

A H E A R T

# *After [God]*

S T U D Y G U I D E

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[worldchallenge.org/psalms](http://worldchallenge.org/psalms)

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As a pastor and a leader, my heartfelt desire is to help people understand the life that God has for them, to know the full freedom we have in Christ, and to live like torches in a dark world. That kind of life which overflows out of us is only possible, though, if we are willing to be candid and deal with issues of the heart.


I don't think there's a better book in scripture for that than the Psalms. Certain books like Job or Jeremiah could teach us how to deal with sin, sorrow and lament. On the other side, messages about joy and praising God for blessings are in certain other books of the Bible like Philippians; but the Psalms encapsulates all these different emotions, celebrations, praise, conflicts, pain, grief and heartache.

We should not just be going to the Book of Psalms as an academic study or even a poetry reading. These are intense prayers that are gritty and sometimes embarrassingly honest.

I think a genuine confession to the Lord — and the Psalms would bear this out — would be to say, “This is the issue that I’m facing, and God wants to hear about my problems. He knows I have them, and he knows what I feel in my heart anyway.” That kind of authentic living is important to me! Growing up in the church and being a pastor of churches in various places, I know all too well that our Christian experience oftentimes is very superficial. I hope this study on the Psalms rattles those polite Christian-culture cages.

These teachings are about the ‘underneath stuff,’ the parts of the iceberg that aren’t revealed by our brief, superficial conversations in the church lobby. There are issues that we can really sink our teeth into and come to God with honestly. This portion of scripture can teach us some amazing things, if we read it the right way.

I’m excited that you have joined me on this journey through the Book of Psalms. I pray that God speaks to your heart in a special way through this sermon series!

  
—Gary Wilkerson



## [ P S A L M 1 ]

# Righteous Prosperity

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

When David talks about the delight that is the Word of the Lord, it's worth recalling that today we have the privilege of 66 divinely appointed books in scripture but this ancient king would have only had the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible. Even so, he said that scripture will delight the follower of God because it is there that we learn about God's nature and see the framework of the world explained by God's laws.

This opening psalm is a preface to the entire collection, setting the tone and subtly instructing the reader on how to interpret future psalms.

As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon once wrote, "See how this Book of Psalms opens with a benediction, even as did the famous Sermon of our Lord upon the Mount! The word translated 'blessed' is a very expressive one. The original word is plural, and it is a controverted matter whether it is an adjective or a substantive. Hence we may learn the multiplicity of the blessings which shall rest upon the man whom God hath justified, and the perfection and greatness of the blessedness he shall enjoy."

Some psalms are misinterpreted as guarantees of God's material blessings on his children if they live moral lives, but that ignores all of the psalms of lament and repentance. This is why David says that the believer who meditates on God's law will be blessed. A tree does not pick which parts of the stream it takes life from, and so we should view scripture as one great whole that must be studied and absorbed in its entirety.

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. How does scripture provide us with a roadmap for godly living in an ungodly age?

2. Many of us work in secular arenas, so how can we live beside the unsaved and witness to them yet avoid walking in step with the wicked or sitting in the company of mockers?

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3. What are some socially accepted behaviors that the Bible speaks against but the church has begun to accept? What excuses are often made for tolerating these behaviors? Where does grace come in to our decision? Where does numbness to the issue factor in?

4. How do we cultivate our hunger for God's Word? What are practical actions we could take to grow in this area?

5. What is a verse or series of verses that you used to find frustrating but now feel at peace with in your heart?

6. What is a passage of scripture that you still struggle with understanding or accepting?

7. How can a believer have spiritual prosperity in the midst of hardships or persecution?

8. What are some blessings that we have received or seen come into other people's lives that are not stereotypical 'blessings'? For example, scripture tells us God 'disciplines' those he loves, so would that be a type of blessing?

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9. How is God's judgment of the wicked and the existence of hell actually a demonstration of the Lord's goodness? Why is this often difficult for us to understand or accept?

10. What do you most look forward to in heaven? How have you experienced little tastes of heaven here on earth?

**[ FURTHER READING ]**

Matthew 6:19-24 — John 15:1-8 — Galatians 5:13-26

**[ PRAYER PROMPT ]**

Pursuing a life with God, meditating on scripture and delighting in God's law are not actions that come naturally or easily to us. For this reason, the old hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" has the striking line addressed to God, "Let thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee." It is not in our nature to stay by the very source of life and light, so we must ask for God's mercy to reveal our wandering heart to us and bring us back to the fount of living water.

In what specific ways can you pray for God to bind your heart to himself?

## [ P S A L M 2 ]

# Trusting God in Times of Crisis

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

At the height of his power, the Roman Emperor Diocletian raised two massive pillars at the far edge of his empire in what is now modern day Spain. Upon the pillars were these inscriptions: *Diocletian Jovian Maximian Herculeus Cæsares Augusti, for having extended the Roman Empire in the east and the west, and for having extinguished the name of Christians...for having everywhere abolished the superstition of Christ, for having extended the worship of the gods.*

We might read this with a bit of a chuckle, particularly if we know the history that would follow. Diocletian would actually live just long enough to see Christians officially given a place in his country. Almost 2,000 years later, Christianity is one of the largest and most widely spread world religions, far from extinguished.

