



Catalog No. 686

Psalm 1

First Message

Gary Vanderet

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A SONG OF SALVATION

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

Have you ever made a wrong turn while driving? I thought about wrong turns this week as I meditated on Psalm 1. I have made a few in my life. As I was preparing for this message, one in particular came to mind. While I was pastoring our high school students, we chose a new site for our annual summer camp. That summer we took 120 students and leaders to Emerald Cove Camp at Bass Lake. Since this was our first time to go there, I suggested we caravan. The temperature that day must have been 100 degrees! On the 101 freeway heading south, the bumper-to-bumper traffic quickly reminded us that it was the weekend of the Gilroy Garlic Festival. It took us nearly two hours to get through Gilroy. Needless to say, the troops were restless. High school students are not known for their patience.

Once past Gilroy, we crossed Interstate 5 and headed toward Fresno on 99. I knew of a shortcut through Madera that could save us time getting to Bass Lake. Not having been there before and unable to understand the map, I thought I knew what I was doing when I turned west instead of east and ended up on a narrow, winding road which went for miles. We drove and drove until I saw a sign that said Interstate 5 was one mile ahead.

I immediately pulled over. As I got out of my car and walked back to the van behind us, I knew I was in trouble. Although everyone was joking and singing, I could tell they were hot and tired. When I told them I had taken a wrong turn, they said, "That's okay, Gary. No problem!" Then I added, "an hour and a half ago." Those understanding, compassionate looks melted in disbelief! Needless to say, I was not the most popular person at dinner that evening.

Even worse than taking a wrong turn on a road is making a wrong turn in life, leading to eternal death.

One author has said, "Only a Philistine could fail to love the Psalms." We all appreciate their beauty. In the ancient hymn book of Israel, we find everything—music, wisdom, theology, and emotion. The Psalms are actually a collection of five books compiled and edited over many years. Psalm 1 along with Psalm 2 introduce the entire book. They are the portal through which we must enter if we are going to experience the richness, beauty and theology of the Psalms. If we want to experience what the psalmists talk about, if we want to say along with them, "The Lord is My Shepherd," we must enter the portal of Psalm 1.

This Psalm forces us to make the most important decision of our life. In fact, one scholar has likened this Psalm to the wicket gate in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Remember Christian found himself loaded down under the burden of sin and guilt in the City of Destruction. He was in complete despair, wondering what he would do and how he would cope. In our day, we might liken this to a feeling of aimlessness, despairing of ever understanding the meaning of life. It would be like having no purpose. When he thought his burden might sink him to the lowest depths, he met Evangelist who pointed him to the wicket gate and told him that somewhere beyond it was the celestial city where he could be freed from his load. When Christian arrived

at the gate, he found that it only offered him two ways. He could either enter the narrow wicket gate to go to the celestial city or turn back to the City of Destruction. These were the only two directions from which to choose.

Psalm 1 shows us the two ways of life. The key word and metaphor "way" frames the Psalm in verses 1 and 6: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners...For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." These two ways lead to opposite but appropriate destinies. One leads to the celestial city and the other to death.

This Psalm stands as a faithful doorkeeper to those of us who want to experience the beauty and worship of the hymnbook of Israel. It will force us to make a decision. As we look at this Psalm, it is my prayer that after examining both directions you will make the correct turn, for the wrong turn means eternal death.

Before we look at the Psalm itself, let me give you two observations concerning the Psalms in general. As we continue in this series, I will add to this information. These two points will help us in our study.

I. Gaining Some Background: Two Important Observations

A. The Literary Form of the Psalms is Poetry

More than 50% of the Old Testament is written in poetry. Every discourse between God and man is written in poetry. Thus, to understand a significant part of the Old Testament, it is important to understand the nature of Hebrew poetry. C. S. Lewis has written:

What must be said...is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung...Those who talk of reading the Bible "as literature" sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about...That seems to me to be nonsense. But there is a saner sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are. Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.

The beauty of Hebrew poetry can be seen in Psalm 1. Notice the literary structure of this poem. The author formed his words and ideas in pairs. There are two counsels mentioned in verses 1-2: the counsel of the wicked and the counsel of the Word. There are also two similes in verses 3-4: the tree and the chaff. Finally, in verses 5-6, there are two destinies: life and death. Even within the major division of verses 1-3 and verses 4-6, we can see the pairing of verses

1-2, 3-4, and 5-6. There are many subtleties to be found in this poetic literature if one is willing to read it patiently.

Look at another detail of the poetic structure. The Psalm deals with two types of people, the righteous and the wicked. Thus, the psalmist moves from the wicked in the first verse to the righteous in the second. Then he moves from the righteous in verse 3 to the wicked in verse 4. And in the last two verses, he continues the pattern. In verse 5, he moves from the wicked to the righteous in one couplet, and in verse 6 he moves from the righteous to the wicked in another. In moving back and forth between the two images, he is juxtaposing them for a powerful contrast. These are deliberate poetic achievements.

There is a second observation we must make in order to understand this Psalm.

B. The Dominant Feature in Hebrew Poetry is Parallelism

“Parallelism” simply means “having two elements which are parallel.” In English poetry, parallelism is usually produced through the use of sound. Hebrew parallelism, however, is based on correspondence of thought. The Hebrew poets did not rhyme words, they rhymed ideas. Notice that most verses have two lines. The key to interpreting the verse is found in the second line. There the poet intensifies and narrows his focus.

Both of these observations about Hebrew poetry will be essential to our study.

II. The Gateway to the Psalter: The Two Ways of Life

In Psalm 1, we will be looking at two ways of life as exemplified by two kinds of people. The first three verses present the blessed way of the righteous man. Look first at verses 1-2.

A. The Blessed Way of the Righteous Man (1:1-3)

**How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path [way] of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2 NASB)**

In these verses, the psalmist describes the character of the righteous man in two ways. First, he uses a negative description and then a positive one.

1. His Character Described (1:1-2)

First, *there is a complete aversion to ungodly counsel.* Notice the adjectives describing the counsel: “wicked,” “sinners,” “scoffers.” These are not different people. Rather these words are descriptions of the same person who refuses to surrender his life to the will of God. Walking in his own counsel, he sees no need for the revelation of God. He lives his life independent of God, as if God did not exist. This wicked man is described clearly in Psalm 10:4-5:

**The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him.
All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”
His ways prosper at all times;
Thy judgments are on high, out of his sight;
As for all his adversaries, he snorts at them.**

What an apt description of the world in which we live! This is modern man who completely rejects the Word of God. In the midst

of the weighty and complex issues facing us today, modern man ignores the revelation of God.

God’s Word says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Modern man says, “You can worship any God you want. All roads lead to heaven.” God’s Word says, “You shall not commit murder.” Modern man says it is perfectly acceptable to commit abortion. God’s Word says, “Do not commit adultery.” Modern man says, “You are free to divorce and remarry any time.” God’s Words says, “Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Modern man says the end justifies the means.

It is one thing to approach God as a sinner like David to seek forgiveness and salvation when we do wrong. It is another to say God’s Word is wrong. The wicked man in the Psalms says, “I am free to do what I want. I will live life on my terms.” The righteous man must avoid his counsel.

Notice the progression in these verses. The heart gets progressively harder as we move from the “counsel” to “way” and from “way” to “seat.” “Counsel” refers to our way of thinking. The “way” refers to our behavior. Our thoughts always precede our behavior. The third step refers to the position of belonging, the “seat.” This progression begins with our thoughts, leads to our behavior and results in our identification with and belonging to a group. Proverbs reminds us, “Guard your heart [your mind] with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” One author has said:

Deterioration is never sudden. No garden “suddenly” overgrows with thorns. No church “suddenly” splits...No marriage “suddenly” breaks down. No nation “suddenly” becomes a mediocre power...Slowly, almost imperceptibly, certain things are accepted that once were rejected. Things once considered hurtful are now secretly tolerated.

When a house finally collapses, you know the termites have been there a long time. Calvin once said, “The first step to living well is to renounce the company of the ungodly, otherwise it is sure to infect us with its own pollution.” I would change the word “company” to “counsel.” I believe God wants us to be in the company of the wicked at times, but he most certainly wants us to reject their counsel.

We must make our stand clear from the beginning! As Christians, we must affirm our identity from the start. Alexander Pope once described the psychological and spiritual transformation of man in this way:

Vice is a monster of such frightful mean
As to be hated, needs but to be seen.
But seen to oft, too familiar her face,
We must first endure, then pity, then embrace.

