) Let them be before the LORD continually, That He may cut off their memory from the earth; (16) Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness, But persecuted the afflicted and needy man, And the despondent in heart, to put them to death. (17) He also loved cursing, so it came to him; And he did not delight in blessing, so it was far from him. (18) But he clothed himself with cursing as with his garment, And it entered into his body like water And like oil into his bones. (19) Let it be to him as a garment with which he covers himself, And for a belt with which he constantly girds himself. (20) Let this be the reward of my accusers from the LORD, And of those who speak evil against my soul.

Fundamental problem

How can a loving God approve of such a request from a loving follower? After all, God is the God of mercy, right?

Take it from first principles: the Christian is a follower of Christ, an imitator of Christ. Does Christ ever show such anger? Indeed, he does, in clearing the Temple. He shows such imprecation towards the Pharisees too, often starting with, “woe to you, Pharisees ...” Evidently it is permissible – particularly when its object is the hypocritical religious leader.

There exists such a thing as righteous anger. It is a part of God’s character, called the wrath of God. Indeed:

Psalms 7:11 NIV God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day

Apparently, then, we have neglected this part of the Scripture, for righteous anger is nowhere to be found in the church today. The main argument against it is something like this: after all, those folks are sinners just like us. To answer this, we must take a side trip into a little bit of philosophy.

Concept of “just desert”

The modern concept of justice is rather different from the ancient one. Our system of justice says there are three reasons for locking up a criminal:

- One is to warehouse the criminal. If he’s off the streets, he won’t commit the same crime until he’s out. Warehousing reduces crime.
- A second reason is deterrence. By locking up someone we think is guilty, we discourage others from doing the same thing.
- The third reason is rehabilitation – that the prisoner might become, somehow, a productive member of society.

But note that not one of these reasons cares about the guilt or innocence of the prisoner? You don't need to be guilty; only convicted.

The ancient theory started with a different concept: just desert. Even if the punishment did nothing to warehouse the criminal, or deter others, or rehabilitate the criminal, punishment was inflicted because the prisoner deserved it.

And, prophetically, this one does deserve it. In the first chapter of Acts Peter applies this to Judas. Now you see the just desert. He earned it.

So we see the possibility of invoking God's wrath. But do not neglect the righteousness needed to stand before God.

Why doesn't God just slay the wicked?

So, then, to take the other side, why is it that God doesn't just automatically slay the wicked? It would save us so much time and trouble, right?

- There is the problem of free will. If one is free to choose righteousness and love, one is free to choose evil and hatred. God earnestly desires that you love him. Evil is the price of that desire.
- God is also patient. He is giving the wicked a chance to repent (2 Peter 3:9).

But deal with me...

Psalms 109:21-31 NIV

But you, O Sovereign LORD, deal well with me for your name's sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me. (22) For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. (23) I fade away like an evening shadow; I am shaken off like a locust. (24) My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt. (25) I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads. (26) Help me, O LORD my God; save me in accordance with your love. (27) Let them know that it is your hand, that you, O LORD, have done it. (28) They may curse, but you will bless; when they attack they will be put to shame, but your servant will rejoice. (29) My accusers will be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak. (30) With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng I will praise him. (31) For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him.

But deal with me

It's a logical question: why should God treat me any differently? We're all sinners. David's answer is found in two things: the nature of God and David's affliction.

The nature of God

Note that the appeal is made not on David's merits but upon the mercy, the loving kindness of God. There are two threads of thought here:

- First, David appeals for the sake of God's name. It is to God's glory that he is ever constant, ever ready to help us. It's God's reputation at stake.
- Next, he appeals to the character of God – who delights to help the helpless and defend the widow and orphan.

The Suffering Servant

Next, David appeals on the basis of his suffering. He is human; he has human needs. Three appeals may be seen:

- There is physical suffering.
- There is also social suffering. We are social animals; to be the object of ridicule and whisper is genuinely painful.
- There is spiritual suffering; it is the wounded heart. A man betrayed by a good friend knows such suffering.

In this way David establishes his appeal to God. God is loving; David is needy.

At the judgment

Finally, this poem is a prophetic, it is a picture of the Last Judgment. Our accusers will put forth the charges, but do not fear. The wicked will rise from the dead only to be clothed in shame and dishonor. The righteous will find Christ at their right hand, defending them, now and forever.

There is comfort in this: you are not alone. Many other children of God have been slandered, whispered about and condemned. But God knows your name; he knows your character. Go on doing good, loving your enemies and praying for them. The Lord, He knows.

