

Some Psalms

By

David Chadwell

www.davidchadwell.com

Lesson One The Basic Contrast Text: Psalm 1

The objective of this lesson: To affirm righteous existence is blessed by God, and to affirm wicked existence is temporary.

The nation of Israel (at its biggest land territory) in the Old Testament was by today's standards a small nation. Though it was a small land, it provided an interesting contrast. While from the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee to the north (and the plain along the Mediterranean Sea) tended to be green, south of the tip of the Sea of Galilee was a desert (except along the banks of the Jordan River) whose rugged hills and mountains eroded quickly.

Emphasize the contrast between land that had a steady, dependable water supply and land that had no dependable water supply. Most of the images in Psalms were rural images. The typical Old Testament Israelite would have understood those images well.

The problem in this region does not tend to be the quality of the soil but the lack of moisture. The humidity is low, it is hot, there is an abundance of direct sunshine, and water is often restricted to sudden runoffs from rainfall elsewhere. Commonly, this water appeared suddenly and unexpectedly, and disappeared quickly. Water usually, in this region, came and left much too quickly to support vegetation. Obviously, little grew (untended) in this region.

Emphasize that fertile soil without water will not produce regardless of how fertile the soil is.

Many Israelites were well acquainted with the importance of a good, dependable water supply.

Israelites in the Old Testament knew well the importance and value of a dependable water supply both in farming and for domestic use. Many know both today. They knew how dependent they were on water.

Psalms 1 was a basic contrast between the life and survival of the righteous and the unpredictable, brief existence of the wicked. The contrast is made by contrasting vegetation that has access to water even in stressful times with dead, harmful, useless chaff.

Stress the contrast was between a useful fruit tree (fruit trees were highly valued) and useless chaff.

The righteous were like a fruit tree by a water source which provided all the water the tree needed every week of the year. The tree never withered, even when drought was severe.

The fruit tree could be depended on to grow and to produce fruit.

The wicked are like dry, unwanted, hurtful chaff. Chaff is principally the husks of the ripe grain that has been harvested (though it can include the debris of the dead grain plants at harvest).

Be certain your students understand (a) what chaff is and (b) how it would spoil their food made from the grain.

The first job was to separate the ripe grain from the dead stalks. The second job was to separate the chaff from the grain. The useful, heavier grain would fall in a light wind that would blow away the much lighter chaff. If the chaff was not separated from the grain, the food made from the mixture of chaff and grain was undesirable to eat.

Harvesting grain primarily involved cutting the grain stalks by hand and tying the stalks into shocks. Once the shocks were made, the primary jobs were (a) separating the ripened grain from the stalks (usually done by having an animal—like a donkey—walk on the stalks with their grain, and (b) tossing the grain and chaff in a light wind to separate the grain from the chaff.

Notice the first two verses. This Psalm affirmed that a particular person experienced a full life—a life blessed by God. First, that life was described in what the person did NOT do. (a) He did not seek guidance from those who have no godly concerns. (b) He did not determine the direction of his life by the direction taken by people who gave no concern to God's values. (c) He was not a continual companion of those who ridiculed God (and those not devoted to God).

Stress the three ways the righteous person avoided being influenced in lifestyle by people who were wicked.

Second, it focused on the relationship the person had with God's instructions. The life and values of this person were quite in contrast to the wicked, the sinner, and the scoffer. He found joy in God's law. He thought continually about God's ways and God's values. The result: he was like a transplanted fruit tree by a dependable source of water. When developed (grown), he produced fruit that blessed, benefited others. He could produce fruit because in stressful times he was not stressed—his leaf did not wither. Trees with dead leaves neither grow, develop, nor produce fruit! This person prospered because the one who transplanted him placed him in a good place! He could prosper because God placed Him in a good place! God was the SOURCE of his blessing! He was able to do what he was capable of doing because God did what only He could do.

Stress the positive ways in which he encouraged righteousness in his life. Stress the result (note he is like a transplanted tree). Stress the importance of the leaves not withering. Stress he is a source of blessing.

The temporary existence of the wicked received emphasis. Those who turn against God were like unwanted chaff. Even the stress of a light breeze blew them away. If they could endure the stress created by a light breeze, these people could not endure the scrutiny of God! (The writer does not regard judgment to be the Christian eternal judgment, but a divine evaluation of the way one was using life in this world.)

Stress the wicked cannot endure the mild stresses of life.

Just as the “wicked” could not endure a divine evaluation of how they lived, neither could the “sinner” (who failed to grasp that the purpose of life was found in serving God) advance among those who are righteous. Those who walked away from God felt, in every way, out of place with those who walked with God. They had no desire to “see who we are,” and they had no desire to be among people who saw who they were instead of encouraging evil behavior.

Stress the wicked had no desire to be with the righteous. Those who enjoy being among the righteous are opportunity, not enemies.

The conclusion: God cared about (regarded) the people who had the insight and courage to be righteous people, but God allowed those who reject Him to face and endure the full consequences of their godless behavior. The great contrast was between those who existed in God’s care and those who lived outside of God’s care.

Stress the basic contrast is to be found in those who are in God’s care and those who are not.

May the writer conclude this lesson with a statement of perspective? You may or may not agree, but you surely have a right to the perspective. The writer finds no presentation of the eternal judgment, the eternal heaven, or the eternal hell in the writings of the Old Testament. That is not the affirmation such did not exist, but the affirmation that such did not help form the motivational basis for Israelite obedience to God.

Present this as a “think about” view, not as a demand.

If the question were asked, “Why serve God?” there would be two reasons. The Old Testament reason would be, “It is in doing so one can live physical life to its fullest.” The New Testament reason would be, “It is in doing so that you can be a living sacrifice for the God who gave us Jesus Christ.” In obeying God, men like Job, Abraham, and David became wealthy because they trusted God. In following Jesus Christ, Christians die to the physical in order to be alive to the eternal like Stephen, James, Paul, and the martyrs. To transfer Christian motivations back to Old Testament acts may be undesirable because it may obscure the lesson embedded in the Old Testament act.

Understand that the pre-Jesus response to God’s activity would differ from the post-Jesus response to God’s activity. Consider 1 Peter 1:10-12—even Old Testament prophets and angels realized God was doing something special, but they did not grasp what.

For Thought and Discussion

1. The nation of Old Testament Israel was what? What interesting contrast did it provide?

It was a small nation. It provided an interesting contrast between a watered north and an arid south.

2. What tended to be the problem?

The problem tended to be the lack of moisture, not the fertility of the soil.

3. In Psalms 1, the basic contrast is between what? How is it made?

The contrast is between the life and survival of the righteous and the unpredictable, brief existence of the wicked.

4. The righteous are like what? The wicked are like what?

The righteous are like a transplanted fruit tree. The wicked are like chaff.

5. What two jobs followed cutting the stalks (the harvest)?

(a) The grain had to be separated from the stalk. (b) The chaff had to be separated from the grain.

6. What did the righteous not do? Instead, they did what?

(a) They do not seek guidance from those with no godly concerns; nor determine the direction of their lives by those unconcerned with God's values; nor are they companions of those who ridicule God.

(b) They focus on God's instructions.

7. Discuss the importance of trees having leaves.

Leaves allow fruit trees to grow, develop, and produce fruit.

8. Discuss the temporary existence of the wicked.

The discussion should include the wicked are like unwanted chaff who could not endure even the stress of a light wind.

9. What was the conclusion?

God cares about people who have the insight and courage to be righteous, but He will allow the godless to face and endure the full consequences of their godless behavior.

Lesson Two

Trusting God From Morning Until Night

Text: Psalm 3 & 4

The objective of this lesson: To encourage trust in God as we face the struggles of our day.

Notice how often the struggles put forth in Psalms are like the struggles we encounter in our daily lives. Often we think that the notable godly people of the Bible did not experience the common stresses that we experience—fear of enemies, the dread of uncertainty, unpopularity because we trust God, the inability to sleep, temptation created by danger, the need for reassurance, the up and down roller coaster ride that went from confidence to concern, etc. The Psalmists should assure us that righteousness does NOT lie in a steady confidence in God that knows NO moments of struggle. A renewing of focus as the godly person faces life is a continual need.

Stress that the daily existence of the righteous person always has faced opposition and struggle. Being a righteous person has never been simple. No one is righteous because righteous behavior is the most convenient behavior!

Though the headings to the Psalms are not inspired, they reflect ancient conclusions or instructions. Commonly, the psalms were ancient Hebrew poetry set to music. Many of them were used in Israelite worship, and many of them were used for personal encouragement, much as Christians use their spiritual songs today.

Stress the psalms were Hebrew poetry set to music to be used in temple worship and for personal encouragement.

A study of the Book of Psalms is a complex study. There is little agreement on the major issues—when were they written, why were they written, what was their purpose, who were the authors, how should they be divided, what purposes did they serve, why were they collected into single book? Anthony L. Ash in the commentary he and Clyde M. Miller produced on Psalms (The Living Word commentary, Volume 10, Sweet Publishing Company: Austin, Texas, Introduction, p. 30) said,

"They are statements of faith, produced under God's guidance.... The prime concern, then and now, is the individual's confrontation with God."

A person studies the psalms to understand how to advance relationship with God, not to try to definitively answer all the technical questions.

You are asked to read Psalm 3 and Psalm 4. The headings suggest these psalms were often used to begin the day and to end the day. Some say this is a king facing his day, and some say this is an individual facing his day. Both psalms reveal that life was tough and uncertain. Trusting God was not a simple challenge! Such trust was not a natural, "without a second thought" happening, but a determined and essential happening. The problems that confront us can consume our attention! Without such trust in God, life was a journey from despair to

despair. Such trust did not exist because it was easy, but because it was essential. The comfort and reassurance was the writer's knowledge that he could depend on God.

Stress the fact that these psalms do not attempt to hide the truth that life involved struggle and uncertainty. Focusing on God was essential but not easy.

In Psalm 3, things have not improved during the night. Those who were adversaries have increased—the situation is worse! Many opposed him in their desire to destroy him. They were certain God is NOT his ally, and he was foolish to place his trust in God.

Stress the fact that "things getting better" did NOT mean that the enemies just disappeared.

However, he knew better—God was his ally! God protected him from his enemies' attacks. Though he cried, God supported him. He was so assured that God was with him, he could sleep. God so sustained him that he did not fear his enemies.

Stress there is a difference in confidence produced by what one feels (based on emotion) and what one knows (based on understanding or past experience). Peace was produced by what he knew, not what he felt.

As a result, he knew God would continue with him. His enemies had no chance! God would attack them and deliver him! He would not be delivered because he was so clever, but because God was his ally. It was not only he who would be blessed, but God would deliver all His people.

Again, his relationship with God delivered him, not his emotions.

In Psalm 4, the writer petitioned God to hear and answer his call. Then, to his enemies, he asked why did they persist in making him miserable? Since God was his ally, there was no way that he would lose.

The writer "knew" he was a winner because of his relationship with God.

He reminded himself that it was okay for him to fear his enemies as long as he did not allow his fear to cause him to abandon God. Fear must not be allowed to turn into temptation, and temptation into sin. What he needed to do was to focus on God, not his enemies. The power lay in meditating on God, not in conceiving his own strategies for deliverance. He needed to focus on behaving like a godly person.

Fear is not spiritually destructive unless it leads to sin.

God was the answer! God was the lighted path through the mess he faced! God could touch him with a gladness that good food and new wine could NOT compete with! The key to safety day or night was God! Only God could allow him to live in safety.

The challenge in stressful times is understanding that God is the answer. The answer is not "me" having things arranged as "I" want.

In the two psalms, note the roles in which God served. God was a shield (3:3). He was the sustainer (3:3, 4). He gave peace and comfort (3:5, 6). He was the protector who delivered (3:7, 8). He answered (4:1, 3). He was light in darkness (4:6). He gave gladness (4:7). He gave safety (4:8).

Emphasize that the essential question in times of stress is this: "What roles do I allow God to have in my life?"

Note carefully that the key to a safe existence is dependence on God. It was NOT (and is not) being without enemies. The person with the courage to be godly will have enemies! Those who determinedly refuse to walk with God will not appreciate those who depend on God. Living in safety does not mean that person lives "the good life." It means the person depends on God.

Emphasize that living for God in an evil world will result in personal stress. No one can attack evil without angering the forces of evil. Being righteous through relationship with God will irritate evil. God's help does not mean evil is not irritated.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Often the struggles in the psalms are like what?

They are like the struggles we encounter in our daily lives.