It's ironic that this Roman emperor would use pillars in his attempt to create a tombstone for Christianity. As Henry Ainsworth pointed out, "The Lord, in Hebrew, 'Adonai,' mystically signifieth 'my stays' or 'my sustainers—my pillars.' Our English word, 'Lord,' hath much the same force, being contracted of the old Saxon word 'Llaford,' or 'Hlafford,' which cometh from 'Laef,' to sustain, refresh, cherish."

William S. Plumer, in his study of the Roman emperors, noted that of the 30 who distinguished themselves by their harsh persecution of God's people, all died horrific deaths either by disease, in battle or by betrayal. One of these, Julian the Apostate, while bleeding out on the battlefield, grabbed a fistful of bloody soil and threw it at the sky, crying bitterly, "Thou hast conquered, O Thou Galilean!"

God cherishes his people, and he is their pillar of strength. The world cannot overcome the name of the Lord.

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. If God is so powerful, why is there so much violence and unrighteousness in the world? Why do evil people seem to run rampant without any consequences?

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2. What modern or historical event do you find the most disturbing because it seems like God was absent or helpless?

3. Several places in the Bible show God's people lamenting evil in the world and sometimes even repenting on the behalf of a nation. Do we do this? If not, why not?

4. How may our nation's leaders be 'after our own hearts'? How do they reflect our sins?

5. How do God's laws bind us in a healthy, healing way like a cast around a broken limb?

6. Where did God strike holy fear in people's lives in the New Testament? Were the disciples ever afraid of Jesus?

7. Why does God's holiness and judgment of evil disturb or sometimes even frighten us?



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8. What does it mean to rejoice with trembling? What does reverence for God practically look like for us?

9. How does awe, reverence and fear of God help us when we're going through hardship?

**[ FURTHER READING ]**

Proverbs 21:30-31 — Luke 23:26-43 — Revelation 19:1-10

**[ PRAYER PROMPT ]**

For almost every practicing Christian, there is a temptation to overemphasize either God as king and conqueror full of wrath and justice or God as shepherd and priest with love, tenderness and mercy. If we belong to the former persuasion, we might find grim satisfaction in sections where God is breaking nations with a rod of iron; or we may belong to the other camp and find this all very disturbing.

Ask God to reveal why you struggle with one particular aspect of his character. Invite him to help you embrace the entirety of his nature, both the lion of Judah and the sacrificial lamb.

## [ P S A L M 3 ]

# It May Look Like I Am Surrounded

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Some of the most painful accusations that we will face are those with a grain of truth. After fleeing Absalom, David must have felt this when he wrote this psalm and complained to God that the bitterest attacks against him were the accusations that God had forsaken him.

He had been warned that there would be divine discipline for his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and then the murder of her husband. God had told David, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun” (*2 Samuel 12:11-12, ESV*). In some way, David had known this day was coming.

We often feel the consequences for our sinful choices. Nevertheless, it’s an old tactic by the enemy to twist the hard truth of sin’s outcomes into an accusation that God is unloving or that he has abandoned us.

As Philip Bennett Power wrote, “The Psalmist will trust, despite appearances. He will not be afraid though ten thousands of people have set themselves against him round about. Weak believers are now ready to make excuses for us, and we are only too ready to make them for ourselves; instead of rising above the weakness of the flesh, we take refuge under it and use it as an excuse. To trust only when appearances are favorable is to sail only with the wind and tide, to believe only when we can see. Oh, let us follow the example of the Psalmist and seek that unreservedness of faith which will enable us to trust God, come what will.”

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. What are struggles that we are ashamed of or have maybe hidden from others?

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2. Why do these struggles cause us to be embarrassed? How is our shame at least partially based on a reality in our lives? How is our shame based on a twisting of that reality or truth?

3. Have we taken time to mourn a loss or broken relationship in our lives? If not, why not?

4. What prayers have we prayed about this situation that God is seemingly not answering?

5. Do you have a habitual sin that you struggle with? Why does it cause you to despair or wrestle with feeling abandoned by God?

6. What promises has God given us to forgive, protect and provide for us?

7. If God is our shield and glory, why do we still sometimes struggle and suffer?

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8. How can we be more honest in our prayers about our struggles and the rough situations that we find ourselves in, especially if it involves conflict with another person?

9. What praise should we offer God before we see a solution to our problems? What can we say honestly and respectfully to God while we're still in our trial?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

2 Samuel 16:5-12 — Isaiah 60:17-22 — Deuteronomy 33:26-29

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

Going through hardship can bring up all kinds of questions about if God is present or why he's permitting pain in our lives. If we feel like we have done something to deserve our suffering, though, that often adds an extra layer of anguish to our situation. We question if God is punishing us or if he's simply stepped back and allowed the consequences of our past to hit us full force. It can be exponentially more difficult in these cases to trust that God loves us and has fully forgiven our sins.

