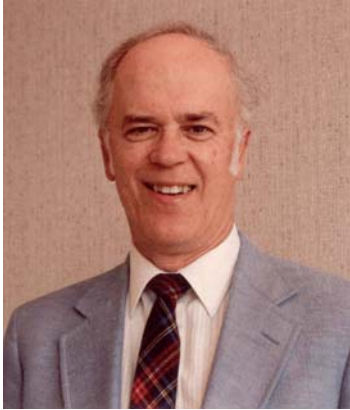


When We Question GOD

by

William C. Brownson

These messages were delivered by Dr. Brownson on weekly broadcasts of Words of Hope, an international radio broadcast of the Reformed Church in America.



About the author

Dr. William C. Brownson, President Emeritus of *Words of HOPE*, was born in Charlotte, North Carolina. He received his A.B. degree with Phi Beta Kappa honors from Davidson College in 1949 and graduated from Columbia Theological Seminary in 1952. He pursued doctoral work at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was awarded the Th.D.

degree in New Testament studies in 1963.

Dr. Brownson has served Reformed churches in Lodi, New Jersey, and Chicago, Illinois. In 1964 he was appointed Professor of Preaching at Western Theological Seminary, a position he occupied for ten years. From 1972 to 1994 he served as radio speaker for the Reformed Church international broadcast *Words of HOPE*. Dr. Brownson served as president of the Reformed Church in America in 1984-85.

In addition to a widespread speaking ministry in churches, on university campuses and at conferences, Dr. Brownson has written extensively for *the Church Herald* and other Christian periodicals. He is the author of 17 books.

His wife Helen has served as an educator and as Minister of Outreach at Christ Memorial Church in Holland, Michigan. The Brownsons reside in Holland. They are the parents of four sons, William and David deceased, James (Kathy) and Jonathan (Jeannette), and have six grandchildren, Rachel, Anna, Benjamin, Joanna, Will and Samuel.

He continues to be busy in retirement teaching at Western Seminary, holding retreats, conducting tours to Turkey and Greece and spending time with family.

Published in 1986 by
Words of Hope
700 Ball Ave., N.E.,
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-1308

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV), copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971 and 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. All rights reserved.

WORDS OF HOPE'S MISSION is to proclaim Jesus Christ by radio and literature in the languages of the world's peoples, seeking with our partners in ministry to win the uncommitted everywhere to faith in Christ and to encourage Christians in the life of discipleship.

CONTENTS

	Preface	5
1.	Why Was I Born?	6
2.	What Is Man?	14
3.	How Long?	21
4.	Who Can Stand?	29
5.	What Shall I Do?	35
6.	Why Do the Wicked Prosper?	42
7.	Why Is My Pain Unceasing?	50
8.	Who Can Live in Your Presence?	57
9.	What Am I Waiting For?	64
10.	Will You Let Me Down?	71
11.	Who Is Like You?	78
12.	Where Can I Run?	85
13.	Will I Live after I Die?	92
14.	What about Your Reputation?	99
15.	What Shall I Give You?	106
16.	Why Have You Left Me?	113
17.	Will You Revive Us?	120
18.	What Good Is Death?	127
19.	When Will You Come?	134
20.	Whom Shall I Fear?	141

PREFACE

We all have our questions. We ask them of parents and teachers. We put them to experts and professionals in various fields. We debate them with friends and mull over them in quiet moments alone.

Our most agonizing queries, though, are reserved for Someone else. We sense instinctively that not even the wisest of our fellow humans can answer them. They are the big questions, the “loaded” ones. They are the questions our history forces on us, life-and-death issues that scream for an answer. We have nowhere else to go, no one else to turn to. We raise them with God.

You know the kind I mean: “Why was I born?” or “Lord, how long?” “Why do wicked people seem to prosper?” “What happens after I die?” or the most painful one of all, “Why have you forsaken me?”

What good would it do to ask other people about those things? What would their opinions be worth? The wisest of them would probably shake their heads and say, “God. . . .” And they would be right. But he doesn’t seem to be telling what he knows. When we whisper questions like these, or even shout them, no answer comes back.

It’s still a good thing to ask him about them — to ask him straight out. For one thing, it helps to ease the internal pressure. “There, I’ve said it now!” It’s a relief to get it off your chest. And even though you ask the question bitterly, you’re still on the right track, looking in the right direction. You may be ready for a quarrel, but you’re appealing to God’s heart. That’s good.

In this book I try to overhear some of God’s people asking those questions. I try to sense what they were feeling, how they were struggling. And then I try to gather all I can from the Scriptures that seems to point toward God’s answer.

I send out this little volume with the hope that it may encourage others to freedom and honesty in asking God questions, and may strengthen them to wait for the vision which, though it may tarry long, will surely come.

Chapter 1

WHY WAS I BORN?

Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

Jeremiah 20:18 RSV

Did you ever find yourself asking the question, “Why was I born?” One of the greatest prophets who ever lived, bold Jeremiah, once raised it like this: “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?”

Different Ways to Ask it

We sense immediately that Jeremiah is asking the question with deep feeling. And it makes a great deal of difference, doesn't it, how we ask it.

For some, the question may be largely speculative. They are philosophers exploring the large issues that engage the human spirit. Prominent among those is the question of *meaning*. Is there any purpose in the universe? And if there is, does my life have significance in the larger scheme of things? That can be asked from the comfort of an arm chair, discussed over coffee among learned cronies. At that level, there doesn't seem to be a great deal at stake. It's the spirit of inquiry that matters. “Why was I born?” is raised as a subject for lively debate. Each person's opinion has as much right to be considered as any other.

At other times, the question may reflect a tired cynicism. Someone has been searching for a note of purpose in life, but hasn't found it. He or she has opted for the gloomy view that life has no ultimate meaning. For such, “Why was I born?”

is a throw-away question. They aren't asking anyone in particular and they don't expect an answer. They speak as into a void, with resignation and a sense of blank despair.

For Jeremiah, it's altogether different. The question "Why did I come forth from the womb?" is a cry of anguish. It's wrung from a broken heart. This man is not wondering whether or not there's any meaning in the universe. He knows full well that life is shot through with purpose. And he is certainly not a disillusioned searcher who has sampled various pursuits but found them all empty. Jeremiah is a believer. He knows that his life is in God's hands. He knows further that God has a design in history and has sent him to fulfill a mission. But he's crushed at what he sees happening around him and directs his question straight at God. "Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?"

What's Behind the Question

Think with me about what led up to that question. While he was still a young man, Jeremiah had experienced an overwhelming sense of God's calling:

The word of the LORD came to me saying, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Nothing could have branded into his soul more deeply the conviction that he was God's person, that he had been claimed by the Eternal for a mission in history. The call was demanding, inescapable. He was destined to be a prophet, and his objections about being too young were swept away as impertinent.

Why Was I Born?

Do not say “I am only a youth”; for to all to whom I send you you shall go, and whatever I command you you shall speak.

Jeremiah would not be left in doubt about what to say. The Lord said, “Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.” Nor would he need to fear his adversaries. “Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,” says the Lord.

The mission was a large one indeed. It took in the whole world scene of Jeremiah’s time. “See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms.” And the prophet would be more than an observer, more than a commentator. His work would have dynamic effects. He would “pluck up and . . . break down.” He would “destroy and . . . overthrow.” He would “build and . . . plant.” And he would do it all by proclaiming the word of the Lord.

The trouble was that when he set out to fulfill his mission, he encountered fierce opposition, not from heathen nations (which might have been expected), but from God’s own people. The religious establishment of his day was proclaiming a message diametrically opposed to his. Jeremiah prophesied that Jerusalem would fall. His opponents were assuring the people that it was indestructible. He warned that Egypt was a broken reed. They insisted that Pharaoh was their strong protector. They, claiming to speak for God, dismissed all of his prophecies as lies.

As Jeremiah continued to proclaim his message, his patriotism was called in question. He was accused of destroying his nation’s morale and acting against its best interests. A troublemaker he was, and worse — a traitor!

He was ordered by the powers that be to hold his peace. And when he refused, he was arrested and tortured, released, arrested again, and thrown into a slimy pit where he almost died. All of this befell him simply because he insisted on speaking the word that God had given him. He became a laughingstock. All his prophecies brought him only reproach and derision.

Why Was I Born?

Further, there seemed to be no way out. He thought about keeping quiet, saying nothing for a while. But that was out of the question:

If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name,"
there is in my heart as it were, a burning fire shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.

The word of God was such a power within him that it overwhelmed all his resistance. Even if he tried to, he couldn't stop speaking. He had no choice.

So that was his situation, called to proclaim a message that no one believed, sent to labor in a cause everyone denounced. The more he preached, the more rage and violence he aroused. No one listened. No one heeded. Jeremiah had to stand by, watching helplessly, as the very doom he had announced came upon his own nation.

Can you sense the unbearable tension in that? You're sent by God to do something, but you're set up to fail. The harder you try, the worse it gets. No wonder you begin to ask, "Why did I come forth from the womb?"

Failure and frustration are always hard to bear. But we can understand them, at least, when we have first gone our own way and flouted God's commands. To disobey and then suffer for it is bitter, but intelligible. After all, it's only what we have a right to expect. But when I do what I know God wants me to do and have nothing but trouble as a result, how can I deal with that?

Jeremiah's is hardly a success story, is it? We'd like to believe that if we do what's right, there will be some kind of payoff. Surely someone, at least, will recognize the sacrifice we've been making. Surely some good-hearted folk will understand. But when I have to do something, when God won't let me quit, and when I'm totally humiliated and despised as a result, how can I account for that?

Why Was I Born?

Have you ever felt as Jeremiah did? You were doing what was right, doing what God says and then getting kicked in the teeth for it? What rhyme or reason is there in that? Something boils up in us to protest. “God, if my mission isn’t going to do anyone any good, if it’s going to get everyone down on me and make my life a constant misery, and if no one will pay attention anyway, why in the world did you send me?”

Jeremiah is beside himself. He rages, “Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!” For him a birthday was no time for celebration. It reminded him of the bitterness that life had brought him. Why, God? Why was I born in the first place? “Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?”

The Outcome

What happened as a result of Jeremiah’s question? As far as we can tell, God didn’t answer it. The next thing we read in the prophecy is another instruction from the Lord to keep on preaching doom. You might say that God didn’t seem to hear the question at all. At least he paid no attention to it. He simply told Jeremiah to keep on doing what he had been doing — and to make it more emphatic!

When we cry out to God, “Why did you get me into this? Why was I ever born?” we don’t usually get answers either. There have been times when I’ve felt like that, sick at heart, complaining, shouting “Why?” in near desperation. I got no explanations. God didn’t speak to me out of the whirlwind as he did to Job. Even then, he didn’t give Job any answers, did he? God doesn’t satisfy us on demand. Many times when we’re asking our most pained questions, he seems to be silent. All we hear is the echo of our own lament.

One result that sometimes follows is a sense of release and relief. I’m thankful for Jeremiah because he was so honest and so forthright. Sometimes we have all kinds of negative feelings toward God, but we don’t dare express them. We fear it

Why Was I Born?

would be irreverent, sacrilegious, so we bottle up those feelings inside or else project them onto someone else. We find no release, no relief.

Jeremiah refused to do that. If his problem was with God, he was going to have it out with him. He would tell the Lord just how he felt, even when it sounded almost blasphemous.

O Lord, you have deceived me, and I was deceived. . . . Cursed be the day when I was born! . . . Lord, will you be to me like a deceitful brook?

We cringe at those outbursts. We almost expect thunderbolts of divine judgment. But strangely, they don't come. Jeremiah was God's man. He knew that. God knew that. And there was nothing in their relationship that ruled out the honest exchange of feeling. We may call it sacrilege. I have an idea that God calls it the honesty and courage of faith. And I know this: When we get it out, whatever it is that's surging up within us, we feel better.

Think about it, friends. If we have questions on our minds, does God know that? If we're filled with pain and anger toward him, does he understand? Which is better — to express it all before him, or to *pretend* to feelings that we don't have? Shall we pray to him as the persons we think we ought to be or as the persons we presently are?

Now I'm not arguing here that we should be forever railing at God. Penitence, praise and prayer ought to be our keynotes. True reverence is a beautiful reality in our life with him. But when our hearts are breaking and feelings run deep, let's not be afraid to open up to the Lord. Remember that great word of the psalmist:

Trust in him at all times, ye people; pour out your hearts before him. God is a refuge for us.

Why Was I Born?

Yes, and he is the God who loved us enough to give us his Son. We can safely tell him everything.

Do you know something else that resulted from Jeremiah's question? As we've seen, he didn't get an answer right away. He did get a lot off his chest. Best of all, he found the strength to carry on. Come to think of it, maybe that was God's answer. Maybe that's how he works when we pour out our hearts before him. He doesn't solve all the mysteries, doesn't settle all the hard questions, but He's there to uphold us in the midst of them.

Sometimes I've wondered why God allowed two of our sons to suffer so much and for so long. There have been times when the questions have just poured out of me toward God, along with a good many tears. Those were draining experiences, but somehow strengthening ones too. Afterwards I could go back again to the everyday round of working, praying and waiting. I could "hang in there."

At a far deeper level and at much greater cost, that's what Jeremiah did. He continued as a lone spokesman for God, a voice crying in the wilderness until disaster engulfed his nation. He later went with a remnant of the people to Egypt, even when he knew they were being disobedient and would have no future there. Tradition tells us that he went on speaking for God to a hardhearted people until they finally rose up and stoned him to death. He never got his answers. That is, not until the Lord called him home. Like many of us, he didn't understand at the time what the Lord was doing with his life. But this man who once questioned the Lord, "Why did I come forth from the womb?" went on to be faithful unto death. Thanks be to God!

Why Was I Born?

Study Questions

1. In what different ways do people ask this question?
2. Why was the question so poignant for Jeremiah?
3. How did God deal with Jeremiah's question?
4. Should we feel free to ask God anything? *Explain your answer.*

Chapter 2

WHAT IS MAN?

What is man? What does it mean to be human? Or, to make the question personal for each of us: Who am I? Here's how a man of faith raised that question many centuries ago and the amazing answer he was given:

When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon
and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art
mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?
Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him
with glory and honor

Psalm 8:3-5 RSV

Very Small

Did you ever stand out in the open on a clear moonless night and spend some time just looking up at the stars? Most of us have. Quite an experience, isn't it? We can hardly put into words the feelings that often steal over us at a time like that. People have been gazing at the stars, I suppose, from the dawn of history, and always with a kind of silent awe. We probably feel our own tininess and transiency more keenly at such moments than at any others.

The beauty of those twinkling lights never fails to fascinate. The stars have a special mystery for us because they seem so remote, so inaccessible. And the quiet and calm of the arching heavens are a soothing contrast to the clamor and confusion of our life here on earth.

But these impressions, which have always come to star watchers, have been heightened immeasurably in our time by what we have learned about the cosmos.

We know now what the ancients never imagined. The stars are far more numerous than the twenty-five hundred or so which we can see with the naked eye or the tens of thousands more that can be discerned with ordinary telescopes. We understand now that for every one we can see, there are literally billions more beyond them. We know something both of their colossal size and of the staggering distances between them. We know the dizzying speeds with which they rush away from each other.

In this generation, we have seen things in our solar system that no mortal had ever glimpsed before. We've gaped at our television screens when they revealed the rugged landscape of the moon and the reddish rocks of Mars. Our astronauts have been given to see the earth as a beautiful blue-white ball floating in a vast expanse of blackness. What a view of home!

For some, such visions of immensity seem chilling and uncomfortable. People feel depressed by their own insignificance. It seems impossible to them that the earth itself should matter very much in the whole scheme of things — a third-rate planet, traveling around a second-class star, in one of the fringe galaxies! And, if the earth is only a bit of dust, what meaning can there be to the life of one mortal who spends a few troubled days in its surface? The whole biosphere is only a faint, fragile film on Planet Earth. What can our petty doings and destinies mean in a universe so ancient and so vast?

Many of our contemporaries are terrified by the thought that we are really alone in the void, that no one anywhere cares what becomes of us, that we're like little children who call and call in an empty house and find no one home. To look at the stars can be bleak and numbing if we're afraid of that.

But here's the cry of a man of faith who once looked up at that same expanse: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth!" This is a man who has come to know God as his King, Redeemer, and Guide. He sees displayed in the starry heavens the unspeakable glory of the Most High. To him all is the work

of God's fingers. The moon and the stars are orbs he has ordained. However huge or distant they may be, each was called into being by his word. God has given to all of the trillions of blazing suns out there their special names.

Very Precious

The psalmist feels like the rest of us. How small he is under the vault of heaven! "When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man?" But for him, that question expressed not despair but grateful wonder. He knows that God is mindful of him, and has cared for him. His God is the Lord of the covenant, ever faithful to his people. The stars may dazzle the believer with their splendor, but they never make him or her to feel abandoned. They remind them of the God whose love they already know, whose glory shines brightly in each one.

But for him, this psalmist, there's a revelation grander still. God to him is the God "whose glory above the heavens is chanted by the mouth of babes and infants." What a contrast — a gigantic ball of blazing light millions of miles in diameter and a little girl in her mother's arms! The child is frail, limited, vulnerable; yet he or she is able, in a way that none of the heavenly bodies are, to express joy and amazement at what God has made. Where else in the universe are persons who can feel awe, appreciate, and offer praise? If they are there, we don't know about them, do we? These lisping songs of infants can confound the skeptics even more than the vastness of the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants is hymned the glory of the Lord. Faith can see God's glory shining splendidly in the near and the small, in the incomparable wonder of human life.

Little less than God

What a dignity, what a special place God has given to humankind! Here's the answer to the question, "What is man?" Thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor.

Though small, weak and swiftly passing, man above all the other creatures is like God, little less than he. The gulf between God the Creator and man the creature yawns wide indeed, but the distance between man and everything else in creation is greater still. Only we human beings bear the divine likeness. We are God's representatives, appointed to rule over all creation. We are to have the dominion. All things are to be beneath our feet. First the domestic animals, then the wild beasts, then birds of the air, the fish of the deep, and then beyond. Man may be a speck in God's universe, but only he can appreciate his glories and return them to his Maker in praise.

Have you ever thought of that? The splendor of God's work is there for *us*. What would be the purpose of a sunset, we wonder, if no one in the universe could marvel at its beauty? How would the stars fulfill their destiny if no heart anywhere could be kindled to awe by beholding them? What a role we humans play in God's great design! Here's man, little man, already beginning with hesitant, planet-sized steps a journey to the stars, a dominion even over space.

But wait, isn't the picture overdrawn? This is far too glowing a picture of man, someone objects. Where are the human beings today who are truly like God, who show forth his praises in all of life? Where are those who rule over and care for this creation as his agents? Cynics call the whole vision laughable. "See how these vaunted humans destroy and devour one another. They care nothing for God or for anyone else. Each is hungry for his own praise. And as far as dominion over creation is concerned, see what a mess mankind has made of that. He has depleted the world's resources, destroyed some of its most wonderful creatures,

polluted its waters and befouled its atmosphere. Is this the being who is supposed to be 'little less than God'?"

It's a searching, disturbing question, isn't it? But there's a passage in the New Testament that speaks directly to it. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews quotes from this very Psalm with its exalted view of human dignity and dominion. He has this to say about mankind:

Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he [God, that is] left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him.

That's a masterpiece of understatement. We surely don't see in mankind the glory and honor of which the psalmist sings.

We See Jesus

That's right. The vision of humanness that we see in the eighth psalm is far from realized in the world around us. But, this writer goes on,

We see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

Although in the mass of mankind, our human destiny seems far from fulfillment, we see one person in whom the vision is realized. We see Jesus Christ. Here is the man whose whole life praises God. Here is the man in whom God's glory is fully revealed. Here is the One whose right it is to rule, God's appointed King to reign over the universe. We may not see what we are looking for anywhere else, but we

What Is Man?

do see Jesus. He loves God supremely. He appreciates God's world, and he loves God's image-bearers enough to give his life for them.

And that, friends, has enormous consequences for the future. Jesus is not an isolated human figure, not a lonely exception to the general rule. No. He is the firstborn of a new humanity. He is the head of a new creation. God, we learn, is bringing many sons and daughters to this glory. He has begun by making the Pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

It was sin and rebellion that had marred God's image in man and distorted his destiny, but this Jesus has come to bear our sins, to taste death for all of us, and thus to conquer it not only for himself but also for his people. He sends now his Spirit to the hearts of all who believe in him and works within them to make them over in his own image. In Jesus Christ we see not only what we ought to be, but what by God's grace and power we are destined to become. God is making of Christian believers a human race in the likeness of his dear Son. And think of it, in people like that, renewed in God's image, his name and glory will shine more brightly than in all the stars put together.

All of us wonder at times who we really are. All of us ponder what it means to be human. Here, if you will receive it, is an answering word from beyond. You — man, woman, fellow, girl — have been made in the likeness of God. You are a creature of great dignity, with a high destiny. You were born to rule in this universe as one of God's special representatives.