As I thought about this poem, I thought about how our own society has dealt with the sin of homosexuality. Fifteen years ago, homosexuality was a vice of such frightful means that to “see it was to hate it.” But “seen to oft, too familiar her face,” we first endured the sin and then pitied it. Now we embrace it as if it were not a sin at all.

My exhortation to you is to examine the input that enters your mind every day. Judge each thought and suggestion. You teenagers ought to consider the music you listen to. I am not against rock and roll, but I do see subtle messages that go against the Word of God being powerfully communicated to each listener. Understand those messages and judge them. The blessed man has a complete aversion to ungodly counsel.

The second trait is contained in a positive description. *There is a complete surrender of his life to the Word of God*—“His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.” The word “delight” is crucial to the theology of the Psalm because this man has a regenerate heart and a new nature. He delightfully surrenders to the Word of God. He does not read the Word out of some religious obligation or come to it as a legalist. Rather, he cannot take his eyes off it for it reflects his heart, a heart that is no longer under the law but longs to be in the law.

Notice that the Psalmist divides all of mankind into two camps. There are only two ways in this Psalm. This seems a bit radical to us and a bit simplistic. We tend to see things in grays rather than in black and white. We have either surrendered our hearts to the Word of God or we have not. There is no third way. We will never enjoy God unless our will is abandoned to him. Otherwise, we only endure him. There is either a commitment or not.

This person not only delights in the law, but he meditates on it day and night. There are three basic elements to “meditate.” The first is memorization. This includes silently quoting it and reviewing it. Second, meditation involves recitation. We see this in Joshua 1, a parallel passage to this Psalm. Moses writes, “This book of the Law shall not depart from your *mouth*.” The third element involves investigation. In studying a Hebrew word, it is important to look at the words contained in the second line of a verse which parallel the first word. Some of the words used parallel to “meditate” are “remember,” “ponder,” “calculate,” “inquire,” and “investigate.” This is illustrated in Deuteronomy where the men wore the Law on their foreheads and wrists so they could contemplate it continually.

In meditating, we are constantly relating all of life to the Word of God. This involves a whole-hearted embrace of his Word which is both qualitative (“delight”) and quantitative (“day and night”). “Day and night” is a Hebrew merism to express the totality of time. This gives the thought of continual dedication to the Word.

Meditate on the full revelation of God. Meditate on God’s history with his people. Meditate on the survival of God’s people through time. Meditate on the failure of all other kingdoms to endure. Where are Babylon, Assyria, and Persia? Where is the church? Only it still exists and is growing.

Meditate on the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Meditate on the pouring out of his Spirit upon his people. Meditate on his promises. Meditate on his coming again. Meditate on the Word of God. The blessed man has completely surrendered his life to the Word of God.

This is the choice we must make. Negatively, there is a conscious resolve to renounce the philosophy, behavior and counsel of the wicked. Positively, there is a wholehearted embrace of the Word of God which is both qualitative and quantitative. Without this decision, we will never enter into the beauty of the Psalms.

The psalmist now moves from describing the character of the blessed man to evaluating his life. In his character, we have seen the cause of his blessedness. The Psalmist now tells us the consequences of this blessed state in verse 3.

2. His Life Evaluated (1:3)

**And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season,
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers. (1:3)**

I want to point out two consequences of this righteous lifestyle. First, *the blessed man has a secure promise of abundant life*. The state of this man is blessedness—“How blessed is the man.” When God blessed a person in the Old Testament, he filled him with the potency for life. He would say, “Be fruitful and multiply.” This carried the idea of physical procreation. Thus, when he blessed herds, crops, or people, he filled them with the potency of the Creator’s life himself. When the Old Testament speaks of a blessed man, it refers to a man who lives in prosperity, abundance, and security. An excellent example of what this means is found in Psalm 144:12-14:

**Let our sons in their youth be as grown-up plants,
And our daughters as corner pillars fashioned for a palace;
Let our barns be full, furnishing every kind of produce,
And our flocks bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields;
Let our cattle bear,
Without mishap and without loss,
Let there be no outcry in our streets!
How blessed are the people who are so situated;
How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!**

This Psalm reveals that the blessed state includes *health*: “our children are like well nurtured plants.” Blessing also pictures *abundance*: “our barns are filled with plenty.” And the blessed man has *security*: “there is no outcry in the streets.” In the New Testament, this truth takes on spiritual meaning. The New Testament develops this concept to include spiritual abundance, health, security, and life. This is seen in the Beatitudes where the Lord tells us that those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek are blessed. Although they may not have much in the way of physical blessing, they have an abundance of spiritual life. He even says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

When Jesus poured out his Spirit, he filled us with the capacity to reproduce spiritually. Thus, for us “blessed” means the ability to live life to the fullest, to realize life to its maximum as the Creator intended. It is to experience life the way life was designed to be lived before the fall of Adam.

A second idea inherent in this word is that of future fulfillment, even when spoken of in the present tense. Because we have a relationship with God in which we are surrendered to his Word and have renounced the counsel of the wicked, we have the promise of a celestial city before us. This, too, is seen in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God...Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God...Blessed are you when you are persecuted for my name’s sake, for great is your reward in heaven.” All of these are fulfilled in the future. It is not clear when that future will occur, but it is guaranteed to be there. When the Scripture talks about the blessed man, it speaks of the reality that will be his in the future.

The second consequence of this lifestyle is that *this man has a constant source of spiritual strength*. Verse 3 describes the present state of the blessed man. This righteous man has a relationship with God sustained through His word and the keeping His word. The psalmist draws a beautiful picture of a verdant, fruitful tree under the hot Eastern sun. This tree’s fruitfulness is a natural consequence. No one needs to force this tree to bear fruit. It will bear it naturally. For the blessed man, the spiritual life is not something in which he strives but is a natural result of his relationship with God.

The planting of the tree suggests care. Rather than growing like a weed, it is carefully superintended by God. The phrase “streams of water” suggests security. Whereas a river might run wild or a wadi might dry up, streams provide a steady, full supply of water. The tree is carefully irrigated by a spring. The person who has learned to draw upon the strength of God has roots that run deep into rich, moist soil. As a result, his leaf never withers. What a promise!

Notice that though the promise for a fruitful life is secure, the timing of enjoying that fruit is not up to us. The fruit comes in its season. Just as there is a season for harvesting in creation, so there is a season for harvesting in redemption. There is a time to sow and a time to reap, a time to cry and a time to rejoice. There is also a time to suffer, struggle, and die. Even though we cannot choose our season, we are assured that we will not be destroyed by drought.

Having stated his point metaphorically, the psalmist then states it literally: “And in whatever he does, he will prosper.” The word of God will take care of every area of our lives, no matter what our needs are. No area of our lives exists outside the reach of God’s Word. As we meditate on it and look for it to meet our needs, we will find that we will prosper.

The description of the wicked man is drastically different from that of the righteous man. Look at verses 4-6.

B. The Tragic Way of the Wicked Man (1:4-6)

The wicked are not so,
 But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
 But the way of the wicked will perish. (1:4-6)

1. His Life Described

The psalmist took two verses to describe the character of the righteous man. He can summarize the wicked in two words—“not so.” In fact, this a gentle description. We might have expected the opposite word of “blessed” which would be “cursed.” Instead, he simply uses this negative phrase. Everything that is said about the godly is *not so* for the ungodly. They are bankrupt of this blessedness, this fruitful life which is the inheritance of the righteous. *Not so* for the man who lives his life in his own autonomy. *Not so* for the man who has rejected the counsel of God and in his proud arrogance lives life in his own strength. There are two observations we can draw from the Psalmist’s description of the life of the wicked.

First, *his life is without meaning*. The psalmist says, “They are like chaff which the wind drives away.” We city folk are not familiar with the winnowing process. When the wheat is tossed into the air, the chaff is blown away by the wind while the heavy grain falls to the threshing floor. These worthless husks and broken straw blown away during the winnowing process signify several truths about the wicked. First, those who have rejected the counsel of God are devoid of life. They do not have the seed which can reproduce life. Second, they are devoid of worth and significance. They can do no good for others. Third, they are devoid of security, being unable to abide with the grain. The wind is obviously a picture of the judgment of God.

Second, *his future is without security*. Verse 5 says, “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” The psalmist clarifies in his conclusion what he meant in the simile. That is, the wicked will not endure divine judgment. He is not necessarily referring to the tests of history, but to the final judgment. Throughout history, God has judged the wicked, but Scripture says the wheat and tares have been allowed to exist and grow together (Matt 13:37). After the judgment, they will no longer coexist. Just as the grain is left after the winnowing of the chaff, so only the assembly of the righteous will remain after the judgment of the wicked.

The psalmist closes in verse 6 by explaining the destiny of the wicked.