If you feel like you are experiencing punishment or the consequences of past sins, ask God to give you faith in his mercy and love for you. Echo the cry of the man in Mark 9:24, "I believe; help my unbelief!"

## [ P S A L M 4 ]

# Demolishing Distress

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

There's nothing quite as terrible as the suffering of a very small child, precisely because you cannot explain to them where their pain has come from or what you are doing at that very moment to help them. Often the road to curing the problem is longer than they could conceive of and will sometimes involve even more pain at the hands of a doctor.

You know this, so you endure their wails and stricken glances, but it's very hard. They know only the present and that you are failing over and over to rescue them.

Not everyone succeeds in bearing this. Many parents succumb to being their child's hero of the moment rather than the provider of their future health and well-being. We are all very fortunate that God never makes the same mistake. He has infinite power over every situation in our lives and an equal amount of wisdom and restraint. Often, when we accuse him of not protecting us or providing for us, we are forgetting this vital fact. If we insist on our present satisfaction, we run a terrible risk of forgoing much greater rewards down the road, in some cases the ultimate reward.

William Secker once wrote, "Lest riches should be accounted evil in themselves, God sometimes gives them to the righteous; and lest they should be considered as the chief good, he frequently bestows them on the wicked. But they are more generally the portion of his enemies than his friends. Alas, what is it to receive and not to be received, to have none other dews of blessing than such as shall be followed by showers of brimstone? The world is a floating island, and so sure as we cast anchor upon it, we shall be carried away by it.

"God...is enough without the creature, but the creature is not anything without him. It is, therefore, better to enjoy him without anything else, than to enjoy everything else without him."

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. What does distress look like in your life? What happens to your spiritual life, emotional state or even your physical health?

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2. How do you process stress and anxiety when it suddenly crops up in your life? What are your steps for responding to it?

3. What situations have deeply troubled you where you still don't feel like you understand why God allowed it?

4. Which verses in scripture gave you peace or at least some comfort when you consider that past event?

5. When have you witnessed God's providence in past trials that didn't make sense at the time?

6. What hardships have you gone through that, in retrospect, have been used by God to address issues in your heart or make you more dependent on him? Is there an instance where you feel like God used a smaller crisis to prepare you for a much larger one down the road?

7. How does the world condemn or shame those who follow the gospel way of going through hardship? Why are unbelievers frightened or threatened by God's way through suffering?



8. What kinds of distress should we always have in our live to some degree if we're actively following Christ?

9. How can we be angry and not sin? What types of anger are not sinful? How can we tell the difference?

10. How do we channel our anger and fear into appropriate action as believers that is honoring to God and loving to the lost?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

Habakkuk 3:17-19 — 2 Corinthians 1:3-10 — Isaiah 45:21-25

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

Often anxiety or other strong emotions begin to affect to our sleep, so it's appropriate that David closes his psalm entrusting his sleep, safety and wellness to God before laying down for the night. In the midst of strong emotions, we often allow them to rage through the night and leave us exhausted in the morning. Only our heavenly Father can truly ensure our safety and wellbeing, and "he gives to his beloved sleep" (*Psalms 127:2, ESV*).

Before you go to bed, talk to God about the situations or relationships that are laying heavily on your heart. Submit them to the Lord; ask him to give you peace about them.

## [ P S A L M 5 ]

### Watch What God Will Do

#### [ INTRODUCTION ]

In his meditations on this very psalm, C. S. Lewis marveled that even in the primitive times of the Bible's writing, God's Word speaks most condemningly about the evil we do with our mouths. He wrote, "I had half expected that in a simpler and more violent age when more evil was done with the knife, the big stick, and the firebrand, less would be done by talk. But in reality the Psalmists mention hardly any kind of evil more often than this one, which the most civilized societies share."

Very few individuals would openly admit to 'big' sins like murder or adultery; however, most people will not only acknowledge that they tell 'white lies' or participate in gossip but also actively defend these two vices as 'not so very bad,' sometimes even necessary!

Sometimes it's hardest to acknowledge our most pervasive sins because the work of rooting them out seems overwhelming. It may be a sin that touches every single part of our lives on a daily and even hourly basis.

Rather than have to start the grueling work of checking ourselves every day, apologizing with appalling regularity to coworkers and family, we decide to justify our 'small' sin. It's not so very bad. We're not really hurting anyone. A little gossip here and there, a little unforgiveness for that one person who hurt us, a little indulging in private fantasies we know aren't good—these little sins don't hurt anyone, right? Then we begin to wonder why God's presence seems absent and why our prayers seem to have a hollow echo.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "Oh, how foolish we are if we attempt to entertain two guests so hostile to one another as Christ Jesus and the devil! Rest assured, Christ will not live in the parlor of our hearts if we entertain the devil in the cellar of our thoughts."

#### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. How often is a word used in this psalm related to the mouth or voice? Which ones are positive, and which are negative?



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2. If you had to guess, how many of your prayers are negative/requests and how many are positive/praise? Why do you struggle with one type of prayer?

3. What time of day are you most likely to pray? Do you have a dedicated time of prayer during the day? If not, what would you need to do to make that time a priority?