People may not see that in you now. You may not be able to see it in yourself. You may wonder as you scan the skies, "How could the Maker of all that be concerned about me?"

God's answer is Jesus Christ, living, dying, rising for you. He is the pledge of God's amazing love and the promise of what you can become. If you believe in him as your Savior, all the ways in which you have fallen short will be forgiven

What Is Man?

you, and he will work in you by his Word and Spirit to make you all that you are meant to be. Thanks be to God!

Study Questions

1. How does gazing at the stars affect you?
2. What does the psalmist see in the starry heavens?
3. In what sense are human beings “little less than God”?
4. What place does Jesus have in the fulfillment of this vision?

Chapter 3

HOW LONG?

How long, O LORD? Wilt thou forget me forever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Psalm 13:1-2 RSV

Who Asks?

Who that you know is asking God these days, “How long?” Maybe you are the one, or maybe it’s someone close to you. I was astonished to discover how many times this question is raised in the pages of the Bible, by how many different struggling people. “O Lord, how long?” Here’s a classic expression of it from Psalm 13:

How long, O LORD? Wilt thou forget me for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

You’ve heard some of those agonizing cries, haven’t you? You’ve spoken them at times, perhaps, or at least felt them. Who is there who hasn’t wondered in the midst of pain and trouble, “God, how long?”

I can see them in my mind’s eye. Here’s a brokenhearted mother. She’s been praying about that restless daughter of hers for more years than she cares to

How Long?

remember. The girl can't seem to find herself. She runs from one damaging relationship to another. She wants nothing to do with her mother's values or her mother's God. She's rebellious, alienated, and deeply unhappy. Her mother asks God every day, and during many a night, for a miracle that will turn her daughter's life around. But as the years keep slipping by and nothing seems to change, she asks through her tears, "Lord, how long?"

I see a man who has been battling for the better part of a decade with cancer. First it attacks one part of his body, then another. He goes into the hospital for surgery. The results seem good. He goes into remission, full of hope. Then the problem flares up again. Another hospital stay: more surgery, perhaps chemotherapy this time, or radiation. Things look promising again, but not for long. The tell-tale signs reappear. The grim cycle starts again. This brave man and his embattled little family are almost afraid to hope anymore. "O God," they groan, "how long?"

I see farmers looking out over their ruined fields, dust blowing in their faces. The forests that once stood on the slopes of the foothills nearby are gone. So are the cattle. The vast desert is moving south, gobbling up acres of arable land every week. Many of the farmers have moved on in search of a better place, hoping to feed their hungry children. For two years, the rainy season has failed to arrive. Nothing seems constant but the blinding sun and the wind. Will it ever rain again? "O Lord, how long?"

I see them in South Africa, herded into "homelands," a cruel title for places where no one would choose to live. They long for a share in their country's fabled wealth, for an opportunity to improve their lot. They yearn to be treated as though they belonged, as though they were citizens in their own country. But the ruling regime is determined to keep them down. All expressions of protest, all bids for freedom, are determinedly repressed. Power is in the hands of the armed few. The

helpless many can only wait, grieve and suffer. A great cry rises from them, swelling in volume and passion: “How long?”

What Are They Asking?

Do we hear what all these people are saying? What is in their cry, “How long?” Intense pain. That is surely there. Pain protracted, coming back in waves. The pressure doesn’t ease; it rather grows. The screws are tightening. The suffering seems too much to bear.

When they ask the Lord, “How long?” we sense a note of vehemence, and yes, of reproach. “Where are you, God? What are you doing to me? When are you going to help me?” There’s an unmistakable challenge in those words, a hint of defiance. Maybe more than a hint. “We’re tired of waiting,” they say, “weary of pleading, too hurt to be proper and polite. We want to know, ‘How long?’”

And yet, before we berate ourselves or scold some other anguished soul, let’s remember that the question is also a testimony of faith. The atheist doesn’t ask “How long?” At least he doesn’t turn the question heavenward. Who is there to hear or care? No, this is the cry of someone who has known God’s help before and recognized it as coming from him. This is the lament of people who take God and his promises seriously, who have deep convictions about his faithfulness and good will. These are folk who know the Lord well enough to tell him how they feel, to appeal directly to his heart. I cannot accept the view that such appeals are irreverent. Irreverence means saying proudly in my heart, “No God!” and then going out to live as though he did not exist. It’s taking the holy on my lips when I won’t seek for God in my heart. Never call the anguished cries of God’s suffering children blasphemous. Jarring they may be, offensive to our sensibilities, perhaps, but not ungodly. They have more of faith in them, more of pulsing life, than the most polished liturgies of the prim and complacent. These people don’t curse

God; they turn to him. They aren't railing at him; they are taking him at his own word, asking him to be to them what he has pledged himself to be.

God's Answer

What kind of answer does God give when we ask "How long?" I wish I could tell you that he comes speedily to our aid, but I can't. Sometimes he does, but not always. Sometimes the problem persists.

The waiting goes on. The pain lingers. The oppression doesn't end. Sometimes, although the situation may not change right away, God gives assurance to his people that it will. Here in Psalm 13, after all those "How longs?" all those pleas for relief, the closing prayer is this:

I have trusted in thy steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has dealt bountifully with me.

You don't sense that the problem is all over yet, the suffering removed. But this man who has called on God in his extremity has somehow been filled with hope. He may not experience it now, but he knows that help is on the way, that the One to whom he has appealed will not finally let him down.

Maybe this has happened to him before — distress and then deliverance. He's been reminded of how God has dealt with other servants of his. James, the brother of our Lord, reminds his friends about that:

As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of

How Long?

Job, and you have seen the end of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

James 5:10-11

That's the thought that sometimes arises in us when we cry out, "How long?" "God finally came through for someone else. I believe he'll do it for me!"

Sometimes the message may come back that something more needs to happen before the trial ends. James also writes this to those who have already been through a great deal: "Let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." In other words, "Hang in there!" There's something more that needs to happen, maybe in your circumstances, maybe in you.

Remember that dramatic scene in the book of Revelation? The Lamb has just opened the fifth seal of destiny's scroll. John writes:

. . . I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?"

Rev. 6:10

Again that question, "How long?" We don't know exactly what was said to them, but we read this immediately after:

Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren

How Long?

should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Rev. 6:11

What about that? Sometimes there's more suffering to come and more trials to be endured, more martyrs to be struck down. The time to end the agonies, the time to set things right, has not yet come.

Sometimes the word of the Lord may be, at least for a time, "My grace is enough for you." The ordeal may drag on, but you'll be given what you need to cope with it. You'll be strengthened to endure, and the power of the Lord will be revealed in your weakness. Only the Lord can say that to us, because only he knows what we're going through, and only he can be our sufficiency in the midst of it. But when he speaks his word of grace to our hearts, we somehow find the resources to hold on a little bit longer.

But whatever he says or doesn't say, and however we may feel about his dealings with us, one thing is sure. The sorrows and struggles will be over soon. The pain won't go on one moment too long. And one day, it won't even seem long any more. Listen to the way one believer celebrated that:

Sing praises to the LORD, O you, his saints, and give thanks to his holy name. For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Psalm 30:4-5

That we can know for certain. The joy comes with the dawn.

How We Can Be Sure

But how do we know that, finally? How do we know with deep assurance that our God is “the God of the last half,” that though he tarries, he will vindicate his people, that all the tears will be wiped away at the last? We know it, friends, because of Christ.

How long we looked forward to his coming! Through all the generations, from the first sin until he appeared, the world waited. We were estranged, lost, exiled from home. Disobedient to God, we had forfeited the right to live with him. Bent on going our own way, we had wandered far and covered ourselves with troubles and sorrows. Something deep within us cried like Job, “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might even come before his presence!”

God hadn’t left himself without witness. Even to the banished ones had come the promise of a redeemer. God had entered into covenant with his people and promised Abraham a seed through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. In the tabernacle and later in the temple, God granted his presence to his people, though separated from them by a thick veil. Through his prophets he spoke again and again of a coming One, a prophet greater than Moses, a true king in David’s line, a great high priest, a suffering servant of the Lord who would bear our sins and carry our sorrows, a Son of man to whom dominion would be given, Emmanuel, God with us.

But as years passed and centuries rolled by, all God’s people had was hope. The godly among them were always forward-looking, always expecting, always yearning, and always in their times of extremity, crying, “How long?” Then, in the fullness of the time, God sent his Son. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. The Savior was born.

Now he has accomplished his mission. He has perfectly obeyed the Father. He has died for our sins and conquered death. He lives and reigns and sends his Spirit to guide and empower his people. One day he will come again to a waiting church

How Long?

and a wistful world. For all whose suffering drags on and on, he is the pledge that a glad new morning is about to break. Soon the night of weeping will be the morn of song. To all who ask this day, from some midnight of sorrow and pain, “O Lord, how long?” he, the Faithful witness, says, “Lift up your heads, for your redemption draws near. Surely, I am coming soon.”

Study Questions

1. What situation in your life has led you to ask, “How long?”
2. Is this kind of question irreverent? Explain your answer.
3. In what ways may God answer this question?
4. How can we be sure an answer will finally come?

Chapter 4

WHO CAN STAND?

If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand?
But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared.

Psalm 130:3-4 RSV

“If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, LORD, who could stand?” So the psalmist prays in Psalm 130:3. He’s wondering about the ways of God with men and how any one of us can hope to “measure up.”

Marking Iniquities

It’s as though he muses, “Suppose, Lord, that you were to mark iniquities?” We know what he means by that. “Suppose you were to take note of our sins and failings. Suppose you were to keep track of them and write them down in your book?” And more than that, “Suppose that you were to keep them on file for a future reckoning, that you were to hold them against us? What then?”

My wife once had the distressing experience of receiving a traffic citation. When she went to the police station to pay the fine, a friend who was on duty invited her to come around behind his desk to watch a television monitor. There before her startled eyes, she saw a detailed list of the traffic violations of which she had been guilty over a period of 20 years. There it was — all on computer. Some things she could recall, others she had been happy to forget. But nothing was missing on that screen. Someone was marking her citations, keeping a permanent record on file. And she was warned that if enough of those infractions accumulated within a given period of time, there would be certain penalties.

Who Can Stand?

What if God did something like that? What if every time I lied or lusted or let down a friend, it went into my permanent file? What if all my hostile thoughts and rash words and willful ways were recorded against me, like so many negative entries in a heavenly computer? What if all the thoughtless, cowardly, loveless omissions in life were tabulated and set down as liabilities against my account? What chance would I have? When the testing time came, could I hope to pass? Could I possibly stand? That's the question here.

And we get the idea, don't we, that when this man asked the question he already knew the answer. When he asked, "Who could stand?" he was expecting to hear, "No one, especially not you."

I once had an embarrassing experience about questions like that. I was a young preacher, expounding the Scriptures to a distinguished group that included an eminent New Testament scholar. And I was trying to demonstrate how honest and humble the disciples of Jesus were. I pointed out that when Jesus spoke of the fact that someone was going to betray him, each one of his followers asked, "Lord, is it I?" My point was that these men were so aware of their own proneness to fall that they were asking the question, "Is it I?" with deep self-searching.

After my talk was over, the learned professor kindly took me aside for a bit of instruction. The Greek language has a particular way of asking a question that definitely anticipates a negative response. That was precisely the construction used in the passage I had discussed. In other words, these disciples were not acting humbly at all! When they asked, "Is it I?" they were expecting the Lord to say, "Certainly not!" In effect, they were asking something like this: "Lord, surely I'm not the one, am I?" I've been more cautious since about trying to make the disciples of Jesus something more than human!

But this man who wrote the Psalm is coming from a different place. He doesn't start with the assumption that he's okay and the fault must lie somewhere else. His cry to God is, as he says, "out of the depths." He's aware of his own

failure, his own sin, his own waywardness and estrangement from God. When he asks, “Who could stand?” he’s not angling for a compliment, for strokes of reassurance. He knows that if God should mark his iniquities, he could *not* stand. Nor could I. Nor, in all probability, could you.

God’s Forgiveness

But the psalmist doesn’t stop with that, thank God! After his question, which can only be answered in the negative, he makes a ringing affirmation. Following the gloomy *no*, a grand *yes*. Listen: “But there is forgiveness with thee.” That puts the whole situation in a different light. If God should mark our iniquities, none of us could stand, but with him there is *forgiveness*.

Now that doesn’t mean that our wrongs and evils are ignored or carelessly forgotten. The Scriptures teach us clearly that one day, everything we have done will pass in review. For every idle word that we have spoken we will yet give an accounting. God will one day bring to light the hidden things of darkness and even make manifest the secret intents of every human heart. There’s a record on high far more reliable than a computer disk in the Justice Department.

But the psalmist is affirming that though God knows our iniquities, he will not mark them, that is, he will not keep them in mind so as to punish us for them. Coming between us and the judgment we deserve is the miracle of his forgiveness.

And so the original question is ruled out of order because the first condition does not apply. If God should mark our iniquities we all would fall, but since he doesn’t, since instead he forgives, we — all of us — can hope to stand.

“Wait a minute!” says someone, “I don’t understand that. You talk about sin, about being responsible for what we do, about judgment, then you say God’s going to forgive us all and accept us at the last. How can that be?” That, friends, is one of the central mysteries of the biblical faith. How can a just God acquit

Who Can Stand?

guilty people? How can those who are clearly in the wrong have a right standing before heaven? How can sinful, defiled people dwell in the presence of the Holy? The answer is in the gospel.

From the very beginning of his self-revelation to his people, God let them know that sin is serious business. It defiles us, enslaves us, cuts us off from God. It must be, it will be, condemned. The wages of sin is death.

At the same time, God showed himself willing to accept a substitute for the forfeited life of a sinner. That's what the Old Testament sacrificial system meant. Men and women who had sinned could bring before God a lamb without spot and without blemish. Hands would be laid upon the lamb, guilt symbolically transferred, and then the lamb would be slain as a substitute. Then, on the basis of a life poured out, the innocent for the guilty, sinners could experience God's forgiveness.

But all of that, friends, was provisional and preparatory. Animal sacrifices could never really take away sin. They could only point to a reality beyond themselves. In the fullness of the time, God Himself entered into our history in the person of his Son, Jesus. He alone, among all human beings who have ever lived, was without sin. Of Him only the heavenly Father could say, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." He perfectly obeyed the will of God, loving God supremely, loving his neighbor as himself. Then in the mystery of Golgotha, he died, the innocent for the guilty, the Savior for a race of sinners. "Behold, the Lamb of God," said John the Baptist, "who takes away the sin of the world."

When any one of us will believe in this Jesus now risen from the dead, we can experience the miracle of God's pardon. And yet God remains the just Judge of all the earth. Our iniquities have indeed been marked, our sins have been judged and condemned. The stroke of judgment has fallen. But through the measureless mercy of God, Jesus the blameless One has been condemned in our place. Now

we are accepted before God as though our record were perfect. Our sins have been counted against him. His perfect obedience is laid to our account. Because He died, we can live. Because He was forsaken, we can be accepted. Now in the holy presence of the Lord, we can *stand*. What marvelous good news! With God, because of Jesus Christ, there is forgiveness!

The Fear of the Lord

One further word makes the picture complete. Listen: “There is forgiveness with thee,” says the psalmist, “that thou mayest be feared.” Do you find that somewhat jarring? All of this — so that God may be feared? Some commentators on this psalm can make no sense of that at all. They think it must be a mistaken reading, a corruption of the text. “How,” they ask, “could God’s forgiveness make us *fear* him?”

It seems on the surface that we would fear him much more if he didn’t forgive. Suppose He did mark our iniquities and hold them all against us. Suppose our sins would bring us certain condemnation. Wouldn’t that be much more likely to make us afraid of God?

Afraid, perhaps, but the fear of God in the Bible means something quite different from fright. We are not to fear him as we fear a tyrant or a tidal wave. Fearing God doesn’t mean being terrified by him so that we run away and hide. To fear God is to reverence him, to stand in awe of him, yes. But it is also to trust him, to hope in his mercy, to love and desire to please him. And it is that kind of fear, friends, which a gracious forgiveness can create.

The wonder of the Christian message is that God seeks us for his own. He wants us for his children. He desires communion with us. He seeks from us the grateful, believing surrender of our hearts. And He wins that from us by his marvelous kindness in Jesus Christ.

If I think of God as only a Judge, I may respect him and tremble before him, but I cannot adore him with a thankful heart. If I think of God as merely indulgent, chuckling over human evil, and saying, “Men will be men,” I may be glad to receive his favors but I will not worship him as the holy Lord.

But if I know that the Judge of all the earth is also Father, unalterably opposed to sin but full of love for the sinner; if I know that he finds a way to forgive me by taking my judgment upon himself, bearing it for me, then I can know what it really means to fear the Lord. If I see in Jesus the wonder of God’s crucified love, then I am constrained to give myself totally to him in grateful commitment.

This psalmist began in the depths and made his way to the heights because he was aware both of the gravity of sin and the greatness of God’s forgiving mercy. There’s a sense in which we cannot really know the one without the other. To know my sin without knowing God’s grace leads only to gloom and self-reproach. On the other hand, to speak of God’s love without a penitent heart is to sentimentalize the gospel. God’s pardon cancels sin but does not annul its seriousness. Forgiveness is free but never cheap. Repentance means that I know, at one and the same time, both the soul’s despair and its breathless gratitude. A sure sign that I have embraced the authentic gospel is that I fear God, I walk by his Spirit, and I feel a sense of measureless debt to Jesus who died and rose again for me. Because of him, I can stand.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for God to “mark” iniquities?
2. How is forgiveness different from God’s indulging or condoning?
3. How is the “fear of God” created in our lives?

Chapter 5

WHAT SHALL I DO?

“What shall I do, Lord?” I asked. “Get up, “the Lord said, “and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.”

Acts 22:10 NIV

“What shall I do, Lord?” That’s a great question for anyone to ask. The apostle Paul once asked it during the biggest crisis in his life, and he was radically changed from that day onward. That was his conversion. Listen as he tells about it in Acts 22, beginning at verse 6:

As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” And I answered, “Who are you, Lord?” And he said to me, “I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.” . . . And I said, “What shall I do, Lord?” And the Lord said to me, “Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.”

A Question for the Lord

Now notice that this was a question directed to the Lord. That’s what made it so significant. Sometimes we can ask ourselves, “What shall I do?” Then we may be simply musing, daydreaming. We tick off the possibilities one by one and think about which course of action seems most attractive. “Let’s see, shall I do

What Shall I Do?

this, or shall I do that, or shall I do something else?” The question then has little urgency. I may decide to do nothing at all.

We may ask others the question, “What shall I do?” You pose it to members of your family, to your friends, to a counselor or anyone who happens to give you a hearing. You lay out the possibilities and ask for advice. “Here’s the situation I’m facing. How does it look to you? What do you think I should do?” Here again, when I ask the question in that way, there’s no commitment involved. I may have to pay for someone’s expert counsel, but I’m not in any way bound to follow it. I listen to what others have to say, but I’ll ultimately make up my own mind and do what I deem best.

But Saul of Tarsus asks, “Who are you, Lord?” and that is a different kind of question. *Lord* means “Master,” “Sovereign,” someone who rules, someone to whom I belong. When I ask, “What shall I do, Lord?” I am looking to someone with absolute authority, for direction that is irrevocably binding. I’m saying, “Here I am, Lord, I’m at your disposal. What do you want me to do?”

Now it’s true that we sometimes don’t mean that even when we ask it. Once God’s people in Judea asked of the prophet Jeremiah,

Pray to the Lord your God for us . . . that the Lord your God may show us the way we should go, and the thing that we should do.

The request sounded sincere, even deeply devout. In fact, the people guaranteed that they would follow through. They pledged themselves to complete obedience to God’s will. They said to Jeremiah,

May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to all the word with which the LORD our God sends

you to us. Whether it is good or evil, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God.

They seemed to be saying from the heart. “What shall we do, Lord?”

The sequel to the story, however, proved otherwise. Ten days later, Jeremiah brought back to the people the Lord’s answer, his clear word as to what they should do. But they said to the prophet, “You are telling a lie. The LORD our God did not send you to say [that].” And they proceeded to go in the opposite direction.

Did anything like that ever happen to you? You asked the Lord to direct you in a decision you had to make, but when his guidance came, you didn’t like it. It cut right across what you had been wanting and planning to do. So you concluded that you must have been mistaken about God’s leading.

Asking with Commitment

What makes us ask the question as Saul did, in this urgent, all-out way? With him it was a personal encounter with the One he called Lord. It’s a question we only ask in earnest when we know who the Lord is. When Saul was dazed and struck down by that overwhelming brightness on the Damascus road, he heard a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” And when he answered, “Who are you, Lord?” the word came, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.”