Teaching the Young - Psalm 34

One particular type of Psalm is called Didactic – which is to say, a teaching Psalm. Here is an example of that type. It is specifically designed to be instructional and easy to memorize – at least in Hebrew.

Magnify the Lord

First, a little background. This Psalm has 22 verses, the same number as the letters in the Hebrew alphabet Hebrew. In, it is an acrostic. Each verse starts with the next letter in the alphabet, which is an aid to memorization. That's one reason it's classified as didactic; it was intended to be memorized by children.

The background of the Psalm is noted at the top. Briefly, it is a Psalm about the lessons David learned from his brief sojourn with King Achish. David was running away from Saul. He stops on the way to obtain Goliath's sword from the high priest, and figures he will present himself and his services to the enemy of his enemy, Achish. That's David relying on the world's methods, not God. Achish's lieutenants are not fooled and insist that David must go. In terror, David feigns insanity. It's a narrow escape.

Incidentally, you will see that the king in question is named Abimelech. Some have thought that this is a scribal error; others note that the word "Abimelech" means "father of the king." It then could well be an official title for Achish

Magnify

Psalms 34:1-3 NASB A Psalm of David when he feigned madness before Abimelech, who drove him away and he departed.

I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth. (2) My soul will make its boast in the LORD; The humble will hear it and rejoice. (3) O magnify the LORD with me, And let us exalt His name together.

David begins with the praise and blessing of the Lord. In any relationship, the first step is to truly know and recognize who the other person is. So David commands the following:

- First, that we should bless the Lord and praise him at all times. Our constant praise of his name cements our relationship to him, for it acknowledges who he really is.
- Is there strength? Decide now whose strength you will rely upon – indeed, boast about. If you are constantly telling the world how wonderful (and no doubt humble) you are, God will allow you to handle things in your own strength. If you tell the world how great God is, things change.
- We are to exalt his name together. The praise and blessing of God is not a solitary activity; one of the purposes of worship is to praise and bless God for who he is and what he has done.

Rescue

Psalms 34:4-7 NASB

I sought the LORD, and He answered me, And delivered me from all my fears. (5) They looked to Him and were radiant, And their faces will never be ashamed. (6) This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him And saved him out of all his troubles. (7) The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear Him, And rescues them. There is an interesting change of pronouns here.

- First, David tells us of how he (singular) sought the Lord. It's as if to say that even if no one else seeks the Lord, one is sufficient. The Lord will deliver that one from all his fears.
- But then "they" looked to the Lord. They (plural) were "radiant," it says. It is the look of those who see God (the pure in heart). They will not be ashamed – for God delivers them as well.

Passing the Faith Along

All well and good so far; but this is an instructional Psalm, so we need to instruct.

Experience

Psalms 34:8-10 NASB

O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! (9) O fear the LORD, you His saints; For to those who fear Him there is no want. (10) The young lions do lack and suffer hunger; But they who seek the LORD shall not be in want of any good thing.

This is a very important concept: the experimental nature of faith. We are familiar with the experience method – that faith must be absolute before any results will be obtained. It's often preached that way. But it is also true that God invites his followers to "taste and see." Experimental faith is not condemned – but given as a method of learning about God. Two cautions:

- That's faith in God – not necessarily his people. Remember that we have both the weak and the hypocrites among us.
- You are blessed as you take refuge in him. That's not you giving him advice; that's God sheltering you.

Note too that this is a relationship that is based on the fear of the Lord. We are so accustomed to the "good buddy Jesus" relationship that we forget who the awesome God is. But if you take refuge in him, did you really want refuge with a good buddy, no stronger than you? Or did you seek the refuge of the awesome and powerful Jehovah?

If you do, it will not be long before you note that God treats you differently. David makes the point in metaphor; you'd think the king of beasts would always be able to feed the cubs. But even when food is that scarce, God provides.

Advice to the children

Psalms 34:11-14 NASB

Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. (12) Who is the man who desires life And loves length of days that he may see good? (13) Keep your tongue from evil And your lips from speaking deceit. (14) Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it.

Having learned the lesson, David now wants to pass it on.

- "Come, and listen." This is not something the kids are going to pick up by osmosis. It's important; they need to come to dad and listen attentively. Put down the video game, kid – this is something you need.
- He offers them the means to a long and good life. This is not something you do because you have to; you do it because it works

So – what does he recommend to the kids? They have the example – here are the do's and don'ts.