2. The psalms assure us that righteousness does not lie in what?

Righteousness does not lie in a steady confidence in God with no moments of struggle.

3. The headings in the psalms are not what?

The headings in the Book of Psalms are not inspired.

4. The psalms were Hebrew poetry set to music. How were they used?

They were used for worship (temple worship) and personal encouragement.

5. Explain why the Book of Psalms is a complex study.

There is little agreement on major issues.

6. Psalms 3 and 4 reveal what two things about life?

Life was tough and uncertain. Trusting God was not a simple challenge.

7. In Psalm 3 what has not happened? The enemies were certain that what was true?

In Psalm 3, things did not improve during the night. The enemies were certain God was not the writer's ally.

8. How assured was the psalmist that God was with him?

He was so assured God was with him that he could go to sleep.

9. In Psalm 4, the writer reminded himself it was okay to do what as long as he did not what?

It was okay to fear his enemies if his fear did not cause him to abandon God.

10. Discuss why God was the answer.

The discussion should include the fact that God could guide him safely through day or night.

11. What roles did God serve in Psalms 3 and 4?

God was a shield, a sustainer, the source of peace and comfort, the protector who delivered, the answerer, the light in darkness, the giver of gladness, and the giver of safety.

12. The key to safe existence is what, not what?

The key to safe existence is God, not being without enemies.

Lesson Three

The Struggle

Text: Psalm 6

The objective of this lesson: To stress that a godly life will not avoid the faith struggle caused by human spiritual failure.

There is an enormous difference between what the psalmist could know and what the informed Christian can know. This lesson will make a serious effort to distinguish between what the psalmist could not know and what the informed Christian can know.

It is important that Christians not impose Christian views/understandings on a psalmist's words, phrases, or thoughts.

The problem is in the foundation of personal spiritual crisis. It is the same in every age. What problem? It is the problem of feeling that "I" alienated God when "I" become aware of how bad "I" am and how terrible "my" acts have been. "I" am so upset because of "my" own mistakes that "I" am certain God wants nothing to do with "me."

It is not uncommon for a person to feel (emotional reaction) he/she is beyond God's consideration or forgiveness because of a past wrongdoing or a past lifestyle. Often a person ridden by personal guilt is certain that his/her past failures are too many in number or seriousness for God to forgive. Thus it is "just" for the person to suffer the consequences of his/her ethical or moral failings. There is little to no consciousness of divine mercy or grace.

Consider the problem from both an Israelite and Christian perspective. First, look from an Israelite perspective. Read 2 Samuel 11 through 12:15. The Jewish law given by God was quite specific in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18. Both the man and the woman were subject to the death penalty (Leviticus 20:10). This was not an unknown to King David—it was in the very foundation of Jewish law! I think it is in the foundation of David's response to Nathan—"I have sinned against the Lord." This act went beyond the violation of a marriage! David offended more than Uriah's marriage! Why else would Nathan's response to David be, "The Lord has taken away your sin; you shall not die." David knew how wickedly he acted in the entire ordeal!

Focus on the magnitude of King David's offense and God's reaction. Realize it is okay for you not to have all the answers or explanations. God is beyond all of us! Just focus attention on Nathan's response to David's sins. God worked even in David's failure. David, even as he received mercy, paid consequences for wrong doing—just not the ultimate consequence. However, forgiveness was God's act, not David's worthiness.

Second, from the Christian perspective, consider the apostle Paul. Few Christians understand what an evil man Paul was prior to conversion. Read what he said about himself in that period in Acts 26:9-11. A Jew who would *kill* a fellow Jew, a man who was hostile, a man who helped imprison people who belonged to God, and a man who tried to intimidate people in a place of worship—regardless of his motives—is a mean man to be feared! Consider the reaction of Jerusalem Christians to the converted Paul in Acts 9:26, 27.

Focus on how bad Paul was prior to conversion, and how "blown away" he was by God's mercy. Paul "owned" his pre-conversion behavior, and it was fine for God to use him as an example of divine mercy. God was glorified, and that was what was important!

The challenge: How does a person deal with what he formerly did when he learns better? How does a person forgive self for what he/she did? If the person struggles with forgiving self, can the person accept God's forgiveness? Is God's forgiveness greater than our ability to forgive self? Is that not a primary faith issue in any age?

The problem with forgiven sin lies in our willingness to forgive ourselves, not in God's ability to forgive us. The problem originates in our view of ourselves as being so needy, not in God's ability to forgive. It is truly a faith problem. We tend to balk at anything that is beyond human ability. We tend to think that if it is too big for us it is too big for God.

Can you imagine David's shock when Nathan said, "The Lord has taken away your sin...." Read how overwhelmed the apostle Paul was at God's mercy in 1 Timothy 1:12-14. His wickedness served as an example of God's goodness revealed through Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 1:15, 16)—that was okay with Paul, in fact it was appropriate.

Stress neither David nor Paul would have expected/anticipated God's merciful reaction.

The irony: The more mature in godliness a person becomes, the more indebted to God the person realizes he/she is. Thus, as godliness increases in the person, the problem increases. As a result, the need for faith increases. This struggle never ends—awareness simply increases and intensifies the problem!

We are comfortable with God forgiving what WE consider little offenses. We struggle with what WE regard to be our big offenses. The more spiritually mature we become, the more aware we become of how huge our offenses were/are.

Psalms 6 revealed the struggle. The psalmist realized he had offended God. He is convinced his offense has alienated God, and he felt the alienation. He felt the alienation so deeply, he pled for the Lord's healing. He felt the alienation so deeply that his bones were out of joint and life itself was a wreck.

The psalmist came to awareness—perhaps consequences "caught up with him;" perhaps he was trying to figure out why so many things were so bad for him. Determining the spiritual component of situations is not simple!

However, as bad as things were, the psalmist knew God was his answer, not his problem. He—his behavior—was the problem, not God. God was the source of rescue and saving. The Christian is so accustomed to thinking of salvation (saving) as a spiritual act that delivers from sin, that he/she too rarely thinks of the act of saving as being a rescue from any form of dangerous threat. The only One who could rescue the psalmist from his dilemma was God—not other people nor burying himself in some physical pursuit of personal interest. If the understanding is correct, the psalmist basically said, "How can I do anything for You if I am dead?" Does that not indicate how serious the psalmist considered the struggle?

The answer to the basic situation the psalmist faced did not lie in God. God was the source of help, not the reason for his problems. It is easy to turn to other sources than God in an attempt to find a “quick fix.”

(Notice death is a reality, but also an unknown.)

The concepts of life after death, the eternal judgment, the eternal heaven, or the eternal hell were not yet revealed/developed.

The psalmist found the struggle exhausting. He cried so much his bed swam, and the chair he sat on was waterlogged. His eyes were swollen from crying. His enemies made fun of his reaction to his distress.

Confronting one’s own weaknesses and ethical/moral failings is an exhausting situation. It was not and is not a simple experience.

Thus, he did not turn to people (an indication of how alone he felt?), but to God. He wanted nothing to do with wicked people. As much as he hurt, he knew God listened to him. He knew ultimately God would vindicate him.

Personal pain must not prevent us from turning to God. Neither must we turn away from God if the pain exits.

Note: This was not a God crisis, but a “me” crisis. The psalmist was powerfully blaming himself, not God. It takes a remarkable person whose faith in God has some depth to separate a “me” crisis from a God crisis. Unfortunately, most of us allow a “me” crisis to become a God crisis. If one’s faith is in “me” and “my acts and goodness,” our “me” crises are destined to become a God crisis.

Stress the difference between a “me” crisis (the source of the crisis is the result of me being physical and making wrong choices) and a God crisis (the source of the crisis is God).

Stress how easy it is to transform a “me” crisis into a God crisis. If we decide our problems result from divine punishment instead of bad human choices, a “me” crisis quickly becomes a God crisis. God quickly is blamed for poor human choices—God easily becomes the “whipping boy” for our problems.

As a matter of perspective, think about how blessed you are as a Christian to have a basic understanding of the afterlife that the psalmist did not have available to him. What a blessing to understand that death does not separate a person from God and His ability to reward!

To understand how much God cares about us (a) in what He did in Jesus Christ and (b) in the eternal life after death is a huge blessing. Read 1 Peter 1:10-12.

For Thought and Discussion

1. In what is there an enormous difference?

There is an enormous difference in what the psalmist could know and what the informed Christian knows.

2. State the problem.

The problem exists when awareness of how evil my behavior and attitudes were causes me to conclude I have alienated God—am beyond divine forgiveness.

3. Illustrate the problem with King David and Bathsheba. With the apostle Paul.

Both realized the enormity of their sins after they committed the sins. Both benefitted because God is merciful.

4. State the challenge.

How do we deal with the fact of our sins when we are spiritually mature enough to realize how enormous those sins are? How do we deal with the problem of forgiving ourselves?

5. When does this challenge become an overwhelming shock?

It becomes a shock when we begin to realize how huge God's mercy is.

6. State the irony.

The irony: The more spiritually mature we become, the more we realize (a) how huge our sins were/are and (b) the enormous nature of God's mercy/grace.

7. What did Psalm 6 reveal? What was and was not the problem?

Psalm 6 revealed the struggle. We are the problem; God is not the problem.

8. State how the psalmist emphasized the struggle was exhausting.

He cried until his bed swam. His couch was soaked with his tears. (Maybe his way of saying that he cried night and day.) He cried until his eyes were swollen.

9. What kind of crisis was Psalm 6? When do "me" crises become a God crisis?

The psalmist knew it was a "me" crisis, not a God crisis. A "me" crisis is caused by human, physical behavior. A God crisis is a faith crisis caused by what is perceived to be divine behavior.

10. What are you asked to consider as a matter of perspective?

You are asked to consider the blessings involved in having a basic understanding of life after death.

Lesson Four God's Worthiness Text: Psalm 8

The objective of this lesson: (a) To focus on God's worthiness of praise; (b) To note that in no way is the human a rival to God's worthiness.

When something you use or know is truly great, the probability is strong that you want to share what you have discovered. Have you found something that makes a common job simple? You share it! Have you found a product or tool that genuinely makes an incredibly hard task near unbelievably simple? You want to share! Have you discovered a service offered that is too good to be described by an advertisement? You are driven to share! Consider almost anything—a food service, an affordable vehicle, a floor covering, a handyman, an incredible book, an outstanding service of any kind, a carpenter, a mechanic, a plumber, a kitchen appliance, a store, a product—if it is honestly good (no hype, please), most of us feel a compulsion to share. That is why the best advertisement of any form is word of mouth if the words flow from a sincere, honest, experienced person.

People really enjoy sharing something they consider worthwhile.

Spiritually, you are challenged to see a problem. Note the problem by answering two questions. (a) How would you describe the characteristics of a good congregation? (b) How would you describe the goodness of God?

These two questions are asked to focus those studying on a spiritual problem. It is very easy to focus our efforts on "having to worship God" rather than understanding that God is deserving of worship. Worship is more than a mere human responsibility carried out because we are terrified of the consequences of not worshipping God. God is worthy of worship—gratitude should motivate us to want to worship God because He is so deserving of our praise.

*Notice that the "goodness" of a congregation is often centered in how well they meet our human needs (the point is not that Christian fellowship should ignore the needs of other Christians). Praising God should center in **His** worthiness rather than in **our** needs.*

If you can think of another way to focus on the problem, fine!

Observation #1: You likely would **not** have to pause to begin talking about the characteristics of a good congregation. You likely **would** have to pause to think about God's goodness. Observation #2: The list you gave which have a good congregation's characteristics would be longer than your list of God's qualities of goodness. Question: Does that mean that God is less good than a good congregation? It is assumed most of us would answer that question with an emphatic "No!!!" Then, if those two observations are correct, what do they mean?

The purpose of this paragraph is to note that we tend to focus on our concern about our fears and needs, not on God's worthiness of praise. We tend to be more concerned with our needs than God's worthiness.

Suggestion: Could it mean we know far too little about God (that we can know through revelation)? Consider some “rarely asked” questions. Answer them to yourself only about your understanding/attitudes. Does God deserve to be praised? If your answer is yes, why specifically do you consider God deserving of your praise? Do you praise God out of a terror of what might happen to you if you do not praise Him, or because you deeply feel moved to give honor to One truly deserving of honor? If you had zero knowledge of hell and were ignorant of eternal consequences, would you still praise God?