When Saul asked the question, “Who are you, Lord?” he was recognizing that he had been met by One with sovereign power, the One who had an absolute claim on his life. But he didn’t at first know who that was. When he heard the response, “I am Jesus,” it was for him totally unexpected. Saul had never dreamed that the Lord could be Jesus. In fact, he had staked his career as a servant of God on the premise that Jesus was not Lord, but rather an impostor, a blasphemer.

Think of what it meant for him to discover that his *Lord* was the One whom he had been so zealously, even murderously, opposing! That brought about in Saul's life the most radical change imaginable. Once he knew that Jesus was Lord, that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had really entered history in this man of Nazareth, Saul felt utterly obligated to obey him. For the rest of his life, he called himself a *doulos*, a bond slave of Jesus, one who belonged not to himself but to his risen Lord.

What about you? Have you ever asked the question, "What shall I do, Lord?" in a way that burns your bridges behind you and commits you for life? That happens for us too when we apprehend at some deep level in life who Jesus Christ is. Imagine it, friends, the One who was rejected by his own nation and condemned by the Roman authorities, the One who died in agony, condemned and alone, was in reality the Master of the universe. Now He is risen from the dead and alive forever. All authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus. We belong to him, not only because he has made us by his creative power but because he has redeemed us by his deathless, self-giving love. When we know that the crucified One is the king of glory, that the sovereign Lord is our Savior, then we say in wonder, in gratitude, in total surrender, "Lord, what shall I do?"

How He Answers

How will the Lord answer? What will he say when we ask, "Lord, what shall we do?" The answer he gave to Saul can be helpful and instructive also for us, "Rise and go to Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do."

Notice that what Saul is to do for the rest of his life has already been appointed, set, destined. Think of that. He has just been commandeered by Jesus; He has been a disciple for only a few moments. Now he learns that all the rest of his life has been mapped out for him. God has had it all planned.

The Lord is always beforehand with us. His plans for us started a long time ago. We read in the Scriptures that we have been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world. It was God's purpose before all ages that we should be his children through faith in his Son. And now it is revealed to Saul that he has not only been chosen and appointed as the Lord's servant, but everything that he is to do has been prepared beforehand, too.

The call of God to his prophets often included something like this: "The Lord said to Jeremiah, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'" And God had in view not only that Jeremiah would be a prophet but that he would minister to particular persons and bring them a particular message. Listen: "To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak." That's how it would be for Saul as well. Every part of his apostolic career had been pre-arranged.

Can you imagine the effect it has upon a person when he or she becomes convinced of this "pre-arrangement"? I can tell you something along that line from personal experience. When I was growing up, I knew that my family had plans and ambitions for what I was to do with my life. I knew that my mother had hopes that I would become an actor. She arranged to have me play child roles in plays at a community theatre. She took me to a movie studio to audition for a part in an upcoming film.

I knew also that my uncle wanted me to become a lawyer and enter politics and perhaps make a bid for the presidency. He had told me that. But when I became a Christian, I realized for the first time that *God* had a plan for my life, that *he* had a work for me to do. The friend who introduced me to the gospel gave me a packet of Scripture verse cards to memorize, and the first one I remember learning by heart was John 15:16, in which Jesus says to his followers:

What Shall I Do?

You have not chosen me but I have chosen you, and appointed you that you should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain.

Those words changed my outlook on life. They gave me a sense of destiny. The Lord had chosen me and was commissioning me. He was sending me to bear fruit. That is, my work would be effective. It would have blessed results, and further, the fruit would *remain*. It would have a lasting character about it. What I did with my life, because the Lord would be in it, would endure.

That conviction has sustained me through many testings and disappointments. It has reminded me again and again that I have been claimed for God's purpose, that he has a "something" for me to accomplish, that I am immortal until my work is done. And, because I have a God-given mission, my life takes on value and uniqueness.

Oh, believe this, friends, when you ask the risen Christ, "What shall I do?" He answers that the whole course of your future life has been planned. There's a race for you to run. There's a calling for you to fulfill.

What's more, he promised Saul, "You will be told all that is appointed for you to do." Not only does God have a plan, but He's going to tell you about it. The mere fact that he has a purpose for your life wouldn't be especially helpful if you couldn't find out what it is. And God will not leave his servants in the dark about that. They will know.

That doesn't mean that we have a complete blueprint from the start. God doesn't work that way, and it would probably ruin us if he did. We'll know it all as we need to know it, in God's good time.

The Lord doesn't say just how that disclosure of his will be made. Saul found that some of it came through a Christian brother named Ananias, one of those he had been coming to Damascus to persecute. Later on he would meet with proph-

ets who declared to him something of the Lord's will. He would experience the promptings of the Spirit within his heart, and providential delays. He would be guided by decisions of the gathered church, and at times the Lord would appear directly to him with some word of instruction or encouragement. But by whatever means, Saul would be shown God's way.

For the next step, however, he could be perfectly clear. "Rise," said the Lord, "and go into Damascus." That was all he needed to know right then. He was assured that further light would be forthcoming. He could begin with a simple, definite act of obedience.

And when you ask the Lord, "What shall I do?" don't expect a detailed itinerary, or even a list of tasks. But do expect that he will give you wisdom, as you seek him in faith, about what you are to do right now. Then, whatever it is, as he makes it clear, trust in him for strength and do it. Let the prayer with which you began be in your heart and on your lips each step of the journey. "What shall I do, Lord?" "Lord, teach me your way."

Study Questions

1. How is the question suddenly different when we ask it of Christ?
2. What leads us to ask it "with commitment"?
3. What does the Lord usually show us by way of answer?
4. How does it make you feel to know that your life-ministry has been pre-arranged?

Chapter 6

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

*H*ere is a profound and agonizing question with which most of us wrestle at some time in our lives. Listen as the prophet Habakkuk raises it directly to God:

Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong, why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Habakkuk 1:13 RSV

There it is, movingly put. “Why, Lord, do the wicked so often win out? Why are the best of people sometimes swallowed up by cruel oppressors? Why does rampant evil go unchecked?”

God’s Character

The prophet begins with some deep convictions about God’s character. Habakkuk believes that the Lord is “of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wrong.” God is the Holy One. He abhors everything evil. He cannot bear the sight of it. He can never look upon injustice and wickedness with approval or even with indifference. He is always intensely opposed to what is evil and wrong. It offends him; it grieves him; it calls forth his wrath and judgment.

Now it’s because we believe that, at least to some degree, that this question troubles us so. Oppression and cruelty would never surprise us if we believed, as the Greeks did, in a whole pantheon of warring deities, if we looked on the gods

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

as being as selfish, jealous and hostile as human beings are. Monstrous crimes in our history then would be predictable.

What I mean, friends, is that it takes a special kind of understanding of this universe to produce moral outrage, to make us question why the wicked prosper. If there is no God in control, he surely can't be held responsible, can he? Or, if he is unjust and uncaring, why should we expect better things?

Sometimes, those who call themselves atheists raise this question. Though they profess not to believe in God, they spend much of their time raging against him or criticizing his ways. And that very protest gives them away. Somewhere down deep, the blurred image of a just Ruler of the universe is what makes them so indignant at what they see going on around them. And if you, even though you're not a church person at all, are asking these questions today, it's because you have at least the beginnings of faith.

For Habakkuk, the question is so poignant because he's totally convinced about God's holiness. His God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the mighty Creator who enters into covenant with his people. He's the One who visits and redeems them, who calls them to obedience, whose name above all else is holy.

Habakkuk starts with that because God has made himself known in Israel's history as the righteous Lord of the covenant. He can always be counted on to act accordingly. He rules over men and nations, always loving righteousness and hating iniquity. He's the just Judge of all the earth, who will always "do right." That's what has all of us who are believers shaking our heads, searching our hearts, crying out to God, "Why do things happen as they do?"

How Can God Make Use of Evil People?

Let's probe this question asked by Habakkuk:

Why dost thou look on faithless men, and art silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

Some of Habakkuk's queries have already been answered. He had been wondering at first why so much lawlessness was allowed to continue among God's people. He saw violence and destruction all around him. Bitter quarreling divided people into rival groups. The officials who should have executed justice were themselves miserably corrupt. How could God let such a situation go on?

God's answer had been swift in coming. "Lo," He said, "I am rousing the Chaldeans, that bitter and hasty nation." Fierce warriors from the north would soon swoop down upon Judah. Their armies, swift and invincible, would overrun every fortress, and take a host of terrified captives. They, the Chaldeans, would be in this generation the rod of God's anger, to chasten his wayward people. "Just watch, Habakkuk, Jerusalem is ripe for judgment, and it's coming soon!"

But that raised the larger, more painful question: How could a holy God make use of a wicked people like the Chaldeans? Judah was infected by apostasy and was morally perverse. But she was still God's chosen people, and many of her citizens still feared his name. The Chaldeans were a thousand times worse. Cruel, plundering, murderous, they had no fear of God at all. They worshiped, if anything, their own prowess on the battlefield. Their might was the only god they knew.

What had God to do with these people? Habakkuk could understand, even accept, his judgments upon Judah. But how could God let the Chaldeans overrun the land and scoff at everything holy? Why, God seemed to favor these ruthless

savages! He was going to stand by and do nothing while the worst ravaged the best. Habakkuk wants to know why.

Sometimes we also tend to feel secure because our enemies seem to us so much worse than we are. “Oh, we’re not perfect,” we cheerfully admit. “But at least we’re not like those godless masses on the other side. Sure, there are a lot of things wrong with us, but we’re not atheists, or perverts, or terrorists. Surely when it comes to a showdown,” we reason, “God’s going to be on our side.” We can’t imagine that he would allow an evil empire to defeat the forces of freedom, the best hope that the world has. That’s exactly how Habakkuk felt when it was Judah against the Chaldeans. That’s why the word of the Lord to him came as such a shock.

How Does God Respond?

Do you know the answer that the Lord gave to Habakkuk? At first, he gave him no answer. He remained silent. Nothing happened; nothing seemed to change. No response came.

Has that ever happened to you? You flung your tortured questions up toward heaven and they simply came echoing back. The question “Why?” seems to be one that God seldom answers. That is, he rarely answers on the spot, right after we ask him. Usually, he listens but doesn’t explain. How do we handle that? Sometimes not very well. We may get impatient. We may lose heart and tell ourselves there’s no use asking. Or we may become cynical and bitter.

We can learn from this searching prophet Habakkuk a better way. Here’s what he says:

I will take my stand to watch, and station myself on the tower, and look forth to see what he will say to me.

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

This man wasn't put off because he didn't get an immediate answer. He determined to wait. Instead of focusing on the problem, continuing to mull it over, stewing in it, he decided to pull back and focus his attention on God.

What a wise and good thing to do! He had asked the Lord a question in all seriousness and now he wanted to give him time to respond. He knew it wouldn't help to keep rephrasing the question or fretting about it. He detached himself as much as he could from the immediate concern to wait for God, to look in his direction.

I'd like to learn to do that, wouldn't you? After all, what good is it to ask God anything if we aren't going to listen to his reply? And it would be the height of rudeness to insist that he has to respond to us on demand. "Come on, God, I've got to have your answer right now!" How much better to say, "Lord, I'm waiting. I want to quiet my heart and shut out the distractions and listen to you."

There is in the prophet's stance here a strong expectancy that God will answer. I will "look forth to see what he will say to me." He's saying, in other words, "I've asked, and even though I haven't heard anything yet, I know the Lord isn't going to ignore me or put me off indefinitely. I'm going to keep focusing on him until I get some kind of answer."

That's another vital lesson, isn't it? The apostle James talks about how important it is to believe that God will respond to our questions. Listen to his charge: "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching." There it is. He's assuring us again that God won't play games with us and won't reject our questions. "But," James continues, "let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways, will receive anything from the Lord."

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

Ask for wisdom, yes, but then don't forget that you asked for it. Don't insult the giving God as though you thought he were stingy, heartless, uncommunicative. If you ask him for something, at least expect that He'll give you the courtesy of a response. Otherwise, you're a double-minded person, divided against yourself. You asked as if you believed that God would hear you. Then, afterward, you acted as though it were totally useless to pray. Friends, when we ask God a question, let's expect him to show himself to us. Let's be sure that he won't leave us without light.

As Habakkuk kept on watching, this is what he heard:

Write the vision; make it plain upon tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end — it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

That's the assurance he needed, and that we need. "The vision awaits its time." The questions will be answered in due season. Down the road, things will become clear. God's ways may not mesh with your timetable, but he will make it all plain.

For now, Habakkuk could be sure of this: the triumph of the Chaldeans would be short-lived. The plunderers would themselves be plundered. The empire built on blood and violence was doomed to fall. "Don't worry, Habakkuk," God seems to say, "I'll deal with oppressors in my time and my way."

What Then?

Do you know what this godly man did after he had received his answer? He affirmed his faith:

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him. God's on the throne. He's accomplishing his holy purpose. Let all the earth bow in listening reverence before him.

He also prayed:

O LORD, I have heard the report of thee, and thy work, O LORD, do I fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.

Habakkuk 3:2

He acknowledges the answer he's been given, admits to very human fears, and then pleads that God will renew his own work. He's not quarreling now with God's ways in the world, not asking that certain judgments be averted. His eyes are on God's kingdom, on the work he is doing in the hearts and lives and societies of men and women. And he's praying, "O God, revive your work; pour out Your Spirit; make all things new. In the midst of judgment, show also your great mercy."

Then, finally, Habakkuk affirms his purpose to celebrate God's saving work, no matter what comes. You know those great words:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk 3:17

Why Do the Wicked Prosper?

He's come a long way, hasn't he, from the plaintive question "Why do the wicked prosper?" Habakkuk has met the Lord afresh and has heard his word. Now, though the circumstances haven't changed, his attitude has. He is so sure that God is doing all things well that he sets his heart to celebrate — even in the worst of times.

I have a lot of admiration for this old prophet that he can be so sure of God in troubled hours. If he could, then surely we can. For we know with confidence what he only looked for in faith. God has acted, once for all, for our salvation in Jesus Christ. Out of Jesus' crucifixion, the worst of tragedies, the most terrible travesty of justice the world has ever known, God has brought forgiveness, life and hope for all who will believe. That doesn't take away our questions, but it lets us know that the Lord who answers them is forever for us. In that we rejoice.

Study Questions

1. What view of God and the universe is assumed by this question?
2. In what sense does God make use of wicked people?
3. Does the fact that others are worse than we are make us secure? Explain.
4. How did God respond to the prophet's question?
5. Where should this question finally lead us?

Chapter 7

WHY IS MY PAIN UNCEASING?

Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?

Jeremiah 15:18 RSV

What would you say to a friend who was suffering from pain that had no foreseeable end? Or perhaps you're someone in that very predicament. Is there any hope for you?

“Why is my pain unceasing?” That’s what the prophet Jeremiah wanted to know. That’s what he asked God. “Why,” he went on, “is my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” He was a man feeling acutely an anguish that went on and on. “Why, Lord,” he cried out, “why won’t the agony stop?”

Why Pain?

C. S. Lewis once wrote a book entitled *The Problem of Pain*. He calls it “God’s megaphone,” his way of getting our attention. It shatters our illusions that all is well with us and that we can know lasting happiness apart from him. Lewis points out how pain can sometimes have blessed effects on people. He has seen great beauty of spirit in some who were great sufferers. If the world with all its pain is “a vale of soul-making,” Lewis concludes that “it seems on the whole to be doing its work.”

Why Is My Pain Unceasing?

That was Lewis the philosopher, the lay theologian. Much later in his life, he wrote about pain quite differently — now as a suffering human being. Married comparatively late in life, he found an undreamed-of happiness with his beloved, but then had to stand by helplessly while she died a lingering, painful death with cancer. He called that book *A Grief Observed*. It raised a question like Jeremiah's, "Why is the pain unceasing? Why won't the wound heal?"

Dr. Paul Brand has written extensively in our generation about the "why" of pain. He is a surgeon whose specialty is reconstructing damaged human hands. Most of his professional life has been dedicated to working with sufferers from leprosy, or what is today called Hansen's Disease. It numbs the capacity of a sufferer's feet and hands and face to feel pain. As a result, patients often damage their limbs and facial features without even realizing it.

If a normal person twists an ankle, the shooting pain will keep him from putting weight on it for a while. But if he has Hansen's Disease, he will probably go on using that injured ankle until it is permanently damaged. Or he may apply such pressure in trying to turn the key in a rusty lock that he cuts his finger to the bone. He may rinse his face with water so hot it will eventually blind him. In each case, he is without the priceless warning signals of pain.

Dr. Brand, after watching hundreds of such casualties, extols the gift of pain. God has built into our lives a marvelous warning system that can alert us to a host of dangers. It makes possible for us a whole range of activities that would be almost certainly destructive to us if we couldn't feel discomfort. And the fact that pain really "hurts," in a way that we can't turn off at will, makes the warning system reliable. What's more, a nervous system sensitive to pain makes possible for us and protects for us a host of experiences that are pleasurable.

The Gift Nobody Wants

But pain remains what someone has called “the gift nobody wants,” at least in large doses, or over long periods of time. Jeremiah and a host of other suffering people like him are not questioning the value of pain, nor doubting that it has some good effects, not even wishing that there were no such thing. They simply protest that excruciating pain, especially when it rages incessantly, makes all such considerations seem worthless. “Yeah, tell me about it,” they fume; “tell me how good it is for me when it hurts so bad I can’t stand it!”

All of us can see reasons for pain, and theoretically imagine positive results. But when pain has done its warning work, when we’ve had more than enough lessons and legacies from it, why must it keep up, run on out of control? What possible value can there be in a torment that consumes us and drives us mad? That’s the question we’re looking at now: why won’t it cease?

Some of you have endured extreme, prolonged physical suffering. You know what it does to people. One of my close friends bore that to a degree that seemed to me incredible. For a dozen years, he lived the majority of his hours, both day and night struggling with a pain which, as Brian Sternberg once put it, “oscillates from ridiculously high to excruciating.” It’s miraculous to me that my friend kept his sanity and his faith.

Some of you know continuing pain of another kind. It’s something about your appearance that never fails to humiliate you around others. It’s a personality quirk you wish you didn’t have or a limitation that galls you. It’s the alienation you have from someone, which try as you will, you can’t overcome. Or perhaps it is the suffering of a loved one — an anguish you can’t seem to relieve. The ache of it never completely leaves you. You can hardly imagine what life would be like if you didn’t have to bear that pain.

For Jeremiah, it had to do with his prophetic calling. He had been summoned by God to bring a message to the people of Jerusalem, a frightful word of ap-

proaching doom. That was difficult enough, but when people refused to hear him out and laughed him to scorn, the pain became more intense. When the so-called religious leaders of his time called him a false prophet and even a traitor, it twisted the knife in his soul even more. And when for all his trouble he was exposed to constant abuse and had to live in terror of a violent death, it was just too much for a man to endure.

The agony was that God wouldn't let him stop. He had to keep on sounding forth a message that brought upon him more waves of vicious hatred. He was heartbroken at the way Jerusalem seemed to be going on heedlessly to its doom, bent on destroying him in the process. What good could there possibly be in all this misery and frustration? Why must the anguish of it drag on interminably? "Lord, why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?"

He complains, "I did what you told me to do, and you've seen the hellishness of what has happened. Isn't that enough? Why is the torture stretched out?"

No Answer

How did God answer Jeremiah's question? If you read on in Jeremiah 15, beginning at verse 19, you'll come upon a "thus says the LORD." God speaks in response to the prophet's cry. But when you read what the Lord says, you wonder if he heard the question. At least he didn't answer it. Jeremiah didn't learn why he had to go on suffering. He didn't learn who was responsible for the pain, who was to blame. He didn't find out what God was trying to say to him through it all or what it was intended to accomplish in his life. There wasn't a word about why.

The patriarch Job had much the same experience. He asked a barrage of questions of God as to why a series of heartbreaking calamities had come upon him. But he never found out why. God met him. God spoke to him. Job found out how pretentious he had been to ask those questions and how great the Creator is.

But God never said, “This is why your suffering had to go on and on.” He never addressed that question at all.

And I dare say that if you have been asking God, “Why is my pain unceasing?” you haven’t gotten any explanation from him either.

I surely haven’t. In our family, we have had a deep, persistent sorrow that has gone on now in one way or another for 40 years. We’ve wondered about it, searched our hearts, and lain awake many nights struggling with the question why it had to be this way. But we’ve never gotten an answer to that. God has spoken to us deeply, wonderfully, but he’s never let us in on why the pain continues. We’re as much in the dark about that as we were 40 years ago.

Do you know what I’ve concluded from that? We don’t know why in particular instances pain goes on unabated. And God is apparently not of a mind to tell us. So even though that question keeps bubbling up almost irresistibly for us, I decided long ago to stop pursuing it. I remember that God didn’t tell Job or Jeremiah why. He didn’t even tell his own Son why when Jesus was in the midst of awful suffering. He’s probably not going to tell me. And if he won’t, I’m not going to try to figure out why on my own, nor am I going to take seriously someone else’s theories about that.