4. Where do we trust that God's sovereignty is still guiding our lives or situations around us?

5. How can prayer change our perspectives and attitudes? Why does it often have this effect?

6. What is an area of your life that you are afraid God might require you to give up?

7. What is a sin that you struggle with believing God will ever truly forgive you for?

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8. What aspect of God's character do you have the hardest time accepting? Why does it disturb you? Does it seem to contradict his character in other parts of the Bible?

9. How does taking refuge in God allow us to not avoid evil in the world but rather better respond to it?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

James 3:1-12 — Luke 6:45 — Romans 8:22-30

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

Consider how you pray to God. Consider what you do and do not tell him. What words do you use when you make a request from God or ask for forgiveness? Do some subjects feel taboo or unacceptable when you're talking to God? Our methods of addressing the Lord are often unconsciously learned from listening to others pray.

Try writing your own psalm about a sin, either in the world or in yourself (or both), that disturbs you deeply. Look through the Bible for God's answer to this sin and reference how God feels about that sin in your psalm. End with either a plea for God to set you free or with praise to him for how he will see justice served.



## [ P S A L M 6a ]

# The Goodness of God in Deferring Deliverance

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Most of us have heard the old saying “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” One sports psychologist described that mentality which separates superior athletes from the rest as “the ability to consistently perform toward the upper range of your talent and skill regardless of competitive circumstances.”

Tony Abbatine, a Major League Baseball coach and professor of sports psychology, divided this mentality into three levels: emotional discipline, physical discipline and visual discipline. He described them as 1) the ability to manage our feelings in high stress situations, 2) the habits we adopt to keep our bodies healthy and 3) the way we prioritize our thoughts in order to focus on our most necessary needs first.

These descriptions create a very useful and gritty parallel of what God often uses trials to bring into our lives.

Christians who have leaned into incredible adversity as God’s method of bringing them into spiritual maturity come out with a version of these three levels of discipline. Sudden crises don’t rattle them into emotional meltdowns. They have a regiment of prayer, biblical study and community engagement that holds them steady through the rigors of hardship. They seem to have an uncanny ability to focus on the heart of what really matters in their struggle; they don’t get sidetracked on people who aren’t supporting them the way they would like or anguishing over why God would ever allow this to happen to them. They simply trust the process and submit themselves to God’s will.

David demonstrates this over and over in the psalms. He acknowledges the realities of his trial; he confesses his feelings; he allows himself to ask honest questions, but he never gets bogged down there. In the end, he emphasizes his trust in God.

“The Lord has heard my plea; the Lord accepts my prayer” (*Psalms 6:9, ESV*).

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. When you are suffering, do you cry out to God? How honest are you with God about your pain?

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2. What would be an instance in your life when God did not deliver you from hardship and later you were able to see a benefit from that trial?

3. What things are you looking forward to being free from in heaven?

4. How does God use struggles to develop the spiritual fruit mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 in us?

5. Sometimes trials have a very negative effect on Christians, and the opposite of spiritual growth seems to take place. Why might that happen?

6. What can we do to prepare ourselves preemptively to respond well to God's discipline?

7. What most frightens or disturbs you about God's wrath? What about it might also be comforting?



8. Why is sin so serious? What does sin do to us mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually?

9. Why does God not just forgive our sins without a sacrifice? Why is this such a core belief in our faith?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

Romans 7:15-25 — 1 Corinthians 11:31-32 — Hebrews 12:3-11

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

What is a spiritual discipline or fruit that you would like more of in your life? Asking God to give you this might involve going through a trial, so you may soberly need to ask yourself how badly you actually want this spiritual fruit. In the New Testament, Paul talks about disciplining ourselves like athletes preparing to run a race. Growth and becoming stronger almost always involve a degree of pain. Is becoming spiritually mature and more aware of God's presence worth the pain to you? If it is, confess your fears and concerns to God, ask for strength and then request that he develop a greater measure of spiritual maturity in you.

## [ P S A L M 6b ]

# The Holy Spirit's Healing Power

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

A young woman named Emily Yates who has cerebral palsy wrote to the BBC about how she regularly has people offer to pray for her healing. She uses a wheelchair, which seems to make people especially eager to see God 'set her free.'

She wrote, "This gesture I have always known to be offered with the very best of intentions, but it has often left me confused. Would the ability to walk suddenly make me happier? Or make me a better person? And what does their desire to cure me say about their perception of disability?"

Despite this, she was willing to allow a famous charismatic faith healer to attempt 'casting out' her disability while being filmed for his YouTube channel. The healing failed, and she was informed that it was because of her lack of faith. Miraculous healing has a spotty history, especially in the Western world where it's often leveraged for donations by big television personalities. However, many Christians can testify to God quietly healing them or medical treatments succeeding when even doctors gave grim prognoses.

Scripture gives clear examples of Christ healing people from untreatable illnesses and even death, but not every leper in Israel was restored. The Bible also gives evidence of faithful people who went unhealed like Paul with his unspecified 'thorn in the flesh' and Timothy with his gastrointestinal infirmities.