2. His Destiny Explained

The psalmist says, “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” The conviction that the way of the righteous will lead to life and the way of the wicked to death is not some fatalistic view of the universe. This idea is based on the bedrock truth that there is a God who knows how men live. The Hebrew word “know” means “to be in personal communion with someone.” It does not mean God knows about someone; it means he is personally related to that person. Because God is personally related to us, he will see to it that righteous are rewarded. This verse could be translated, “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous.”

In conclusion, let me remind you that the kingdom of God is the only kingdom that will endure. Although the wheat and the tares are allowed to grow together, although the good and bad fish are all in the same net, the day is coming when the final separation will be made. Those who have never surrendered their lives to the Word of God will be blown away like the chaff.

This is the wicket gate we all face—whether or not we have surrendered the will of our lives to the Word of God. There are only two choices—the way of the blessed man or the way of the wicked. It is my prayer that God will give you the grace to make the correct turn.

I am indebted to Dr. Bruce Waltke for his exegetical insights into this Psalm.

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Psalm 62

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

June 12, 1988

A SONG OF SUFFICIENCY

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

When I was a little boy, the most popular toy in building was called Lincoln Logs which consisted of small wooden logs that could be used to construct a replica of Abe Lincoln's cabin. Our children have grown up with Legos. Maybe I am prejudiced, but Lincoln Logs were meant for kids. Legos require a Masters Degree in Mechanical Engineering! Some of the projects pictured on the box look like they require a building permit.

In recent years, our home has experienced some tense moments regarding Legos. At six years of age, our oldest son Joel was a Lego expert who could see a picture of a lunar landing module and set off on his building project. Stephen, an adoring disciple of his older brother, would attempt his own version of the module at the same time. Unfortunately, the fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination of a three-year-old are not as developed as a six-year-old's. Stephen would be okay until he found a brick that would not fit. He would press with all of his might trying to get that one brick to lock with the others, but to no avail. He would continue to press until he destroyed his piece of art. At that point, he would look at his older brother's project, his face would turn red, and he would do one of two things: he would either throw his Legos into the air or take a swipe at his brother's project. Either response would be accompanied by an ear-piercing cry.

When he saw the promise of that beautiful lunar landing module in the picture and saw his brother's work of art, he wanted it too—right then. I have faced times of spiritual "Lego frustration" in my own life as well. When I see the picture in Scripture of what I am intended to be in Christ and how I am intended to reign in life, the pieces of my life do not seem to fit no matter how hard I press. I have come to realize that all the pieces are not supposed to fit, if I read my Bible correctly.

Look at David. When David was anointed by Samuel in 1 Samuel 16, the prophet whispered in his ear, "You will be the next king." Immediately after that, he defeated Goliath in a magnificent display of faith. But then do we find him upon the throne? No! He had to run into a wilderness, being chased by a mad king.

This was also true of our Lord Jesus. What happened after his baptism and the vocal assurance that he was God's beloved Son? The Spirit immediately took him into a wilderness. As he was preparing to be king over his people, he was led into an experience where he had to trust the Father while he hungered and thirsted for forty days. Then angels ministered to him and provided him with supernatural food.

The children of Israel experienced this same truth. After they were brought out of the Egyptian captivity and had victoriously come through the Red Sea, did they enter the promised land? No! They headed into the wilderness. In the wilderness, God does his best preparatory work on his people. There David poured his heart out to God in psalms.

In the next three messages, I want to look at three psalms that are often categorized as lament psalms. About 100 of the 150 psalms fall into three distinct forms or types. In fact, these three distinctions are identified for us in 1 Chronicles 16:4: "And he appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the Lord, even to *lament* and to *thank* and *praise* the Lord God of Israel." In these three verbs, we find the three main types of Psalms: lament, thanksgiving and praise.

The term "lament," the Hebrew word *hazkir*, comes from the verb *zakar* which means "to remember." This is where we get the name Zechariah which means "God remembers." In the lament psalms, the king is facing a crisis, a situation in which he cannot cope, and he cries out to God to remember him. Often at the end of these psalms is a verse of declarative praise when the psalmist says, "God, if you will do this for me, I will offer a vow of thanksgiving."

In the thanksgiving psalms, the psalmist thanks God for answering him in the midst of the crisis. He develops that one sentence of acknowledgement into an entire psalm. The praise psalms simply declare the beauty and wonder of the character of God which the king learned through the crisis. Thus, there is a progression from specific to universal truth. First, the psalmist cries out to God from within a crisis. Then he learns that God answers his prayers and delivers him. As a result of this interaction, he learns about the attributes of God and writes a psalm in response.

David learned his theology in the midst of crisis, in the midst of life. He did not learn about God in a classroom. This is why I love the Psalms. As we read them, we will learn the same lessons for the circumstances of our own lives.

In the lament psalms, we need to remember that the one in crisis and the one petitioning God is the king who represents the righteous rule of God on earth. In fact, at his coronation, the king was given the title "son of God," signifying their important relationship. In 2 Samuel 7, God made David a promise that he would give him a son with an eternal kingdom. Psalm 2 begins with inviting the king to pray—a privilege of this sonship relationship. The Psalms are an expression of this one who in covenant with God is bringing about the righteous rule of God on earth and thus are a prayer book of the king.

When we look at the enemies of the psalmist, we are dealing with those who reject the rule of God on earth, those who resist the grace and rule of God in their lives. Often these enemies are not named so that each succeeding generation could fill in the identity of their foes. As we look at our own enemies in light of these lament Psalms, we need to remember we are talking about the kingdom of God. In Psalm 1, we saw the progressive revelation of truth in Scripture regarding the idea of blessing. The Old Testament concept referred to physical health, prosperity, and security. In the New Testament, being blessed refers to spiritual health, prosperity, and security. The same is true of the kingdom of God. In the New Testament, this refers to a spiritual kingdom—the rule of God in our hearts. Thus,

the enemies of the kingdom of God are anything and anyone who hinders the rule of Jesus Christ in our lives. The New Testament defines them as the world, the flesh, and the devil.

Most scholars believe the background for Psalm 62 is recorded in 2 Samuel 15–17. The consequences of David’s sins of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband are recorded in 2 Samuel 11–12. One of the consequences was that the sword would never depart from his house; there would always be conflict in his family until he died. In the setting of this psalm, David had just been informed that his defiant son Absalom had performed an effective *coup d’etat*, having stolen the hearts of the people away from his father, and had himself proclaimed king. When the size of the rebellion grew, it became obvious to David that he had to flee Jerusalem. With his servants and family, he fled into the wilderness where he had spent so much time earlier fleeing from Saul.

It is important to realize as we look at this psalm that David penned these words while the heat of conflict was still intense. He can understand the emotions we feel in the midst of our struggles, pressure, and defeat, for he knew those feelings himself. But he also knew a confidence and peace in the midst of that pressure that perhaps you have not experienced yet. This confidence is expressed in the words of Psalm 62. In this psalm, we will see not only David’s confidence, but also the choices necessary for experiencing it.

The psalm is divided into three paragraphs, each consisting of four verses. In the first paragraph, we discover the foundation of David’s expectations, where his hope lies. In the second paragraph, we see the firmness of that foundation. And in the final paragraph, we see the futility of all other foundations. Each of these paragraphs teaches us a choice—one that David made and one that we must make if we are going to experience his confidence in the midst of our pressure.

The first choice is given in the first four verses.

I. We Must Recognize that Only God is Sufficient to Meet Our Needs (62:1-4)

My soul waits in silence for God only;
 From Him is my salvation.
 He only is my rock and my salvation,
 My stronghold; I shall not be greatly shaken.
 How long will you assail a man,
 That you may murder him, all of you,
 Like a leaning wall, like a tottering fence?
 They have counseled only to thrust him down from his high
 position;
 They delight in falsehood;
 They bless with their mouth,
 But inwardly they curse. (Ps 62:1-4 NASB)

David is obviously in an extremely vulnerable position. By means of a cleverly orchestrated campaign of deceit, strategically sowing subtle half-truths and timely lies, his son Absalom had undermined his administration. David describes himself as a leaning wall, a tottering fence. What a picture!

There is something about a wobbling wall that begs to be tipped over. It taunts with its weakness. I remember some heavy competition as a child as to who would be the one to finally push the wall over. David had already taken some severe punishment, and certain

individuals intended to exploit his vulnerable position to the fullest. Even his life was at stake.