I cringe whenever I meet with amateur interpreters of providence, people who claim to know just why disasters have overtaken other people. These interpreters imply, as Job’s “comforters” did, that if the suffering ones will just do a little self-searching and a little honest confession, they can figure out why. I don’t believe it.

We know that suffering exists in the world because we’re a flawed race. We’re survivors from the wreck of a golden ship that went down at the dawn of history. There is suffering because of sin, that’s true — the Bible teaches it. But that a particular sorrow which goes on and on is the result of a particular sin — the Lord never taught us that.

On numerous occasions, he emphatically denied such a teaching. The man born blind wasn't that way because his parents had sinned or because he had rebelled in some pre-existent state. The tower in Siloam didn't fall on a group of bystanders because they were the most flagrantly wicked people around. So don't torment yourself looking for explanations when tragedies fall on you and keep you pinned down. And please don't push other people into that weary, fruitless search, either.

The Promise

Here was God's answer to Jeremiah: "If you return, I will restore you, and you shall stand before me" (Jer. 15:19). How about that? "If you return to me, Jeremiah, if you seek me with all your heart, you can know my restoring power and you can live in my presence." What is more, God goes on, "If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall be as my mouth." In other words, "If you will proclaim the message I give you, it will be just as though I were speaking. You will be genuinely identified with me."

Further, God told him he didn't need to worry about his enemies: "They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you" (Jer. 15:20). Then comes the best word of all: "for I am with you to save you and deliver you, says the LORD."

Did you hear that, friends? No matter what you have to go through as the Lord's servant, he'll be there. He hasn't forgotten you. He won't abandon you. You'll never really be alone. That's what the risen Jesus said to his disciples when they had all kinds of unanswered questions: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

Because of Jesus Christ, friends, that word of promise takes on new depth and power. This is not a Creator shouting distantly from the heavens. This is Immanuel, "God with us." This is the one who came to share our humanity, to bear our

Why Is My Pain Unceasing?

sins and carry our sorrows. This is the one who knows what it is to be human. This is the one who can struggle and be tempted, who can feel hunger and pain, who can bleed and die, and who can weep at the grave of a friend. He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities because he has been there. When he says, "I am with you," it means that he's involved, that he's sharing the pain that goes on and on. That does for us what no explanations or painkillers could ever do. "In all our afflictions, he is afflicted."

But not forever! Though your pain may seem to be unceasing, it really isn't. It will be ended, perhaps very soon. "I am with you to save you and deliver you." God will one day wipe away all the tears. There will be no more sorrow or crying or pain. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous," says the Psalmist, "but the Lord delivers him out of them all" (Ps. 34:19).

Let God's word to Jeremiah be a message to you. In the midst of the pain and questioning, turn to the Lord with all your heart. Commit your life to Jesus Christ if you've never done that. Concentrate on doing what he calls you to do in spite of the consequences, and lean hard on his word, the answer that's better than a thousand reasons: "I am with you."

Study Questions

1. In what sense is pain a priceless gift?
2. How does continuing pain seem to nullify all its blessings?
3. What kind of answer does God usually give to this question?
4. How is a promise better than an answer?

Chapter 8

WHO CAN LIVE IN YOUR PRESENCE?

O Lord, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?

Psalm 15:1 RSV

We've been thinking about the big questions that come to our minds, especially questions that people address to God. Now I'm looking at a whole cluster of them that can be boiled down into one.

“O LORD, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill? Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place?”

Those questions from Psalm 15 and Psalm 24 all come down to this: “Lord, who can live in Your presence? Lord, who can be with you?”

The biblical writers use a variety of images to describe this. They talk about living in the courts of the Lord, about abiding under his shadow, dwelling in his house, beholding his face, walking in his company. But the same blessed reality is always in view: that we should be near God and know fellowship with Him.

Now that for some, and perhaps for you, may not sound interesting or attractive. Perhaps God has never seemed very real to you or very approachable. You're not entirely sure that He's there, or that if he is, you would want to be

close to him. You may never have wanted to know how to dwell in God's presence. You may never have asked, "Lord, who can live with you?"

I suppose that some people don't believe that it's even possible. When they ask, "Who can live in your presence?" it's almost a sigh of despair. God to them seems so far away, so high, so holy, that no one can get close to him; no one is worthy to draw near. For them the question has no answer. Who can? No one can!

But really, friends, whoever you are, this is a question for you. If you haven't wanted to be near God, it must be that you haven't known what He's like. And if you've thought he isn't approachable, you must not have realized what he has done. And here's the best part: if you're really seeking an answer to this question, you're going to find it. Yes. If you want to live with God, you can!

I want to share with you now three things the Word of God says about our dwelling with him. First, it depends on our integrity. Second, it depends more fundamentally on his grace. And finally, it depends on Christ's work.

It Depends on Our Integrity

When the psalmist asks, "O LORD, who shall sojourn in thy tent? Who shall dwell on thy holy hill?" he anticipates this answer from God:

He who walks blamelessly, and does what is right, and speaks truth from his heart; who does not slander with his tongue, and does no evil to his friend, nor takes up a reproach against his neighbor; in whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change; who does not put out his money at interest, and does not take a bribe against the innocent.

In Psalm 24, the answer is much the same:

Who Can Live in Your Presence?

Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully.

These men are convinced that living with God demands integrity, upright dealings, truthful words, wholehearted worship, genuine compassion.

Now it's quite interesting that they don't talk here about rites and ceremonies. The people of Israel had an elaborate sacrificial system. There were offerings prescribed for every situation in life and detailed instructions about how these were to be arranged. For the priestly class there were detailed procedures for purification. But these men of God in the psalms we've read are seeing beyond the surface to what is essential. God, they insist, doesn't want sacrifices nearly as much as he wants obedience. What matters to him supremely is not ceremony but character. And that, you see, is because of who God is. His word to his people is always, "You shall be holy for I am holy." As his people, they are to bear his likeness.

Any close friendship involves a certain community of interest. Our friend may be different from us in many ways, and the minor differences between us may be part of the attraction. But we cannot be really close unless there is harmony in our deepest commitments and values. Your best friends are usually people you see eye to eye with about the most important things in life. Imagine trying to be a close friend with someone who hates what you love and loves what you hate! It just couldn't work.

In a similar way, living near to God involves sharing more and more his outlook. Since He's a God of justice, his friends care about what is right. Since He's a God of truth, they won't love the lie. Since He is faithful to them, they will be loyal to him. Fellowship with God, friends, is a moral reality through and through. In no way can we divorce true religion from upright living. If we want to dwell in God's presence, we need clean hearts and changed lives.

But that's not the whole story about living with God. If it were, we would all be in trouble. Our greatest problem is that our hands are not clean, our hearts not pure. Instead of loving God supremely and loving other people as ourselves, we're inclined to be selfish, willful, and proud. If we have to be Mr. Right or Ms. Clean to be near to God, what chance have we?

It Depends on His Grace

We need to hear also the message of another psalm:

Blessed is he whom thou dost choose and bring near, to dwell in thy courts! We shall be satisfied with the goodness of thy house, thy holy temple!

That's from Psalm 65:4. There we learn that coming into God's presence and enjoying his fellowship is basically a gift. It depends on his grace, his unmerited kindness.

How can any of us live with the Lord? Because we are among the blessed ones whom he chooses. That's how it was with Israel. Think about Abraham, the great ancestor of the Jewish people. How did he become God's man? It was by no act of his and certainly not because of any sterling character he possessed. God chose him. God spoke to him, as it were, out of the blue. God entered into covenant with him and made to him some staggering promises.

Why Jacob as the heir of the promises and not Esau? Certainly not because Jacob was such a paragon of virtue. At some points in his life we see him as a liar and a cheat. Yet God chose him and gave him a new name and then gave this man's name to the whole nation.

Later when his people Israel were despised slaves, regarded as nobodies by the powerful nations of the ancient world, God visited them to set them free and bring them into a renewed fellowship with himself. The secret behind it all was his electing grace, his initiative. The only reason that any of us can hope to live with God is that he should choose us and bring us near.

But throughout the Old Testament, it was always clear that something stood in the way. Israel was his chosen people, redeemed from bondage by his grace and power. God had promised that he would be with them, but somehow they could not know the full glory of his presence.

In the tabernacle which God told them to build, and later in the temple, hung a thick veil which separated the most holy place from the rest of the sanctuary. Within this holy of holies, where were kept the tables of the law, God had especially promised to dwell. But strangely, none of the people could ever enter that inner sanctuary. None could come directly into God's presence except for the high priest, and he only once a year to make an atonement for the sins of the people.

The veil was a symbol freighted with meaning. It spoke to every Israelite this powerful message: Though He is our God, we cannot live in his unveiled presence because of our sin.

It Depends on Christ's Work

Now we're ready for the heart of the gospel. Being near to God, friends, depends finally upon the work of Jesus Christ.

Who Can Live in Your Presence?

Do you remember what happened in the Jewish temple when Jesus breathed his last? Something strange, unaccountable, took place there. That thick veil which had shrouded the inner sanctuary was ripped apart. It was as though two immensely powerful hands had taken hold of it and torn it in two from top to bottom. The priests on duty must have been numb with terror. They couldn't imagine what was happening. But we can understand it now.

There was something dreadful and mysterious about Jesus' dying. It was the first time in the history of the world when a man died who had been completely blameless, who had never sinned. What was more, he was the Lord, the Almighty, incarnate in a genuinely human life. It seemed inconceivable that he should pass through death. And here was the center of the mystery. He, the innocent, was being condemned for the guilty. He the sinless one, suffered for sinners; He the Creator gave himself up to die for us, his rebellious creatures. And when he did, the veil was torn in two. Everything that had blocked our way into the presence of God was dealt with forever. Listen to the music of these words as the apostle Paul describes what happened in his letter to the Ephesians.

Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.

That's it — we once were far off and now we have been brought near through the blood of Jesus, through his death on our behalf. Here's how Peter says it: "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God." That's what his death was about — bringing us to God, making us fit to live in his presence.

This same Jesus, risen from the dead, alive now forever, has sent his Holy Spirit to the hearts of his people. The Spirit assures them that they are beloved

children. He encourages them to draw near to God. He inclines them to pray. He transforms them within so that they become more and more like their Master.

Do you see why our living in God's presence finally depends on Christ? He is the One who bears away our guilt so that we may enter the presence of the Holy One. He is the One who by his Spirit transforms our hearts and lives that we may walk with God in new obedience. He is the One who lives forever to be our Savior, our Mediator, our Advocate with the Father. Because of him, we can draw near to God and have him draw near to us. Because of him, we can more and more have clean hands and pure hearts. Because of him, we can dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Now remember, I said to you at first that if you really searched for the answer to this great question, you would find it, and that if you truly wanted to be near God, you could be. Let me emphasize that again. Who can live with God? Anyone who sincerely wants to. All you need do is confess to God your sin and estrangement, turn toward him with all your heart, and welcome Jesus, the risen Lord, as your Savior. Rely on his finished work for you, commit yourself to his lordship, and he will bring you this very day into God's presence, for a fellowship with him that will never end.

Study Questions

1. Discuss the varied ways in which this question is asked in the Scriptures.
2. In what sense does living with God depend on our personal integrity?
3. In what sense is it a gift of his grace?
4. How does living in God's presence depend on the work of Jesus Christ?

Chapter 9

What Am I Waiting For?

LORD, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is! Behold, thou hast made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in thy sight. Surely every man stands as a mere breath! Surely man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nought are they in turmoil; man heaps up, and knows not who will gather! And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in thee.

Psalm 39:4-7 RSV

When we're around some people, we get this distinct impression: they really know what they want. Maybe they've made an early firm decision about their life-work. A friend of mine told me the other day that his son, now in college, has been sure about his vocational future since he was ten years old. I know a girl who decided when she was in the seventh grade who it was that she wanted to marry. Sure enough, ten years later, she married him! She knew what she wanted.

I had a college friend who was serenely certain about his economic goals. By the time he was ten years out of college, he expected to be earning \$50,000 a year. It happens all the time — strong self-confident people set their sights on a political office, or an executive post in a corporation, and they go for it. We tend to admire such people, even to envy them a little. They seem so clear about where they're headed, and they concentrate all their efforts on getting there.

Others find goal-setting very difficult. They have a hard time getting in touch with what they really want. They aren't sure what they're looking for in life or

even what they should be looking for. They have scarcely a hint about what the future holds in store. If you asked them, “What do you want most in life?” or “Where are you headed?” they might not know what to say.

And you know, moments of uncertainty like that come even to the self-assured and highly successful. Let’s say you have succeeded in marrying the person you wanted to marry. You quickly discover that that’s not so much an end as a beginning. Maybe you’ve reached the top of your profession. Now what? Or you’ve made a lot of money but you’re not clear now on just what it’s for or where you should go from here.

Perhaps you knew what you wanted, or thought you did, but it didn’t come through for you. Your beloved, the apple of your eye, married somebody else. Another seeker got that position you had been pointing toward. Or your plan to start a thriving business didn’t pan out. You had to declare bankruptcy.

Setbacks like that make us reconsider, don’t they? If you’re put on your back with a long illness or you suffer from a crushing grief, you may go through a period of re-evaluating your life goals. That happened to the man who wrote this psalm, Psalm 39. He had gone through a deeply painful time in his life, and came to ask this question, “And now, LORD, for what do I wait?” He wanted God to help him know what he really wanted and to show him what he could expect. Maybe a question like that is in your mind today. Maybe you would like to voice it to God: “Lord, what am I waiting for?”

Dispelling the Illusions

First, we may need to clear away some illusions. Listen to this man’s prayer:

LORD let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is! Behold, thou hast made my
days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in thy

What Am I Waiting For?

sight. Surely every man stands as a mere breath! Surely man goes about as a shadow! Surely for nought are they in turmoil; man heaps up, and knows not who will gather!

Now there's a fruitful way to search for life's meaning. You begin by asking God to straighten out your thinking, to free you from your illusions. One is the illusion of permanence. In one sense we all know that we're going to die some day, but in another sense we don't realize it. We usually act as though we were going to live indefinitely. We don't keep in mind the fact of our mortality. We don't let it shape our outlook. We don't take it seriously. But this man wants to — he wants to know his “end.” He wants to realize clearly and fully that his life is limited. He wants to know the “measure” of his days, wants to grasp that they are few, and of a fixed and ever-dwindling number. Even with an optimum life expectancy, he has only so much time. He wants to be aware of that, wants to take it into account constantly.

He wants to know how “fleeting” his life is. He would like to grasp what a transient thing is every career, how uncertain, how quickly passing. He wants to be delivered from thinking he has forever to live, from imagining that he is permanently secure.

He believes, you see, that it's God who can give him the right perspective on all this. God is the One who has made his days, as he says, “a few handbreadths.” The Lord has imposed these limits. He is the One who brings life to an end, just as he begins it. It is before him, in his light, that our lifetime appears as brief. It's the fear of the Lord, a reverent awareness of him, that most impresses that reality upon us.

Then there's the illusion of *power*. Sometimes we think that we are the “movers and shakers” of this world. We become impressed with our importance, our omni-competence. We celebrate our vast capacities. But again, the psalmist

wants to see himself in God's light, as a mere breath, or a shadow. We appear for a moment here and then are gone. We are like a vanishing vapor, quickly dissipated. And like a shadow, we lack enduring substance. And, if we could only see it, our turmoil, our busyness is often "much ado about nothing." When we imagine that we are independent, when we presume to be great and important in ourselves, all we do becomes laughably vain. The psalmist wants to see that, wants to know that in his bones. "Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." We are not nearly as powerful as we imagine ourselves to be.

Then there's our fancy about possessions. This man wants to know how ludicrous that is. Listen to him: ". . . man heaps up, and knows not who will gather!" Our passion for getting, for acquiring, is one of the most evidently foolish things about us. We try to grab all we can, to increase our hoard, but for what? We'll surely die. We can't keep it, can't indefinitely use and enjoy it. We don't even know who will have it when we're gone. We have precious little control over that vaunted wealth of ours. We only seem to possess it, and that for a very brief period.

It seems, friends, that an important part of knowing what we really want is clarity of vision, the ability to distinguish reality from mirage. If we can realize how airy, how insubstantial some of our goals have been, maybe we can find out what is worth seeking, especially when we ask God for light.

What We Really Want

There are some things that our man is quite clear about wanting and needing. One is forgiveness. "Deliver me," he prays, "from all my transgressions" (v. 8). He wants to be right with God, wants to be cleansed from sin's guilt, freed from its power. He knows all too well that wrong doing, rebellion against the Lord, is his biggest problem. He cries out for God to make him whole.

What Am I Waiting For?

What's more, he wants his troubles to be lifted. He feels that God has been chastening him with many and heavy blows. He can see it as divine discipline. He doesn't question that he has deserved it. And yet he longs for the ordeal to be over; He wants God to turn away his frown of chastening, and to look upon him rather in mercy. And he knows this also: he hungers for joy. "Let me know gladness," he says, "before I depart and be no more" (v. 13).

Here it becomes plain that he's not expecting anything on the other side of death. For him to die is to depart into nothingness. He seeks in this life the light of God's countenance, the blessing of his favor, that may give him some respite from trouble and sorrow, some season of happiness before life ends. He knew what another psalmist meant when he prayed, "Lord . . . make us glad as many days as thou hast afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil" (Ps. 90:15).

Do you know what strikes me most about this man's question? It's what he affirms right after it. Listen: "And now, LORD, for what do I wait? My hope is in thee." He still isn't sure about many things. He can't identify exactly what his heart longs for, and he doesn't know what God may have in store for him, but his hope is in the Lord. Whatever fulfillment is ahead for him, whatever of satisfaction, whatever of joy, it will surely come from God. He is the great reality beyond all our illusions.

Though we may sometimes discern him but dimly, we know that he is the object of our search and the answer to our prayers. All the good we can expect is from his hand and his heart. This man has given up expecting to find satisfaction and security within himself or in anything around him. Pardon, deliverance, peace, all must come from God. For whatever good things may lie ahead, "My hope," he says, "is in thee." And that, friends, is living faith.

Fuller Light

In one sense, it's still the same for us today. We aren't always clear about what we're after in life, but we know that the Lord Himself is the ground of all our hopes. The difference is that we've come to know him now more fully. We've seen the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. We've come to know the breadth and length and depth and height of that love of his which passes knowledge. Christ has died for us. He is risen from the dead, a mighty Savior!

Now we know a great deal more about what we can expect in the future. We know now that to die is not to depart and be no more, but rather to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. To be absent from the body is not to dwell in a land of forgetfulness but to be present with the Lord. We are destined for a communion with God and with others that is unclouded by sin. That's what we're waiting for.

We have an inheritance coming of which the promised land was only a sign. That land could be seized by oppressors or polluted with idolatry. But the inheritance for which we wait in Christ is incorruptible, undefiled, unfading. In Him we have true treasure, riches that can never be devalued or stolen. That's what we're waiting for.

God has promised in his Son a day when all our tears will be wiped away, when there will be no more sorrow, nor pain, when all our thorns and afflictions will be over, when we shall know comfort and releasing in God's peace. That's what we're waiting for. We wait for God's kingdom, the fullness of his reign, for him to break every yoke, and establish justice, for him to rule, with all enemies beneath his feet. Every knee will one day bow to Christ and every tongue confess that he is Lord. That's what we're waiting for.

And Jesus hinted in many of the things he taught that there is a fulfillment ahead, a capacity to exercise our gifts in undreamed of ways. We shall have

What Am I Waiting For?

heightened responsibilities, and the power to become all that we can be for God's glory. That's what we're waiting for.

There's still much that we don't know about what's ahead. But because of Christ, we know that we are not waiting in vain, not "waiting for Godot," as the despairing play has it. We are waiting for the One who has already come, to come again. We wait for the God who has already acted for us in his dear Son to bring his saving work to completion. We still may cry out at times in confusion and anguish, "What am I waiting for?" But we can also confess with greater assurance than ever was possible before, "My hope is in thee."

Study Questions

1. What leads us to ask a question like this?
2. What illusions does God dispel on the way to an answer?
3. What, ultimately, does every human heart want most?
4. In the light of the gospel, what can we be sure we are "waiting for"?

Chapter 10

WILL YOU LET ME DOWN?

Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?

Jeremiah 15:18b, RSV

When Waters Fail

Two years ago I visited missionary friends in the East African country of Kenya. It was during a time of terrible drought. When the missionaries had originally established their camp there, tall grass had waved for miles around. They had settled by the lush banks of a river. Now for two years, however, the rainy season had failed to come. When we were there, we could not find a single blade of grass. Many animals had perished and herdsmen had taken elsewhere the few cattle that survived. What had been a rushing river beside the missionary campground was now a deep, parched canyon.