Christians can respond to the problem in many ways that range from an intense sense of guilt to an intense sense of appreciation. However, many do not know enough about God to grasp His praiseworthiness. Too many do not understand how deserving of praise God is. Though God is the central character of the Bible, we often study so little about God that we are more knowledgeable about human guilt than we are of God deserving our appreciation and gratitude. Unfortunately, many of our views of God are views handed to us, not views that are the result of our study of scripture.

The psalmist praised God in Psalms 8. His motivation was not the terror of hell. Neither was his motivation a sense of eternal consequences. Jesus had not been born. Jesus’ death on the cross had not occurred. The expressions of grace as you know it, mercy as you know it, sanctification as you know it, justification as you know it, or redemption as you know it had not been revealed. Salvation for all as you know it did not yet exist.

Before you consider the reasons for the psalmist praising God, examine the reasons he did NOT praise God. If all those motivations for praising God were removed from us, would we have any motivation to praise God?

Yet, the psalmist understood that God was praiseworthy. For three reasons, he understood God was praiseworthy: (a) He understood that God was Creator; (b) he looked away from the human sphere of existence and work, and (c) he was impressed with God’s actions on the earth and in the heavens.

The psalmist’s reasons for praising God have little in common with our reasons for praising God. Yet, without many of our basic motivations, to him, God was praiseworthy.

He saw God as having a majestic name, as a Being filled with splendor. From the existence of a human infant to the dazzling display of a clear night sky, he saw the evidence of God’s greatness. In the powerless infant, he saw the strength of God. In the amazing night sky he saw the work of God’s “fingers.” Such displays of power were beyond the power of any enemy.

When he looked at an infant or the glory of a night sky, he was overwhelmed by God’s glorious power. We become so engrossed in the “how” that we do not see the obvious message. When we obsess about the methods, we lose sight of the message. Too often we affirm things scripture does not affirm.

The psalmist was so dazzled and impressed by the evidences of God’s greatness, people looked vastly inferior. When he compared adult people to what God had done, the comparison was pitiful. It was more than pitiful—it was astounding! The infant did not cause God headaches! The stars did not cause God headaches! It was the rebellious adult person that was the source of God’s problems on earth!

There was so much difference between the human adult and God that there was no comparison. The human adult was the source of earth's rebellion against God.

The question: Considering God's obvious power, why does God endure rebellious human adults? Considering human problems are the result of human mistakes, why does God even care about humans? Why not just allow adults to endure the consequences of their behavior? By the investment of God, people have amazing potential! Given the position of the human adult in this world, the human potential defies imagination! The human adult ruled over all God made including sheep, oxen, wild animals, birds, fish, and creatures in general.

The obvious question to the psalmist was not about "how did God do it," but about why would God even care about what happened to the human adult? Though the human rules over all earthly life forms, the human adult only does what God gave him the potential to do. God is praiseworthy, not the human adult.

Everything, including the infant human, gave witness to God's greatness and praiseworthiness! All God made bore witness to the majesty of God. (Nothing bore witness to the praiseworthiness of the human adult.)

To the psalmist, the witness of greatness was to God, not to the human adult.

Most adult humans seem to be impressed with themselves. They particularly seem to be fond of their accomplishments. They surround themselves with what they have done, and they forget what God has done. The more urban they become, the more forgetful they become. The more they limit their exposure to nature, the more impressed with themselves they seem to be. The more they focus on, "Look what we did!" the less they see what God did.

Humans are prone to arrogance. They are easily impressed with themselves. Greatness lies in them, not in anything else.

God made and the adult human utilizes what exists. Everything the adult human utilizes existed thousands of years ago. There is a vast difference between making and utilizing. Though the psalmist did not know or utilize the things you do, he was amazed at God's majesty. He was most unimpressed with the adult human.

Everything the adult human utilizes today existed long ago. All that has changed is the understanding of human adults.

For Thought and Discussion

1. When something is truly great to use or utilize, what is a strong possibility?

The possibility is strong that the person wants to share his findings.

2. Spiritually, you are challenged to note a problem by asking what two questions?

- a) *How would you describe the characteristics of a good congregation?*
- b) *How would you describe God's goodness?*

3. Give the two observations presented.

- a) *We could describe the characteristics of a good congregation more easily than we could describe the goodness of God.*
- b) *Our list for the characteristics of a good congregation would be longer than our list of God's goodness.*

4. What suggestion is made?

Could that mean we know far too little about God's revelation of Himself?

5. Give four rarely asked questions concerning praising God.

- a) *Does God deserve to be praised?*
- b) *Why, specifically, do we regard God worthy of praise?*
- c) *Do we praise God because we are in terror of what will happen to us if we do not praise Him, or because we feel God is truly deserving of our praise?*
- d) *If you were ignorant of hell and eternal consequences, would you still praise God?*

6. In Psalms 8, what was NOT the psalmist's motivation for praising God?

- a) *He did not know the terror of hell as you know it.*
- b) *He did not know eternal consequences as you do.*
- c) *Jesus had not been born.*
- d) *Jesus' death on the cross had not occurred.*
- e) *The expressions of mercy, grace, sanctification, justification, redemption, and salvation as we know them had not been revealed.*

7. The psalmist found God praiseworthy for what three reasons?

- a) *He understood God was Creator.*
- b) *He looked away from the sphere of human existence and work.*
- c) *He was impressed with God's actions on the earth and in the heavens.*

8. When the psalmist looked at God, what did he see?

He saw a majestic name and a Being of splendor.

9. What was the question?

The question was, "Why does God endure rebellious human adults?"

10. Most adults seem to be impressed with what?

They seem to be impressed with themselves.

11. There is a vast difference between what?

There is a vast difference between making and utilizing.

Lesson Five

In Some Basic Ways, People Do Not Change!

Text: Psalm 10

The objective of this lesson: To note the godly in all ages have struggled with the dilemma created when righteous people devoted to God suffer because of the acts of wicked people who reject God.

People! With all the changes in our world, in our society, and—too often—in our behavior, in some fundamental ways, we never change. Always, God acts too slowly! Always, some people give themselves to wicked behavior! Always, people who give themselves to wicked behavior harass the defenseless and the weak! Always, the arrogant wicked prosper at the expense of the humble righteous! Always, the behaviors of the wicked generate faith crises for the righteous! Why does it seem the wicked prosper as the righteous struggle?

Stress that in some basic ways people have NOT changed throughout recorded history.

Sound familiar? As much as has changed this past generation, those situations have not changed. Those situations are true right now, and those situations were true three thousand years ago! Those situations will continue to be true in the future!

Stress the basic confusion/struggle of the righteous as they endure the opposition of wicked people has not changed. The question, “How could this be?” remains and the struggle to understand continues.

Have you not found those situations to be true in your experience and observations? Is it not true that those situations are the basis for some of your largest faith crises? Hopefully, the awareness that the basis for faith crises always have existed will provide you with a fresh perspective. If you struggle to be righteous, these struggles are not new—not in any way!

Stress how easily this question can become a faith crisis when righteous people endure difficult moments that are caused when wicked people cause a righteous person unfair struggle.

Can you hear the palmist’s agony as he begins the psalm? Things were not well! “Lord, why are You distancing Yourself from us believers? When troubled times remind us of our great need for Your closeness, why are You so difficult to locate? The wicked are overflowing with self-confidence as they bear down on defenseless us. They make our existence miserable, and they are never the victims of their own plots. We suffer and they laugh! It is not fair!”

Stress the agony the psalmist expressed.

Then the psalmist began a long, graphic description of the wicked people who caused them so much trouble. The wicked bragged because if they wanted it, they had it. They were so proud of themselves and their “accomplishments” that they laughed at God in the conviction that He did not even exist.

The value of this powerful description will be found in presenting it realistically. Do not ignore or slight the struggle as the psalmist seeks to understand and thus maintain faith in God.

Those who were wicked were always prosperous. God's judgments were so above them that they never saw them. They ridiculed those who opposed them. They were so self-confident they feared nothing—not even the future!

The wicked lived what society calls “the good life” and were enormously confident that nothing would change for them. They were extremely confident they always would be the dominating force. Nothing would change for them!

They could not speak without cursing. They were constantly deceiving others. All they wanted to do was to oppress people. They were constantly plotting how to cause others heartache. When they were around people's living places, they lurked about and hid in order to find and destroy the innocent. They were constantly on the lookout for the defenseless; they were as dangerous as a lion hiding in the bushes ready to pounce on the unsuspecting. They constantly set traps for the weak and vulnerable.

The wicked were foul-mouthed, intimidating, and never to be trusted. They were constantly hurting others, and were never the victims—they were the cause of hurt who successfully avoided suffering. They searched for people they could take advantage of—they, themselves, were never at risk. However, people who easily could be taken advantage of were at great risk.

Their victims were no match for those who attacked them! Their view of God was so idolatrous! They thought God was so involved with His own interests and affairs that He had neither time to see nor interest in what they did to others.

The wicked were careful to make certain they always had the advantage. They never were at risk; they “won” every time. God was too self-absorbed to pay attention to what they did! (That was a common view of idolatrous gods. See 1 Kings 18:25-29.)

Next, the psalmist pled with God to take action against the wicked oppressors. “Notice what the wicked are doing to us! Do not forget our struggle! Be offended by how they view you! They count on the fact that You will not get involved!”

The psalmist is seeking to motivate God to action. People have been known to plead, to promise, to remind, and even to try to force God to act as they want Him to act. The psalmist was not trying to go out of the “bounds” of righteous conduct, but he was seeking to move God to act. Do we not often seek to do that through prayer requests?

“I know You are involved. I know You do see what the wicked do. I know you will act. You are the only protection we have, our only defense. Please let the wicked experience the misery they have caused those they oppressed. Make them know what it is like to suffer! Oppose them until wickedness no longer exists!”

The struggle of the psalmist is evident. He was seeking to move God to act, but He was also seeking to affirm faith in God in a difficult situation. Can you not identify with the psalmist's struggle?

“I know who You are—You are the King, and You always will be the King! You decide the destiny of nations (the wicked are no match for you)! Never let the oppressed righteous doubt that You hear us! Give us strength to endure! Be the champion of the defenseless! End the reign of terror of the wicked oppressors!”

Though the psalmist struggled with the dilemma of how righteous people could suffer so much at the hands of wicked people, he had not lost faith in God or God’s identity. He did not want any other righteous person to lose faith in God.

Begin by noting the dilemma that caused the oppressed who are righteous to struggle in all ages: How can people who are righteous in their devotion to God be oppressed by wicked people who ignore God? Is the answer to be found in a weakness in God? Is the answer to be found in the oppressed having an incorrect definition of righteous devotion to God? Is the answer found in neither? This unanswered struggle is not a new problem!

Acknowledge that the dilemma of righteous people suffering exists, and has existed for thousands of years. Avoid the temptation of offering an over-simplified answer. Be certain the students understand the dilemma caused when the wicked cause the righteous to endure suffering.

Continue by noting that there are numerous factors involved in this complex struggle.

1. What is your view of God? What is the source of your concepts of God?
2. Is more happening in this struggle than just the conflict between good and evil in this physical world? (Consider Paul’s statement in Ephesians 6:10-12.)
3. Is the source (are the sources) of the consequences which produce the physical struggle obvious and easily recognized? (Is it possible for the righteous to endure physical suffering as a result of consequences to acts that the suffering righteous do not even know about?)
4. Will devotion to the values of righteousness produce struggle as those devoted to the values of wickedness oppose the values of righteousness?
5. For what reason are you a Christian? (If your answer is some form of avoiding pain and struggle in this physical world, you need to examine your motives. Consider Hebrews 11:13-16.)
6. Did Jesus perfectly do the will of God? Did he suffer? Was He executed? Did God fail in Jesus? Do you see a contrast between those who seek to avoid struggle turning (in their quest) to a Savior who endured physical suffering?

Be certain to help the students understand it is a complex—not a simple—issue. Use the questions as an illustration of how complex the matter is. There are some matters that are beyond the human ability to understand or answer. Few people realize how much their religious answers/views are based on traditional approaches or “handed down” answers which have never examined scripture. There are moments that it is shocking to learn our assumptions are nothing more than that—assumptions!

Consider this suggestion: The prayer of the righteous person is not focused in escaping physical struggle, but it is centered in the request for the strength to endure physical suffering. In the physical world, the righteous will be subjected to the assaults of the wicked.

It is disturbing to see how often our prayers are (a) an attempt to manipulate God (b) to achieve a specific physical outcome we desire RATHER than an expression of faith in God regardless of what happens. Never forget that we trust God no matter what Satan does or does to us as he opposes God and His purposes. If God could produce a universal Savior from the cross, He can produce your salvation from anything that happens to you!