- Do “depart from evil.” In other words, watch who you hang around with. What are they doing? What kind of people are they?
- Do “keep your tongue from evil.” Just because you can shoot your mouth off doesn’t mean you should. Often enough you say something which commits you to evil you did not intend. Speak the truth in love.
- Do good. Examine your ways and ask if what you are doing is a good thing. You’re going to be doing something; make it a good something.
- Seek peace. This must have been hard for David, who was a warrior since his youth. But it must be so; always look to resolve the conflict. Blessed are the peacemakers.

You can see David’s experience with Achish in this. He went to join the enemies of his people, telling them he would help them against Saul. Later, he realizes the error of his ways – and God’s rescue from a tight place.

Righteous versus evil

Psalms 34:15-22 NASB

The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous And His ears are open to their cry. (16) The face of the LORD is against evildoers, To cut off the memory of them from the earth. (17) The righteous cry, and the LORD hears And delivers them out of all their troubles. (18) The LORD is near to the brokenhearted And saves those who are crushed in spirit. (19) Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all. (20) He keeps all his bones, Not one of them is broken. (21) Evil shall slay the wicked, And those who hate the righteous will be condemned. (22) The LORD redeems the soul of His servants, And none of those who take refuge in Him will be condemned.

We need so often to be reminded of how God treats the righteous (even if the righteous are fretting over it):

- He sees and hears what’s going on. You don’t have to explain it to him – but you often have to acknowledge it. Don’t bother with giving him advice. He already knows better than you. You should acknowledge that, too.
- He comforts his people. Often enough in the time of trial we ask for instant rescue. Rescue comes when God finishes bringing you through trial. In the meanwhile seek his comfort and be blessed by it.
- He delivers. One way or another, he delivers the righteous. At any given moment the wicked look to have total sway, but be patient. It will pass.

To the evil

The hard part for most of us is that it seems that God is ignoring the evil and the destruction they cause. He does not – but his purposes must be served as well. It may be that he is giving them time to repent. It may be that he wants to use them as a bad example to you (a cheap lesson).

In fact, God doesn’t ignore the evil, but is rather flint-faced toward them. You think your prayers are unheard? How do you think God deals with the self-righteous in prayer?

There is a key to God’s treatment of the evil here. “Evil shall slay the wicked.” What goes around, comes around. The universe is a moral place. The instrument by which God destroys the evil is often another set of evil people.

In the end

Ultimately, at the last judgment, there will be a divine reckoning. May we point out the kind of people God will rescue on that day?

- They are those who are his servants. Not just the hangers-on, the uninvolved, but those who served.
- They are those who took refuge in him. Those who trusted their own strength will see just how puny that strength is when Christ returns. Those who cast their cares on Christ will see that return as pure joy.

BUT – in the meanwhile, there will be trouble. It is the life of the Christian to constantly have troubles and just as constantly have joy. For in times of trouble God rescues his children, and his children rejoice in that fact.

What Right? - Psalm 50

The Mighty God Psalms 50:1-6 NASB A Psalm of Asaph.

The Mighty One, God, the LORD, has spoken, And summoned the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. (2) Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth. (3) May our God come and not keep silence; Fire devours before Him, And it is very tempestuous around Him. (4) He summons the heavens above, And the earth, to judge His people: (5) "Gather My godly ones to Me, Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice." (6) And the heavens declare His righteousness, For God Himself is judge. Selah.

The Names of God

It is a common fact of the Old Testament: names are not just labels stuck on people. In this time, people expected that your name meant something — and that it described you in some sense. This is true for the names of God in this passage as well. There are three such names here:

- El — this comes from the root word meaning "mighty." Sometimes translated as "Almighty," it carries with it the idea of great power.
- Elohim — this is the plural of the previous word. It is something like to use in the English language of a royal plural; as Queen Victoria once said, "we are not amused." The fact that both the singular and plural versions are used is curious until you read the New Testament. The doctrine of the Trinity is hinted at in the Old Testament, but never really explicitly stated.
- Jehovah — this is the Hebrew for "I am." It proclaims God as the self-existent one, the one who is not contingent on any other being. It is the personal name by which God identified himself to Moses.

The use of all three names is an unusual combination. We may infer that the psalmist meant to impress us.

Out of Zion

The interpretation of poetry is never an exact science. Sometimes we are reduced to speculation concerning what the poet really meant. Particularly difficult phrase in this one is the second verse. The clause, "the perfection of beauty," is the particularly difficult one. It has some interesting implications:

- It associates beauty with God. An artist would see this simply as a matter of perfection. Therefore we must conclude that perfection itself exists. This has enormous implications. For example it implies there is a perfect standard of behavior.
- Such beauty is said to shine forth. In other words, such perfection is visible to us in some way.
- Note that this is not necessarily referring to natural beauty in God's creation. This beauty is associated with God.