The Orma people were in great distress. Speaking through our missionary friends as interpreters, they lamented their dire need. Their only source of water was a small, fly-infested hole 25 feet below the river bed. The descent to it was so steep and treacherous that two little children had recently been engulfed by the sands as they tried to get water. A great sadness had settled over the land. The river on which these people had long depended for sustenance had vanished in the shimmering heat. They didn't know where to turn or what to do.

It's hard for us to understand what water means to people who live in conditions like these. An oasis in the desert, a deep well in a dry land, a mountain spring that never runs dry — these are life and hope to people who would otherwise perish. Ponder what it would mean if you had a precious resource like this and then the oasis became polluted, the well ran dry, or the spring ceased to flow.

That had been your security, your defense against intolerable thirst, your lifeline, and it let you down. When you needed the water most, it wasn't there.

If we can imagine ourselves in a situation like that, we can sense some of the poignancy of these words from the prophet Jeremiah. He asks God a bold, almost desperate question. "Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?" This man had known the Lord for years as his refuge and refreshment. Now he had come upon evil times. God seemed absent and unreachable. Jeremiah was bitterly afraid. Would God prove to be like a barren creek bed? Would He be like a mirage in the desert, only seeming to offer water? The prophet was beside himself with pained anxiety. "Lord," he demanded, "What's happening? Are You going to let me down? Will You be to me an empty cup, a well gone dry?"

We Should Have Known

Jeremiah should have known better. He was an Israelite. He belonged to God's chosen people, his covenant community. God had bound himself to these, his own ones, with solemn promises. He would be their God and they his people. He would bless them and through them all the families of the earth would be blessed.

When Israel had languished in cruel bondage, God had visited them, raising up Moses as their deliverer. He had brought them out of captivity with signs and wonders and an outstretched arm. He had revealed to them on Mt. Sinai his holy will.

All through their wilderness wanderings, he had been their portion and their guide. He had fed them day by day with manna from heaven. Yes, and when they had lacked *water*, he had opened for them a cleft in the desert rock from which had flowed a pure river of refreshment. Jeremiah's people had a long history behind them of God's faithful provision. He should have known.

Will You Let Me Down?

What is more, God had made special promises to him. He had revealed himself to the young prophet as a God of sending grace.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you. I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (1:5).

He would have nothing to fear from his enemies. “Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD” (1:8).

He would know what to say.

“Behold, I have put my words in your mouth” (1:9). No one could stop him. “They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD” (1:19).

Thus God had given to Jeremiah from the very beginning of his ministry a clear sense of calling. He knew what he was to do, he was warned about the opposition he would face, and he was assured of God’s help. Through whatever he had to face, he would be divinely sustained. He should have known that God would never be to him like a deceitful brook or like waters that fail.

You see, this prophet had even preached that message to others. Listen to the word that God spoke through him:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

Jeremiah had been chiding these Israelites who had turned from the living God to idols. “When you do that,” he jeered, “you are like people who give up water to build water tanks, wretched containers at that, which have not only no moisture in them but could not hold it if they had. God, on the other hand, is not like these cracked pots. He is the fountain of living waters. He is the source of refreshment that keeps springing up forever.” Jeremiah had told the people that he had preached it as the truth. He should have remembered his own sermons and not have asked such brash, irreverent questions!

But he did! He asked these terrible things. He spoke rashly. He challenged the Almighty. “Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?”

But before we condemn this struggling, suffering man, let’s remember what he was going through. Let’s recall that he was obediently carrying out the mission that God had given him, and that for it he was bearing abuse. He was warning his own people of approaching doom, and they refused to listen to him. He was accused by the religious establishment of falsely representing God and of selling out his own land to her enemies. He was reviled, imprisoned, tortured. And it seemed to him, friends, that it was all for nothing. No one heeded his word. No one turned from his evil way. A sickening fear settled over his spirit. He began to question everything, even God.

We ought to know better, too, but sometimes we forget. In the midst of tragedy and disappointment, all the history of God’s past dealings with his people fades from our view. His promises to us, even those we have shared with others, somehow seem unreal. Physically exhausted, mentally confused, spiritually drained, we find ourselves overcome by a storm of emotion. We think fierce thoughts, do foolish things sometimes, and speak frenzied words even to God. We

know better, yes. But when we're stretched beyond endurance, these questions come surging up from deep within us, and we can scarcely hold them back. "O God," we say, "everything else has gone wrong. Now are *you* going to let me down?"

The Answer We're Looking for

Aren't you glad those questions are there in God's Word? I am. I'm grateful to know that Jeremiah, this devoted servant, sometimes felt this way and questioned God as he did. It helps me realize that the prophets and apostles were baffled, vulnerable people like the rest of us and that they sometimes felt as we feel.

Even more, I'm encouraged to remember that we can bring these troubling questions directly to God and that he won't reject us for it. Jeremiah, after this outburst, wasn't disqualified as a prophet. In fact, God renewed his commission. He gave him further orders, which the prophet proceeded to carry out.

I get the feeling that Jeremiah's complaints against God were part of a lover's quarrel. He wasn't renouncing God; he surely wasn't cursing and blaspheming. He wasn't even threatening to disobey. He simply cried out in anguish, "Lord, what's going on? Where are you? Why don't you help me? Aren't You going to come through for me?"

I think Jeremiah really knew the answer, just as you and I do when we ask questions like that. I think this was like the question Jesus asked his disciples when many were beginning to turn back and follow him no more. He said to the Twelve, "Will you also go away?" The grammar of the passage stresses that he was expecting a negative response. In other words, he was saying, "Surely you men aren't going to leave me, are you? I've counted on you, you my friends. You won't run out on me like the rest, will you?"

Will You Let Me Down?

I hear Jeremiah praying like that. Now if one of the jailers had asked him while he was in the stocks or in the slimy pit, “Jeremiah, is your God going to fail you?” I feel sure he would have said no. He would have insisted, “My God will never let me down.” But in his own heart, when he was alone with the Lord, the question came out like this: “God, You see what’s happening. I’m just about at the end of my rope. Surely You’re not going to fail me now, are you?”

I suppose that some in our time conclude that God did fail Jeremiah. Look at the record. It’s true that he was released from prison and was able to resume his preaching, but the situation in Judah didn’t change. Jeremiah never gathered a big following around him. Apparently he didn’t persuade the ruling authorities or even sway popular opinion. The very evils he had warned his nation against literally came to pass. Jeremiah kept on telling them what the Word of the Lord was and they kept on rejecting it. Finally, tradition tells us, his own people put him to death. That was the end of his career. Not much of a success story, was it? Was God, after all, like a deceitful brook to this prophet? Was He like waters that fail?

I think not! Things may not have turned out as Jeremiah had hoped or expected, but the Lord made good on all his promises. Remember. It wasn’t revealed to Jeremiah that he would be prosperous or successful. He wasn’t even told that people would pay attention to what he had to say. He was assured only that he would be able to get his job done and that God would be with him in it. And that is exactly what happened.

My friends in Kenya tell me that since I was there two years ago, the rains have come in abundance. The grass has marvelously reappeared and the long-lost river gurgles again past their tent. I take special joy in that, not only because of what it means for the people in that area but because of what I remember happening while we were there. When the people, most of whom are not Christians, told us of their plight, we tried to express our love and concern and then offered prayer

on their behalf. We prayed that God would look upon them in mercy and send them rain. We offered our prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Within a few days after that, heavy rain had begun to fall. When I received news of that, I felt a rush of overwhelming gratitude.

It's not that I feel responsible for what happened or that I imagine my prayers to be more efficacious than those of many others. But I am deeply glad that prayer offered in the name of Jesus could be seen by those people to have power with God and to bring his life-giving rain.

Jesus is God's pledge, friends, that he will never let us down. In Christ, he came to share our life, to taste fully what it is to be human. He identified himself with us. He took upon his own heart our sins and sorrows. He bore the stroke of judgment we deserved. He died for our sins. In Him we see how far God in his love was willing to go for us.

When I have felt at times as Jeremiah did and wondered aloud if God had forgotten me, the thought of Jesus, crucified and risen, has been my great encouragement. He is no deceitful brook, no waters that fail. God says to us in him, "Ho, every one who thirsts. Come to the waters. Whosoever shall drink of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up to eternal life." Jesus is the great resounding yes to all of God's promises, the assurance to every believer that his love will never, never fail.

Study Questions

1. How does life in the Middle East make the question about "waters that fail" especially urgent?
2. Why should Jeremiah have "known better"?
3. What comfort can we find in Jeremiah's question?
4. How can we be sure that God will not finally "let us down"?

Chapter 11

WHO IS LIKE YOU?

Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth? He raises the needy from the ash heap.

Psalm 113:5-7 RSV

We've been thinking about the big questions, the burning questions, which people sometimes ask God. Many of them arise from some deeply troubling experience. We encounter monstrous injustice in the world and cry out, "Why, Lord, do the wicked prosper?" We undergo some trial that goes on and on so that we're stretched almost beyond endurance, and ask, "Lord, how long?"

But these sorrows and testings aren't the whole of life, are they? Sometimes we have questions of a very different kind. They grow out of rich, happy experiences. Perhaps God has heard our prayers in some extremity. We ask, "What shall I render to the Lord for all his benefits to me?" Or perhaps the wonder of who God is has freshly dawned on our hearts and we feel constrained to ask in adoring wonder, "Who is like the Lord?" I hope that's a question you are asking him today, or will begin to ask. "O God, who is like you?"

The Incomparable Lord

Listen to the way in which the servants of God have hundreds of years. I'm reading from Psalm 113.

Who Is Like You?

Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth? He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap.

For these worshipers the question is clearly rhetorical. That is, they don't anticipate an answer to it. They can't imagine that there would be a reply. They are confessing that God is the Lord and there is no other. They are celebrating the fact that no one in all the universe is like the Lord, that nothing can begin to be compared with him. It's a question that soars up in the midst of praise. The psalm begins with a hallelujah and ends with another. "Praise the Lord," his people sing, "Who is like him?"

Something in all of us hungers to give praise. I happened to watch a late-night television program last week which featured the founder of a highly successful new company. He was to address a gathering of his regional sales directors. Dashing attire, he strode to the platform through a sea of admirers. Smiling, reaching out to shake hands as he went, he was clearly their hero, their ideal. They hung on his every word, clapped loudly at every hint of his achievements. For them he was clearly the greatest. You could almost hear them say, "Who is like this young leader of ours?"

We're always looking for a new sports figure to say that about, a new movie star, a new singing group. We want to find, it seems, and be identified with, the incomparable. We want to say, "There he is! There she is! There's never been anyone like this before."

My uncle who lives with us loves to do this sort of thing. He's 97 years old; yet hardly a day goes by without his noting something that is uniquely glorious. His excursion on the lake is pronounced to be "the best boat ride I ever had!" A simple meal at home is declared to be "the greatest ever." And nothing anywhere on earth, he says, can be compared with the view from his back yard.

Who Is Like You?

Do you know what all of that says to me? We are created to be worshipers. We are made for wonder. The pity is that we sometimes exhaust that capacity upon beautiful people and fascinating things. We don't see behind them. As the apostle Paul put it, we worship and serve "the creature rather than the Creator who is blessed forever."

This is not to blame people who recognize excellence and go on to extol it. We don't serve the glory of God by playing down what is human. But those who know the Lord long that others should honor him above all, that he should be supremely exalted.

In His Majesty

The Lord, they say, is incomparably first in his *majesty*. Listen:

The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens! Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down upon the heavens and the earth?

God to these worshipers is the absolute sovereign. He is LORD over all that is and everything that happens. As the Creator, the Holy Other, he towers over creation and history. Who could be like him?

Read sometime the latter chapters of Isaiah's prophecy. You'll be impressed at how often God through his prophet raises that very question.

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? . . . To whom then will you compare me that I should be like him, says the Holy One . . . Who is like me?

Who Is Like You?

Then God answers his own question:

“I am the Lord, that is my name. My glory I give to no other.”

And again,

“I am the Lord, and there is no other beside me.”

This prophet laughs at all idols, together with those who make them. A man cuts down a tree, says Isaiah, and burns part of it in a fire to warm himself. With the other part, he makes a god and bows down before it. What an absurdity! God is the One who made all things. Idols of wood and stone are burdens that must be carried by someone, while the living God is the One who carries his people all their life long. The idols are mute, unresponsive, totally helpless, but God is the Almighty Ruler of history.

This God, says the psalmist, is “seated on high and looks far down upon the heavens and the earth.” Can you imagine that? We get a hint of what it means to look far down upon the earth when we fly at 38,000 feet. Large farms look from that perspective like tiny checkerboard squares. We can take in whole cities and great mountains at a glance. We trace a river’s wanderings for scores of miles. How incredibly tiny everything *human* seems from way up there!

And that’s the earth! What is it to look far down on the *heavens*? The vastness all around us totally eludes our power to comprehend it. Think of this: The nearest of all other stars to our sun is still several *light-years* away. Yet in the galaxy, the family of stars to which our sun belongs, there are said to be over a hundred billion stars. That’s one galaxy, among billions and billions of others. Amazing! Now recall the fact that these stars and galaxies have been speeding away from each other at speeds close to the speed of light — for billions of years! The distance covered by the entire expanse is inconceivable to us. But God, sitting upon his divine throne must bend far down even to notice it. Who is like the Lord?

We wonder then — if the staggering immensities of the heavens are far beneath him, can God even find Planet Earth? Could an orbiting astronaut notice one grain of sand at the bottom of the Pacific? Could a man on a mountaintop spot a tiny electron gyrating down in the valley?

In His Mercy

But God is not only unique in his sovereign greatness. He is incomparable also in his wonderful compassion. He *does* know about the earth. He cares for the people on it, and even stoops to intervene there. “He raises the poor,” says the psalmist, “from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children,” says the psalmist. “Praise the Lord!”

Think of that. God makes his own the cause of forgotten, afflicted people. Here is a sick man, a leper perhaps. Expelled from the human community, he must eke out a miserable existence on the rubbish heaps outside the city. But what human custom forbids, God’s mercy makes possible. He lifts this unhappy man from his shame and misery and gives him instead a place of honor.

In the second scene, we see a barren woman. To be without children in the ancient orient was a disgrace for any wife and could result in the withdrawal of her privileges, or even expulsion from her household. But God the Almighty takes care of this childless woman, restores her rights, and gives to her also the blessing of a progeny.

Let’s try to take that in today. The Lord of this whole universe takes special interest in the little people, the despised ones, of this earth. He becomes their Champion, their Vindicator, their Savior. Who is like the Lord?

Now we can understand something of the psalmist’s fervor. God is a Lord both of incomparable majesty and of tender compassion. His mercy makes his

might seem all the more magnificent, and his majesty makes his kindness the more astonishing. “My God, how wonderful thou art!”

The Perfect Likeness

Who is like the Lord? There seemed to be no answer to that until the first Christmas. Remember what happened then? Angelic hosts filled the heavens with song and a Savior was born in a stable to a peasant girl. That night, ever so quietly he came, whose mighty love was to leap over all barriers. He touched the lepers that others avoided — and made them whole. He spoke words of pardon, especially to the despised and condemned. He defended the Samaritans whom every other citizen had tended to scorn and reject. Yes, and he ate with publicans, sinners, and social outcasts, letting himself be called their friend.

Yet with all of that, he spoke as never man had spoken before. Listen:

“Before Abraham was, I am . . . I am the light of the world . . . All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth.”

On the night before he died, he sat at supper with his disciples. The apostle John tells us that Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, girded himself with a towel, poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet. See it all there: the Lord of glory is stooping down to serve. On the next day, when he could have called on angelic legions to save him from his tormentors, he chose instead to die, all to redeem the hopeless and condemned. Who is like the Lord? Every believing heart answers: It is *Jesus*. He, uniquely, is “like the Lord.” That was his own word, wasn’t it? “He who has seen me has seen the Father . . . I and my Father are one.” Jesus is Immanuel, *God with us*.

That puts the old question in a new light. Certainly we can never be “like the Lord” in his transcendent power and majesty. We don’t rule the universe, obviously. We can’t look far down upon anything. But there is a way for human beings to be like God, without a trace of pride or presumption. Jesus said, “I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” The apostle Paul caught that vision and called on others to share it. “Be kind to one another,” he wrote, “tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake has forgiven you. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

Friends, if this is God’s glory, that he is rich in mercy, that he sides with the poor and deprived, then let it be our glory too. If Jesus was always stepping across boundaries of prejudice and discrimination, caring most for those least thought of, then let us follow his lead and walk where he walked. Never forget it, we who trust in Jesus Christ are God’s dear children. And we, by the power of his Spirit, can more and more bear the family likeness. As God’s children, we can be “like the Lord.” Hallelujah!

Study Questions

1. In what sense is God incomparable?
2. What does our prevailing desire to identify “Number One” in every field show about us?
3. How is God incomparably great in majesty? In mercy?
4. How can human beings be “like the Lord”?

Chapter 12

WHERE CAN I RUN?

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

Psalm 139:7 NIV

“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

This man of faith in Psalm 139:7 seems to be inquiring, “God, how can I get away from you? Where can I possibly run and hide?” Have you ever wondered about that? Honestly, have you ever felt like escaping from God, finding a place where he couldn’t see you?

Apparently, asking a question like that is all right. We don’t have to apologize for wondering. It’s an honest question. Pursuing it may do us good. Let’s explore it now: “Lord, where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

A Sense of Wonder

The question may be an expression of sheer *wonder*. The man who wrote this psalm was overwhelmed by a sense of God’s presence everywhere. Listen to him:

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD. You hem me in, behind and before; you have

laid your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

God's awareness is simply too much for this man to take in. "Think of it," he says, "God searches me through and through and understands everything about me. He knows when I rest and when I get up. He even sees from heaven what I'm thinking about right here on earth. He sees where I go all the time and notices everything I do. In fact, he knows what I'm going to say even before I can get the words out. It's as though he has me completely surrounded and holds onto me every moment!"

But notice, he doesn't describe all this in the way I've just done, as though he were telling someone else about it. He expresses it all directly to God. "O LORD, you have searched me." That's why the psalm is so vivid, so alive. It's the difference between a discourse on theology and a book like *The Confessions of St. Augustine*. Augustine was another man who spoke out his memoirs straight to God, as though he were talking to him face to face.

Do you see the difference? I may say to you, "I believe that God is omnipresent and omniscient," or I may say to God, "You hem me in on all sides." I can say the first without a quickened pulse. I can say it almost with a yawn. But when I speak it out to God, the doctrine becomes dynamic. It takes on color. It kindles emotion. It sparks a sense of wonder.

Try saying something like this to God and seeing how it affects you. "Lord, I'm always within your gaze. In every part of my life, I'm standing before you. And really, although I can't see you or prove to someone else that you are there, Your surrounding presence is by far the most significant thing I ever experience. I don't live by myself or to myself, no matter where I am. I don't have any 'private life.' It's all an open book to you. Everywhere I turn, You are there, and your hand is always on me. It's a marvelous thing. I can't begin to grasp it fully. I can't

hold it in my consciousness for very long. God, You are too much for me. How unimaginably great you really are!”

An Urge to Flee

But when most of us ask the question, “Where shall I flee from your presence?” there’s more than wonder in it. We may well have *a restless desire to get away* from him. There’s something uncanny about being surrounded by God all the time. Having his hand on us constantly can seem like a lot of pressure. Sometimes that can feel inhibiting, can’t it, or downright depressing? Think of what it would be like in your everyday life if you could never close a door and be alone. What if you could never get off by yourself along a beach or on a mountain side, or in a patch of woods. Someone was always watching you.

Missionary families have sometimes told me that one of the greatest trials of their work is the lack of privacy. As strangers of another color and culture, they are always being observed. Curious eyes follow their every move, even peer into their kitchens and bedrooms. It can be annoying, embarrassing, stifling. “Won’t these people ever let us be by ourselves?” they wonder. “Must we always be on display?”

We can begin to feel that way about God and his attention to us. Adam and Eve tried to hide from him. The Prodigal Son wanted to get away from his father. He didn’t want the old man looking over his shoulder all the time. What are the chances, we all wonder, of getting far enough away or finding a place secluded enough where we can really be alone? Listen to this psalmist again:

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

Where Can I Run?

There's simply nowhere in heaven above or in the earth beneath or across the seas where we can escape the Lord. He'll still know where we are and we'll still have to deal with him.

There's one more possibility. What about the night? When the sun is on the other side of the earth and the clouds hide the moon and stars, maybe then we'll go unnoticed. Listen again:

If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me . . ." even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

It's all the same, apparently, with God. He can see us just as well at midnight as at noon.

We most yearn to escape the Lord when we've done something that we know displeases him. That was Adam's situation. Or we want concealment when we plan a course of action he would not approve. That's how it was with the Prodigal Son.

Once, when one of our boys was very small, he took some change that was lying on his mother's dresser and used it to buy something at a nearby store. For a long time, he was nowhere to be found. I finally located him hiding under the front porch, at which time he promptly confessed. But when that act had been weighing on his young conscience, he had tried to get as far out of our sight as he could. And when we ask the Lord, "Where shall I flee from your presence?" sometimes that same restless fear may be driving us.