For Thought and Discussion:

1. Discuss the struggle, in all ages, to grasp why the righteous suffer because of the acts of the wicked.

The discussion should include this understanding: the power of God figures prominently in the dilemma.

2. What was the psalmist's description of the wicked who were causing the struggle?

They were arrogant, haughty, wealthy, condescending, foul-mouthed, distrustful, oppressive, sneaky, dangerous, hurtful, conceited, and impressed with themselves—not God.

3. Discuss what the psalmist knew. How does that intensify the struggle of the righteous?

The psalmist knew who God was and that He listened to the oppressed. It intensified the struggle of the righteous because they must ask, "How can God listen and the suffering continue?"

4. What were the six questions given to illustrate that this is a complex issue?

- a) *What is your view of God? What is the source of that view?*
- b) *Is more happening in this struggle than the conflict between good and evil in this physical world?*
- c) *Are the consequences that produce this struggle obvious?*
- d) *Will devotion to the values of righteousness produce a clash when they encounter devotion to the values of wickedness?*
- e) *For what reason are you a Christian?*
- f) *How do you explain Jesus, his suffering, the cross, and God's triumph in all of that?*

5. Discuss the prayer suggestion made in this lesson.

The discussion should include the awareness that the focus of prayer is not escape from physical suffering, but strength to endure physical suffering.

Lesson Six

Where Will I Go? To The Lord!

Text: Psalm 11 & 12

The objective of this lesson: To affirm that when struggles do not challenge your dependence on God, those struggles can still make you ask "Why?"

The struggle goes on and on! When you are a young adult, you are impressed that money, power, human resources, or human abilities are the answer to life's uncertainties. Most young adults do not fear enemies—unless the crisis is severe! The attitude is more a declaration of "bring it on!" than the question, "How will we ever cope and survive?"

As the Christian ages, it becomes increasingly obvious that human struggles do not end and needs are constant. As we look at a situation in our youth we are sure it has an easy answer/solution. Then later in life we realize the situation is far more complex than previously imagined. There are real factors that young adults often do not see or did not consider.

As our age advances and we see that the physical is uncertain and difficult, our confident bravado erodes as it is replaced by the realization that struggles never end. "Permanent solutions" do not exist. No matter what we do, struggles continue.

Young adults pursue permanent solutions passionately while older adults accept the fact that enduring solutions do not exist. Both have advantages and disadvantages. The "can do anything so do not get in the way" and the "can do nothing so do not try" attitudes are not a blessing. Change is such a constant in determining needs that each generation must learn how to assert values as it faces its new reality.

Perhaps nothing makes us think as does seeing the struggles of people who have no spiritual family. To see people who face the stark moments of life alone underscores the value of mutual dependence on God. To lose or abandon that blessing is to forfeit one of physical life's great gifts.

How often have you wondered how a person or a family coped with a demanding circumstance when they had zero connection with a congregational family?

In Psalms 11, the psalmist declared his refuge was God. A difficult time had enveloped the psalmist. As is often the case in difficult times, there was an abundance of advice. The advice given the psalmist: Flee to an inaccessible place where you can successfully hide from your enemies.

Be clear that the situation did not produce a faith in God crisis for the psalmist. God was his refuge. However, the crisis caused him deep concern. He was compelled to cry out to God as he asked why. Finding refuge in God does not prevent crisis or the felt need to ask why.

"Psalmist, you should know your enemies are determined to destroy you, and they will not fight fair. They will use the cover of darkness to hide their movements. You and the righteous will honor the rules of engagement, but they will not! They gladly will shoot you in the darkness.

They do not care who they hurt—all they care about is winning! It is time to run—save yourself from your uncertain danger!”

The advice was the old standby encouragement: “Save yourself—that is the only important consideration!”

The righteous psalmist declared there was more to consider than his physical safety. Righteous people are concerned about honoring values—God’s values. “If we do not care about honoring God’s values, there is far more to be lost than our physical lives!”

The values that motivated the psalmist to be a righteous person were at stake. Something much bigger than personal safety was at issue. Christians need to understand that there are bigger issues than personal safety when God’s values are the issue.

Righteous people never forget that the Lord is in control! No matter the physical cost or the “right now” situation, the righteous do not forget who the Lord is or where He is. Because of who He is and where He is, He sees everything that happens. “Happenings” tested all people—the righteous and the wicked. God knew what people did and why they did it! Nobody got away with anything! It was impossible to deceive God! God would take care of the wicked—leave that in His hands and focus on being righteous! He would act in ways you never could, in ways that will defy imagination! However, He would certainly do it!

God being in control means God knows. God being in control and knowing does not mean that what God does is obvious to us. God knowing does not mean that all is fine physically with us. Let us focus on being righteous people and allow God to work His purposes in all situations—good and bad. Because evil does the “bad” does not mean God is not continuing His purposes in spite of the “bad” being done.

The Lord was righteous and He loved the righteous. The upright should not worry about the enemy—they would see the Lord’s face! He never abandoned the upright!

God has not abandoned us because the moment or situation is undesirable for us. God’s blessing is often the strength to endure the trial.

Perhaps Psalm 12 followed Psalm 11 because the situation depicted was dire. The psalmist was pleading with God for help. He was not pleading because he doubted God, but because the situation was so severe. People who were godly were vanishing! It seemed as though wicked people were winning. The faithful were disappearing—it seemed they were no match for the wicked. Thus, the psalmist asked for God’s help. Obviously, the psalmist was baffled by the problem’s existence.

It is not an unrighteous act to cry out to God for help in difficult situations. We just must exercise care not to become selfish and self-centered in such situations. As God works, He does not need our approval. We need to concern ourselves with trusting, not approving. God is in charge; we are not.

This problem seemed to be caused by the effective deceitfulness of the wicked. They knew how to gain a person’s confidence through flattery. The wicked knew how to say just the right thing to make their declarations believable to those who sought to be righteous people.

However, when the wicked spoke, they spoke falsely with a double purpose (the self-serving purpose of the wicked was not evident to the righteous).

The problem was caused by deceit effectively misdirecting the righteous. Deceit caused the righteous to focus on the wrong things.

The psalmist did not ask the Lord to “zap” the wicked out of existence, but to destroy their ability to flatter and deceive. The wicked were confident that they could do anything through their speech! No one could get the better of them because they knew how to use flattery to make anyone their victim. Everyone was troubled by something! Everyone had needs or struggles that overwhelmed them. All the wicked needed to do was to figure out how to exploit the situation produced by the trouble, the struggle, or the need!

The request was NOT for God to destroy the wicked, but to end the deceit. We are warned not to let evil exploit us (consider Ephesians 4:26, 27 and James 4:7).

The psalmist understood part of the problem was produced by the eagerness of the righteous to have a “quick fix” solution to troubles, struggles, and needs. The answer: Turn to the Lord for answers, and not to the flattering words and deceitful promises of the wicked. God truly addressed a situation. He did not deceive—He addressed the real problem. His words could be trusted as though they were the finest, most expensive silver. He would be with those who belonged to Him, and those who belonged to Him had a future that could not be destroyed—never would the righteous vanish!

We become part of the problem when we decide God must function “in the way we desire.” That attitude opens the righteous to deception. The solution is found in trusting God.

The wicked might go about in the extreme confidence that they were in control, but their work depended on the gullibility of people. The righteous depended on the steadfastness of God!

Any effort that depends on humans for effectiveness is doomed. People fail; God endures.

When horrible things happen like the death camps of WWII, the genocide of Sudan, or the death and destruction of 9/11/2001, it seems the wicked have all the advantages. However, the righteous depend on a force superior to any earthly happening. Wickedness will self-destruct because it depends on the deception of humans. Righteous shall prevail because it depends on the enduring God. To be righteous, one must see further than the immediate situation.

People are capable of terribly wicked behavior just as they are capable of incredible righteous behavior.

For Thought and Discussion

1. When we are young adults, what impresses us? Why?

- a) *Money, human power, human resources, and human abilities impress us.*
- b) *We feel the human is the answer to life’s problems and questions.*

2. Often, the attitude of the young adult is what? Often, the question of older adults is what?

- a) *The young adult often has the attitude of "bring it on!"*
- b) *The older adult asks, "How will we ever cope and survive?"*

3. Discuss this statement: "Permanent solutions" do not exist. What makes us think?

- a) *The discussion should include the awareness that each generation must deal with its own realities.*
- b) *Seeing people struggle with problems when those people have NO spiritual family to help and encourage makes us think.*

4. What advice did the psalmist receive in his time of difficulty? The psalmist declared what?

- a) *The advice: "Save yourself from the danger confronting you."*
- b) *The psalmist said there is more to consider than my physical safety.*

5. Righteous people never forget what? What do "happenings" do?

- a) *Righteous people never forget the Lord is in control.*
- b) *"Happenings" test all people—the righteous and the wicked.*

6. In Psalms 12 why was the psalmist pleading with God? Discuss the situation.

- a) *The psalmist pleads with God for help because the righteous are falling to deception.*
- b) *The discussion should include that it seemed to the psalmist as if the wicked were winning.*

7. The psalmist understood what?

The psalmist understood the righteous were making themselves vulnerable by wanting "quick fix" solutions.

8. Contrast what the wicked depend on with what the righteous depend on.

The wicked depended on the gullibility of people and the righteous depended on the steadfastness of God.

9. In our "today world" when does it seem the wicked are winning?

The wicked seem to have all the advantages and sometimes do terrible things.

Lesson Seven

The Anguish of a Struggling Godly Person

Text: Psalm 22

The objective of this lesson: To emphasize that the suffering of the righteous does not destroy the praiseworthiness of God.

It is extremely important (because of Jesus' usage) to set this Psalm in the context of the psalmist's time. It is quite easy to interpret the Psalm by looking back from Jesus' usage and imposing our Christian theological perspective on the Psalm's struggle. Did Jesus use quotations from this Psalm as he died? Yes! The issue: did the psalmist use this psalm in a conscious effort to predict God's coming work in Jesus? In the understanding of Peter's statement in 1 Peter 1:10-12, that seems unlikely. That God was at work throughout the Old Testament was evident, but not even the angels understood what God was doing. **Or**, did Jesus regard some statements in the Psalm an appropriate declaration (a) of the just suffering through the actions of the wicked, and (b) of the suffering of the just not being "the end of the situation" of God's work? That seems more likely. Remember, the terrible temporary physical suffering of Jesus' cross was followed by the joyful, eternal resurrection of Jesus that still provides the Christian hope.

*It is very easy to impose one's Christian emphasis/theology on the psalm by using Jesus' quotation as a justification for doing so. The meaning of an Old Testament scripture should not be determined because it is quoted in the New Testament. There is an enormous difference between saying this is a conscious effort by the psalmist to predict Jesus Christ **OR** saying Jesus quoted from the psalm because it was an appropriate declaration of Jesus' situation.*

The Psalm powerfully and eloquently captured a basic struggle of the righteous in every century. How should the righteous reconcile God's knowledge and power with the sufferings of the righteous? Every righteous person (Christian and pre-Christian) has struggled with that challenge—especially when righteous people struggle as a result of the deliberate actions of wicked people. The onlooker can hypothesize, but the righteous suffer must search for an answer.

The age old problem: How do we reconcile the suffering of the righteous with the power and knowledge of God? There are problems with no sufficient answers thus far.

The Psalm began with the righteous who was suffering with feeling abandoned by God. (Remember, it is possible for one's feelings and one's convictions to be in conflict—faith often questions as it grows.) Though the suffering was severe, the holiness of God was unquestioned—the solution was not that God was unjust. In fact, to the psalmist, history vindicated God. Verse 3b may be a reference to Exodus 3:7, 9. Verse 4 may be a reference to Israel's exodus from Egypt. Thus, Israelites cried out, they trusted, and they were delivered. "Why is that not happening to me? Have I not cried out and trusted? Why am I not delivered?" (The righteous often fail to consider how long many past situations existed prior to God's deliverance.)

The problem: the righteous who suffer often feel abandoned by God. In answering, a common reference in the Old Testament was to the Jewish exodus from Egypt. Often, we fail to realize

how much time was involved in God's response to the Israelite people's cries. Lots of people died before a response came. More was involved than Israel's distress.

The situation the righteous person encountered was severe—it crushed his image of himself. He was overwhelmed by the shame he encountered. The way people treated him ridiculed him—their actions showed him contempt in public. They ridiculed him for placing his trust in a God that did not deliver him from his suffering! If his God was of value, then his God should rescue him.