Can you identify with his weakness? Are there tottering fences in your life, circumstances that cause you to be vulnerable and weak, discouraged or frightened? For some of you, the tottering fence is your marriage which is barely surviving. I talked with a mother this week who has lost all hope of being an effective or godly parent. This afternoon, I am going to visit a woman who is terminally ill with cancer and is trying to make sense of her life. Maybe you are facing an IRS audit, and you know you have used loopholes you should have avoided. We all have tottering fences, areas of our lives in which others could take advantage of our vulnerability. May I remind you that our adversary is a master strategist who will exploit our vulnerability to the fullest.

One significant word which occurs six times in this Psalm is rarely used elsewhere in the Old Testament. It is the Hebrew word translated “only” (or “truly” in some translations) in verses 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, and 9. Verse 1 literally reads, “Only as it looks toward God is my soul in silence.” David knew that God was his *only* source of salvation.

Notice how he reinforces this truth by ascribing all his help to God. In verse 2, he cries, “He is my rock and my salvation, my stronghold.” He repeats this again in verse 7 where he calls God, “The rock of my strength, my refuge.” In the ancient Near East, safety was synonymous with reaching and remaining upon some fortified height which was inaccessible to any enemy. David saw this as a picture of a believer’s security in God. God is a rock, a reliable source of strength. He is security, safety, and protection.

David concludes, “I shall not be greatly shaken.” This does not mean he would never face difficult circumstances. Obviously, he knew this was not true, but he also knew he would never be shaken to the point of being uprooted.

A common phrase in the lament psalms is: “How long.” David cries, “I am not experiencing the promise, Lord. Why are you allowing this to happen?” When the Israelite nation came out of the Egyptian captivity, they entered the wilderness before they went into the promised land. Why would God allow this? Moses tells them in Deuteronomy 8:2-3:

“And you shall remember all the ways which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” (Deut 8:2-3)

God puts us in wilderness experiences in order to humble us. Times of pressure and pain have always been God’s tool for teaching his people that life is only found in dependence on him. The Israelites could not learn this in a classroom. David could not learn it in a classroom. Neither could Jesus; neither could we. It would be foolish to think that simply reading this Psalm will prevent us from facing difficult circumstances.

Even the apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death

within ourselves.” We do not know the exact details of that experience in Paul’s life, but we know the results. His own strength had been drained, and he was in despair, ready to quit. Maybe this is how you feel. Why does God allow this? Why does he show us the picture of the lunar landing module and not let us get the pieces to fit?

Paul shares the secret he learned: “in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” This is the same truth David expresses. This is why the pressures and problems are in our lives. The God who loves us is, as Paul puts it, delivering us over to death in order that we might not depend on happy circumstances or in pleasant surroundings but on the Lord of life who lives within us.

David needed a wilderness experience in order to learn this truth, and so do we. Though perilously outnumbered by his enemies, the king refused to come to terms with them. Instead, he turned to the Lord who had elected him. David knew that to turn anywhere else for help would have been a sin, idolatry. It would have meant breaking covenant with his loving Lord. We need to recognize that only God is sufficient to meet our needs.

The second truth this psalm teaches us is found in verse 5-8.

II. We Must Continually Choose to Allow God to Meet Our Needs in His Time (62:5-8)

My soul, wait in silence for God only,
For my hope is from Him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
My stronghold; I shall not be shaken.
On God my salvation and my glory rest;
The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God.
Trust in Him at all times, O people;
Pour out your heart before Him;
God is a refuge for us. (62:5-8)

Verses 5-6 are almost identical to verses 1-2, but I want you to notice the major change. In the first verse, David simply states a fact: “My soul waits in silence for God only.” In verse 5, the same truth becomes an exhortation: “My soul, wait in silence for God only.” David knew that it takes more than simply recognizing that only God could meet his needs. He knew he had to make a choice to look to God to meet those needs. Thus, David exhorts himself to “wait on God.”

Our expectation and hope should be placed in God, but it is difficult for us to wait. Someone has said that the American’s prayer is, “Lord, give me patience, and I want it right now!” It is difficult to teach patience to a society that can get information in seconds from its computers and meals in an instant from their microwaves. In fact, I saw a commercial on television the other evening for a pain medication whose slogan was, “When you haven’t got time for the pain...” My friends, you better have time for the pain! If you think you do not, it will be there a long time.

What does it mean to “wait” on God? We are given two crucial elements in verse 8. One involves confident trust and the other prayer. First, we are to confidently expect God to meet our needs. David says, “Trust in Him at all times, O people.” We are to consciously expect God to meet our needs.

I want you to understand that trusting God does not mean that we do not take any action ourselves. If the historical setting for this Psalm is 2 Samuel 15-17, David took action. As he fled from Jeru-

salem with his servants and friends through the Kidron Valley to the Mount of Olives, he met up with one of his faithful advisors Hushai. This man had already torn his robe, had dust on his head, and was ready to accompany David into the wilderness. However, David told him that he could be of more use acting as an advisor to Absalom in Jerusalem. There he could confuse and contradict the advice of his other men, causing the destruction of Absalom’s kingdom. That is exactly what happened. David never praises himself for his sharp mind in thinking up the plan, for he knew that unless God worked to cause Absalom to take Hushai’s advice the plan would have failed.

There is nothing wrong with “methods” as long as we realize that they are useless without God working behind them. Psalm 127 says that unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it. You could work all day with your children, but unless God works in their lives you will fail. Without God behind the scenes, all our methods are in vain.

The Lord is the only one worthy of our confidence. David had believed God’s promise that he would be king. Knowing that he was God’s representative, he moved out against all who would oppose him with the same confidence we can have. Jesus said to his disciples, “Go into all the world, and lo, I am with you always.” We can rest even in unrestful circumstances. We can wait in silence. The term “wait in silence” does not refer to the absence of speech but to a soul at rest experiencing the absence of anger, revenge and turmoil. The Lord is worthy of our confidence.

Second, waiting involves prayer. David says, “Pour out your heart before Him.” Let me exhort you to reserve some time to spend with God. If this is not your regular practice, I urge you to consider it. You should have times for unburdening yourself and sharing with God your hurts, fears and struggles.

Let there be times of silence. Some of my most memorable times with the Lord have been wordless. I do not pray well sitting down, so I like to walk. I even have a path charted through the neighborhood near the church in Palo Alto. On that walk, I can meditate upon what I have been reading or what I have been saying. And I can listen for God’s reproofs or counsel. I am not listening for a voice, but simply trying to sense what God is saying to me about certain situations.

There ought to be times when we can wait in silence and confidently expect God to meet our needs. It is wonderful to take our Bible and a hymn book and spend time with God. God wants to meet our needs. We must look to him who will fulfill them in his time.

The final observation is found in the last four verses.

III. We Must Refuse to Look for Other Sources of Fulfillment (62:9-12)

Men of low degree are only vanity, and men of rank are a lie;
In the balances they go up;
They are together lighter than breath.
Do not trust in oppression,
And do not vainly hope in robbery;
If riches increase, do not set your heart upon them.
Once God has spoken;
Twice I have heard this:
That power belongs to God;

**And lovingkindness is Thine, O Lord,
For Thou dost recompense a man according to his work. (62:9-12)**

Having given us the foundation of his expectations and the firmness of that foundation, David now shows us the futility of all other foundations. In verses 9-10, he attacks what we often seek first and trust the most. David picks the two assets we seek the most when our tottering fences cause us to be the weakest and most vulnerable.

The first one is *people*. The terms “men of low degree” and “men of rank” are a poetic way of saying all men. All men—rich or poor, distinguished or without any distinction—are merely a puff of wind, a vapor, lighter than breath. The word “breath” is the same word translated in the book of Ecclesiastes as “vanity.”

This is easily seen in those without wealth, fame or authority. No one puts their trust in a man of low degree when his honor is at stake. But David says the same is true of those who seem to have everything going for them. Their appearance is deceiving. It is a facade, a lie. When put on the scales, they too are lighter than breath. Who would want to pin their hopes on a breath of air?

The second item we often trust is *money* or material possessions. In fact, David notes that we put so much value on money that we will resort to violence to get it. I do not need to elaborate on how we pin our hopes on money. If you do not think people believe money will meet their needs, watch the check-stand where they sell lottery tickets!

David concludes in verses 11-12 by summarizing what he has learned about God through this crisis. He says first that “power belongs to God.” Power, the ability to help us no matter what our need, no matter what condition the fence is in, and no matter how vulnerable we are, belongs only to God—not to people or material possessions.