In the third verse the poet uses the unusual phrasing, "may our God come." If you read the rest of this section, you cannot help but come to the conclusion that the poet wants God to come in a way most of us would not appreciate. We are all for the gentle Jesus; we appreciate the comfort he brings. But do we really want the God before whom fire devours? Indeed, the poet here gives us three characteristics of this God which might describe the second coming of Christ just as well as a visitation in the Old Testament.

- First, he is not silent. God has no intention of sneaking up on us. This will be an event quite visible and heard.
- May I point out the next important word: fire? The New Testament mind leaps immediately to the fires of hell.
- In a curious phrasing, the psalmist declares that it is "very tempestuous around Him." The modern airplane traveller might think of the word turbulence; think of the most difficult flight you've ever had.

This would be very difficult to interpret without the concept of Judgment Day.

Gather My Godly Ones

This passage probably made only dark sense to the ancient Jew. We can interpret it in the light of the New Testament. Simply put, there will come a day when God arrives in visible power, accompanied by the resurrection of the dead, resulting in a new heaven and a new earth after he has passed judgment upon all of mankind. This particular passage speaks only of the resurrection of the godly; we are assured in Revelation that those who are in Christ rise first.

Here we find a hidden meaning: the covenant of sacrifice. This would mean the sacrifices he made at the altar in the Tabernacle (when this Psalm was written) and later the Temple. That would be the Old Testament interpretation. But we also know that Christ is our sacrificial lamb, and therefore we are bound to God by a covenant of sacrifice as well. The reason we take communion is so that we will remember that sacrifice. Given such a memorial, it must be important.

The last key fact emerge from this section is that God himself will judge. This tells us that the judgment will be righteous; those who have earned the reward will receive it. God is both righteous and abundant. The reader will recall that God himself will use the standard by which we judge others (or refrain from judging others) in judging us. This too is justice.

Complaint

Psalms 50:7-15 NASB

"Hear, O My people, and I will speak; O Israel, I will testify against you; I am God, your God. (8) "I do not reprove you for your sacrifices, And your burnt offerings are continually before Me. (9) "I shall take no young bull out of your house Nor male goats out of your folds. (10) "For every beast of the forest is Mine, The cattle on a thousand hills. (11) "I know every bird of the mountains, And everything that moves in the field is Mine. (12) "If I were hungry I would not tell you, For the world is Mine, and all it contains. (13) "Shall I eat the flesh of bulls Or drink the blood of male goats? (14) "Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving And pay your vows to the Most High; (15) Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me."

Does God Approve?

This passage is somewhat unusual in the Old Testament for the fact that it does not condemn meaningless sacrifices. Remember that Asaph was a contemporary of King David. Worship in his days was honest and sincere, we may assume. Therefore God approves. We may make the same extension today about our own worship services. Supposing that they meet the standard of sincerity and some attempt to worship in the fashion which God would approve, it would seem reasonable to think that he does approve. This would also apply to our tithes and offerings, which parallel the sacrifices of the Old Testament time. Note, please, the measurement is not how many decibels the

guitar player can crank out his amplifier — but the honest sincerity of the congregation singing along.

Does God Need?

The phrasing here implies that God has no need or desire to reach down into the land of Israel and scoop up a few more goats or bulls to be sacrificed to him. In other words, Israel was doing just fine with this. More to the point, God here proclaims his ownership of all things created. As such, we are simply returning to him what he has given to us. Logically, therefore, he has no real need to grasp at anything we have.

The expression here stresses the abundance of what God has. The phrase, "the cattle on a thousand hills," has passed into the English language as a sign of riches. Even more, God makes it very clear that if he wanted more the last place He would go to get it would be from us. It makes sense if you view everything you have as a gift from God.

So What Does God Want?

Okay, what is it that God wants — if it's not another bull on the altar? The psalmist gives us three things:

- First, offer him your thanksgiving. Be thankful for the things that he has given you; be vocal about it.
- Keep your promises to God. If you have made a declaration to him that you will do this, that or the other than follow through. You prefer to deal with an honest man; so does God.
- Call upon him when you are in trouble. Why? Because he will come to your rescue and give you reason to praise him — as he so richly deserves.

What Right Do You Have?