The discussion of when and why God moves miraculously is an ongoing one, but hopefully we can see it as an invitation to seek God and wrestle with a complex aspect of our relationship with our Heavenly Father.

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. Some churches or denominations of Christianity believe that the Spirit no longer performs signs and wonders. What logic (or fears) might lead one to this belief?

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2. Why do you think that certain churches or believers in certain countries seem to see miraculous healings more often than others?

3. Do you believe that God physically heals people? Have you witnessed someone being divinely healed? Have you experienced being miraculously healed?

4. If you struggle with the idea of asking for miraculous healing, why is it difficult to ask God for this?

5. Have you ever asked for healing but not experienced it? Have you seen a reason that might have been why God didn't give healing in that moment, or are you still waiting and wondering why he didn't move?

6. Do you pray for others to be healed? If not, why not?

7. How does evangelism often link to offering to pray for other people we meet who are suffering?

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8. What are the gifts of the Spirit? Which gifts do you believe you've been given? What evidence is there of them in your life?

9. How do we exercise our spiritual gifts? How does God strengthen those gifts in our lives?

**[ FURTHER READING ]**

2 Corinthians 12:2-10 — Mark 6:1-6 — 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

**[ PRAYER PROMPT ]**

Are you willing to ask God to give you an opportunity to pray with someone today? It may be for a physical issue they're experiencing, or it may be for something emotionally troubling them. The important thing is to ask the Lord for an open door and then carefully listen to people, ask thoughtful questions and then let them decide if they want prayer or not.



## [ P S A L M 7 ]

# Overcoming Accusations and Wounds

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Some of these maledictory psalms like Psalm 7 can make us modern readers squirm. King David, whom the Bible calls a man after God's own heart, violently and furiously curses his enemies. What are we to make of this? Does this mean the scriptures are condoning swearing at our enemies? Like much of the Old Testament, this psalm reveals a disturbing aspect of human nature that we would all much rather not have pointed out.

When we are hurt, it is 'natural' — not commendable, but still very human — to wish the same pain or worse upon our adversaries.

If infidelity in a marriage is revealed, everyone's natural response is to sympathize with the victim and probably even argue that they deserve to see some kind of justice done to the cheater. The most common response is that the injured party should be allowed to leave the relationship, punishing the offender with their absence.

This is not a commentary on when divorce is appropriate or not; I only mean to point out how eagerly we leap to punish those who hurt us, how reluctantly we forgive and how often the world justifies our lack of forgiveness.

This was why Jesus' commands and parables about forgiveness and the standards of holiness in Matthew 18 and 19 left his disciples so appalled that they asked, "Who then can be saved?" (*Matthew 19:25, ESV*). The godly principles of forgiveness run so counter to our natural inclinations that they often seem impossible and even absurd.

Perhaps John Calvin pointed out the truest lesson of this psalm. "David, in order to pray aright, reposes himself on the Word and promise of God; and the import of his exercise is this: Lord, I am not led by ambition or foolish, headstrong passion, or depraved desire, inconsiderately to ask from Thee whatever is pleasing to my flesh; but it is the clear light of Thy Word which directs me, and upon it I securely depend."

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. Have you ever had someone lie about you in a way that ruined a personal relationship or defamed you professionally? What made that experience so painful or different from other types of relational breakdown?

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2. Have you ever had to forgive someone who was never sorry for how they hurt you? What makes that situation uniquely difficult?

3. Some people are working to move past an old pain that involves a relationship where reconciliation is not an option (i.e. the offender is deceased, incarcerated or otherwise permanently estranged). How does this make forgiveness more complicated in some cases?

4. Some individuals have to go through therapy or other medical procedures to help them heal from the damage another person has done to them. How does this sometimes make forgiveness even harder?

5. How does the internet or social media provide a vehicle for harsh words or disparaging language to have even more impact? How should we, as believers, respond?

6. What are the various factors that make emotional wounds as bad or sometimes worse than physical wounds?

7. How do the world's solutions to pain always fall short? Where does the gospel provide a real and final answer?

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8. How have we departed from our identity in Christ? What can we do to reverse that and move toward the person that God wants to purify us into?

9. How does experiencing God's discipline help us grow into a more mature spirituality?

**[ FURTHER READING ]**

Luke 6:27-42 — Colossians 3:12-16 — Ephesians 4:29-32

**[ PRAYER PROMPT ]**

Forgiveness, especially for an unwarranted wound or an agonizing betrayal, is a bitter pill to swallow. In almost every case, we must forgive over and over as the pain rears its head and we're reminded of the price tag on someone else's sin that we've been forced to pay. Perhaps write out the cost of each thing that you're dealing with as the result of someone else's cruelty or harsh words. Be brutally honest. Then note on each one that it has been paid by Christ. Ask for Jesus' help forgiving that person today, a kind of daily bread, if you will.

## [ P S A L M 8 ]

# God Loves Using Small Things

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Arguably one of the most famous paintings of the Realism movement is *The Angelus* by Jean-Francois Millet. Two farm hands stand in a field, heads bowed; the man clasps his hat in his hands; the woman has her fingers laced together in prayer.