David reiterates this in the second thing he learned: “Lovingkindness belongs to the Lord.” This word *hesed* is perhaps the most important word in all of the Old Testament. The King James Version translates it thirteen ways because the word is so rich there is no English equivalent. However, the definition of this word is the essence of this Psalm. This is what God taught David in the wilderness. Bruce Waltke, a gifted Old Testament scholar defines *hesed* in this way:

It has three ideas. First of all, it means that two people have a relationship. They are bound together. Secondly, it means that one party in that relationship is in a desperate situation, where he cannot save himself but the other party can; and the third idea is that the stronger party, out of mercy, out of loyalty, out of love, saves that person.

This is the attribute of God available to those who have a relationship with him. He is committed to us. Like David, we all face situations in which we cannot cope for one reason or another. We often find ourselves in a wilderness where we need food and protection. There is only one person who is sufficient to meet our needs. Not only is he sufficient, he is committed out of his covenant loyalty which he displayed on the cross when his Son died for our sins.

He has promised to meet all our needs. The lunar landing module will be built in our lives. He promises to help us reign in life. But often he finds us looking to other sources for meeting those needs. He is the only one who is sufficient. We must continue to look to him daily to work in our lives in his time and refuse to look to other sources for fulfillment.

Let me close with the encouraging words of Samuel Rutherford who wrote in the seventeenth century:

If God had told me some time ago that he was about to make me as happy as I could be in this world, and then had told me that he should begin by crippling me in arm or limb, and removing me from all my usual sources of enjoyment, I should have thought it a very strange mode of accomplishing his purpose. And yet, how is his wisdom manifest even in this! For if you should see a man shut up in a closed room, idolizing a set of lamps and rejoicing in their light, and you wished to make him truly happy, you would begin by blowing out all his lamps, and then throw open the shutters to let in the light of heaven.

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Psalm 73

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

June 26, 1988

A SONG OF RESTORATION

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

We all love stories, but we like them to have the proper ending. We want the good guys to win and the bad guys to lose. We can handle any pain, tragedy or loss as long as justice prevails in the end. Every child knows this for our fairy tales have always taught us well.

Take Cinderella for example. This charming young woman was raised in a cruel home by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters. Then she miraculously had the opportunity to attend a ball where she met the prince. But at the stroke of midnight, her coach turned back into a pumpkin and her radiant gown into her old, shabby clothes. We could handle this tragedy because she had been warned this would happen. We knew she would eventually get the glass slipper, marry the prince and live happily ever after. I do not know how I would have taken it if one of her cruel step-sister's feet had fit into the glass slipper.

As a young boy, I was fascinated by Robin Hood who stole from the rich to give to the poor. I sometimes wrestled with the justice of his actions, but I could rationalize them in my young mind because fairness always prevailed. Those poor people needed the money much more than the rich. But what if we found out that Robin Hood had been running a scam operation and that all the money ended up in a Swiss bank account? We would not have been able to handle that.

We still want stories to end well. We long for fairness and justice to rule. Unfortunately, we are often disappointed and shocked because all around us helpless people are constantly being abused. The wicked step-sister often gets the slipper; and people whom we trusted as sacrificing, loving individuals turn out to be self-seeking after all. If you live with a storybook focus long enough, you will become disillusioned and cynical. You will find yourself agreeing with the famous words of James Russell Lowe: "Truth forever on the scaffold, / Wrong forever on the throne." My guess is that some of you are already bitter, having lived with this focus long enough.

We are in the midst of a series entitled *Songs for Troubled Hearts*. In these lament psalms, we have learned that crises give us the opportunity to grow and to discover afresh the wonderful attributes of God. Even so, there are times along the road of faith when we want to quit—to abandon our faith, walk away from God, go back through that wicket gate Psalm 1 taught us about, and walk away from Scripture and the people of God. At these times, it seems that God does not exist, or if he does, he is no longer relevant to us.

Psalm 73 is unique because it gives us the confession of a man who not only held these views but gave honest expression to them. It is the confession of a faith sorely tested, but finally victorious. This psalm is like a road map of our faith journey in which the psalmist shows us the steps that led him away from God, almost ruining his faith, and the steps that led to his dramatic turnaround. In fact, he ends up farther down the road of faith than he had ever been before.

The psalm's 28 verses fall into two equal parts. Verses 1-14 reveal the steps that put the psalmist on the road to ruin. In verses 15-28, the psalmist tells us the steps he took for restoration.

Many of you will identify with the honest confession of the spiritual struggle of this man. It is my prayer that as we look at these steps in both directions, away from God and back to him, we will identify where we are on this journey and more importantly in which direction we are headed. If you are headed away from God, I pray you will take the appropriate action to turn yourself around.

The author of this psalm is Asaph, and his biography is found in 1 Chronicles 15-16. When Moses first instituted the sacrificial rituals of the temple, there was no musical accompaniment to the sacrifices. It was David who created the first hymnology to accompany the worship experience. At that time, he asked the Levites in charge of the worship to appoint leaders from among themselves to lead in music. One of the men they appointed was Asaph, and David made him the chief musician.

Let us look at the first half of the Psalm to see the steps that led Asaph down the path to ruin.

I. The Road to Ruin: Three Steps Back (73:1-14)

Surely God is good to Israel,
 To those who are pure in heart!
 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling;
 My steps had almost slipped.
 For I was envious of the arrogant,
 As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
 For there are no pains in their death;
 And their body is fat.
 They are not in trouble as other men;
 Nor are they plagued like mankind.
 Therefore pride is their necklace;
 The garment of violence covers them.
 Their eye bulges from fatness;
 The imaginations of their heart run riot.
 They mock, and wickedly speak of oppression;
 They speak from on high.
 They have set their mouth against the heavens,
 And their tongue parades through the earth.
 Therefore his people return to this place;
 And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
 And they say, "How does God know?
 And is there knowledge with the Most High?"
 Behold, these are the wicked;
 And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.
 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure,
 And washed my hands in innocence;
 For I have been stricken all day long,
 And chastened every morning. (Ps 73:1-14 NASB)

I am sure many of you can identify with these sentiments. From these verses, I want to share with you three significant steps that almost led Asaph to his destruction, to the giving up of his faith.

A. His Evaluation of Life is from the Wrong Perspective

Asaph first takes his view of life from what he sees. He says in verse 3, “For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” To him, the prosperity of the wicked and the affliction of the godly appeared to contradict the moral teaching of Scripture.

The Old Testament contains two basic sources which reveal to us God’s will in ethics and moral behavior—the books of Deuteronomy and Proverbs. Both sources clearly teach that when a man walks in accordance with God’s will, he will prosper and be blessed. If a man fails to obey God’s will, he will die without God’s benediction. Moses makes this clear in Deuteronomy 28:1-6:

Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth, and all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deut 28:1-6)

Proverbs says the same thing. This teaching characterizes the entire Old Testament. But Asaph says, “I don’t see it that way. As I observe life, I see the righteous being afflicted and the wicked flourishing.”

The psalmist goes on to characterize the lifestyle of these wicked people. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, verse 4 of this Psalm reads: “There are no ropes leading them to their death.” In other words, the wicked do not die in the prime of life. Although they live immoral lives, they seem to outlive the righteous. The psalmist also says, “Their body is fat.” These wicked are prosperous! Verses 5-6 reveal that these men exploit people for their own ends.

Asaph begins by taking his view of life from what he sees rather than from the Word of God. If we take our view of life from what we see in the newspapers, *Time* magazine, or on daily soap operas or nightly sitcoms, we will come to the same conclusion. There we find beautiful people enjoying life and prosperity with no thought of God and no place for him in their lives. Eventually, we may conclude that there is no moral governor in this universe. Viewing their prosperity in the midst of our skimping and saving can tempt us to take the first step down the road to ruin. But this is a “keyhole theology”—a narrow perspective. It is so easy to evaluate life on the basis of what we see.

This led to Asaph’s second step.

B. His Focus is on the Wrong Objective

As he evaluates life on this level, Asaph begins to make material gain and physical pleasure his highest goals. He says in verse 3, “For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” He substitutes the creation for the Creator in his worship!

It is not wrong to be perplexed by what we see in life. We ought to be!

Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that God’s ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. Even the apostle Paul admits in 2 Corinthians 4:8 that he was deeply perplexed, but he was not despairing. It is one thing to be perplexed, it is another to be envious. Perplexity is normal, envy is sin. The fact that his own situation is difficult and discouraging while the wicked seem to prosper is disturbing to Asaph. Thus, his resentment begins to build into envy.

This leads him to his third step.

C. His Faith is Compromised to Satisfy His Desires

Look at verse 2: “But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped.” In Hebrew, “foot” is from the knee to the sole of the foot. Thus, Asaph is saying, “I almost buckled, my legs nearly slipped out from under me.” This word is used ten times in the Old Testament and always refers to walking confidently in the ways of Scripture. In effect, he is saying, “I was about to remove the Lord from the throne of my life, to take my life into my own hands. I was going to satisfy my desires and throw away the rule book because it did not make sense any more! I was going to free myself from its restrictions in order to get what I wanted even if I had to use unethical means.”