Psalms 50:16-21 NASB

But to the wicked God says, "What right have you to tell of My statutes And to take My covenant in your mouth? (17) "For you hate discipline, And you cast My words behind you. (18) "When you see a thief, you are pleased with him, And you associate with adulterers. (19) "You let your mouth loose in evil And your tongue frames deceit. (20) "You sit and speak against your brother; You slander your own mother's son. (21) "These things you have done and I kept silence; You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you and state the case in order before your eyes.

The Implied Problem

The price we pay for having a system which is intended to be impartial is that we sometimes acquit the guilty. The wicked are entitled to use the laws of our country to escape punishment, if they can. Often enough, this bothers the honest citizen. It appears that the Almighty has the same opinion.

The problem extends to the church as well. In any particular church, there will be those who are minimal believers. The wicked look at such people and make them their standard of comparison. They criticize such believers. Often enough, so do the serious Christians. The serious Christian challenges this with an eye to correcting it.

The wicked have a different purpose. They look at such people and use them to justify themselves. I suspect this is the primary use of hypocrites — to make other sinners feel good.

There is no logical sense to this. It amounts to saying, "you are bad. I am worse. Therefore, I am justified in being evil." It makes no sense – but it is a common opinion. This in no way fools Almighty God.

Who Is He Talking about?

It helps us here to see who the wicked really are. There are three criteria:

- These people accept neither God's word nor God's discipline. Their own pride substitutes for these things.
- These are people who are pleased with evil. Adultery is "enhancing your marriage." Theft is "redistribution of assets."
- Most telling of all, these people speak evil. They are quick to defend what is vile.

God Kept Silent

There is always a temptation in Christian prayer to give advice to the God: wouldn't this be a good time to smite the evil? How about a lightning bolt directly in the head of some notable, "evil" leader? God has a different point of view. He wants that all should be saved, that none should perish. Hitting somebody with a lightning bolt is tantamount to saying it is impossible for them to repent. It may be very difficult, but nothing is impossible with God. However, the day is coming when God's patience will run out, and he will return to judge the living and the dead.

No Fence to Sit on

Psalms 50:22-23 NASB

"Now consider this, you who forget God, Or I will tear you in pieces, and there will be none to deliver. (23) "He who offers a sacrifice of thanksgiving honors Me; And to him who orders his way aright I shall show the salvation of God."

The choice is quite simple:

- Either you are one of those who forget God completely, and for you there is no deliverer.
- Or you are one who thanks God, orders your ways as he would desire — and is therefore shown salvation.

As the days approach the end of the age, the fence you want to sit on has sharper and sharper pickets. In the end, you must decide.

Under His Wings - Psalm 91

It is the good pleasure of God to do extraordinary things through ordinary people. Those ordinary people often discover God's power because of a trial in their lives; they turn and run to God, and discover there the protection of God. They are "leaning on the everlasting arms;" they are "under his wings."

The Psalmist here knew the same kind of protection. We don't know who wrote this particular Psalm; speculation is Moses or David. It does not matter; this is a man who has turned to God for shelter – and found more than he needed.

Shelter for those who trust

Psalm 91:1-4 NIV

1 He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. 2 I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." 3 Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare and from the deadly pestilence. 4 He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

Staying in the shelter

The word "dwell" is passing from our language. It carries with it the idea of staying for a time, settling down. God desires his children to stay – not run into – his shelter. Other translations use the word "abide" –, conveying the sense that we live in the shelter of his arms. The key is this: abide. Don't wait for the crisis.

The word "shelter" can also be translated "secret place." This abiding is not something that is prominently displayed. Our Lord counseled us to pray in secret; the results will be public enough.

Proclaiming the fortress

One aspect of trusting the Lord is "proclaiming the fortress." Others should know in whom you trust. And what are you to say?

- First, that he is your refuge – the shelter in which you abide.
- Next, that he is your God – the one who has all authority in your life.
- Finally, there is the fact that you trust him – tell them that.

You are the leading expert on what God does for you. In these three points are the testimony of the average Christian.

Deliverance

He promises to deliver you if you will trust him. He delivers us in two ways;

- He delivers us from troubles – for when we follow his truth he keeps us from temptation and evil.
- He delivers us out of trouble – if we will but turn to him.

His Faithfulness

Do we believe in the faithfulness of God. God covers you; but you have to run to him to hide. You must make the active choice (run to him) before he makes his active choice to cover you. Then you will see the faithfulness of God. He is not like us; his word always is true.

Do not fear

Psalm 91:5-9, NIV

5 You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, 6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. 7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. 8 You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

Our Psalmist amplifies his previous thoughts. This is helpful to us, for often we trust God in one thing, but not another. Listen to his fears as they leave.