Emphasize the severity of the situation. Shame can cause enormous suffering! The psalmist endured both pain and ridicule!

The psalmist had no doubt God always had been there. God was there when he was born. God was there when he was a nursing infant. The plea: “Do not be removed from me now when trouble is so near.”

To the psalmist, the problem was NOT that God was not present.

The psalmist depicted his situation in pathetic terms. He was surrounded by bulls that were determined to kill him. They were strong and inescapable! Their intent could not be more deadly if they were lions! He had control of nothing. He compared himself to spilt water (forces other than the water even determine its shape and where it goes). His bones were out of joint (can you imagine the pain of just the hips, the knees, the shoulders, and the elbows being out of socket or unhinged?). His insides were as unstable as shaking Jell-O. His strength had vanished—he was as useless as a piece of broken clay pot. He was so dry his tongue stuck to the inside of his mouth. He was as good as dead!

The problem to the psalmist was his severe suffering when he knew God was there. Emphasize the pain and loneliness the psalmist felt in the situation.

To make matters worse, people like semi-tamed dogs surrounded him just waiting for him to die. They increased his misery and stared at him. He was so malnourished he was like a sack of bones bound together with skin. He did not have any strength—he was defenseless against their attacks!

Again, emphasize how horrible the situation was.

No matter how terrible his condition was, he knew God was near him. He cried out for God's assistance and deliverance. In his dire circumstances, God answered.

The psalm did not say how (the way in which) God answered.

Please notice: The psalmist did not say, “Why did you allow me to get into such a horrible shape and suffer those things?” He did not say, “Why did You not come quicker?” He did not criticize God for allowing him to go through that situation. Instead, he praised God for His help!

The psalmist did not criticize God for inactivity or delay.

He would not be ashamed to praise God in public. He would be a witness of God's worthiness of praise, glory, and awe. He would declare that God does not desert the afflicted. God does not hide his face from those who cry to Him. He would not be less devoted to God because of his experience.

The psalmist was not ashamed of God and did not regard God as undeserving of praise.

Those who laughed would not continue to laugh. It was evident God was with the afflicted. Not only was God with Israel, but He also ruled (rules) the nations. Those who were as good as dead would praise God. Those who, at one time, seemed to have no posterity would be the parents of generations who praised God. The yet unborn would honor God.

The psalmist had no doubt of his vindication before those who caused him such severe suffering.

Physical suffering will be a reality for righteous people in all generations. The righteous do not praise God because all is physically fine with them all the time. Times and situations of suffering do not mean God abandoned the afflicted nor did (does) it mean God did not heed the cries of the afflicted. God's best witnesses are those who endured suffering and continued to praise God. The suffering of the righteous does not define the character of God.

On this earth, righteousness will never eliminate physical suffering. The righteous should not bind physical well being and godly living. We are righteous because of who God is, not because righteousness is the avenue to a human's physical advantage.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss why it important to set this psalm in the psalmist's time. What is the issue?

- a) *The discussion should include this: Because of Jesus' quotation of the Psalm on the cross, it is easy to impose Christian theology on the meaning of the Psalm.*
- b) *The issue: Did the psalmist consciously predict God's coming work in Jesus, **OR** did Jesus consider some statements in the Psalm appropriate for his situation?*

2. What does the psalm powerfully, eloquently capture? How does it begin?

It powerfully, eloquently captures a basic struggle of the righteous in every century.

It began with a righteous person who suffered with feeling abandoned.

3. Why is the righteous person's situation severe?

It crushed his image of himself, it overwhelmed him with shame, and he felt a deep sense of contempt.

4. The psalmist did not doubt what?

He did not doubt God was there.

5. How did the psalmist depict his situation in pathetic terms? What were people like?

He was surrounded by strong bulls determined to kill him, and he could not escape. He had control of nothing. He was in enormous pain that eliminated his strength. He was useless, dehydrated, and defenseless.

6. What did the psalmist know?

He knew God was near him.

7. The psalmist did not say what?

He did not criticize God for not responding in the manner he wished.

8. He would not be ashamed to do what?

He would not be ashamed to praise God in public.

9. Discuss: Physical suffering will be a reality for righteous people in all generations.

The discussion should include the awareness that physical suffering is not to be equated with God's abandonment.

Lesson Eight

God's Guidance

Text: Psalm 23

The objective of this lesson: to encourage dependence on God.

Verses from this Psalm are among the most recognized scriptures in the whole Bible. These verses are commonly used in distress, and frequently used in funerals.

People who are not Jews or Christians often recognize verses from Psalms 23 as being from the Bible.

This Psalm is not about death, but about God's provision for those who follow Him. It is not about having in abundant excess, but about having the necessities to sustain life. The primary image used to communicate the message of the Psalm is a sheep following its shepherd in the wilderness. It is essential to grasp some basic background and context in order to accurately see the message of the Psalm.

Great care needs to be exercised NOT to allow our usage of this Psalm or some of its statements to determine the meaning of the Psalm or those statements. Because the Psalm is often associated with the suffering and mourning caused by death does not mean the Psalm is about death. The Psalm is about confidence in God to provide NEEDS (not wants).

The setting: The setting is likely in a wilderness area far away from people and cultivated fields. In that time, being a shepherd was a lonely task that commonly separated a person from civilization by demanding he lead his sheep to and in wilderness areas. The objective was to care for the sheep's needs in a place where the sheep could do no harm to people's fields. Then farmers (the majority of people) practiced what today is called "open range"—no fences! If sheep were to be guided away from cultivation, they had to be led into wilderness areas!

The setting was in their wilderness. Often going from one pasture to another pasture involved going through a narrow corridor with sheer cliffs on each side of the corridor. There were times the cliffs were so sheer and the corridor so narrow that sunlight would penetrate the passage way only when the sun was directly overhead. Thus it was a dim place that gave predators many places to hide and attack. Going to pastures in wilderness areas was often dangerous and difficult!

The relationship: The sheep totally depended on the shepherd for guidance and protection. They were helpless even to go where they needed to be in order to have food and water. They followed the shepherd; they were not herded. Sheep also were defenseless—the only protection they had from their enemies (predators) was the protection of the shepherd.

The shepherd received no aggressive help from the sheep! The shepherd has to provide all the care, all the guidance, and all the protection! If an uncooperative sheep wandered off alone, that sheep would make the shepherd's life miserable! The greatest help a sheep could provide a shepherd was to be a cooperative follower.

In the Psalm, God was the shepherd, and the psalmist was the sheep. The psalmist would not be afraid of being destroyed by future needs because of his confidence in the Lord. The Lord would attend his needs and protect him from harm. Like a sheep, he would have more than enough to eat, and he could drink without fear. In fact, like a good sheep following a good shepherd, his “enough” would refresh his life as he followed the ways that blessed his life rather than leading him into danger.

Note that the sheep was focused on the needs of today, and the shepherd was focused on the needs of tomorrow. The position of the sheep and the shepherd were not interchangeable.

As the sheep, he could follow his shepherd along ways he would never enter. He did so without fear because of his confidence in the shepherd. Harm would not befall him! If he needed assurance, he looked at the shepherd’s rod and staff—the shepherd could both defend and help him! The shepherd would lead him to food in lush pastures. Those who would devour him could do nothing but observe from the distance as they watched from the rocks. The shepherd would examine him for wounds daily, and treat him when he needed it.

The defensive tools of the shepherd were the sheep’s comfort. The shepherd would not eliminate the predators, only protect from the predators. The good sheep cooperated with the shepherd. The behavior of the sheep determined how much the skills of the shepherd could benefit the sheep!

Because of the shepherd’s guidance, there always would be another pasture. Nothing could sever his relationship with this ideal shepherd—that relationship would continue for all of life! He would always live with the shepherd!

The future was secure because of the skills of the shepherd, not because of the proficiency of the sheep.

Several things should be noted.

1. The Psalm is about the elimination of need, not the satisfying of greed.
2. Sheep fear water. Wool caked with mud can make it impossible for the sheep to get up. Wool soaked in water can make it impossible for the sheep to function. Drinking is necessary, but a soaking is dangerous.
3. The objective of being a good sheep is to be a living witness to the effective goodness of the shepherd. (We do not live in righteousness to prove our goodness, but our Lord’s goodness.)
4. Following a good shepherd eliminates fear. (Following the Lord is designed to destroy being afraid.)
5. Fear is not destroyed because “we can take care of ourselves,” but because we trust the shepherd.
6. The shepherd will take care of our wounds and our enemies.
7. Our future is found in our relationship with the shepherd.

These seven things are reminders that we are dependent on God. We are not even capable of recognizing danger when the danger is obvious to God. We do not even understand the importance of distinguishing between need and want!

Observations:

1. Greed and the desire to measure ourselves by our ability to possess is not the mark of being a good follower of God. The divine promise is NOT “be righteous and you will have all of your physical desires.” Needs and desires are quite different.
2. A righteous person follows God to declare and demonstrate the worthiness of God, not to advance self.
3. Following God sometimes means we go to dangerous places.
4. Being a good follower of God does not eliminate enemies.
5. Comfort is not in the proficiency of self, but in the proficiency of God.
6. Safety is found by sustaining relationship with God.
7. There is more to be considered in successful living than what seems to be physically advantageous at the moment.

We do not wish to overextend the images of the Psalm. However, we want the complete benefits of understanding the ancient relationship between the sheep and the good shepherd.

The analogy of a sheep and a shepherd is fascinating. Stated simply, sheep are dumb. If ever there was a dependent domesticated animal, it is sheep. In ancient times, they were completely dependent on shepherds. God does not prize us because we are brilliant of thought and do wonderful things. God prizes us because we have an amazing ability to follow. When we refuse to follow God, we get ourselves into trouble. Only to ourselves are we brilliant and accomplished! It is amazing how stupid our brilliant accomplishments are to us later in life.

We do not wish to exaggerate our sense of self-sufficiency. The focus is on knowing our limitations. We are in serious trouble when we think we can do the work of the shepherd or think the shepherd is unnecessary.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Verses from this Psalm are among the most recognized what?

They are among the most recognized scriptures in the whole Bible.

2. The Psalm is about what? What is the primary image?

The Psalm is about God's provision for those who follow Him. The primary image is that of sheep following its shepherd.

3. What is the setting? Why?

The setting is likely the wilderness area—pastures and water pools in the wilderness.

4. What was the relationship? Why?

The relationship is between the dependent sheep that follow and the skilled shepherd who protects and leads.

5. In the Psalm, who is the Shepherd, and who is the sheep?

In the Psalm, God is the shepherd, and the psalmist is the sheep.

6. Discuss the fact that the sheep follow the Shepherd through dangerous places without fear.

The discussion should include that the sheep was not afraid because the sheep trusted the shepherd to care for its needs. The shepherd knew what he was doing!

7. List the seven things to be noted.

- a) *The Psalm was about eliminating need, not satisfying greed.*
- b) *Sheep fear water. Water was necessary for life, but also was dangerous.*
- c) *The object of being a good sheep was to be a living witness to the effective goodness of the shepherd.*
- d) *Following a good shepherd eliminated fear.*
- e) *Fear was not destroyed because, "we can take care of ourselves," but because we trust the shepherd.*
- f) *The shepherd would take care of our wounds and our enemies.*
- g) *Our future was found in our relationship with the shepherd.*

8. List the seven observations.

- a) *Greed and the desire to measure ourselves by our ability to consume is not the mark of being a good follower of God.*
- b) *The righteous person follows God to declare and demonstrate the worthiness of God, not to advance self.*
- c) *Following God sometimes means we go to dangerous places.*
- d) *Being as good follower of God does not eliminate enemies.*
- e) *Comfort is not in the proficiency of self, but in the proficiency of God.*
- f) *Safety is found by sustaining relationship with God.*
- g) *There is more to be considered in successful living than what seems to be physically advantageous at the moment.*

9. Why is the analogy of a sheep and shepherd fascinating?

Sheep are dumb and dependent. God prizes us because of our amazing ability to follow. We are brilliant and accomplished only to ourselves—only to live beyond our brilliant accomplishments!

Lesson Nine

Praise of God

Text: Psalm 24

The objective of this lesson: To emphasize God's glory and worthiness of praise.

We have no comparable ceremony to celebrate the arrival of the reigning King. Perhaps the closest ceremony we have occurs when the United States President officially welcomes a visiting head of state from another country.

America tends not to be big on the importance of ceremony. Only occasionally is ceremony associated with a person's worth. We are more likely to use ceremony to express appreciation than to declare worth.