The Comfort of Belonging

But you know, friends, we can also ask the question: “Where shall I go from your Spirit?” with a sense of relief. The thought may be full of comfort for us, *the strong comfort of belonging to God*.

It all depends, you see, on how we think of God, on what we believe about him. If He’s a relentless enemy, pursuing us to punish us, that’s one thing. If He’s a spy gathering information to be used against us, we’ll surely want to steer clear of him. If He’s out to expose and humiliate us, who wouldn’t want to avoid his gaze? But suppose we’ve come to know him as the gracious One who keeps covenant with his people, who visits and redeems them when they are in bondage, who pursues them with kindness in the midst of their wanderings? Suppose above all that we have seen his glory in the face of Jesus Christ and have come to know him as the Good Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep? Suppose we know that his heart is full of mercy, that he pursues us only to bring us to himself and give us abundant life? Suppose we become assured that he is altogether for us, that he’s “on our side”? Then we will ask with joyous abandon, “Lord, where can I ever go that you won’t be with me?”

This psalmist knows God in that way. God for him is the One who formed him in his mother’s womb, who planned for him all his days and whose thoughts toward him are wonderfully good. God’s overarching presence is a joy. His all-seeing eye is kindly; his search brings healing; his touch can set us free. We are known, altogether known, by a gracious, faithful God.

You can tell that he feels that way by the prayer with which he ends the psalm:

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Psalm 139:23-24

“But wait a minute!” someone asks. “Hasn’t God already searched him? Isn’t that how the psalm begins, ‘O LORD, you have searched me and you know me’? Why ask him to do it over again? Why appeal to God for what he always does anyway, that is, search our hearts and know what goes on within us?”

Well, that’s not what this man of faith is asking for here. He hasn’t forgotten the great reality with which he began. Of course not! He’s asking God to search his heart, not so that *God* will know what’s there, but so that *he* may know. He wants the Lord so to shine the searchlight of his Word and his Spirit into his heart that he may truly know it. He wants God to test him so that he may learn what his own motives really are. He prays that the Almighty will bring to light, call to his attention, any wicked way within him.

That is the attitude of people who know the living God. They are not perfect. They are not blameless. Far from it! In fact, they know that there may be evil within their lives of which they aren’t even aware. But they want to know about it. They welcome God’s searching. They ask him to bring to mind any wickedness in them so that they can recognize and turn from it. They want to renounce their own wrong ways, so that they may walk in his way, “the way everlasting.”

Scott Peck has written a deeply sobering book entitled *The People of the Lie*. The notable characteristic of these people, he says, is that they resist learning the truth about themselves. They won’t listen to correction because they cannot believe that they are wrong. They will not receive forgiveness because they are convinced that they don’t need it. And as long as they keep up those defenses, they are a people also without hope.

On the contrary, those who sincerely pray this prayer, “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” are “people of the truth.” When light comes to them, the Word of the gospel, the person of Jesus Christ,

Where Can I Run?

they don't run from it into the shadows. They don't hate the light and try to put it out. They move toward the light. They welcome it. They walk in it all the days of their lives.

And you know, they make a marvelous discovery. The same light that reveals the ugliness within us also cleanses it away. The presence that dazzles us also heals.

My prayer for you today is that you may know God as this psalmist did and be filled with wonder at his all-encompassing presence, at the way he searches and knows us. May you see in your own life the things that make you want to run away from him, and face them honestly. And then I pray that you will ask the God who loved you enough to give his Son to die for you, that he will search your heart and try your thoughts, and then that he will lead you in his own blessed way.

Study Questions

1. What significance do you see in the psalmist's asking this question directly to God?
2. What may be involved in our desire to "hide" from God?
In what sense can God's absolute knowledge, his inescapable presence, be a comfort to us?

Chapter 13

WILL I LIVE AFTER I DIE?

If a man die, shall he live again? All the days of my service I would wait, till my release should come.

Job 14:14 RSV

Everyone's Question

“If a man die, shall he live again?” I suppose that's everyone's question, at some time or other. What will happen to me after I've breathed my last? Is there life beyond the grave?

The question was asked long ago by a suffering man named Job. He wondered about the future during a dark and painful time in his life. In one way he was inwardly musing about the question. In another, he was hurling it up to God for an answer. And it's important to see that for him it was a real question. He didn't have an answer on the tip of his tongue. He was clearly struggling with the issue. You couldn't have satisfied him with an easy, canned response. He was a groping, yearning human being, desperate to know if he had any hope beyond this life.

The form of the question is a bit misleading, isn't it? “If a man dies. . . .” Wait a minute! There's no if involved here. We can say, “*When* a man dies, what?” or “*After* a man dies.” But let's not imply that there's any uncertainty about our dying. “Nothing is certain,” it is said, “but death and taxes.” Well, you and I may know people who don't pay any taxes, but we don't know any who are immortal. Every one of us, unless God brings human history to a close very soon, is most assuredly going to die.

Job for one has no doubt about that. “Man,” he writes, “is of few days, and full of trouble. He comes forth as a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow.” Your life, my life, anyone’s life, is fragile and fleeting.

Further, the span of every person’s lifetime is set by God. “His days are determined,” prays Job, and the number of his months is with thee, and thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass.” No one, this patriarch believes, will be able to live one moment beyond his or her appointed time. Death is as certain as God’s decree. It will happen to us because he ordains it.

Now who would contest the truth of all that? It sounds like the baldest of platitudes to repeat it’s so ridiculously obvious. But we are those strange creatures who see the evidences of death all around us, who are convinced that everyone else is going to die some day, but who still have great difficulty realizing that it will happen to us. We know it, but we don’t know it. We believe it, but we persistently block it from awareness. We’d like to think that for us there is an “if.” *If I should die, will I live again?*

Weighing the Evidence

Job’s going to weigh the evidence now. What are the probabilities of living again after death? It’s not unthinkable, he muses, “for there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its roots grow old in the earth, and its stump die in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant.”

I have a tree like that in my backyard. Years ago, someone must have cut it down at ground level, thinking that would be the end of it. Perhaps for a while it seemed to be so. But from all around the tree trunk, new branches have now sprung up. It’s almost as if several trees have begun to grow from the one that was cut down.

But, you object, that tree was never killed. The root system remained intact. Given the right conditions, it sent up new shoots. It's different with a human being, insists Job. "Man dies, and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?" When he goes down, no root system remains. When he dies, all of him dies. "As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so man lies down and rises not again." And Job sees a dreadful finality in that. Listen: "Till the heavens are no more he will not awake, or be roused out of his sleep."

It's not that Job doesn't want to believe in life after death. He would give anything for another chance, for a future beyond the grave. He'd be willing to wait a long time. "Oh that thou wouldest hide me in Sheol, that thou wouldest conceal me until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and remember me. . . . All the days of my service I would wait, til my release should come." "Wouldn't it be something?" he ponders, "wouldn't it be wonderful if God would let us rest in the grave and then at his appointed time remember us and release us from the bonds of death?" He seems to say, "If I could only know that that would happen! It would be worth going through anything and waiting for eons, if finally I could live again."

He tries to envision how that might come about. "Thou wouldest call, and I would answer thee; thou wouldest long for the work of thy hands." God would summon him with a voice that wakes the dead, and Job would say, "Here I am." God would yearn once more for the one he had originally made in his own image and would bring him back to life again.

Job knows that for that to happen, something would have to be done about human evil. Sin would have to be taken out of the way. He tries to anticipate the thrill of that:

Then thou wouldest number my steps, thou wouldest not keep watch over my sin; my transgression would be sealed up in a bag, and thou wouldest cover over my iniquity.

In other words, all the sin and wrong that had brought Job down to death would be done away. God would bury it. God would forgive and forget it. And then he would make Job anew, would grant him life out of death.

Could it possibly be that way? Job asks. Are there grounds for hoping that such a thing should be? You can almost see Job shaking his head, saying sadly,

“But the mountain falls and crumbles away, and the rock is removed from its place; the waters wear away the stone; the torrents wash away the soil of the earth; so thou destroyest the hope of man.”

There’s no evidence, he groans, that God is going to give us another chance.

“Thou prevailest for ever against him, and he passes; thou changest his countenance, and sendest him away.”

Man passes from the earth. The Almighty sends him off. Whatever may happen here after he dies will have no meaning whatever for the dead man. “His sons come to honor, and he does not know it,” says Job, “they are brought low, and he perceives it not.” His ties with the land of the living are cut forever. He’s gone. He’s finished. He has ceased to be.

New Grounds for Hope

Was Job right? Were his darkest fears well founded after all? Is death a final end for us, an exit to nowhere? Or have we some encouraging evidence today that wasn’t available to the old patriarch?

Someone points cheerily to the returning springtime. “There, you can see it in nature,” they say, “from the death of winter comes a new beginning, a new life. God has written large in the natural order that death is not the end.”

Yes, how we'd like to believe that! But Job, you remember, was old enough to have seen more than his share of spring times. And that, apparently, didn't convince him.

Some argue that there surely must be a life after death because they have had contact with departed spirits. They've received supernatural messages assuring them that the dead are alive and well. Those claims aren't new, either. There were surely those in Job's time who claimed to be in communication with the unseen world.

"But in our day," someone affirms, "many people have been on the brink of death and then have been brought back. What about the bright lights they saw, the welcoming voices they heard, the unspeakable peace they felt?" Yes, but that's a flimsy foundation for hope. A hardheaded realist might argue, "Those people didn't really die. If they had, they wouldn't have come back to tell about it."

But someone who truly died *did* come back. Yes, and he lived again and lives now to tell us about it. His name is Jesus of Nazareth — Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. He, friends, is the foundation for all our best hopes.

Job was on the right track in his longing search, even though he never came to full assurance about life after death. Remember that wistful dream of his that God might call him and he would answer? Listen to the word of Jesus: "The hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). Do you remember Job's fervent desire that God would once more long for the work of his hands? Hear Jesus again: "This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day" (John 6:39). God won't forsake the work of his hands. He will not leave in the grasp of death those who belong to him by faith!

But just as Job had surmised, all of that would depend upon God's somehow dealing with sin. He would have to cover over our iniquity, seal up our transgression and remember our sins against us no more. And that happened, friends, in the

suffering and death of Jesus Christ. He bore our sins and carried our sorrows. He took our place and died for us. Because of him, our Savior, God buries our sins, as it were, in the depths of the sea and removes them from us as far as the east is from the west. And since in Christ we are free from sin, we shall one day be free also from the power of death.

Even before Jesus died, he had showed an undreamed of lordship over death. Remember, he broke up a funeral procession once and restored a deceased young man to his grieving mother. He called his good friend Lazarus, four days in the grave, to come forth, and Lazarus did. But resurrection for each of them, however, was only a sign. They would once again taste the death that all of us face. But He, Jesus, having died once for our sins is now alive forever. He is the sign, the pledge of resurrection for all who trust in him. He speaks to us this word of heart-thrilling hope: "Because I live, you shall live also."

Jesus, wherever the gospel has gone, has filled the world with this hope. Because of him, people in every nation on earth are facing the future this very day with calm assurance. Oh, certainly, they still fear dying, as all of us do the mystery of it, the possible pain, the separation from loved ones. Death is still for them the last great enemy. But they have no doubt and no dread about what awaits them on the other side of death. They know whom they have believed. They know that to depart for them is to be with Jesus Christ, which is far better. They substitute for Job's plaintive question, "If a man die, shall he live again?" this triumphant one: "O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?" And here is the answer they have found: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Study Questions

1. What evidence do you see that this is “everyone’s question”?
2. What is Job’s conclusion about it?
3. Why can we see things differently now?
4. How would you describe the Christian’s attitude toward death?

Chapter 14

WHAT ABOUT YOUR REPUTATION?

For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and will surround us, and cut off our name from the earth; and what wilt thou do for thy great name?

Joshua 7:9 RSV

“What will you do for your great name?” That surely is one of the most striking questions ever addressed to God. Here is Joshua, one of his tiny creatures, concerned about the Almighty’s reputation!

Think about the occasion for this remarkable prayer. God’s people, under the leadership of Joshua, had entered the Promised Land. They had experienced a signal triumph at Jericho and were encouraged to believe that soon all the land would be theirs. But in seeking to take a relatively minor stronghold, the town of Ai, they had been sent fleeing in shameful defeat. Joshua was brokenhearted. Listen:

Joshua rent his clothes, and fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the LORD until the evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust upon their heads. And Joshua said, “Alas, O Lord God, why hast thou brought this people over the Jordan at all, to give us into the hands of the Amorites, to destroy us? Would that we had been content to dwell beyond the Jordan! O LORD, what

What About Your Reputation?

can I say, when Israel has turned their backs before their enemies!
For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of
it, and will surround us, and cut off our name from the earth; and
what wilt thou do for thy great name?"

Joshua 7:6-9

We can feel the varied moods in this outcry. There is despair: "Alas, O Lord God." There is regret and remorse: "Oh, that we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan!" There is complaint: "Why hast thou brought this people over the Jordan at all?" There is downright fear: "The Canaanites will surround us, and cut off our name. All of these are very natural what we would expect under the circumstances. But the final plea takes us by surprise. "Lord, what about your reputation?"

Joshua may have learned something of this concern from his great predecessor, Moses. Once, when God's people had been guilty of gross idolatry, the judgment of God seemed certain to consume them. But Moses interceded for the people:

O LORD, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, "With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth"?

Exod. 32:11-12

His logic was plain: "God, these are Your people, whom You have delivered from the hand of the world's greatest military power. Egypt has seen what you have done on their behalf. Now, if you consume them here in the wilderness, the

Egyptians will say that you hated your people from the beginning and simply lured them out here to slay them all.” Moses, too, was concerned about God’s reputation. He couldn’t bear to have God’s character maligned, his gracious purposes despised.

Think supremely of Jesus Christ our Lord. It was always his greatest concern and prayer that God should be glorified. He told his followers that they were the light of the world and that they were to so let their light shine before men that they might see their good works and as a result glorify their Father in heaven. He taught them to pray in the very first petition of the Lord’s Prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.” That is, “Let your name be honored and praised.”

A Heart for God

What does it show about a man, a woman, a people, who would pray such a prayer, who would ask of God, “What will you do for your great name?” It reveals first of all a heart for the Lord. This deep concern for the good name of another is one of the marks of love. Someone has defined love like this: “Love is rejoicing over the existence of the beloved one. It is the desire that he be rather than not be . . . it is happiness in the thought of him. It is profound satisfaction over everything that makes him great and glorious.” Further, “love is loyalty. It is the commitment of the self, by self binding will, to make the other great.” That’s love — wanting the loved one to be great and to be seen in that way.

Think about it. Isn’t that the truth? If you love your parents or your children, you want others to think well of them, don’t you? You take delight in their being praised and honored. You are hurt and outraged if anyone should slander them. If you are a friend to people, you can be counted on to praise their good qualities. You will want others to esteem them highly. You will do anything you can to

guard their good name. Not to care what others think or say about your friend is not to act as a true friend.

We can readily understand the dynamics of this when it comes to our family members and our close friends. But we are scarcely prepared for people to feel this way about God. Perhaps that reveals that we do not take seriously what Jesus called the “great and first commandment,” that we should love God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind.

Henry Nouwen wonders if we really believe that this is the “first” commandment. He writes, “It seems that in fact we live as if we should give as much of our heart, soul and mind as possible to our fellow human beings while trying hard not to forget God. At least, we feel that our attention should be divided evenly between God and neighbor. Jesus’ claim is much more radical. He asks for a single-minded commitment to God and God alone.”

Oh, friends, if we cherish and would gladly suffer for the good name of a parent or a brother or a spouse or a friend, how much more should it matter to us that the One we call Lord be rightly known and fitly praised? It’s one of the outstanding qualities of a devoted life to desire passionately that God should be truly known, and that people everywhere should give him praise and thanks.

God’s Honor at Stake

Do you know what else emerges in this question? There’s a conviction here about the relationship between God’s name and God’s people. Joshua, Moses, the prophets, the apostles, and Jesus Himself are convinced that God’s honor is at stake in the fortunes and conduct of his people.

Joshua evidently believes that if the Canaanites destroy Israel, God’s name will suffer. These, after all, are the people who bear his name, the ones whom he has chosen and redeemed. They are the special people on the face of the earth in

What About Your Reputation?

whom his glory is to be displayed. If the Lord's people are wiped out, what will other nations think about the Lord?

That's Moses' line of argument also. If God should bring judgment upon rebellious Israel, after having delivered them from bondage in Egypt, the Egyptians would surely misconstrue his motives. They would see him not as a gracious Savior but as an Almighty Sadist. He would have led his people out of Egypt with promises of a land flowing with milk and honey, only to destroy them in a dreary wilderness. God's name is somehow "on the line" in what happens to his people.

But even more *profoundly*, onlookers gain their impressions of what God is like from the *conduct* of those who profess to be his. That's the point of Jesus' charge, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father." He's echoing the Lord's call, "Be ye holy, for I am holy. Love as I have loved you." He is saying, "Let your lives as well as your lips testify faithfully to God's name."

The church, you see, is Exhibit A of God's saving purpose in the world. In this, the chosen community, the new life which God gives in Christ is to become evident. When they, God's people, disobey, turn aside to idols, and live as hypocrites, the name of the Lord is blasphemed. He becomes a laughingstock. The unbelieving world cannot see his glory. When they obey, on the other hand, when they abound in good works, when they walk in love, a wistful world beholds that and, almost in spite of itself, is constrained to say that God is great and good.

We Americans have learned, sometimes painfully, that a country is judged by its representatives. People around the world gain their impressions of what the United States is like by the citizens we send abroad. Some are military personnel. Some are in the diplomatic corps. Some are missionaries and relief workers. Many are tourists. All of us at home wince and blush when they behave badly,

when they are rude, deceitful, or arrogant. We feel maligned and misunderstood when people call us on their account “ugly Americans.”

We’re not alone in that. I read the other day of a prosecutor in the U.S. who is laboring tirelessly and courageously to bring Mafia figures to justice. He is an Italian-American himself and cannot bear the thought that Italians should be judged by the lifestyle of the Mafioso.

And when we pray for the hallowing of God’s name, we are expressing the conviction that even heaven’s kingdom is judged by its citizens and its ambassadors.

What He Will Do

But the question, “What wilt thou do for thy great name?” is also a fervent plea for God to act. When God’s people are in danger of defeat at the hands of their enemies, only he can deliver them. When they’re exposed to judgment because of their sins, only he can forgive them; when they have defiled themselves, and dishonored his great name, only he can lead them to repentance and a new beginning. That’s why the concern that God’s name be hallowed becomes a *prayer*. The lifting up of God’s name in this world is the sacred duty of his people, but in seeking to do it, they always fall short. They need his pardon; they need his purging; they need his power if they are to be a people for his praise.

One of the ways in which we honor God is in the honesty of our confessions. *Confession* means literally, “speaking the same as” or “agreeing with another.” When we confess our sins, we call them what God calls them. We say about them what he says. In so doing, we glorify him. That’s why encouragements to confess our sins in the Bible are sometimes preceded by the charge, “Give glory to God.” In other words, by your confessing, “declare him to be true. Acknowledge the rightness of his judgments.”

What About Your Reputation?

But we are only led to do that, friends, when we recognize in Christ the wonder of his forgiving mercy. Though God's people through all the ages have disobeyed his law, wandered from him, and dishonored his name, God has never ceased to seek for us. In the fullness of the time, he has sent his Son to bear our sins and die in our place. In Him we are forgiven. In Him we are cleansed. In Him we are set free to live a new kind of life.

In the gift of his Son Jesus Christ, God has given the final answer to Joshua's question, "What will you do for your great name?" This is what God does: He reveals Himself fully and finally in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. He sends his Spirit to the hearts of all who believe in this risen Lord. Then by his quickening power, he more and more transforms them so that they may live to the praise of his glory. May that be so for you and me!

Study Questions

1. Why is it remarkable for human beings to be concerned about God's reputation?
2. Do you see concern for another's good name as an essential part of love? Explain.
3. How is God's honor at stake in the fortunes and conduct of his people?
4. What has God done about his "great name"?

Chapter 15

WHAT SHALL I GIVE YOU?

How can I repay the Lord for his goodness to me?

Psalm 116:12 NIV

Blessed are those who ask that question, from the heart. They are on the way to real happiness.

Who Asks?

What leads a person to ask something like this? In the case of the psalmist, writing here in Psalm 116, it was an experience of being marvelously helped by God in a time of need. Apparently his life had been in grave danger. “The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow.” That’s about as bad as things can get, isn’t it? Waves of adversity and grief have come crashing over him. He’s ready to despair. Death seems imminent. Then, out of the depths he cries for help. “I called on the name of the LORD,” he says; “O Lord, save me!” Now he celebrates what happened:

The LORD is gracious and righteous, our God is full of compassion. The LORD protects the simplehearted; when I was in great need, he saved me.