This will always follow if you take your view of life from what you see in the lives of the beautiful, prosperous, successful people whom the world emulates—those who are viewed on our television every day. Who among us has not felt what Asaph is sharing? You can see in Asaph’s words the argument of the atheist who says, “How can your God be a God of love and power? If he is a God of love then presumably he cares about people in trouble. Why doesn’t he do something? If he has the power and does nothing, then he isn’t loving!”

Have you ever felt this way? How can people who are so unconcerned about God and give him no place in their lives do so well? Everything goes well for them, yet in attempting to keep our hearts pure, we face trials and pressure. This comparison hurts the psalmist who is ready to give up.

When I think of this psalm, I am always reminded of Demas who is mentioned twice in the New Testament. He is recognized in Colossians 4 as a companion and ministry associate of Paul. Then in 2 Timothy, Paul writes from prison that Demas had deserted him, “having loved this present world.” I often wonder if he faced the same dilemma, and it proved to be too much for him. Perhaps, because he could not understand, he gave up and compromised his faith in order to satisfy his desires.

Fortunately, this story does not end here. There is a turnaround. Asaph goes on to share four steps which brought him back to his faith.

II. The Road to Restoration: Four Steps Forward (73:15-28)

A. He is Dissatisfied with this Philosophy

Look at verses 15-16:

If I had said, “I will speak thus”;

Behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children.

When I pondered to understand this,

It was troublesome in my sight... (73:15-16)

Remember these psalms were written to be sung in the temple during worship. He wonders what if he had stopped at verse 14. This

psalm would have never been sung in worship! He knew his words would “betray the generation of God’s children.”

This is a feeble, but critical step. Asaph is troubled with this philosophy of materialism and self-gratification. He knows he cannot propagate it among his children. He knows there is something wrong with a philosophy that puts food on a table but no fellowship around it. There is something wrong with a philosophy that gives us big houses but not homes, that provides the family with fine clothing but not love.

That is the society in which we live. We are physically affluent, yet spiritually poor. We have great jobs, beautiful homes and nice cars, but we also have divorce and alienation. We are physically abounding, but spiritually bankrupt. Listen to the honest confession of a man who experienced what Asaph is talking about. His words were contained in a letter shared by author Gordon MacDonald:

Several years ago I was at a point of great frustration in my life. Although I had a wonderful wife and three beautiful sons, my career was going badly. I had few friends, my oldest son began getting into trouble—he started failing in school—I was suffering from depression, there was great tension and unhappiness in my family. At that time I had an opportunity to travel overseas where I stayed to work in a foreign company. This new opportunity was such an excellent one financially and career-wise that I made it number one in my life, forsaking all other values. I did many wrong things to advance my position and success. I justified them as being of good consequence to my family (more money, etc.)—resulted in my lying to myself and my family and behaving wrongly in many ways.

Of course, this was intolerable to my wife and she and my family returned to the U.S. I was still blind, however, to the problems that were within me. My success, my salary, my career—all moved upward. I was caught in a golden cage...

Although many wonderful things were happening outside me, inside I was losing everything. My capacity to reason and my capacity to decide were both weakened. I would evaluate alternatives constantly going over various options, always trying to pick the one that would maximize success and career. I knew in my heart that something was terribly wrong. I went to church, but the words there couldn’t reach me. I was too caught up in my own world.

After a terrible episode with my family several weeks ago, I completely gave up my course of thinking and went to a hotel room for nine days to figure out what to do. The more I thought the more troubled I became. I began to realize how dead I really was, how so much of my life was dark. And worse than that, I could see no way out. My only solution was to run and hide, to start in a different place, to sever all connections.

My guess is that I am speaking to some who find themselves in a golden cage. Asaph was and he understood his situation. He says, “When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome.” This last word means “hard labor” and speaks of the pains of childbirth or the pain involved in digging a ditch. It is painful labor to Asaph to understand. To go through life using one’s fellow-man instead of loving him never satisfies a man’s soul. To those who know the Lord, who are Christians, it is deeply painful because we have a different spirit filled with the love of God.

This is a small step for Asaph, but an important one. His dissatisfaction with this philosophy leads him to the second step.

B. He Put Himself in a Place where God can Meet Him—And He Does

Look at verse 17:

Until I came into the sanctuary of God; (73:17a)

Asaph takes the opportunity for God to meet him in his doubts, confusion and perplexity. By entering the sanctuary, he comes before the presence of God. He actually goes into the temple where God has made provision to meet with his people.

One of the dangers we face in our doubt, when God seems so far away and life seems absurd and nonsensical, is the tendency to avoid all connection with God. We stay away from the church, fellowship, our Bibles, and talking to God. But the psalmist does not keep his problems to himself. In his perplexity, he does not walk away from God. This is important for us to see. In our spells of dryness, we can meet God once again in the fellowship of God’s people and the speaking of God’s Word. Anyone thinking of abandoning God must make this step in order to get back.

Look at what happens as expressed in the last half of verse 17:

Then I perceived their end. (73:17b)

Until now we have all agreed with Asaph, but at this point we may differ. All of a sudden, everything becomes clear to Asaph, but we wonder why for it does not seem clear to us. I want us to understand what Asaph saw when he came into the temple.

The sanctuary was divided into three parts: a porch, the holy place, and the most holy place which contained the very essence of the revelation of God. This last room was the center of everything in the temple. In fact, all the architectural lines focused on the most holy place. Even the doors became more narrow as one approached this inner chamber. Inside the most holy place was a box, the ark of the covenant, which contained the two tablets of the Ten Commandments—the transcendent, moral will of God that said, “Walk in this way and you will live.”

Over the Ten Commandments was the mercy seat sprinkled with the blood of the atoning goat from Yom Kippur, the blood that made it possible for the righteous God to dwell in the midst of His unclean people. Obviously, this blood symbolized the blood of Christ which makes it possible for God to have a relationship with immoral man.

Standing over the ark were the two cherubim, fifteen feet high and fifteen feet wide. They had the face of a man, the torso of a lion, and the wings of an eagle—all reflecting God’s utter sovereignty. Man was to have dominion over all things. The lion was the king of the beasts. And the eagle symbolized the king of the fowl. Those cherubim, whose wings touched the walls on both sides, shouted to Asaph of God’s sovereignty.

It is at this point that the psalmist begins to change. When Asaph sees God, he can see life in the proper perspective, and that makes all the difference. This meeting with God gives him a new perception of life. Thus, he begins to shift from natural thinking, evaluating everything by what he can see, to spiritual thinking, considering things from God’s point of view.

When we gather together on Sunday or in a Bible study, our purpose is not to find something to soothe our emotions. We are to have our eyes opened. The Bible can transform our lives, for it reveals life

as it is. Often we use our Bible as a tranquilizer, but it should be used to help us understand what is happening in our lives.

The New Testament reveals that we are the sanctuary. God now lives within us. Therefore, we can enter this sanctuary at any time by exposing ourselves to his truth and by entering into fellowship with other believers who will help us to face the truth.

Asaph put himself in a place where God could meet him and God was there. The third step follows naturally out of the second.

C. His Encounter with God Changes His Perspective

Asaph gains new insight into the wicked, the world and himself. All the great prophets of Scripture shared Asaph's experience. When they met God, they saw the world and themselves differently. Isaiah was in the temple when he saw the seraphim and heard them singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isa 6:3).

Until you see God, you will never see life clearly in its broad perspective. You will be a keyhole theologian and narrow in your thinking. When Asaph looks at the arrogant, foolish, insolent wicked under the awesomeness of the sovereign, righteous, everlasting God, he knows that their doom is inevitable. He knows they face the wrath and judgment of God. Look at his almost prophetic words in verses 18-20:

**Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;
Thou dost cast them down to destruction.
How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form. (73:18-20)**

We also become prophets when we see God and see all things from his perspective. We can interpret history and current events in the light of God's judgment of the world and Christ's atoning death. It is this realization of the world's death that compelled Paul in his ministry and will compel us as well to care about those successful, prosperous associates whom we envy.

Asaph also has a new insight into what he was like when his heart was bitter, when he considered walking away from God. Look at verses 21-22:

**When my heart was embittered,
And I was pierced within,
Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before Thee. (73:21-22)**

The person who makes materialism his God is no better than an animal. Like an animal who has no regard for the spiritual and ethical, Asaph was tempted to simply gratify his appetites. Those who live like this are like beasts before God.