This ceremony occurs on the South Lawn of the White House. Assembled will be a color guard, flags of each US state, and up to 4,000 invited guests. Small flags of the US and the visitor's nation have been distributed to the guests, and an official program exists to be followed in detail.

At the appropriate moment, the U.S. Army Herald Trumpets perform four "ruffles and flourishes." The President and first lady appear, and a service band plays "Hail to the Chief." Then in the same attention to detail, the head of state is welcomed.

This occurs to say, "Someone of great importance is welcoming someone of importance." If we are capable of paying such tribute to our President and another head of state, how should we pay tribute to God?

Typically, Churches of Christ have an aversion to use ceremony to emphasize God's worth. This aversion is so strong that it often would be counterproductive to combine ceremony with a declaration of God's worth. Israel had no such aversion.

This Psalm pays tribute to God. Much conflicting discussion still occurs as to what the occasion was and when this occasion occurred in Israel. The questions: When did God arrive? What actually prompted this celebration? This study will not focus on those unanswered questions.

The basic focus of this Psalm is on honoring God who deserves honor.

Israel was a theocracy. The recognized actual ruler of the nation was God! Americans are unfamiliar with ruling (a kingship) or God being the King. There is a vast difference in people acknowledging God's power and presence in government and God being the government! God was being welcomed by his people in the same manner a conquering King returned from battle to his residence.

In a theocracy, laws are determined by divine decree and divine values. The problem with a theocracy (there is a troubled area in every form of governmental leadership) is in making application of divine decrees and values as situations change. Time passing always produces change. How does a theocracy address change in things as simple as what is an act of work?

The Creator God was honored for all He had done. God possessed the earth and everything living on earth because He was the origin of all that existed. The foundation for His creation was the seas and the rivers. This was perhaps a reference to the concept in passages such as Genesis 1:9.

The understanding that God created is neither questioned nor defended. It is an accepted as the basic reason God is deserving of praise. God is the source of all that exists, therefore He is worthy of our praise. The role of God as Creator is extremely important throughout scripture.

Note God brought what we would call stability out of what we consider instability. What human could or would use water for a foundation? God's achievement was not based on a human accomplishment! God deserved the welcome!

The fact that God produced order out of disorder, the fact that He could produce stability from the symbol of instability, was regarded as basic tribute to God. It was a demonstration that God was far superior to the human. Therefore, God deserved human praise.

Question: What people should accompany the King to His residence? Who should go with Him?

Who did the King God want in His presence? Not just anyone should associate with the King.

Accompanying the King God to his residence involved far more than being at the correct place at the appointed time. When Israel was led from Egyptian slavery as a non-nation to become a nation ruled by God, they, as a people, had to break away from idolatrous concepts of divinity. Deuteronomy 12:5, 11, and 13-14 involve one of the breakaways—the nation of Israel would not perform sacrificial worship anywhere and everywhere. God would select one place—the people of Israel would not select the place.

From the beginning of the Israelite nation, the place of sacrificial worship was quite important. The sacrifices were a human expression that acknowledged God's importance. The human, through sacrifice, acknowledged the importance of God. The question: What type of human would God choose to be in His presence? Would His selection just be made on being in the proper geographical place?

From that time forward "the place" became extremely important to Israel. Proper religion too often was reduced to the correct place at the appropriate time. In becoming a self-declared righteous person, being at the right place doing the right thing became more important than who you were as a person. In common language, *where you were* became more important than *who or what you were*. Too many thought that in righteousness, place was more important than personal behavior. How one acted in his/her personal life was insignificant if he/she were at the correct place doing the appropriate things.

Righteous not only involved the place of sacrifice, but it also involved the values and behavior of the person.

First, note the qualities of those who the King God wished to accompany Him to His residence.

1. These would be people with clean hands—their hands were not spotted with the filth of evil.
2. These people would have a pure heart—their righteous acts expressed an internal reality.
3. These people did not compromise life by telling lies.
4. These people did not exploit other people through deception.

Who they were was as important as being at the right place.

Note and emphasize the qualities. The behaviors that produced the qualities were based on specific values. Those values recognized the worth (in God's priorities) of people.

Second, note the active role the King God took. He blessed; He made it possible to be righteous; He delivered from danger (saved) those who had clean hands, pure hearts, did not lie, and did not deceive.

God actively benefited those people who honored His values in their behavior.

It was inappropriate for the King God to bow to anything! He was too deserving, too worthy to bow to anything. So the huge doors (gates) to the city were wide open to receive the King God (the Protector had arrived—closed gates were unnecessary). If necessary the entrance was raised so the unbowed King God could enter His city. He was the strong one, mighty in battle, and filled with glory.

This could not happen, but was an illustration of how much they valued King God. When a wall was built around the royal city, the entrances were designed to be restrictive to an invading force. The wall at the gate commonly had an overhead structure for defensive purposes. If the entrance into the city was too low for the riding King God to enter without bowing, then it was better for the overhead of the entrance to be raised than for King God to bow. This is a declaration of profound respect for King God.

May you see and sense the honor these people felt for their King God! They did not praise God because they had to; they praised God because they wanted to. God was deserving of all honor they could give Him!

The point you must sense is the profound respect the people had for King God which had to be expressed in praise and honor.

For Thought and Discussion

1. We have no comparable what? What, perhaps, is the closest American ceremony?

We have no comparable ceremony. The closest is, perhaps, when the president officially receives another head of state.

2. To whom does this Psalm pay tribute?

This Psalm pays tribute to God.

3. The government of ancient Israel was what? What does that mean?

Ancient Israel's government was a theocracy. That means God was the King. Their laws were to be based on God's decrees and values.

4. God brought stability out of what?

God brought stability out of instability.

5. Who were the people that should accompany King God to His residence?

- a) Those with clean hands.*
- b) Those with pure hearts.*
- c) Those who did not tell lies.*
- d) Those who did not deceive.*

6. Discuss the importance of the correct place in Israel's sacrificial worship. What mistake was easily made?

- a) The discussion should include sacrificial worship was to occur only at one place—Deuteronomy 12:5, 11, 13-14.*
- b) Many Israelites made the mistake of thinking righteousness only involved doing proper things at the correct place instead of involving both place and personal behavior.*

7. What active roles did King God take?

He blessed, made it possible to be righteous, and delivered from danger (saved).

8. What did they consider inappropriate for King God?

He should not bow to anything.

Lesson Ten

Trusting God

Text: Psalm 25

The objective of this lesson: To stress that faith does not end struggle. Faith grows as a result of facing and enduring struggle.

There is more than one way to approach this Psalm, and its content poses more than one question. The text used in this lesson is the New American Standard translation. The basic approach taken toward the content and message of this Psalm is the one of personal perspective produced by one's experiences resulting from age. Approach the Psalm's message with this understanding: there was a relationship between personal righteousness and the righteousness of Israel as a nation that is unfamiliar to most of us. Our concept of righteousness focuses more on the individual rather than the nation. Such was not the case in a theocracy, in ancient Israel.

The approach to this Psalm is still open to discussion. The approach of this lesson focuses on the perspective of the psalmist as he struggled because his total faith in God clashed with his physical circumstances.

As a person grew older and more experienced, his/her perspective changed. There were some things the person knew, but the more he/she knew the more his/her personal struggle deepened and intensified. Things he/she did not even know to ask as a young adult became daily mysteries that often plagued his/her life. For example, he/she knew God was holy, completely void of any sin. He/she also knew that he/she was sinful—more sinful than he/she ever saw or acknowledged as a young adult.

Spiritual maturity brought a deepening struggle that intensified as faith in God clashed with physical circumstances. People typically want tidy answers that are easily explained and understood. Many times such answers do not exist!

The struggle: how does the God in whom there is no sin associate with a human who has abundant sin? He/she trusted God, but when does God react to one's trust and when does God react to one's sin? How were difficult situations and moments to be understood in light of this disparity between God's holiness and any human's sinfulness? How does this disparity "figure in" regarding bad happenings or situations? Thus, the more a person knew as he/she aged, the more he/she trusted God, and the more aware he/she became of personal sinfulness. The result: the more he/she struggled with the disparity between God's holiness and personal sinfulness. It was a vicious cycle that seemed to never end!

As an example, consider the problem that a holy God in whom there is no sin (and who hates sin) associates with humans who cannot escape from being sinful beings who always stand in need of forgiveness. How can He who abhors sin associate with those who are incapable of ceasing to sin? Can physical disasters in our lives be explained by the clash between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of humans? The teacher wants the students to grasp the foundation of the problem.

The Psalm began with an affirmation: "I trust God! Without reservation I give Him my life! May I never be ashamed of my relationship with God, and may God's enemies never defeat me! May the righteous never be ashamed! May the treacherous be shamed! May You, God, champion the righteous and give the treacherous what they should receive!"

The psalmist in no way doubted God's existence or God's goodness. The problem did not exist because of some problem or defect in God.

Note the psalmist spoke of shame, not pain. Although it is obvious in the Psalm that the psalmist dealt with pain-filled situations, the greater suffering was the result of shame, not of physical pain. Only for comparative purposes, note how often the New Testament spoke of the shame of Jesus' cross rather than the pain of Jesus' cross. The American Christian mindset is more touched by physical suffering than by shame. Yet, even now shame often causes intense suffering.

The greatest suffering seemed to exist because of the feeling of shame. Illustrate the fact that shame can cause pain—use things like depression or perhaps the prodigal son. Sometimes shame is the "hidden pain."

Next, the psalmist affirmed life's answers lie in God's teachings. If one wanted to live life meaningfully, he/she allowed God to be in the role of supreme teacher. Passionately, he wished to know God's ways. He wanted to know God's paths (note such knowledge was not intuitive, it did not "just happen.") He knew God saved him from the difficulties he faced, and he was patient enough to wait on God instead of impetuously making up his own mind and charging ahead. Yet, he knew he was not deserving of God's consideration. He sought for God's compassion and mercy (the kindness that came from God's love), not for what he deserved. He was quite aware of his past sinfulness when he lacked judgment to pursue God's ways! If he knew of his past sins, God surely knew! He needed and pled for divine mercy!

Knowing and understanding the fact of God's goodness does not eliminate the struggle. Knowing God's goodness and our sinfulness can intensify the struggle as it calls for a deeper trust in God keeping His promises.

The psalmist knew God. He knew God well enough to describe Him.

1. God is good and upright.
2. He is not ashamed to instruct sinners.
3. He will bring justice to the afflicted (the humble).
4. He will guide those He leads to mercy (lovingkindness) and truth.

Note the psalmist did not "pretend" to know God.

Put those characteristics together. None needs to be terrorized of God or His destination for those who follow Him. The imperfect can follow God! If a person honored his/her agreement with God, that person would be accompanied by mercy and truth as he/she followed God's ways.

The mystery: How can God care that deeply about His people?

Please note one followed God to honor God! One allowed God to be his/her teacher for the sake of God's goodness (verse 7). One followed God's ways for the sake of God's name (verse 11). The plea WAS NOT lead me follow You so I can satisfy my personal ambitions—it was not a self-centered following! It WAS the plea to allow “sinful me” to honor You, God. “May my life and the way I use my life never detract from Your goodness or shame Your name!”

Devotion to God centers (1) in His worthiness and (2) in His purposes and objectives, not in us. Our blessings are a by-product of our seeking the worthiness of God and His objectives. Our salvation is primarily about who God is, not about who we are. Consider these verses: Psalms 23:3; 31:3; 79:9; 2 Chronicles 14:11; 1 Kings 8:41; Acts 9:16; Philippians 1:29; 3 John 7; etc.

Especially in the Old Testament, God acted to establish His identity. Jesus Christ is the ultimate in God declaring His identity.

Who is the person who fears (reverences) God?

1. This person made his choices by understanding God's instructions.
2. He lived in God's definition of good.
3. His descendants would continue after he died.
4. God's purposes will be to such people's benefit.
5. God's protection would be over such people.

The person's determination to follow God is intentional and not accidental. God's blessings are intentional and not accidental.

The Psalm ended with a focus on the psalmist's struggle. The psalmist knew who God was and what God did for those who followed Him. Yet, the psalmist struggled with reconciling what he knew about God and his current circumstances.

1. Because he was lonely and afflicted, he asked for God to be gracious to him.
2. Because his internal troubles were huge, he asked for help with his distress.
3. Because his affliction was burdensome, he asked for forgiveness.
4. Because his enemies were numerous and vicious, he asked for God to be his refuge.