Hear him as he lifts his heart directly to God and recognizes him as Savior: “For you, O LORD, have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before the LORD in the land of the living.”

What Shall I Give You?

What a rescue this has been! His life has been spared. His weeping has ended. He walks securely now, without fear of falling, in the light of God's presence.

He's ready to tell the whole world how the Lord has won his heart:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live.

It would be hard to find a happier man than this one. He had feared that everything was lost. Then, when he cried out to God, he had been wonderfully spared. God gave him back his life and sent him on his way rejoicing.

Now this may seem foreign to your experience. You may never have been in mortal danger. You may never have felt so crushed by trouble that you were ready to despair. You've never needed, you say, to cry out to God for his saving help. And so, having never known the soul's despair, you've never felt either its breathless gratitude.

I surely wouldn't wish any calamities upon you or want to manufacture a crisis to make you call on God for help. But how blessed we would be if all of us could recognize our deep need even when things seem to be going well! I wish we all could know that the evil in our hearts is more deadly than the worst of our foes. I wish we could know that without God's gracious intervening, we would all be utterly lost. I wish we could feel deeply that Jesus Christ, crucified for us and risen from the dead, is our one hope for salvation and eternal life. If all of that were real to us, we would cry out to God as this psalmist did and would be heard, and we would know the gladness of which he sings.

Perhaps you have been fearful, sad, and hopeless but you have never called on the Lord as this man did. I speak especially to you today. Listen. His word is, "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Others have found

him a very present help in time of trouble. You can too! Whatever your peril, whatever your sickness of mind or spirit, whatever your grief and pain, try him. Call on him. He will not fail you. He will do more for you than you dare to hope and even give you something to sing about. If you call on him with all your heart, you will yet find yourself asking, “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?”

The Religion of Response

That question is the calling card, the sure sign, of a certain kind of religion, the very best kind, I believe. It’s the religion of grateful response.

Not all religion is of that sort. Some forms of it seem almost like bargaining with God. *Quid pro quo* — “this for that.” *I’ll do this for you, God, if you will do thus and so for me.* “I’ll go to church. I’ll contribute to some worthwhile charity. I’ll be a reasonably decent person, won’t step too far out of line. I’ll even do a good turn for someone now and then. And I’ll expect you, God, to treat me right and look out for me at the last.”

That’s the kind of religion the Pharisee had, the man whom Jesus pictured as praying in the temple:

God, I thank you that I am not as other men are — extortioners, unjust, adulterers — or even like this tax collector here. I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all I get.

The man says in effect, “Look at me, God, I’m doing a great job for you. I’m one of your shining lights. Surely You’re going to keep your side of our bargain and give me the very best.”

Here we find no wondering gratitude, no amazement at God’s mercy. Religion, on this view, is a prudent investment, a shrewd calculation. The question

What Shall I Give You?

being asked from this mind set is, “What good thing must I do to gain eternal life?”

Or the question may be, “How much can I get away with and still be on the safe side?” “I’d like to be a Christian,” says someone, “but I don’t want to miss out on anything the world offers. How far can I go on the broad road before I have to get off? What is the last exit to the way of life?” Religion for such people seems to be a slightly distasteful duty, a matter to be taken care of as quickly and cheaply as possible so that they can go on to the more worthwhile and exciting things of life. The question here is how to manipulate God, how to “get him,” as it were, “off my back.”

But people who ask, “How can I repay the LORD for his goodness to me?” are living in an entirely different religious atmosphere. They have entered the realm of grace. They feel no need to make deals with God, to maneuver him or buy him off. They know that’s not possible. And they also know, happily, that it’s not necessary. They have discovered that God is *for* us. He’s already on our side. In spite of all we’ve done or all we’ve failed to do, he loves us still and wants the best for us.

And here’s the great good news: He has already taken the initiative on our behalf. He had a care for us when we thought nothing of him. When we had turned away, he came looking for us. In the fullness of the times, he sent his Son to share our life. In Jesus of Nazareth, he stooped under the burden of our sin and guilt and carried it for us. He conquered death and hell for us and now lives to be our Savior.

It’s that loving, divine initiative, that saving work which God has already done on our behalf, that leads to authentic biblical religion. God acts, and we respond. He calls, and we answer. He saves, and we trust. So the question becomes for us, not how we can prevail upon God to treat us well or how we can

avoid his displeasure, but rather, how can we fittingly respond to his grace? “How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?”

What to Do

Now the psalmist goes on to answer his own question. God has given him insight, he believes, as to what his response should be. How can I answer God’s grace? How can I repay his goodness? First, he says, “I will take the cup of salvation.” That’s a strange kind of repayment, isn’t it? I’ll take the cup that God offers me. This believer realizes that there is no way in which he can possibly “repay” the Lord. Payment is out of the question. God wants him simply to receive the grace offered. Faith is receptivity. It’s the empty, outstretched hand that accepts God’s gift in Christ. If you want to repay the Lord for what He’s done for you, begin by welcoming the gift he offers you in Jesus. Say to him, “Lord Jesus, I now receive you as my Savior and King. I take today the cup of salvation from your hand.”

That’s what pleases God, friends; that you should hope in his mercy, that you should trust in his steadfast love. Remember when people once asked Jesus, “What must we do that we may work the works of God?” His answer was, “This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he has sent.”

But it doesn’t stop there. The next step of response is, “I will offer to Thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving.” People for ages have asked, “What kind of sacrifice shall I bring to the Lord? What offering would be appropriate? Will it be a portion of my harvest, or an animal from my flock? Will it be something supremely precious to me, like a firstborn child?” The psalmist has come to know the sacrifice that God prizes most: a grateful heart. The Lord says in another of the psalms, “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me.”

When we give thanks to God, we are acknowledging his gifts. But more than that, we are recognizing him as the Giver. We are discerning and appreciating the

What Shall I Give You?

thoughtful love behind the gift. There's a sense in which everything we do in response to God's amazing mercy is an expression of gratitude. Our whole life is to be a thank offering.

Here's a further part of the answer: "I will . . . call on the name of the LORD." Remember how the psalmist said at the outset that because the Lord had heard his voice, he would call on him as long as he lived? God wants from his people the response of faith. That means trust in his promises, confidence that he will keep his word. And that confidence comes to expression all through life in the practice of prayer. To call on the name of the Lord means to expect good from him, to invoke him as our *ever-present* help, to spread all our concerns out before him. How can I rightly answer the Lord's goodness to me? I can be a praying man, a praying woman. I can take God at his word. I can expect him to fulfill his covenant. I can be his kingdom-partner in a life of believing prayer.

Now here's the last part of the answer. "How can I repay the LORD for all his goodness to me?" "I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people." It may be that this man is remembering promises he made in the time of his distress. "O God, if You'll only get me out of this, I promise you that I'll do thus and so." But whether we've made foxhole prayers, desperation promises or not, receiving God's mercy brings us into a covenant relationship with him. And that involves, in a voluntary way, assuming obligations. The sure instinct of a grateful heart is to do all it can to please the Giver. We show our thankfulness by seeking to obey the Lord in all things.

Now here again, friends, it's not a matter of obedience so that God will bless me, but of faithfulness because he already has. It's not accumulating merit with God, but responding to his mercy. We trust the Lord and then we hear him say, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." Then out of grateful devotion, we seek to do just that. We rely on his Spirit. We call on him for strength.

What Shall I Give You?

And we pay our vows before all the people. We give to him, along with the sacrifice of thanksgiving, our hearts, our daily lives, in glad obedience.

There's our answer, friends. How can we repay the Lord for all his goodness to us? How can we respond to the unspeakable gift of salvation in Christ? We can receive him with a grateful heart. We can remember to thank him every day of our lives. We can call on him in all our needs, and obey him in every part of life. Listen, if there's any "key to happiness," if there's any "secret" to the good life, this is surely it. May we always be asking the question, "How can I repay the LORD for his goodness to me?" And may we always be answering it in God's way!

Study Questions

1. What makes people ask a question like this?
2. In what sense is the Christian faith a religion of response?
3. What does Psalm 116 teach us about what the Lord wants from us?

Chapter 16

WHY HAVE YOU LEFT ME?

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lama sabach-tha ni?” that is “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

Matthew 27:46 RSV

We Feel Forsaken

Have you ever been forsaken? If there is a word more chilling than that, an experience more dismal, I don’t know what it is. Forsaken. To be forsaken is to be deserted by others, abandoned, left completely alone. When people forsake you, they withdraw from you entirely. They have nothing more to do with you; they act as though you don’t exist.

Feeling forsaken is worse than loneliness. There’s the added pain here of being deprived by another, almost betrayed. Someone has heartlessly let you down.

Let’s say you are in need or distress. You’re counting on someone to be there, to stand by you, but he or she is nowhere to be found. Or someone promises to meet you in a strange place, amid pressing dangers, but doesn’t appear. You feel doubly desolate for having been duped.

The closer the tie, the fuller the trust, the more crushing is the blow when we are forsaken. A soldier is utterly dismayed when a group of buddies in his platoon pulls back to safety from their positions around him, leaving him all by himself, helplessly exposed to enemy fire. A husband can’t get over it because his wife of 29 years suddenly leaves him when he’s ill and out of a job. She goes to another

Why Have You Left Me?

city, another man, with scarcely a look backward. Or here's a mother with four children whose husband leaves the country with a young woman half his age. Never a note, never a check, never even a goodbye; he simply forsakes his family. What a trauma for them!

In some cases, we can see the break coming for a long time. Relations are becoming strained; distance is developing. It's no great surprise when the colleague or partner finally moves away. It's when we have no warning that being forsaken hurts the worst. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Mark Antony calls the wound inflicted by Brutus "the unkindest cut of all." Caesar might have expected betrayal from some in his retinue, but never from this trusted friend. That came as a total shock. "Et tu, Brute?" *You also, Brutus? You want to be rid of me just like all the rest?* That must have caused more pain than the dagger thrust. Life hardly seems worth living any more when the one you love best and rely on most, suddenly proves false and forsakes you.

Have you ever felt that God was doing that to you? That's the ultimate forsakenness, isn't it? The Lord has become your refuge and your strength, your light and your salvation. You've put your whole trust in him; you've experienced his delivering power. You've found him adequate for all your needs. But it may be that now, in what you're going through at this moment, he seems to have abandoned you. You've had prayers answered in the past, but now nothing changes when you pray. It's as though God has turned a deaf ear to all your cries for help. Some loss, some tragedy, has devastated your life and shaken the very foundations of your faith. All sense of God's presence and comfort has left you. "Where were you, God, when this terrible thing happened to me? Why didn't you do something?" And the suffering goes on and on. "Where are you now, God? I'm your servant; I've put my life on the line for you. What's happened? Why are you suddenly so far away?"

Why Have You Left Me?

Let me say to you as your friend and brother that many, many devout believers have felt as you do. I've been studying through the Scriptures recently, noting especially the anguished questions which God's people sometimes ask. Here are some of them:

Why dost thou stand afar off, O LORD. Why dost thou hide thyself in times of trouble? . . . How long, O LORD? Wilt thou forget me for ever? . . . Thou art the God in whom I take refuge. Why hast thou cast me off?

And finally, from Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

You can identify with these feelings, can't you? You've been, perhaps, in that place. Maybe you are there today as you read these words. Though you wouldn't come right out and say it to others, you desperately fear that it may be so: God has left you.

He Was Forsaken

There is no part of our human experience into which Jesus Christ has more deeply entered than this one. He knew, just as we do, and more than any of us, what it is to be forsaken. Reflect on his career for a moment. Think about the townspeople with whom he grew up in Nazareth. They all loved him when he was a boy. He grew among them "in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man." He was one of their own. When his ministry had begun and he first visited their synagogue in Nazareth, "they all spoke well of him." But when he went on to tell

of God's mercy to Gentiles, how he passed by the chosen people to show kindness to a widow from Sidon and soldier from Syria, their attitudes changed. They were furious; they ran him out of town, even tried to push him over a cliff. He was forsaken by his boyhood friends, by the villagers he had known for years.

At an early period in his travels, he was extremely popular. Great crowds flocked to hear him; many were eager to become his followers. But there came a time when large numbers of those would-be disciples "drew back and no longer went about with him." The Scriptures tell us that his own brothers did not believe in Jesus during those days. They not only declined to follow him; they sometimes impugned his motives and even suggested that he was out of his mind.

When Jesus came to Jerusalem, at the climax of his ministry, great multitudes welcomed him there. "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they cried. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" Nothing was too much to do for him then. They scattered palm fronds in his path. They even laid down their garments to prepare the way for his royal entry. But only a few days later, some of those same people, when they could have spoken up in his favor, went along with the mob that screamed madly for his blood. When it came to a choice between Jesus and a rebel guilty of murder, they said, "Give us Barabbas!"

But then, of course, there were his twelve disciples, the inner circle of his followers. Surely He could count on them! They had promised to follow him even to death. But one of them sold him away to his enemies for a few silver coins. The most outspoken of them all, Simon Peter, denied with a volley of profanity that he had ever known Jesus. And all of them, when he was finally arrested, forsook him and ran away. So much for the disciples, his best friends! Was anyone ever more wretchedly abandoned than Jesus was?

But he had to endure something worse, immeasurably worse. It came upon him palpably, terribly in the Garden of Gethsemane. The disciples saw how troubled he was, how overwhelmed with a kind of anguish. "My soul is exceeding

Why Have You Left Me?

sorrowful,” he said, “even unto death.” With his sweat like great drops of blood, he fell on the ground and prayed that some mysterious “cup” might be taken away from him, that he might not have to drink it.

What was it that so convulsed him, that filled him with such horror? Was He afraid to die? No, he had known since early in his ministry that an untimely death awaited him. Was the coming ordeal of crucifixion too much to face? No, he had been ready for a long time to face shame, rejection, and agony. He marched toward it, face set like a flint. He strode out to meet his captors when they came to arrest him. He refused to call on the hosts of heaven for help or deliverance. He never showed the slightest trace of fear about what any man or men could do to him.

No, the cup must have been something else, something more, something no one else had ever confronted. It was Jesus’ portion to bear our sins, to suffer what was due to us, to be, as the Scriptures startlingly relate, “made sin for us.” And that cup was the judgment of a holy God against moral evil. To drink it was to taste of hell, of banishment from God’s presence. That dreadful reality brought forth Jesus’ cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” There on Golgotha, while the skies grew black, a deeper darkness came over Jesus. As He bore our sins in his own body on the cross, it was as though a shadow passed between him and his Father’s face.

Never had Jesus felt that before. The joy of his entire life had been this: “The Father is with me; He has not left me alone.” But now, abandoned by fickle crowds, scorned by his nation, betrayed and denied even by close friends, Jesus, identified with sinners, felt himself forsaken by God.

For Our Sakes

Do you know what that can mean for your faith for your life? Let me tell you what it means for me. When I hear Jesus cry out, “My God, my God, why hast

Why Have You Left Me?

thou forsaken me?" I know that he is a brother to us all. He has shared our human lot. He has been where we have been, felt what we have felt. He, the risen, living One, is not remote from our struggles, our agonizing questions. He can sympathize with us. He understands.

But more, when I hear that cry of dereliction, I remember that he stood in my place, carried my burden, paid my debt. "Surely," sings the prophet, "He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; . . . All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Jesus is my sin-bearer, the One who was condemned for me.

But last and best of all, his forsakenness means that I, with all who believe in him, will never be abandoned by God. That is the great exchange, friends. He is condemned so that I can be forgiven. He dies that I may live. He drinks to its dregs the bitter cup so that I may take from his pierced hand a cup of salvation. As an old communion liturgy puts it, "He cried out, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' so that we might be accepted of God and never be forsaken of him."

That doesn't mean that we will never *feel* abandoned any more, that it will never *seem* to us that God is absent. We know that happens to us, don't we? Experiences like that have come to God's choicest saints and they still come today. We may still cry out in our darkest hours, "Why are you so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning?"

But because of Good Friday, because of Jesus Christ forsaken for us, even our "whys" are addressed to the One we call, "My God, *my* God." Through Jesus, he is *our* God, *our* Father, now and always. That's his pledge. Because of Jesus Christ, he is and always will be our God, and nothing can separate us from his great love.

Hear the promise again in these words of a wonderful Christian hymn:

Why Have You Left Me?

The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose
I will not, I will not desert to his foes
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake!

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to be “forsaken”? Describe an experience of yours that felt like this?
2. In what sense was Christ forsaken during his public ministry?
3. In what special way was he forsaken in Gethsemane and on Golgotha?
4. What does his forsakenness mean for all who believe in him?

Chapter 17

WILL YOU REVIVE US?

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?
Psalm 85:6 NIV

Here is a question hurled up to God as an appeal. Will He revive his people?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word *revive*? I recall vividly a scene I watched not long ago. A football player had been knocked unconscious in a violent collision. He lay stretched out on the field, motionless. Doctors and trainers gathered around him, full of concern that he might be seriously injured. This huge, powerful athlete was for the moment inert and helpless. Then he opened his eyes. He began to move his arms, then his legs. Soon he was on his feet again, walking off the field. After a temporary loss of consciousness and strength, he had been, before our eyes, *revived*. His powers had been restored and, moments later, he was able to get back into the game.

Sometimes the word *revive* can apply to our moods, our emotional states. We are depressed, languid, discouraged, but suddenly the gloom begins to lift. We find new courage and hope. Our spirits, we say, have been *revived*.

At other times, a return from inactivity may be called a *revival*. A man who had become listless and sluggish in his work appears one day and attacks his job with new zest. He does more in a morning than he had been doing in a week. He's a dynamo of creativity. Something has *revived* both his interest and capacity for his work.

This man of faith in Psalm 85 is longing to see something like that in the total experience of his people. He wants them to experience new life, new joy in God,

new vigor in his service. He wants to see both their circumstances changed for the better and their inner lives transformed. He longs to see them experience abundant life, to be roused from slumber, lifted from despair, stirred to action. “O God,” he asks, “Won’t you do that? Won’t you do it again?”

The Role of Memory

This is a question that arises only among those who know the Lord. It’s a prayer of remembrance. It celebrates what God has done in the past. Listen to the psalmist:

LORD, thou wast favorable to thy land; thou didst restore the fortunes of Jacob. Thou didst forgive the iniquity of thy people; thou didst pardon all their sin.

Think now. Can you say that about God’s past dealings with you? Was there a time when you knew God’s gracious favor and when he gave you new life? Can you say with assurance that he has forgiven your iniquity and pardoned all your sin? That’s the common experience of all who belong to the Lord. Because Jesus Christ, God’s Son, has died for our sins and has been raised from the dead, we who believe in him can know God’s fatherly smile over our lives. We can be completely forgiven. We can be born anew. If you are a Christian today, that has already happened for you. You have known God’s pardoning love. You are a part of his new creation in Christ.

And if that’s not true of you, it *can* be — this very day. No matter who you are, no matter how you may have gone wrong, no matter what religious background you have (or don’t have), you can become a child of God. You can receive eternal life by simply acknowledging your sin to God and receiving Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. You can do that right now, wherever you are, in a simple

Will You Revive Us?

prayer of trust and commitment: “Lord, I confess that I have sinned and wandered from You. I believe that you died for my sins and rose again to give me life. I now receive you as my Savior. I turn from my sins to give over my whole life to you, and I trust you henceforth to be my Lord, my Redeemer, and my Guide.”

Now it’s only when you have done that, and when you belong to the people who share that faith, that this question makes sense: “Will you not revive us again?” Obviously, it’s only someone who has been alive who can be “revived,” only someone who has once known health who can have it restored. Only hearts that have once burned with faith and love can be kindled afresh. That’s why the prayer for revival is a prayer of *remembrance*.

The psalmist looked back on day when God had worked mightily on behalf of his people Israel, freeing them from their oppressors, delivering them from their fears. He had visited them in his great kindness. In a similar way, believers in Jesus Christ recall how God has acted for them in the past. He has redeemed them through the death and rising of his Son. He has poured out his Spirit upon them in the first Pentecost. And through the intervening centuries, again and again, in various different parts of the world, he has revitalized his believing people. He has renewed their faith and love. He has made their witness winsome and powerful again.

The prayer for revival arises from just that memory:

God, you have visited us before. You have sent seasons of refreshing from your presence. You have awakened your people. You have made your church in days past a burning and a shining light; You have revealed your glory in the midst of your people. Will You not revive us again?

Maybe that's your personal history too, or mine. Maybe there was a time when we were more alive spiritually than we are now. Perhaps our zeal has cooled with the passing of time. We may have left our first love. We're not as active and devoted in his service as once we were. Remembering that, we need to pray, to ask for ourselves and those near to us: "Will you not revive us again?"