This once arrogant man becomes humble. This is what seeing God will do. Isaiah had the same vision when he encountered God: "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). You cannot know yourself until you first know God.

Asaph also has a new perception of God's abiding relationship with him. Look at verses 23-24:

**Nevertheless I am continually with Thee;
Thou hast taken hold of my right hand.
With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory. (73:23-24)**

In these verses, he sees beyond the physical and temporal into the eternal future. He realizes that it will be worth all of his perplexity and affliction. Thus, he has a new perception of God's abiding relationship with him: "I am always in your thoughts and purposes." He reminds himself of God's presence. Remember Jesus' words: "I am with you always...I will never leave or forsake you."

Asaph takes one final step on the road back to faith.

D. He Commits Himself Afresh to God

Look at verses 25-28:

**Whom have I in heaven but Thee?
And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and heart may fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For, behold, those who are far from Thee will perish;
Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord God my refuge.
That I may tell of all Thy works. (73:25-28)**

Asaph comes to a new position of faith, farther than he has ever been before. Here he sees the adequacy of God who can meet our needs in our loneliness, despair, frustration, disappointment, and sorrow. No one else can do that. Having realized this, Asaph cries out, "What I really want is God himself." Once God satisfies his soul, he longs for nothing else. It is as if there is a balance with nothing but God on one side and everything but God on the other. Facing these two choices, Asaph says, "I take no delight in earth." What a change in perspective! Once he thought he needed all the things the wicked possessed. Now he comes to realize that all he needs is God himself. He realizes that God keeps his word and does exactly what he says he will do. As a result, Asaph re-commits himself to this loving, sovereign God.

My friends, where are you on the path of faith? In which direction are you headed? My guess is that some of you are tempted to be bitter, cynical keyhole theologians because of your narrow perspective on life. I exhort you to take a fresh look at our powerful, sovereign, loving God and begin to evaluate life around you from his perspective.

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Psalm 139

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

July 3, 1988

A SONG OF SECURITY

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

In this series, we have been studying lament psalms. I hope you are beginning to see how valuable they are and how much they can help us get to know God in the crises of our lives.

Of the approximately 50 lament songs, 47 mention an enemy. As you remember, the king of the nation acted as God's representative and was responsible for establishing God's kingdom on earth. Invariably, he faced opposition just as Jesus did. You and I will also meet opposition as we seek to establish the lordship of Christ in our own homes and hearts and as we seek to fulfill the great commission. There is an evil force bent on hindering our efforts and destroying us. As we read these lament Psalms, we can learn about what gave the king the ability to endure in the midst of the crises and struggles of his life.

In preparation for our study of Psalm 139, I want to read a letter from a young father as shared by James Dobson in *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*. Many of you will identify with the struggles he faces. He says:

The reason I'm writing is that the Lord has blessed us so much, and I should be full of joy. But I have been depressed for about 10 months now.

I don't know whether to turn to a pastor, a physician, a psychologist, a nutritionist or a chiropractor.

Last September the Lord blessed us with a beautiful baby boy. He is just wonderful. He is cute and smart and strong. We just can't help but love him. But he has been very demanding. The thing that made it hardest for me was last semester Margie was taking classes three nights a week to finish her BA degree and I took care of little Danny. He cried and sobbed the whole time we were together. He would eventually go to sleep if I would hold him, but then I was afraid to put him down for fear he would wake up. I was used to being able to pay my bills, work out the budget, read, file mail, answer letters, type lists, etc., in the evening, but all this had to be postponed until Margie was here.

It was a real depressing time for me. I just couldn't handle all that crying. It was worse because Margie was breast-feeding him. I got very tired and started having a great deal of trouble getting up in the morning to go to work. I started getting sick very easily.

I have not been able to cope with these things. I really should be at work at 8:00, but I haven't been there before 9:00 or 9:30 in months. It seems like I'm always fighting the flu. I love our baby a lot and I wouldn't trade him for anything in the world. But I don't understand why I'm so depressed. Sure, Margie gets tired because we can't seem to get Danny to bed before 11 or 12 midnight and he wakes up twice per night to be fed. But she's not depressed. All this getting awakened at night really gets to me and I don't even have to get up to feed him.

Another thing that has been a constant struggle is leaving Danny in the nursery at church. He isn't content to be away from us very

long so they end up having to track Margie down almost every Sunday. We hardly ever get to be together. This has been going on for 11 months now.

There are a couple of other things that probably contribute to my depression. They are (1) responsibilities at work; we're short-handed and I'm trying to do too much; (2) spending too many weekends with yard work or trying to fix up our fixer-upper house; and (3) our finances, which are very limited. Sixty-four percent of our income goes to pay for our house and there's not much left over. We don't want Margie to go to work, so we are on a meticulous budget. It's down to the bare essentials, now. I get so tired of that.

We have all the things we would ever dream of at our age (27). Our own neat little house in a good neighborhood, a job I consider a ministry. We have a fine healthy boy, each other, and not least of all, our life in Christ.

I have no reason to be depressed and tired all the time. I come home from work so exhausted that I don't even want Danny near me. He hangs on to Margie and she can't even fix dinner if I don't get him out of her hair. I just don't know how she stands it.

She must have a higher tolerance as far as not getting anything done is concerned.

If you have any insights as to what I should do, please let me know. Thanks and God bless you.

Any one of us could write a similar letter. Although there are some things we could recommend to help this man in his situation, we often find ourselves in situations without any easy answers—when there are no quick fixes and the crisis persists. There is an evil one who seeks our destruction and who will use anything he can to undermine the lordship of Christ in our lives.

Psalm 139 reveals the resources which will help us cope. David, the author, is again surrounded by enemies who are determined to destroy him. In the midst of his present crisis, he writes about the two significant attributes of God which have sustained him in his life. The Psalm falls into four paragraphs, each composed of six verses. In the first two paragraphs, David contemplates the two attributes which have given him strength. In the final two paragraphs, he shares two significant discoveries he has learned about himself in the process.

Let us look at the psalm in detail. David begins by sharing a significant attribute about God in verses 1-6.

I. God Knows Me Intimately (139:1-6)

O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me.

Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up;

Thou dost understand my thoughts from afar.

Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down,

And art intimately acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before there is a word on my tongue,
 Behold, O Lord, Thou dost know it all.
 Thou hast enclosed me behind and before,
 And laid Thy hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 It is too high, I cannot attain to it. (Ps 139:1-6 NASB)

The first attribute that brings David strength is God's omniscience (a theological word meaning "God knows all"). He reveals this truth in the summary statement in verse 1: "You have searched and known me." In these verses, it is as if David allows the magnifying glass of this truth to shine directly on his own life. His conclusion from the experiment is: "God, you know me!"

Almost every line shouts this main point. Verse 1 says, "You know me," while verse 2 reveals, "You know when I sit down." Verse 3 says, "You scrutinize." Verse 4 declares, "Before a word is on my tongue, you know it all." Finally, in verse 6, David exclaims, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me!" You only have to know how to read to get the point!

There are three wonderful facts about God's knowledge that are revealed in these verses. The first is: *God's knowledge is extensive*. The word "search" always has in mind probing and penetrating, seeking something that is difficult to find. This word was used for Joshua and Caleb "spying out" the land and for "mining" gold. In this passage, it refers to the ability to know a man's motives and thoughts. Although it is difficult for us to get inside another man's mind, it is not difficult for God. He peels us as he would an onion, layer by layer, until he reaches the core. David reminds us that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Second, *God's knowledge is continual*. In verse 2, David uses a Hebrew figure of speech which combines opposites to express a totality: "when I sit down and when I rise up." This means "all the time." Thus, he declares that God knows him every second of the day. From the time we got out of bed, throughout our day, and throughout our lives, God knows our every thought and motive. Does this amaze you?

Third, *God's knowledge is universal*. Verse 3 says, "Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, and art intimately acquainted with all my ways." God is everywhere we go. The word for "lying down" refers to our most private moments and our most private act, sexual intercourse. Whether we are in public or private, on a trip or at home, God is intimately acquainted with our ways. Even before we articulate our intentions, God knows them. David says, "Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, Thou does know it all."

Such knowledge is too wonderful, too awesome! It is so incomprehensible, yet it is comforting to David. Perhaps, God's omniscience concerning you causes you to cringe. A better understanding of the Hebrew concept of "knowledge" will help us. The word implies not only information but intimacy and love—a personal relationship. Not only does God know us, he loves us. The fact that he knows us so intimately and loves us so deeply will enable us to handle the circumstances we face.

From this knowledge and love, we can draw our sense of well-being. Most of you are familiar with 1 Corinthians 13 in which Paul describes agape love. We often read this chapter, as we should, as speaking about the kind of love we should have for one another.