Regardless of the psalmist placing his trust in God, his undesirable physical situation remained. Differentiate between the strength to endure struggle and the absence of struggle. Both are gifts from God.

Though all of this was true of his situation, He knew his preservation was in God's integrity and uprightness. He understood that he must be patient. He understood that the situation was bigger than just him—thus he asked God to redeem the nation of Israel.

The reality of his struggle did not destroy his ability and willingness to trust God.

In this Psalm, recognize these things:

1. The struggle for the believer between an understanding of God's character and the reality of the believer's circumstances is ancient.
2. Never come to the conclusion you have God “figured out.”
3. Refuse to allow your situation to be a “faith in God” crisis.
4. Realize the need for patience.
5. Realize all problems are bigger than just you.

Note the things that should be remembered.

Always remember the enormous blessing we have living on “this side” of Jesus’ cross!

We often regard our struggle in Jesus Christ as huge. Yet, we can look back and see what God did to provide the Christ and see why God provided us the Christ. Think of the trust to be righteous before people knew what God was doing. Read 1 Peter 1:10-12.

For Discussion

1. Discuss the struggle caused by **knowledge of God’s character** and **the reality of our situations**.

The discussion should include how God can be who He is and the righteous suffer so much in this world.

2. Discuss why a person follows God’s values and paths.

The discussion should include that the righteous person obeys God to declare the goodness of God.

Lesson Eleven

Fearless Faith and Reality

Text: Psalm 27

The objective of this lesson: To emphasize confidence in God involves personal struggle.

The first 6 verses have the courage of faith before encountering the faithless enemy. Then the battle began. Casualties occurred, blood flowed, and screams of pain filled the air. Suddenly, the reality of the situation descended over the psalmist like a wet blanket. The reality of the situation and the grave nature of the conflict produced a sober attitude. This change in attitude was seen in verses 7-12. Then a sobered new trust in God arose. This new trust was reflected in verses 13, 14.

Note the cycle. (1) Prior to the conflict, the psalmist was encouraged to understand that with God's help he could do anything. He was brimming with confidence as he was among those who understood his confidence in God and encouraged him. (2) Then the conflict involved his personal struggle as the conflict that could destroy him raged. (3) Finally, renewed trust in God became reality in the face of struggle.

The majority have been a part of this cycle. For example, a good coach prepares his team to win before a game. Through numerous devices the coach convinces the team that they can and will win. The team is full of confidence before the contest begins—they are convinced they cannot lose! After the contest begins, the game becomes a genuine struggle as key players sustain injuries. Suddenly, everyone collectively realizes, "The other team is as determined to win as we are! Winning will not be as simple as we thought!" Then, only a confident faith that is mixed with the reality of the situation can win! Victory does not ignore reality, but confronts reality with a confident determination!

A good illustration is a good coach preparing his team for victory before the contest with a worthy opponent began.

The Psalm began with a declaration of total confidence in God. The declaration was neither insincere nor just a "bragging" statement. The statement was not improper or thoughtlessly made. Perhaps it was more a declaration of unstressed confidence than a declaration of insincerity. The psalmist made the statement in a realization of God's adequacy in every circumstance. (The problem never lies in God's adequacy, but in our ability to trust God's adequacy.)

As the Psalm began, the psalmist had complete confidence in the adequacy of God to provide the psalmist all he needed no matter how severe the conflict.

He said that because of the Lord he did not need to be afraid of anyone. (True!) God was his light. In a world with feeble (at best) artificial lighting, he did not need to fear the darkness—God could "see" in darkness as well as sunlight. God could save him from any form of danger! He had no need to dread anything! The worst of enemies could attack, and God was more than equal to the challenge. God was bigger than numbers! Because of God, he had the right to be confident even if war broke out against him.

God was huge! He could see in darkness! He was bigger than numbers! (It is easy to have confidence in God if we are in charge of telling Him in what ways He should use His power.) It is easy to declare God's greatness as we silently assume God will use His greatness in the manner we expect (which often does not involve threats to us or our suffering).

Everything he said about God was true! He had every right to feel confident in God! It was true that God (a) could preserve him and (b) could be superior to any adverse situation.

Because what we believe about God's power is true does not mean the conflict between good and evil will not involve human struggle.

As an example, it is one thing to be motivated as a righteous person in a congregation of likeminded people when everyone is focused on the adequacy of God. It is quite another to maintain that focus and motivation when you are all alone in an evangelistic situation where no one understands you and most people regard you to be an enemy.

It is FAR simpler to maintain confidence in God's greatness in favorable circumstances as the person is surrounded by a support group who understands his confidence than to sustain that confidence in unfavorable circumstances surrounded by people who do not understand you or your confidence.

In verse 4 he was totally focused on God's adequacy. The one thing that mattered the most to him was maintaining and sustaining relationship with God. He wanted to be close to the temple and be impressed with God. If the situation became truly dire, God would conceal and hide him. God would place him above his enemies in a secure circumstance where he could not be attacked. In the face of frustrated enemies, he would delight in offering sacrifices to God and singing praises to God.

Stress that he was totally focused on God's capability and seemed to be unaware of his vulnerabilities. He deeply wanted relationship with God. There are two factors constantly involved in human confidence in God: (1) God's adequacy to address the situation, and (2) our adequacy to depend on God when God does not respond as we wish.

Then the situation demanded his struggle. Perhaps things were not going as he previously anticipated. Now he had to face himself. The issue was no longer God's adequacy, but his adequacy. In the reality of struggle, he became acutely aware that the problem in the struggle confronting him lay with his sinfulness, not with God's adequacy. God was adequate; he *knew* God was adequate; but did he have the strength to place his confidence in God's adequacy? How was his sinfulness affecting his ability to put his confidence in God's adequacy?

Sometimes dealing with US and OUR struggle is more an issue than accepting God's greatness. The struggle against enemies is ours as well as God's. Affirming God's greatness does not remove our struggles.

Note that the problem IS NOT the adequacy of God, but IS his inadequacy. His confidence in his ability to trust God's adequacy was falling fast. He was pleading with God to listen to him and answer. He was as determined as ever to seek God's face, but now he feared God would hide His face. Now he feared his sinfulness so offended God that God would respond in anger or abandonment.

Today's question often is, "How can this happen to me?" Too often we share the feeling of abandonment with the psalmist. Does the reality that we struggle offend God? Are we struggling because we sinned?

His feelings confused him. How can he think of his Helper and the One who rescued him in terms of anger or abandonment? Even if his parents deserted him (unthinkable), God would not! Suddenly the one who was so confident in God understood he needed for God to teach him God's ways. Knowing God's ways would be the difference between falling to his enemies and surviving the attack.

It is easy for us to be confused. Does affirmation of confidence in God remove all doubt? Does the existence of doubt mean the affirmation of confidence was false? How can we have such confidence in God and be so upset with God? What do the existence of such feelings mean? Read again Romans 7:15-8:1 to see the struggle and to see the answer for us. Give thanks to God for what we understand in Jesus Christ that the psalmist did not have available to him.

As all looked dark and gloomy, he realized God was and had been active, giving him help all the time. Had it not been for God's goodness, he would have been consumed by his despair. The need was for patience. Only if he waited for the Lord would he discover strength and courage.

Often we do not grasp all God has done and continues to do for us until we see God through the gloom of serious struggle. Human struggle is used by God to verify His presence. The difference between despair and hope is the ability to see God at work in our struggles. Read John 20:26-29.

In the beginning of the Psalm, God was the light that saved. God was the light, but he had to look for the light instead of staring at the darkness.

They lived at a time when (a) darkness was a powerful reality and (b) was a constant danger. In a real way, darkness controlled the rhythm of life. To affirm that God was greater than darkness was a huge affirmation.

Perhaps the question for us is this: Do we look for the light, or do we stare at the darkness?

The issue is what controls our focus?

For Thought and Discussion

1. What cycle did the Psalm use? Illustrate the cycle.

- a) *The cycle is confidence in God in favorable circumstances, doubt in struggle, and renewed confidence in spite of struggle.*
- b) *A coach preparing his team for victory before the contest begins and the realities of the struggles of the contest can be a good example of the cycle.*

2. How did the Psalm begin? Explain "unstressed confidence."

The Psalm began with total confidence in God. "Unstressed confidence" is confidence expressed in favorable circumstances with eyes only on God as an understanding support group encourages us.

3. What did he say about God? Discuss the truth of his attitude toward God.

- a) *The Lord was so big he did not need to fear anything.*
- b) *The discussion should include that confidence in God's adequacy in all situations is correct.*

4. Verse 4 was totally focused on what?

It totally focused on God's adequacy as the psalmist yearned for continuing relationship with God.

5. What was most important to him?

A continuing relationship with God in which God was always his priority was important to him.

6. Discuss the fact that the situation demanded his struggle.

The discussion should include that he was not prepared to face his role in his severe struggle.

7. The problem was not what? The problem was what?

The problem was not God's adequacy. The problem was his adequacy.

8. Why did his feelings confuse him?

He did not understand how he could know his confidence in God was so real, and yet he could struggle so much to maintain his confidence.

9. What did he realize?

He realized God was and had been there sustaining him all along, even in his darkest times.

10. Perhaps the question for us is what?

Do we look for the light, or do we stare at the darkness?

Lesson Twelve

The Reality of “Ups and Downs”

Text: Psalm 31

The objective of this lesson: To note the struggle that attacks faith in repetitive trials/attacks.

This Psalm, as is often the case in the Psalms, is subject to numerous interpretations. What is the setting? Why are there mood swings? How should a word or phrase be translated? Is it the combining of more than one Psalm?

Most of the psalms are subject to multiple interpretations. Most interpretations vary because of questions concerning background or technical questions that focus on the psalm’s structure.

Remember several things. A psalm is Hebrew poetry, not Hebrew prose. The majority of us are dealing with the *translation* of a writing about 3000 years old—words and phrases change meaning as time passes. If the Psalm made sense to those who originally sang the Psalm, that does not mean the Psalm will automatically and obviously make sense to us. Often the Psalms dealt with life’s rawness in a time when people did not have the insights we are provided through Jesus Christ. Those people dealt with life’s uncertainties differently than do Christians.

Two things to take into consideration when studying the Psalms: (a) The Psalms are poetry, not prose. (b) The Psalms commonly do not view “now” difficulties from a Christian value system.

One of the raw edges of life we all endure is the “ups and downs” produced by physical hardships. It often is easy to believe in and trust God when things are going the way you want. It is challenging to believe in and trust God when a period of struggle is followed by another period of struggle.

In every age the explanation of current difficulties are challenging to one’s faith. This is especially true when difficulties come over and over. Just when a righteous person thinks he/she has the challenges figured out, he/she is attacked again in a new but vulnerable and weak spot. The new attack is frequently unanticipated.

We should be able to relate to this challenge. One war ends, another begins. The Twin Towers disintegrate, vigilance heightens, and still someone attempts to blow up Times Square. A huge, destructive hurricane is followed by huge, destructive earthquakes which are followed by a massive, destructive oil spill. Human greed and evil never end! Many are the expressions of human hate! One group grabs for power as it ignores other groups’ suffering! Problems go on and on, ignoring human dilemmas produced by the problems! How does one maintain trust in God in the face of all that occurs?

Have your students to (a) verify the difficulty of repeated attacks and (b) discuss why such attacks can be challenging to one’s faith. Discuss the fact that a situation may be of help to people in one society but disastrous to people in another society.

The Psalm began with an affirmation of trust in God. Note the focus was on God. It focused on what God did for the psalmist. Perhaps it was a declaration of what the psalmist knew to be true because of God’s responses in the past. He took refuge in God. He asked that God assist

him in not being ashamed of God. God was his rescue, his strength, and his salvation. For the sake of God's name (for the sake of God's reputation), he asked for God to lead and guide him, to deliver him from the entangling net, and to continue to be his ransom.

It is simple to maintain faith in God when small difficulties are mastered. There is a huge difference between the dilemma of a personal inconvenience and the dilemmas caused by a starving child! The individual's struggles in those two situations are not the same!

Even with all his threats and troubles, he hated idolatry. He trusted in God and God's mercy. God knew what he went through. God was aware of his troubles! Yet, God did not desert him! (Even though he endured a very difficult time, he did not feel abandoned by God.)

Though the struggle was severe, the person understood the situation would not be resolved by changing gods—a real option when idolatry was rampant!