Night or Day

It's the middle of the night, there is no one around who is friendly, and the night seems to hold the almost visible forms of your enemy. Alone in the dark, courage ebbs. But we are not alone in the dark.

The day brings its terrors too – but you need not fear. Your Lord is your shelter.

It makes no difference, the time of day or night – to the one who created time.

Disease and disaster

Of all fears, that which “might happen” is the worst. The Psalmist does not say you will not get sick; nor does he say you won't face natural disaster (or, for that matter, any other kind). He says you will not fear them. Make provision for these things. But fear them? Do you not know the one who holds all things in his hands?

One in a thousand

Indeed, it appears that the Lord God is very fond of you. He chose you before the world began to inherit his salvation. More than that, for those who are obedient, there is protection beyond measure. Remember Esther? Did the fate of the Jewish nation really depend upon a king's insomnia? The Almighty is superior to time, and is pleased to look after his children.

You will see the wicked get their due

Though it may seem wickedness goes unpunished, God provides the sight of the wicked getting what's coming to them.

- So that you might know righteousness. As you see those who are wicked getting what they deserve, you will also see the virtue of doing it his way.
- So that you might know justice. It is not wise to assume that the loving God is also one who ignores justice.
- So that you will know that God is sovereign – it's his universe. What goes around, comes around.

The Providence of God

Psalm 91:9-12 NIV

9 If you make the Most High your dwelling— even the LORD, who is my refuge— 10 then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent. 11 For he will command his angels concerning

you to guard you in all your ways; 12 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Trust rewarded

Hebrews 11:6 (NIV)

6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

God rewards our trust in him. Abraham believed God; he trusted in him and acted upon that trust. God rewarded him by counting that belief as righteousness.

No relationship of love can be built unless both persons trust each other. (Try having a happy marriage without trusting your spouse) That relationship is what God wants.

Angelic Protection

While there is a lot of nonsense on this subject it is clearly taught that God provides his angels for our protection. Indeed, the basic manner in which God punishes people and nations is not so much to strike them as to cease protecting them. But for those who are strong in the faith, God's protection is something to be claimed in faith.

From C. H. Spurgeon:

In the year 1854, when I had scarcely been in London twelve months, the neighbourhood in which I labored was visited by Asiatic cholera, and my congregation suffered from its inroads. Family after family summoned me to the bedside of the smitten, and almost every day I was called to visit the grave. I gave myself up with youthful ardor to the visitation of the sick, and was sent for from all corners of the district by persons of all ranks and religions. I became weary in body and sick at heart. My friends seemed falling one by one, and I felt or fancied that I was sickening like those around me. A little more work and weeping would have laid me low among the rest; I felt that my burden was heavier than I could bear, and I was ready to sink under it. As God would have it, I was returning mournfully home from a funeral, when my curiosity led me to read a paper which was wafered up in a shoemaker's window in the Dover Road. It did not look like a trade announcement, nor was it, for it bore in a good bold handwriting these words: - "Because thou hast made the Lord, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; there shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling." The effect upon my heart was immediate. Faith appropriated the passage as her own. I felt secure, refreshed, girt with immortality. I went on with my visitation of the dying in a calm and peaceful spirit; I felt no fear of evil, and I suffered no harm. The providence which moved the tradesman to place those verses in his window I gratefully acknowledge, and in the remembrance of its marvelous power I adore the Lord my God.

Angelic protection simply a matter of physical safety. As we see here, the problem was not only disease, but the oppression of death. Our Lord knows your every need; trust him for it.

Triumph of the Saints

Psalms 91:13-16 (NIV)

13 You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. 14 "Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. 15 He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. 16 With long life will I satisfy him and show him my salvation."

It is curious but true: it pleases God to give victory over the strong to those who are weak – but who trust in him. Why is this?

- So that his power might be shown; in our weakness is his strength displayed.
- So that his purposes might prevail.
- So that we might be encouraged.

So God tells us what to do about it. It's a pretty simple thing; in the sense of logic, it is an "If-Then":
IF

- You love him
- You truly know him, and acknowledge his glorious Name
- You call on him in time of trouble

THEN

- He will answer you, he will rescue you and protect you
- He will be with you, You will know his peace; you will feel his presence.
- He promises you his rewards on earth: honor, long life – and salvation.

You are privileged as a child of God to claim his promises to you; if you do, you will not only shelter under his wings; he will give you the wings of an eagle to soar.

Envy - Psalm 73

Psalm 73:1-3 (NIV) A psalm of Asaph.