Have you ever thought of it as describing God's love for you? He is patient and kind. He knows you intimately.

The second attribute is given in verses 7-12.

II. God is with me always (139:7-12)

Where can I go from Thy Spirit?
 Or where can I flee from Thy presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there;
 If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.
 If I take the wings of the dawn,
 If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
 Even there Thy hand will lead me,
 And Thy right hand will lay hold of me.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
 And the light around me will be night,"
 Even the darkness is not dark to Thee,
 And the night is as bright as the day.
 Darkness and light are alike to Thee. (139:7-12)

The second attribute David focuses on is God's omnipresence which simply means "he is everywhere". Not only does God know us, he is personally present with us.

David looks at this knowledge first from a vertical plane in verse 8: "If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, Thou art there!" Again he uses a figure of speech, a merism of opposites, to express totality. From heaven to hell, God is everywhere on the vertical plane. But these statements of opposites are qualitative as well as quantitative. Heaven signifies a state of joy and hope, while hell symbolizes darkness, disappointment, and death. In times of happiness, hope and bliss, God is there. In times of deep disappointment and pain, God is still there. Even though David feels as though he is in hell, he knows that God is with him. In whatever crisis we find ourselves, as his children, we can know that God not only knows about it, he is present with us.

Then David looks at the horizontal plane in verse 9: "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea." As he thinks of flying from east to west, he imagines himself as a bird taking on the "wings of dawn," flying with the speed of light to the far sea. Notice the merism again as he thinks about flying from the eastern dawn to the western sunset. In the ancient Near East, the east where the sun rises was seen as heaven and the west was the place of darkness and death.

I will never forget when we travelled to the Middle East in January as a pastoral staff. At one point, we drove from Israel to Egypt. As we entered the western part of Cairo, we were overwhelmed with the picture of death, for we were surrounded by graveyards. The western side of the Nile was the place of death. All of the temples were on the eastern side, the place of life.

Do you see David's point? No matter where we are, no matter what desperate situation surrounds us, God will never forsake us. In one of his most discouraging and darkest moments, David says, "Even there Thy hand will lead me, and Thy right hand will lay hold of me." Maybe you are in a difficult situation now or have recently suffered some loss. Maybe the wound is still tender. Perhaps, it is too early to know why it is happening, or you may never know. Believe me, God has not left you. He will never walk away from you. You will never find yourself in a situation that has not been carefully screened by his loving, sovereign hand.

David imagines himself in utter darkness in verses 11-12. The word translated “overwhelmed” means “to crush.” It is the same word used in Genesis 3 when God told Eve the serpent would crush the heel of her seed, but the seed would ultimately crush his head. David says, “If I feel overwhelmed, even the darkness is not night to you.”

Having spoken of these two awesome attributes of God, his omniscience and his omnipresence, David steps back to explain how he knows them to be true.

Notice verse 13 begins with “for.” He now gives the basis for his declarations of these truths. Because these truths are solid, David realizes two significant facts about himself. The first one is given in verses 13-18.

III. I am Created by God: My Situation is Secure (139:13-18)

For Thou didst form my inward parts;
 Thou didst weave me in my mother’s womb.
 I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 Wonderful are thy works,
 And my soul knows it very well.
 My frame was not hidden from Thee,
 When I was made in secret,
 And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.
 Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
 And in Thy book they were all written,
 The days that were ordained for me,
 When as yet there was not one of them.
 How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
 When I awake, I am still with Thee. (139:13-18)

In these verses, David looks at his own creation and realizes that God made him. This is why God knows him so well. David is saying, “I am not a chance product of an impersonal universe. I’m not a biological accident!” Without denying genetics, he sees beyond the biological realities to the spiritual realities—that there is a Creator. In response, he says, “I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

No wonder we struggle with identity crises when we are constantly being told we are merely struggling mortals on an obscure planet located in a second-rate galaxy, one among billions. Scripture has a different viewpoint. We did not just happen.

Dr. Paul Brand is well-known among medical circles for his pioneering work with leprosy and hand surgery. In fact, most medical textbooks on hand surgery have chapters written by him. He often speaks of the awe he experiences when thinking about the creation of the human body. Listen to what he writes:

I could fill a room with volumes of surgical textbooks that describe operations people have devised for the human hand: different ways to rearrange the tendons, muscles, and joints—thousands of operations. But I don’t know of a single operation anyone has devised that has succeeded in improving a normal hand. It’s beautiful. All the techniques are to correct the deviants, the one hand in a hundred that is not functioning as God designed. There is no way to improve on the hand he gave us.

I concur with Isaac Newton, who said, “In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God’s existence.”

David even looks at where God creates us. In the dark, watery chamber of our mothers’ wombs, God produces his masterpieces. Look at verses 15-16 again:

My frame was not hidden from Thee,
 When I was made in secret,
 And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.
 Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
 And in Thy book they were all written,
 The days that were ordained for me,
 When as yet there was not one of them. (139:15-16)

God is consciously involved in the fetus developing in the mother’s womb. There is much questioning today about when an embryo becomes a human being. David does not talk about himself as an impersonal collection of cells. Notice the words “we,” “I,” and “my frame.” The marvel of the human body has convinced him that God is with him and knows him intimately.

God knows us because He made us. He knows us inside out. He knows our crises and how we respond to them. He even knows how much we can handle. And he has a wonderful purpose for our lives.

I am reading a fascinating book entitled *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Chang. It is her marvelous testimony of courage. After the communists overthrew Chiang Kai-Shek in 1949, Nien and her husband decided to stay because her husband was a general manager for Shell Oil Company, which was the only multi-national company that chose to remain. When her husband died in 1957, Shell hired her as a special advisor. In 1966, Mao Tse-Tung launched the Great Proletarian Revolution, and Nien was arrested, beaten and taken to prison where she remained in solitary confinement for over six years.

One account in her book parallels what David is saying. One afternoon, while lying in her cell, a spider crawled in and began to climb up one of the iron bars of her window. She said she watched it climb steadily to the top, and it was such a long walk for this tiny creature. When it reached the top, it swung out and descended on a silken thread spun from its body. After it secured its thread to the other end of the bar, it crawled back to where it had started and swung out in a new direction. Nien was fascinated by the fact that this spider knew exactly what to do and where to take the next thread without any hesitation or mistakes. When it had made the frame, it proceeded to make an intricate web that was perfect with all the strands evenly spaced. As Nien watched this architectural feat, she was flooded with questions: Who had taught the spider to make the web? Could it really have acquired that skill through evolution, or did God make that spider with the ability to make a web for catching food and perpetuating its species? This spider helped her to see that God was in control. From then on, Mao Tse-Tung and his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. She says, “I felt a renewal and a hope surge inside of me.”

This is what David is saying. Since God made him and knows him, he obviously knows his circumstances. Having laid hold of these marvelous truths, David looks around at his world and sees a difficult and confusing place. He concludes this Psalm by sharing with us a second truth he has learned about himself in verses 19-24.

IV. I Belong to God: My Identity is Secure (139:19-24)

O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God;
 Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.
 For they speak against Thee wickedly,
 And Thine enemies take Thy name in vain.
 Do I not hate those that hate Thee, O Lord?
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee?
 I hate them with the utmost hatred;
 They have become my enemies.
 Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
 And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
 And lead me in the everlasting way. (139:19-24)

Having suffered because of his love for God and having felt in his own body the pain of others' hatred of God, David has learned an important truth: "I am God's person." He is saying "Lord, I don't understand this problem of evil, but the persecution has taught me that I do know where I belong. I know my identity as your son, and I have made a commitment to you." Is this issue clear in your life? Is your commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ firm?

Backing off, David realizes that he has painted a rigid picture. Things are not always so black and white. The good guys do not always wear the white hats. He looks at himself and knows that at times even he is gray. Thus, he says, "I am not always sure about myself. Search me and penetrate me, bring to light any evil in me so that I might deal with it. I want your lordship in my life to be clear."

Maybe you find yourself to be without any understanding regarding your life or without a relationship with the God of the universe. I want you to know that your life has meaning and a purpose. You have worth and dignity because you are created in his image. And he has a purpose for your life. It is my prayer that you would come to see God as he really is: a God who knows you and loves you, a God who longs to be with you always.

The greatest demonstration of this is the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." When he returned to the Father, he left us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that he would one day return and take us to be with him. Jesus Christ gave his life to pay the penalty for the sin and darkness in your heart and to offer the free gift of salvation to any who would come to him.

In this series I am indebted to Dr. Bruce Waltke for his exegetical insights.

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