Seemingly then the psalmist went through a second hard time that was even worse than the first. He could feel his confidence and strength slipping! Out of his distress He called for God's consideration. He cried so much that his whole body was wasting away. His life went from sorrow to sorrow. His acquaintances ridiculed him. His neighbors wanted nothing to do with him. He was like a dead man, a broken (useless) vessel, as many slandered him and terrorized him. People plotted to kill him!

The psalmist was experiencing some major personal rejection as a result of his hardship! Personal rejection is extremely painful—a righteous person has to deal with injustice in ways he never felt before—and may not have imagined.

Even though his circumstances were disastrous, he was not ashamed to trust God. He just asked for deliverance from his enemies. He asked for God's face to shine on him as God used His mercy to save him. Instead of him being shamed, may the wicked be ashamed. Instead of him dying, may the wicked be silenced by death. May the lying lips be stopped!

He clung to God as in his confusion he struggled to understand his circumstances. His only response was to trust God. In his view, the wrong person was suffering. The situation was unjust and should be reversed.

As God again delivered, the psalmist again sang God's praises. God's goodness was great for those who endured difficult times. God blessed those who endured hard times through trusting Him. God provided care that the wicked could not see. Though troubles put a "siege" on his life, God's mercy rescued him. Though he was alarmed and in horrible circumstances, God heard him when he cried out.

His trust in God was vindicated! He did not say how God acted, but he gave God all the credit. There is no formula that said, "Do this, and troubles will go away." The solution: "Do not abandon trust in God! God has many ways to help you!"

His exhortation was simple: Love the faithful God! God preserved those who belonged to Him! If you belong to God, be strong in Him and find your courage in Him. Let nothing prevent God from being your hope!

The psalmist's exhortation was simple—do not abandon God ever, no matter the circumstance.

This is not a psalm that said, “If you trust in God, nothing bad will ever happen to you!” It said, “If bad things repeatedly happen to you, endure the bad circumstances by patiently keeping your hope in God! Never let God cease to be your strength and courage!”

In no way is this a “health and wealth” message to vindicate being a righteous person. It is the assurance that a righteous person can and will endure if he keeps his trust in God.

The American Christian often lives in a “health and wealth” environment. Often he/she expects to receive “health and wealth” in exchange for faith in Jesus Christ. Some have lost their faith in God because life did not work out as anticipated. More often than not, faith in God provides the righteous with the strength and courage to endure while refusing to abandon righteous living. Good times that are favorable to a righteous life are not essential to righteous living. Righteous is what you are because you believe. Your life—good or bad—is but the canvass on which you paint righteousness because you believe. The blessing of deliverance is wonderful, but the blessing of endurance often has the loudest and most recognized voice.

In the American society, many associate the promise of faith in God to be the assurance of physical health and physical wealth. This is not God's promise to any righteous person who trusts God. The righteous person does not need favorable circumstances to continue to be a righteous person. God's promise is the ability to endure even if Satan opposes us with hardship.

For Thought and Discussion

1. This Psalm is subject to what?

It is subject to numerous interpretations.

2. The majority are dealing with what? How does time affect translation?

The majority of us are dealing with a translation. Time affects the meaning of words and phrases.

3. What is one of the “raw edges of life” we all deal with?

We all endure the “ups and downs” produced by physical hardships.

4. Discuss why we should be able to relate to the challenge of this “raw edge of life.”

The discussion should include (a) the unending physical hardships of physical existence and (b) God's power.

5. Discuss how the psalmist looked at God in the first difficult time.

The discussion should include this: he saw God as a refuge, a rescuer, a savior, and a guide.

6. The second hard time was what in comparison to the first hard time?

The second hard time was worse than the first difficult time.

7. Even though his circumstances were disastrous, he was not ashamed to do what?

He was not ashamed to trust God.

8. What was his attitude toward the wicked?

He wished they would be shamed and silenced by death so the lying would stop.

9. When God delivered him, what was the psalmist's simple exhortation?

The exhortation: "Love the faithful God! Do not abandon your trust in Him!"

10. What did the Psalm not say? It said what?

It did NOT say, "Trust in God and nothing bad will happen to you!"

It said, "If bad things repeatedly happen to you, endure by patiently keeping your hope in God."

11. What environment does the American Christian often live in?

They often live in the "health and wealth" environment. (Trust in God and you will have physical health and wealth.)

12. What is not essential to righteous living? Righteousness is what?

Favorable circumstances are not essential to righteous living. Righteous is what you are because you believe in God.

13. What is wonderful? What often has the loudest and most recognized voice?

The blessing of deliverance is wonderful. The loudest and most recognized voice is produced by the blessing of endurance.

Lesson Thirteen

Trust God—You Will Not Be Disappointed!

Text: Psalm 34

The objective of this lesson: To stress the importance of seeing the God behind the blessing in order to increase our trust in God.

The headings of psalms are often looked to by readers to determine the incident that inspired the Psalm. Thus, readers often determine the meaning of a Psalm by the heading. That may or may not be helpful. The headings are ancient, but are not part of the Psalm. The Psalm existed before the heading was constructed. The accuracy of some headings is questionable. Sometimes it could be that the content of the Psalm was appropriate for the incident the heading cited.

Stress the importance of not considering the heading of the Psalm as being a part of the Psalm. Though ancient, the heading existed after the Psalm was written, not as a part of the Psalm.

In Psalm 34, the psalmist was profoundly grateful for God's deliverance. Note that the gratitude expressed was for "deliverance," not for the absence of afflictions (note verses 4, 6, and 8—pay attention to "sought," "cried," and "refuge"—words of rescue instead of words free from troublesome experiences).

The Psalm began with an overflowing feeling of honor for God, though the psalm itself may indicate the psalmist did not initially have these positive feelings for God.

The Psalm began by praising God. There was the sense of an overflowing gratitude that could not (and should not) be contained. It was not a momentary reaction, but a continual reaction. The psalmist simply could not forget what God did in rescuing him. He would not boast of himself, but of God!

Whatever changed the psalmist's feeling for God totally redirected his view of God. There is a value to be respected for turning a negative view into a positive view. The person who opposed who becomes the person who (with reasons) affirms, frequently has insights that the person who always affirmed does not have.

The result would be that the humble (those who were impressed with God, not themselves) would join the psalmist in magnifying God and exalting God's name. The psalmist saw his reaction to God as an encouragement to others who also recognized God's greatness.

Humility is commonly determined by the degree that a person can see and regret his/her mistakes. The greater a person's humility, the more impressed he/she is with God. The humble have an amazing capacity to appreciate God.

Perhaps the psalmist had not always recognized God's worthiness of praise. Perhaps this was emphasized or suggested by words such as "sought," "answered," "delivered," and "saved." Such wording might suggest a before-and-after situation. If this before-and-after situation was true, the Psalm depicts at least a person who doubted God who turned to God. If that was the situation, the psalmist turned from the despair produced by affliction to confident hope in God's

rescue. The psalmist did not say how he was rescued, but he knew the rescue was God's work, not the work of humans.

Encourage your students to look for clues within the Psalm of the psalmist's attitude produced by evaluation and appreciation.

God was depicted as the rescuer who heard the cries of the afflicted and delivered. God specialized in delivering and protecting. It is because God is who He is and does what only He can do that should motivate people to be righteous. The Lord God of ancient Israel differed from all the idols that others regarded to represent gods.

Talk about why a person's view of God is important to his/her appreciation of God.

Note how personal the psalmist was. He did not ask others to rely on his testimony regarding the Lord God. He wanted others to experience relationship with God—"taste" relationship with God and see for yourself the goodness of God!

In verse 8, his use of the word "taste" is directed to his readers. It is an invitation to come experience what the psalmist experienced. It was as we would say, "Do not take my word for it; see for yourselves."

Often people tend to be quite selfish in seeking God. Often they have a "what is in this for me" or "God, prove Yourself to me in the manner I want" attitude. Seeking God becomes about us, not about God. We want benefits without responsibility. What we can "get" is all important; God's integrity is of little to no importance to us. We focus on our desired benefits given in the manner we wish on our time line. We often fail to focus on the worthiness of God.

It is too simple for us to conclude that God's salvation is primarily about us—that has been our emphasis. Salvation is principally about God. God created. He had an objective and purpose in His creation. God is reclaiming His creation from evil. Read Romans 8:18-22. Consider the abundant references in the Old Testament where God acts for His name's sake (Exodus 3:14, 15; 9:13-16; Leviticus 21:6; 1 Samuel 12:22; Psalm 23:3; Isaiah 12:2-4) or is called upon to act for His name's sake (Jeremiah 14:7, 21; Psalms 25:11; 79:9).

The psalmist was focused on God. Certainly, he benefited! However, he saw God beyond his benefits. His benefits came as a result of God's identity. He marveled at the God who could do only what God can do. He stood in profound, respectful awe of God. So would any man or woman who was righteous and saw God for who He is! Though the young of the predators had to await the return of the mother who was successful in her hunt in order to be fed, there was no need to wonder if God would be successful. The Lord God could and would do what he intended! Nothing prevented that!

Seek to help your students see the psalmist looked beyond his blessings to see the God behind his blessings. Help them see that God blessed because of His identity—because of who He was. God's blessings to people are a verification of His nature.

The psalmist said, "Let me teach you about God! Do you want a full, long life? Reject the answers of people who do not know God, and who do not adopt God's values for their guide to life. (1) Do not do evil—no matter how convenient or profitable it may seem at the moment.

(2) Do not deceive—always be honest and straightforward. (3) Focus yourself on doing good—regardless of the view or opinion of others. (4) Seek peace (do more than merely what you regard to be just)—pursue the well-being of others, even when such is misunderstood and unappreciated.

Emphasize God's appreciated human values that centered on the ways God's people treated other people. People cannot do deeds that affect God's personal well-being. God is self-existent—He would be God even if we did not exist. We are His creation; He is not our creation. Our primary means of expressing appreciation for God is to be seen in the way we treat others—from family to those who are genuinely undeserving. We are kind to people because God is kind to us.

God is so impressed by such human acts that He hears the cries of such people and opposes their enemies. God will deliver them out of troubles. He will be near the brokenhearted. He will save the humble (the crushed in spirit).

God is kind and gentle to us when we do not deserve His compassion and consideration. We learn the depth of kindness and the nature of compassion from the way He treats us. It is His nature that assures us that we can trust Him not to abandon us in difficult times.

This WAS NOT a “no-affliction” Psalm! The righteous would have afflictions, but they would endure! The righteous would not be abandoned as would be the wicked. Those who do wickedness will become the victims of the wickedness they serve. However, God will NEVER use the righteous to their own detriment nor abandon them. The righteous may suffer as a result of evil's war against God, but God is always there for His people.

This Psalm did not promise the righteous that they would not experience affliction—the opposition of evil. It promised that God would not abandon the righteous in their times of affliction.

For Thought and Discussion

1. The headings of a Psalm are ancient, but they are not what?

They are not a part of the Psalm.

2. In Psalm 34 the psalmist is grateful for what?

He is profoundly grateful for deliverance.

3. The Psalm began how? There was a sense of what?

The Psalm began by praising God. There was a sense of overflowing gratitude.

4. The result would be what?

The humble would join him in magnifying God and exalting God's name.

5. God was depicted as what? What did God specialize in?

God was depicted as the rescuer who heard the cries of the afflicted and delivered. God specialized in delivering and protecting.

6. What should motivate people to be righteous?

The identity and actions of God would motivate people to be righteous.

7. Discuss how personal the psalmist was.

The discussion should include the psalmist's invitation to "taste" relationship with God. "Experience the relationship; do not just take my word for it."

8. How can people be quite selfish in seeking God?

Their primary concern is the benefits they will receive for doing as God requests.

9. What did the psalmist see? What caused the psalmist to marvel?

The psalmist focused on God—he saw God! He marveled at who God was and what God could do.

10 The psalmist stood in what?

He stood in profound, respectful awe of God.

11. If a person wanted a long, full life, what four things should be done?

a) *Do not do evil--no matter how convenient or profitable evil may seem.*

b) *Do not deceive—always be honest and straight forward.*

c) *Focus on doing good—regardless of what others think.*

d) *Seek peace—pursue the well-being of others (not just justice).*

12. God is so impressed with the human that does those things, God does what four things?

a) *He hears their cries and opposes their enemies.*

b) *He delivers them out of troubles.*

c) *He is near the brokenhearted.*

d) *He will save the humble.*

13. The wicked will become what? The righteous never are afraid that what will happen?

The wicked will become the victims of the wickedness they serve. The righteous will never fear that God will use them to their own destruction nor abandon them.