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. {2} But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. {3} For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

More than any recent time, we can sympathize with Asaph. He "envied the arrogant." Truly the arrogant are dominant today. Like no time in written recent memory, our society considers arrogance a virtue rather than a vice.

In former times arrogance was still seen as evil - the arrogant no longer see the virtuous life as worth pretending to. Envy then becomes one of the great temptations of our time - all the more if it is never preached against. Let's hear Asaph's complaint:

4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. 5 They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity ; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. 8 They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. 9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. 10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. 11 They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" 12 This is what the wicked are like--always carefree, they increase in wealth.

In the background, you can hear Asaph's complaint: why is it that God allows these obviously wicked people to prosper. God says He is a God of justice. God says He is omnipotent. God says He loves the righteous -so why do the wicked prosper?

Interestingly, Christ never answers this argument. He simply advises us to do likewise:

Matthew 5:44-45 (NIV)

44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

God is also a God of love; it is not his wish that any should perish:

1) Is it not at least a little presumptuous to tell God who He should or should not strike with lightning?

2) And if He struck the wicked down like that, perhaps some in this class would be in the grave, and on to Hell, rather than saved?

So why do we complain? It is the comparison between them and us. If we were rich and carefree too, who would care that the wicked were such? But Asaph say,

Psalms 73:13-14 (NIV)

13 Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. 14 All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

In other words, I've been good and look where it got me.

Asaph isn't totally lost, however. He knows when to keep his mouth shut:

Psalms 73:15-16 (NIV)

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. 16 When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me

I may not know what's going on, but I know when to shut up. For envy is contagious. If you think not, listen to the conversation around the lunch table at work, especially when the subject of management comes up. It's a real temptation to envy (and condemn) those you may not even know. James gives us some good advice on this:

James 3:14 (NIV)

14 But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.

The turning point now comes. We have seen Asaph, in the mind's eye, down in the depths, looking up in envy. We are about to see the virtues of regular worship - worship which obliges the human mind to touch the mind of God:

Psalms 73:17 (NIV)

17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

The word "sanctuary" gives us the clue to Asaph's restoration. In Old Testament times, most people could not enter the sanctuary. (Num 3:10)

So Asaph was a priest! His restoration then must be thought of as being that of a priest who comes into contact with God. Indeed, the solution to the problem of envy is to see the situation from God's point of view. Now, according to the Bible, we too are priests - a kingdom of priests. A priest is one who is the bridge between people and God. So, let's look at this from the point of view of a priest in our world. What does a priest see? He sees the heart worries of all who come to him. Put yourself in the position of the priest in our society. The wicked, arrogant man comes into your office for a little heart to heart talk. What does he say? How does this person appear to God? Asaph describes it this way:

Psalms 73:18-20 (NIV)

18 Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. 19 How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! 20 As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

Consider well the secret fears! Arrogance is often the cover of fear; especially if you have the money to pull it off. Asaph now bursts into one of those characteristic songs found in the Psalm. Consider it as the verse and chorus. Verse by man; chorus by God:

Man

Psalms 73:21-22 (NIV)

21 When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. -- How like us! Envy turns us into animals, running on emotion alone. But God is patient; He understands and cares for us.

God

Psalms 73:23-24 (NIV)

23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Even when I behave like an animal, God cares for me, gently guiding me back into the right path. And when He does guide me back, I realize how gracious He has been, and what strength He is to me:

Man

Psalms 73:25-26 (NIV)

25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

That pair of verses is a chorus of worship. The proper response of man to God's grace is praise. Even to this God gives us guidance:

God

Psalms 73:27-28 (NIV)

27 Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. 28 But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

It is not sufficient to praise Him in sanctuary; we must tell others of His deeds. It is the natural outflowing of God's spirit in us.

As James tells us,

James 4:8 (NIV)

8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. --

There is the real solution to envy. Draw near to God; see things as He sees them. Love others as He loves them.

Let Me Paint You A Picture - Psalm 84

One of the wonders of the Bible is that our Lord uses the experiences and praises of the Israel in the Old Testament as pictures of the nature of New Testament experience. We will see that in Psalm 84. Picture three concentric circles. In the inner circle, hidden from the view of all but God, is the spiritual life of the Christian. Next is the outer life, and finally that life as viewed by others. These are the Temple, the Pilgrimage and the Worship. Psalms such as this do not define doctrine; they illustrate it.