One commentator on the painting wrote, “By depicting these two silent and anonymous figures, in the middle of a vast cultivated plain, with only a few simple tools to help them scratch a living from the soil, Millet highlights the backbreaking life of the rural worker with its daily grind of physical toil which endures throughout the seasons. At the same time, the moment of silence reminds us of our inescapable connection with the Almighty and our insignificance beside him.”

Jean-Francois Millet painted the picture based on a childhood memory of his grandmother who always stopped the children when she heard the church bells ringing and would insist that they pray, praising God for his goodness and glory then thanking him for sending Christ to save us. *The Angelus* itself is an ancient prayer written in much the same spirit as Psalm 8. It praises God in his splendor and also quietly wonders at his goodness in sending a Savior to a rebellious world.

*The Angelus* was traditionally prayed three times a day as a routine reminder of God’s glory and his gift to humanity. Such a relatively quick and small reminder several times a day must surely help us recenter ourselves on a proper view of God.

He often delights in using such small and humble things as a brief prayer, song or psalm to introduce joy to our souls.

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. How does worshipping God even in our hard times reframe our difficulties and trials?

2. What about acknowledging God’s attributes, infinite nature and ‘otherness’ can comfort us?

A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

3. What about humanity puts us in a unique position among the animal kingdom but also the heavenly beings? Why do you think God made us this way?

4. How would we answer the psalm's question "What is man that you are mindful of him and the son of man that you care for him?"

5. How has God given you responsibility to care for the earth, animals around you or people in your life? What does this look like for you on a daily basis?

6. In what ways does a right view of God's majesty and power enable us to care most responsibly for those who are dependent on us?

7. As a being outside of time, God never experiences our lives or the world in terms of past, present or future; he sees all of it simultaneously. How does this make you feel?

8. Why does God allow people who are antagonistic to the gospel to continue attacking him and us?

A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

9. How does having a right view of our enemies' position before God allow us to have greater compassion for them?

10. When we worship God and have compassion for our adversaries, how will our prayers change?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

Hebrews 7:26-28 — Ephesians 3:7-13 — Matthew 21:1-17

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

Making a list of God's attributes or nature to praise isn't a bad exercise. There are plenty of examples throughout scripture of prophets and apostles doing just this. A particularly lovely one was penned by Nehemiah. "You are the Lord, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and you preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships you" (*Nehemiah 9:6, ESV*). What would your own psalm of praise to God look like? Try writing one out and then praying it to God.

## [ P S A L M 9 ]

# When the ‘How Long, O Lord?’ Is Finally Over

### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Maximilien Robespierre was a well-educated man and a lawyer, persuasive and well-spoken. He argued for the abolition of slavery and the right for French citizens to bear arms. He blamed France’s King Louie XVI and Queen Marie Antoinette for much of the country’s social ills. After the French Revolution had dismantled the monarchy, people began talking about giving the king mercy, and Robespierre was incensed.

He lobbied with endless energy to have the royals executed, focusing on Marie Antoinette with particular vitriol. At last, a beleaguered Antoinette was dragged up onto the gallows, bereft of her home, husband and children. She was mercilessly beheaded.

Almost gleeful at the success he was experiencing, Robespierre began a full-sale purge of the government, executing some 17,000 people within his first year at the head of the somewhat ironically named Committee of Public Safety. It’s estimated that he would be responsible, either directly or indirectly, for the deaths of some 40,000 individuals before he was finally arrested.

Robespierre was concerned, and rightfully so, that his own instrument of punishment might be turned against him. The night of his arrest, he attempted to shoot himself and only succeeded in injuring his jaw.

The next morning, he was beheaded on the same guillotine where he had once forced his queen to die. Rarely does history have such a poetic turn where the evil that one person has enacted on many others is suddenly and clearly returned upon their own head, quite literally in Robespierre’s case. Even so, God promises that he does not turn a blind eye to wickedness, and the Lord is faithful to his Word.

### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. What’s the longest that you have prayed for something and waited for God’s answer?

A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

2. How does hope deferred make the heart sick? Why does this happen? Why would God allow this to happen to us?

3. What are the consequences of stifling hope so we're not disappointed? Why do you think this is?

4. Is lamenting or being honest about our feelings toward God disrespectful to him?

5. How do we honor God and praise him while also mourning or struggling with anxiety or depression?

6. When we've experienced a major loss or had a stunning disappointment, what do we have to be thankful about?

7. Has God set you free from something that weighed you down for a long period of time? What did that release look like for you?



A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

8. In retrospect, why has God allowed certain hardships into your life?

**[ FURTHER READING ]**

Isaiah 55:6-11 — 2 Corinthians 4:1-6 — Hebrews 13:15-16

**[ PRAYER PROMPTS ]**

The ancient church father Chrysostom wrote, “Prayer is a haven to the shipwrecked man, an anchor to them that are sinking in the waves, a staff to the limbs that totter, a mine of jewels to the poor, a healer of diseases, and a guardian of health.... O blessed prayer! Thou art the unwearied conqueror of human woes, the firm foundation of human happiness, the source of ever-enduring joy, the mother of philosophy.” Say a prayer that is both honest about your feelings or current experiences but also expresses a trust in God’s goodness and plans.