The Temple

The Old Testament picture of the Temple is very explicit. Chapters are written about how it was built; instructions were given in great detail. In Psalm 84 we see the result, as seen by ancient Israel:

{84:1} For the director of music. According to gittith. Of the Sons of Korah. A psalm. How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! {2} My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. {3} Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may have her young-- a place near your altar, O LORD Almighty, my King and my God. {4} Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you. Selah -- **Psalms 84:1-4 (NIV)**

The temple of the New Testament is the Christian. Here we see some characteristics which might interest us: First, there is the beauty of the Temple. Where God resides, the building is beautiful.

How is this beauty of soul achieved? In Jesus we see the way to spiritual beauty - the yearning for God. This is a natural yearning, and only Christ can satisfy it:

{13} Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, {14} but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." -- **John 4:13-14 (NIV)**

The phrase "cry out" in the NIV is translated "shout for joy" in the RSV and Jerusalem versions. There is really no conflict; yearning in any sense comes out. Witness Job in his yearning for God:

{25} I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. {26} And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; {27} I myself will see him with my own eyes--I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me! -- **Job 19:25-27 (NIV)**

From the oldest to newest books of the Bible ("even so, come") we see this yearning on the part of the Christian to meet God.

The personal nature of this relationship is also shown in this Psalm. Notice the use of the sparrow as nesting near the altar, and remember Jesus' words:

{29} Are not two sparrows sold for a penny ? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. -- **Matthew 10:29 (NIV)**

Pilgrimage

{5} Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage. {6} As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools. {7} They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion. {8} Hear my prayer, O LORD God Almighty; listen to me, O God of Jacob. Selah {9} Look upon our shield, O God; look with favor on your anointed one. -- **Psalms 84:5-9 (NIV)**

In this world we do the "going." Strength in this world starts with the desire of the Christian to go where God wants him to go. How often we tell God that we do not like our circumstance, or we wish he would not place us in such a position. We are just passing through, as the old spiritual says. If we set our hearts on pilgrimage they would be much lighter.

Pilgrimage does not mean walking through as much as it does (in the Hebrew) setting up a temporary lodging. "Pitching the tent nightly closer to home" is the closest I can get to this feeling in English. Corrie ten Boom tells this story to illustrate the guiding principle of pilgrimage:

When Corrie Ten Boom of The Hiding Place fame was a little girl in Holland, her first realization of death came after a visit to the home of a neighbor who had died. It impressed her that some day her parents would also die. Corrie's father comforted her with words of wisdom. "Corrie, when you and I go to Amsterdam, when do I give you your ticket?"

"Why, just before we get on the train," she replied.

"Exactly," her father said, "and our wise Father in heaven knows when we're going to need things too. Don't run out ahead of Him Corrie.

When the time comes that some of us will have to die, you will look into your heart and find the strength you need -- just in time."

You see the point? We "arrive" only in heaven. Here on earth, we are pilgrims. So, we must ask for our daily bread. Sometimes that bread will arrive with tears. The Valley of Baca translates "Valley of Weeping." The name refers to the trees in the valley, which are Palestinian alders. They "weep" sap. The valley itself is mentioned one other time in the Old Testament - it's also called the Valley of Rephaim. Rephaim were the original inhabitants - they were giants - but by the time the Israelites conquered the land they had been wiped out. Hence "Rephaim" also meant "ghosts" to the Hebrews. Tears, giants or ghosts - these are in our trials. The tears we weep at loss; the fears of the giants in our lives and worst of all the ghosts of our pasts join to terrify us.

But in all these things we are more than conquerors! We take the valley of weeping and make it a fertile place; we go "from strength to strength." This is the life of victory, the pilgrimage of triumph which leads us to the Father's throne.

Worship

By worship I mean service, for they are the same word in the New Testament. The Psalmist puts it this way:

{10} Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. {11} For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. {12} O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you. -- **Psalms 84:10-12 (NIV)**

The Christian refuse to try and stand on his own two feet, proud to be dependent upon no one. The Christian looks to God as sun and shield, instead. Sun - as in light to my path. Shield, to defend me against the tempter. As Proverbs puts it,

{5} "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him. -- **Proverbs 30:5 (NIV)**

What the world sees is the strange sight of Christian taking refuge in God, not in the strength of this world. For those who trust, the world also sees the blessing of God on that same Christian.

We are the doorkeepers in the house of the Lord. It doesn't appear to be a noble position to those in the world; indeed, the lowest one around. But if someone else is to get inside, someone has to open the door - right? Remember the words of the Lord:

{24} "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. {25} The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. {26} But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. -- **Matthew 7:24-26 (NIV)**