## [ P S A L M 10 ]

### Is God Absent?

#### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Perhaps no series of atrocities in modern times is as well documented as those committed during World War II. The six million Jewish people and half a million Gypsies who perished in the Holocaust are a common feature in Western history books. Those who are perhaps less well recognized are the nearly 20 million civilians who died in the Soviet Union and the 35 million who perished in China around the same time, often because of famine, invasions or in concentration camps and gulags.

The Allies were not exempt from these horrors. Britain exported so much of India and Bangladesh's crops that several massive famines swept through those countries. Starving farmers and fishermen flocked to Calcutta, seeking aid. Instead, authorities forcibly removed them from the city so they could die in the countryside, out of sight.

Thanks to England's East India Company, it's estimated that a third of Bangladesh's people starved to death in a single year.

Meanwhile, American researchers who were part of the Manhattan Project were injecting unsuspecting people in hospitals with radioactive plutonium to see what the effects would be. Even children were included in the experiments, and because the research was classified, no one was informed.

God does not turn a blind eye to the actions of wicked and selfish men who cause the death and pain of others. As Martin Luther observed of Psalm 10, centuries before World War II would sweep the globe, "There is not, in my judgment, a Psalm which describes the mind, the manners, the works, the words, the feelings, and the fate of the ungodly with so much propriety, fulness, and light, as this Psalm...we may here find a perfect image and representation of iniquity. This Psalm, therefore, is a type, form, and description of that man, who, though he may be in the sight of himself and of men more excellent than Peter himself, is detestable in the eyes of God..."

#### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. How is the concept that God sees injustice and will require an accounting for it both a comfort and perhaps a conviction?

A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

2. What should we make of the fact that we sometimes pray against injustice and evil, but God doesn't seem to respond?

3. How do we explain the fact that the world is filled with corrupt people who have great wealth and seem to find success in all of their work?

4. What events in our pasts have caused us to ask God, "Are you paying attention? Do you even hear me?"

5. What about asking God "Why?" can feel frightening? Why do we sometimes avoid giving voice to that question?

6. If we find ourselves asking God to explain and he doesn't respond, what should we do?

7. How does hidden sin make our 'bones sick,' as David described it in the psalms?

A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

8. What sometimes keeps us from being completely honest with God, either about our sins or about our desperate need for him?

9. How does sin put down roots in our lives that bring out bad fruit in all areas in our lives?

10. How do we ensure that we don't fall into condoning or even enacting evil on other people, especially those around us who are vulnerable?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

Jeremiah 22:3-5 — Galatians 6:1-10 — Romans 2:1-11

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

Edward Reynolds wrote, "Satan hath three titles given in the Scriptures, setting forth his malignity against the church of God: a dragon, to note his malice; a serpent, to note his subtlety; and a lion, to note his strength. But none of all these can stand before prayer. The greatest malice of Haman sinks under the prayer of Esther; the deepest policy, the counsel of Ahithophel, withers before the prayer of David; the largest army, a host of a thousand thousand *[sic]* Ethiopians, run away like cowards before the prayer of Asa."

When we are confronted with injustice, either in others or perhaps even within ourselves, we have access to a great corrective power in prayer. God is always watching and listening to his people. Although he may seem silent for a season, he is not unmoved by his children's cries, and this should give us great hope.



## [ P S A L M 11 ]

### In the Dark

#### [ INTRODUCTION ]

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a well-known German pastor who was put in a concentration camp for his steadfast refusal to be silent about the Nazi regime's wrongs. The Bonhoeffer Project offers us a glimpse into what the conditions were like for this man of God as he was creating some of his best known works.

“That night, April 5, 1943, even though his Uncle had been the Commandant of Berlin, Bonhoeffer shivered from the cold in his reception cell. The blankets were soiled and the wooden bed very hard. He could not stand the stench. For a young man of privilege who had slept on the best linen and was always German clean, this was very unclean. Someone wept loudly in the next cell.

“The next morning dry bread was tossed through a crack in the door.... His first twelve days were spent in solitary confinement, shackled hand and foot. Nights carried the sobs of his fellow prisoners broken by confinement - his new congregation.

“Once he was released from solitary and given pen and paper, he would write prayers and blessings for his fellow prisoners. He would mail them to his parents who in turn would mail them directly to prisoners. These prayers were not spontaneous. They were carefully composed after hours of prayer and meditation....

“He told his parents that prison wasn’t all that bad; it was a ‘steam bath’ for the soul. This was only partly true. He was being interrogated, he fought serious bouts of depression, he missed his friends and family terribly, and he lived with a continued sense of dread.... During the two years between his arrest and death, Bonhoeffer never stopped writing - letters, poems, prayers, drafts of novels, plays, stories outlines of future books and essays, aphorisms and exegeses of scripture, as well as sketches on various themes. Collectively, his letters and prison papers document a great unburdening of an active and varied mind who would have influenced the world in so many ways. Yet never as much as his ultimate death would. “Confinement and punishment squeeze the best and the worst from a person.”



## [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. Are there periods of your past that were incredibly dark and impacted you for years afterward? How have you responded negatively and positively to it with God?

2. When you're under stress, what's something you turn to for comfort or to satisfy a longing other than God? How does this source of comfort not actually help or deal with the source of stress?

3. What's a habit you have that you know probably isn't very healthy but would be really difficult to stop doing?

4. How have other people responded to you in ways that hurt you even more while you were in your dark season?

5. What has someone done for you that really helped encourage you or give you hope?

6. Why does God allow protracted periods of darkness in his children's lives?

A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

7. How have these long struggles in our lives made certain other temptations easier to resist? How have some later hard periods seemed less overwhelming as a result?

8. How do you pray or talk to God differently as a result of going through a spiritual dark night? How do you read certain passages of scripture differently now?

9. What do you think it means to ‘see the face of God’ through or after intense hardship? What does scripture say about seeing the face of God?

### [ FURTHER READING ]

Job 27:13-17 — Isaiah 26:1-9 — Habakkuk 3:17-19

### [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

As Richard Gilpin once wryly observed, “In temptations of inward trouble and terror, it is not convenient to dispute the matter with Satan.” Often, we may be tempted to pray against the devil or question why such evils have been allowed into our lives, focusing on the darkness itself rather than our path out of it.

In your prayers today, be frank with God about the pain that you’re dealing with and the fears that you have, and then ask him to grant you strength to endure, but also ask for the creativity to discover more about him in this darkness and for the ability to bless others who may be experiencing similar trials but without the hope you have in Christ.

## [ P S A L M 12 ]

### Born into a Battle

#### [ INTRODUCTION ]

A pastor and adjunct faculty for Houston Theological Seminary, Gary Thomas shared a story one woman had told him about a regular battle she faced. “In her mid-thirties, Nicole works in an industry that has not been kind to women. It’s beginning to change because it must, but Nicole is still a bit of a pioneer in having to deal with the ‘not yet’ part.... When she called out a male coworker for making a mistake that cost the company hundreds of thousands of dollars, he asked her if she was upset because it was her ‘time of the month.’

“Why does Nicole stay? As a strong believer, she is convinced this is God’s call on her life. ‘I couldn’t handle the toxicity I face if I wasn’t absolutely certain of who I am in Christ. In fact, my being a Christian may draw as much ridicule from some coworkers as the fact that I’m a woman. They think of Christians as ignorant, anti-science, weak do-gooders.’

“Nicole has a much younger sister, and she wants to set an example for her. ‘If I left my job every time somebody said something misogynistic or anti-Christian, the toxic people would win. If I lose my seat at the table, I lose influence, and I’ve come to believe that would be selfish.... But do I have to put up with a lot? Yeah, I do.’

“Nicole works hard to not allow a poisonous atmosphere to poison her own soul. She prays for her coworkers. She may call a friend in the middle of the day to have a ‘healthy, edifying’ conversation instead of fretting about heated comments in the boardroom. She’ll listen to a podcast. She remembers that God’s work is moving forward; he’s touching many lives; and he has placed Nicole to be a light in a sometimes dark place.”

Standing up for the right things always sounds noble and exciting, but actually having an upright life in the face of opposition day-in and day-out is brutally exhausting in reality. If we don’t have the right foundation, we won’t withstand the storm.

#### [ DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ]

1. Describe a situation where you had to fight back against someone who was attacking you.



A H E A R T  
*After [God]*

2. How is the idea of warfare for believers often swing to one of two extremes in the Western Christian culture (either Christians are healers, and all conflict is evil; or Christians are soldiers, and attacking everything/everyone who doesn't fall in line with our beliefs is necessary)?

3. What are some ways that you see evil being accepted and even promoted around you in your work or daily life?

4. How do you respond when you come across these cultural evils? Based on scripture, how do you think Jesus would've responded to these issues?

5. In what ways have you felt personally attacked in this season of your life?

6. How do you combat these personal attacks? Have you started to feel discouraged in this battle, as if this new issue may be a permanent feature of your life now? How do you fight against giving up hope?

7. What kinds of lies about God and ourselves are we often assaulted by when we're struggling spiritual or pushing back against evil in the world?



8. Why are both mourning and longing important in our Christian walk?

9. What are three different ways that we can stir faith and confidence in our hearts?

10. What is a passage of scripture that encourages you when you're in conflict with evil in your life?

## [ FURTHER READING ]

Luke 22:31-34 — 1 Peter 5:6-11 — 1 John 4:1-6

## [ PRAYER PROMPT ]

If there are situations, relationships or items whose alignment with God is uncertain for you, ask God for discernment as you seek to 'test every spirit.' Search for a passage of the Bible that may apply, and then ask the Holy Spirit to give you clarity as you pray over this scripture.

If you are already in conflict with evil and are well aware of it, ask God for strength, purity and wisdom in this battle. Jesus told his disciples, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (*Matthew 10:16, ESV*). We must deal with the world shrewdly without allowing ourselves to be compromised morally or ethically.



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