The Place of Prayer

All heaven-sent reviving seems to be preceded by prayer. Remember what was going on in the lives of Jesus' followers just before Pentecost? Listen to Luke's account in Acts 1:14: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer." And after that, the Holy Spirit, in life-giving power, came upon them. I was reading just this week how the great spiritual awakening of the Moravians in 1727, under Count Zinzendorf, came after seasons of extraordinary prayer. What is called "the Second Great Awakening" in the United States in 1857 was also the culmination of a vast prayer movement in which thousands of Christian lay people gathered to plead together for a mighty outpouring of God's Spirit.

God has made himself known in the Scriptures and in Christ as the "giving One." He delights to bestow good gifts upon his people. There is no reluctance in God to visit his own with gracious seasons of renewal and reviving. But his promise is always given to those who *pray*. Listen to Jesus:

How much more shall your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who keep on asking him? . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.

God pledges himself, "I will pour water on him that is thirsty and floods upon the dry ground." It's when we know our need, it's when we feel our emptiness,

that we are ready to receive. It's when we confess our sin and lament our barrenness, appealing to God in prayer, that we experience his reviving work.

And that lays upon us, friends, a heavy responsibility. The Lord has promised us that if we ask, we will receive. If we seek, we will find. If we knock, it will be opened to us. When we turn to the Lord with all our hearts and cry out to him for his reviving, he will surely visit us. "We have not," says our Lord's brother James, "because we ask not." We are responsible, then, for our spiritual dullness, our deadness of soul, if we neglect what could cure it. We're on the right track when we cry with the psalmist, "Restore us again, O God of our salvation . . . Will you not revive us again?"

Consider the church in the United States, large in numbers but often puny in influence. It is a wealthy and gifted church but seems to exert little purifying influence on the decaying culture around it. "Will you not revive us again?"

Think of the church in western Europe, once alive and vigorous, but now in many places withered and weak. Many great cathedrals that testify to the faith of the past are now only museums. "Will you not revive us again?"

Will you pray that prayer for yourself? For the congregation you know best? For the church of Jesus Christ in every place? Will you call other Christians to join you in earnest prayer for a great outpouring of God's Spirit? For all that we long to see happening in our warring, anguished world, *that* is our best hope.

The Hearing of Faith

But the psalmist has another vital word for us. Listen:

Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak
peace to his people, to his saints, to those who turn to him in their
hearts. Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that
glory may dwell in our land.

Will You Revive Us?

If there is a formula given in God' Word, we surely have it here. We begin with the remembrance of God's mighty works in the past. We celebrate those with grateful hearts. We call on the Lord to revive his work now in the midst of the years, to pour out his Spirit again on his people. And then *we listen to his word of promise, and believe.*

If we want to know God's renewing power in our time, listening to him is our primary need. His Word calls to mind the mighty acts of God for our salvation. It's his Word of promise that encourages us to lift our hearts in prayer. The wisest resolve a man, a woman, a fellow, a girl, can ever make is this: "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak."

When we have something burning in us to be said, how gladdening it is to find a real listener! We've all had enough of people who only seem to listen, who nod absently as they look past us. Oh, give us friends who will look straight at us and listen intently to us! They are more precious than gold.

Believe this: God also wants to be heard. We who crave listeners are, after all, made in his image. He says through his prophets: "Earth, earth, earth, hear the word of the LORD." All our problems, from Eden onward, have rooted in this fact: we are too self-preoccupied to listen and too willful to heed.

But when Jesus speaks his "Ephphatha" to us, his "Be opened," giving us ears to hear and hearts to understand, when we can say from the heart, "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak," then we can be sure that our prayers for revival will not be in vain. Christian, never settle for the gloomy doctrine that the best days of the Christian church are all behind her. Never resign yourself, smugly or idly, to the view that things will just naturally get worse. Hear the word of the Lord:

Will You Revive Us?

He will speak peace to his people. . . . Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land.

Let us dare to believe God for a worldwide spiritual awakening, for such a revival of God's church that his glory may appear in the midst of his people in every land. Join with your prayers for revival the faith that God waits to hear and to bless. "Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?" Heaven's answer to those who listen, believe and pray, is a resounding yes!

Study Questions

1. What images does the idea of "revival" bring to your Mind?
2. In what sense is this a "prayer of remembrance"?
3. How are prayer and revival related? Give examples.
4. How does "listening with faith" enable us to pray effectively?

Chapter 18

WHAT GOOD IS DEATH?

What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?

Psalm 30:9 RSV

*O*f all the questions that people ever ask God, this is surely one of the most bold and striking. Here we have a man pleading for his life, and asking:

What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?

The writer of this verse doesn't want to die. He's pouring out his heart to God about it. He wants an extension of life. Who wouldn't? His argument is: What good can possibly come from my death?

A Gloomy Prospect

There are several things that impress me here. One is the way in which he views death. For him it is a *gloomy prospect*. He awaits the possibility with mourning, in sackcloth. He can't bear the thought of it. It seems to him like going down into a dark pit.

Now this man, whose words we read in Psalm 30, was a believer. He knew the Lord of heaven and earth. He could call him "my God." He was aware of God's revealed character as the Holy One, whose "favor is for a lifetime." But the man wasn't at all sure about what would befall him at the end of his life.

Many of the Old Testament saints had that same struggle. What God has prepared for his people in the life to come had not yet been made clear to them. They often looked on the place of the dead as a shadowy underworld. At best, existence there was a dull, dreary affair. It meant the end of all that had made life in this world full and bright. For this man, it even meant that praise to God and celebration of his goodness would be no more. He felt that he was about to descend into a deep cavern. The very thought of it cast a shadow over his spirit. For him there was nothing beautiful, nothing noble, nothing sentimental about dying. It was grim business.

Remember when King Hezekiah was told by God's prophet that he was about to die? The Scriptures tell us that he wept bitterly. He turned his face to the wall and prayed that his years might be prolonged. He had the same despondent feelings about death that we've been looking at here. He said, "Sheol cannot thank Thee. Death cannot praise Thee. Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Thy faithfulness." For this king facing his mortality, death meant the end of worshiping God and enjoying his presence. The Almighty could be his portion no longer if he went down to the pit.

Maybe it's because people look on death in that way that many of them don't even want to think about it. Maybe that explains our feverish search for excitement and diversion. Maybe that's why we seek escape in alcohol, in drugs, even in mental illness. Anything to distract us from realizing that we have to die!

Think of the people who have no faith at all, for whom there isn't even a God to plead with about it. For them, death is a blank wall, an exit to nowhere, an absolute end to all things. The late Joseph Bayly tells of a mother like that. After she learned that her boy had leukemia, she said, "When he dies, I'll just have to cover him up with dirt and forget I ever had him." For her that seemed like the only sensible way to face it. She challenged Bayly, "You're a person of reason-

able intelligence. How can you possibly believe that the death of a man or a little boy is any different from the death of an animal?"

If it isn't, friends, it's hard to fight back despair, isn't it? What final meaning can life have if its end can be so blank and meaningless? What comes to nothing amounts to nothing. If death is going down into the pit or worse, then it's not surprising if people cling so desperately to this life. It's literally all they have.

A Godly Prayer

And yet the question this man asks is not cynical or hopeless. He believes that God can keep him alive. Regardless of a doctor's diagnosis or even a divine prophecy, he turns to God and appeals to him for additional years.

Now the remarkable thing here is not that he wants to go on living. Most of us would like some additional good years. It's not even noteworthy that he prays about it. Some people who have never done much praying become intensely religious when their life is threatened. What impresses me is *why* this man wants to live: so that he can praise God and tell others of his faithfulness.

"Wait a minute!" says the skeptic, "that's what he says, but people will say anything to save their own skins." Yes, some may scoff at the whole idea of a prayer like this. "Imagine trying to buy off the Almighty," they sneer, "bartering prayers and praises for more time!"

But when I read the psalm, I can't accept that cynical view of it. This man is describing a prayer that he prayed in the past, a prayer that God has answered. Now he's full of thanks and praise. "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing," he says. "Thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness, that my soul may praise thee and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to thee forever." It sounds to me like his prayer was sincere, because when it was answered, he didn't forget. He meant to go on praising God and celebrating his work.

Really, I can't imagine anyone praying a prayer like this who didn't mean it. If we've never wanted to praise God and never enjoyed doing it, surely he knows that! The psalmist is assuming that he has shared with God a long history of worship and witness. There must have been something like that going on or else the prayer would have made no sense.

Further, this man believes that his thanks, his devotion, his testimony mean something to God. God prizes them. The Lord of heaven and earth would miss them if they weren't there. Something of value to the Lord would be lost if this man were no longer around!

Do you believe that about your prayers? Your praises? Your words of witness? Does God want them and welcome them? Does He, as Jesus said, seek those who will be his worshipers in Spirit and in truth? Does He inhabit the praises of his people? Do they delight his heart? Would the symphony around his throne be incomplete without your little note, and mine? That's what we imply when we ask a question like this, "What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise thee? Will it tell of thy faithfulness?"

A servant of God is saying here, "Lord, I want to live, of course, but not just to put in more time. I want to be your person for a while longer. I want to be able to exalt your name and tell others of who you are. Surely I'm worth more to you alive than dead! What about it, Lord? Let my soul live that it may praise Thee." No doubt about it. In that question, there is a prayer, a godly prayer.

I'm not guaranteeing, mind you, that a prayer like that will always gain you more time. But for this psalmist, it apparently did. And when King Hezekiah prayed in that way, this is the message that God sent to him through the prophet Isaiah: "I have heard your prayer. I have seen your tears. Behold, I will add fifteen years to your life."

A Gospel Promise

Well, we've talked about the gloomy prospect and the godly prayer. Now I want to tell you about *the gospel promise*. We know something that this psalmist didn't know. We celebrate as a sure hope what he was only groping after. Hundreds of years after he wrote this psalm, our planet was visited. God came to us in the person of his Son to share our life. He entered history in Jesus of Nazareth. He went about doing good, healing the sick, delivering the captives. He lived a life of perfect obedience to the Father, and then died, willingly shouldering the burden of our sins. He, the innocent, was condemned for the guilty. Then on the third day, God raised him from the dead. He appeared to his followers. He ascended to the throne of the universe. He sent his Spirit to the hearts of his people. And ever since then, those who have believed in him have looked at death in a new way.

Death for them is still an enemy, the last great one. Christians, like everyone else, shrink back from the accompaniments of dying. But they know beyond all doubting that to die is not to go down into the pit but up to the Father's house. To be "absent from the body" is to be "present with the Lord." "To depart," says the apostle Paul, "is to be with Christ, which is far better."

What comes after death can never be dreadful for a Christian, as though life and everything worthwhile were to be forever lost. Dwight L. Moody, in his latter years, used to say this to his friends, "One of these days you're going to read in the newspapers that Dwight L. Moody is dead. Don't you believe it. I'll be more alive then than I've ever been before!" Death, friends, is not a trap door through which we sink into nothingness, but as Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called it, "the supreme festival on the road to freedom."

Christians aren't worried that death may rob them of their power to praise. They expect then to do it much better. Listen to one of them:

Then in a nobler, sweeter song,

What Good Is Death?

I'll sing thy power to save,
when this poor lisping, stammering tongue
lies silent in the grave.

There is a gospel promise, you see, that fills believers with hope. Jesus said it:

Because I live, you shall live also . . . I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live, and he that lives and believes in me will never die.

He pledged to the dying thief and to all who look to Him for salvation: “You shall be with Me.” So the people of God rejoice in the confidence that nothing, not even death, can ever separate them from the love of God.

Believers may still, on occasion, ask for more time, both for themselves and for others. I have a friend, a brother minister, who is gravely ill with cancer. He has been carrying on a ministry in evangelism training which seems to many of us vital for the life of the church. I feel constrained, as many do, to pray that God will heal him and give him many more good years to serve. But for him and his family and his circle of friends, that prayer is not a cry of dread and desperation. We all want him to live longer so that he may praise and serve the Lord here in this world. But we aren't the least bit afraid that death will be the end of him or even of his worship and witness. Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's, and shall forever rejoice in his presence, praising his name. That is the good news of Jesus Christ — that is the gospel promise.

I don't want to end this message without inviting you to think about your own life. How brief it is and how precious! What are your prospects for the future? What is the purpose for which you're living right now? I want to assure you of this, that if it's your desire to praise the Lord now and tell of his wonderful works,

What Good Is Death?

then death for you won't be a disappointment. A great believer named Paul once put it this way: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

So it will be for us. If life means Christ to you, and to me, then death for us will not be darkness but light, not sadness but everlasting joy. Oh, believe that!

Study Questions

1. What makes death a gloomy prospect?
2. What does this prayer tell us about the man who prayed it?
3. What evidence do we have that our praise to God will continue beyond death?

Chapter 19

WHEN WILL YOU COME?

I will give heed to the way that is blameless. Oh when wilt thou come to me? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house.

Psalm 101:2 RSV

Waiting for an Arrival

When will you come? Have you ever waited, hopefully and anxiously, for someone's arrival? I remember a night on which I did. Two lovely girls, then the fiancées of our sons, were driving across the country to our house. We had expected them late in the evening. My wife and I waited up for them.

Soon after midnight, I dozed off, then awoke with a start. It was well after 1:00, and they still had not arrived. I called one of their homes on the telephone to check on when they had started out. I learned that they had been slightly behind schedule, but calculated that they still should have reached our house before midnight.

By now, wide awake, I set myself to wait. It was totally quiet in the house. I could almost hear my heart beating. I paced about, alternately praying and fretting. At about 2:00, I began to write in my journal, thinking of how much these two girls meant to all of us. I put in writing the emotions I was feeling as I tried to fight back my fears, "O God, don't let anything happen to them. Let them arrive safely."

I kept going to the window to look out into the driveway, but there was no sign of them. Finally, after 3:00 when I was still writing, I heard a welcome, wonderful sound at the door. There they were, safe and sound!

When Will You Come?

King David, long, long ago waited with mingled feelings for *God's* arrival. David had established his capital in the city of Jerusalem. A God-fearing king, he had longed to bring the ark of the covenant, the sign of God's presence, into the city. But his only attempt to do that had ended in tragedy. One of his servants, who had tried to steady the ark on its journey, had been instantly struck down. David gave up the plan for a time, but his longing remained. He expressed it in this psalm, numbered 101:

I will sing of loyalty and of justice; to thee, O LORD, I will sing. I will give heed to the way that is blameless. Oh when wilt thou come to me?

“O God,” he wondered, “when will you come?” He was hoping for the presence of the Lord in the midst of the city, but was also anxious about the prospect. He was eager but afraid. He wanted to do all he could to “prepare the way of the Lord.” He pledged himself to sing of loyalty and justice, to give heed to God's way, to renounce every evil and to walk in his integrity. He knew that God was faithful and gracious. He yearned to be in his presence, but he knew also that God was the holy Lord, of purer eyes than to look on sin, and that made him tremble with awe. “O, God, merciful and majestic, faithful and fearful, when will you come?”

The whole world, for long, weary centuries, waited like that. Israel, God's chosen people, were like the watchmen on the walls. They knew that God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, had promised to come. He would keep his covenant. He would visit and redeem his people. He would satisfy their longings. He would hear their prayers. Listen to the psalmist as he anticipates the joy of all that:

When Will You Come?

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the floods clap their hands; Let the hills sing for joy together before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity.

God will come, he sings, in sovereign power and glory. He will come and make things right. Happy day for all the earth!

But there was something dreadful about his coming too. Listen to Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets:

Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the LORD whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears?

The Lord who comes, says the prophet, is like a refiner's fire, like fuller's soap. He will draw near in a purging judgment against all defilement and wickedness.

And so with yearning and yet with apprehension, the world waited. In the hearts of multitudes, a yen for deliverance mingled with tremors of conscience. The world asked, eagerly and anxiously, "When, O Lord, will you come?"

Timely, but Surprising

As we look back on it now, we can see that God was preparing two answers to that heart-cry, "When will you come?" The first was this: *at just the right time*.

Habakkuk the prophet had heard from God that the divine timing would be perfect:

When Will You Come?

And the LORD answered me: “Write the vision; Make it plain upon tablets so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the end — it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

Not too soon, he says, but not a moment too late, the vision will be realized, the promise fulfilled. The Lord will come.

Paul writes about God’s perfect timing after the fact:

When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

Gal. 4:4-5

God came. His Son was born. Christmas arrived — at just the right time.

Just how it was “right” we can’t fathom fully, but we have some hints. The Caesars of Rome, after their legendary conquests, had created a world of relative stability and peace. The greatest road-building genius ever known had made travel possible all over the empire. The Greek language, spread through the conquests of the great Alexander, had become so common that all over the empire people of diverse groups could speak to one another and be understood. And, through the dispersion of the Jews, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his witnesses and his synagogues everywhere.

More, the hearts of the multitudes were strangely restless, craving a message of hope. Greek philosophy had spent itself, leaving behind a profound pessimism. The religions of the Roman world were morally corrupt and intellectually sterile. Jewish prophecy had been silent for centuries. Every searching heart, it seemed,

was waiting for a word from beyond. All things were ready. What a time for God to enter history!

But God was saying in answer to the question, “When will you come?” not only, “at the right time, but also, “*In the way you least expect.*” Who knew how God would visit his world? Who could predict what his judgments would mean? Some were certain that there would be political deliverance for Israel, the restoration of the golden days of David and Solomon — world-wide domination for the saints of the Lord. Others looked for frightful judgments upon evil-doers, perhaps with vast upheavals in the natural order.

But when the great day came, no thrones were toppled, no heads rolled, no mountains were cast into the sea. Nothing happened at all in Rome, or Athens, or even in Jerusalem. No, what the world had been waiting for happened in a little Judean village, to a young peasant girl. No one heard about it but a few sheep herders. No one deemed important even seemed to care. Amid the shadows and smells of a stable, as a tiny baby boy, the Lord of glory came.

The Difference it Makes

We sing about that in one of the loveliest of the Christmas carols. Remember these words from “O Little Town of Bethlehem”? “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

What about “the *hopes* of all the years”? How were they fulfilled in Bethlehem that night? In the birth of one called *Immanuel*, “God with us.” Augustine said it well: “Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.” Created first in God’s image, but now rebels against his will and estranged from his presence, all of us know a profound, lingering homesickness. Our searchings and longings all point to that. “Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might even come before his presence.!”

When Will You Come?

In Christ is satisfied our hunger to know God. The wonders in Egypt and the thunders at Sinai had revealed the Lord to Israel, but these were only the outskirts of his ways. His prophets spoke of him truly, but their witness was partial and preparatory. In Jesus Christ, God not only spoke and acted — He came and gave himself to us. The God who had been strangely present within the tabernacle and the temple now walked among us in his Son. Listen to John's witness:

The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father.

This was something totally new. "No one has ever seen God," John goes on, "but the only begotten Son who was in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him." He has "exegeted" him. He has "made him known." Jesus could say, with lordly simplicity: "He that has seen me has seen the Father."

In Christ, God is with us to stay. This was not a temporary appearance, a weekend visit. In the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, God took our nature, shared our human lot, identified himself with us forever. Remember how the crucified and risen Jesus said it just before he ascended into heaven? "Lo, I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age."

How did his coming banish our *fears*? It almost seems that that was heaven's first concern. The message of the angel to the expectant young mother was, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." The word to the shepherds was, "Be not afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." When God comes, he comes most of all as a Savior.

It's true that this child was "set for the rise and falling of many." It's true that his coming would lay bare what is in our hearts. It's true that all who would receive him must welcome him with repentance. However, he comes not to

destroy people's lives but to redeem them. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins."

This Jesus comes among us that we may have life and have it abundantly. He comes to seek and save that which was lost. He comes to die, the just one for the unjust, so that he may bring us to God. All who seek him, shepherds, wise men, and all the great host of the faithful, go on their way rejoicing. "I sought the Lord, and he delivered me from all my fears." His birth, his ministry, his dying and rising, all say with one triumphant voice: "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven. Be not afraid."

When we have waited with hopes and fears, crying, "When will you come?" the long-delayed arrival is joy. How I welcomed those two girls, now our daughters-in-law, when they finally arrived at our home! How David rejoiced when the ark finally came to the city! He danced before the Lord all the way home! And how the world began to sing on that first Christmas when Jesus, Immanuel, came among us!

I hope that you, like the rest of a multitude that no one can number, have found your hopes realized and your fears scattered in what happened there at Bethlehem. I hope that you have tasted this joy of the Lord. And if you haven't, there could never be a better time to welcome Jesus Christ, born for you, crucified for you, risen for you, offering to be with you all the days. You don't need to wonder any longer, friends, "When will you come?" In Jesus, at Christmas, the King has arrived!

Study Questions

1. With what mingled feelings do people wait for God?
2. In what sense was Jesus' advent "at just the right time"?
3. What about it was startlingly unexpected?
4. How did his coming affect our hopes and fears?

Chapter 20

WHOM SHALL I FEAR?

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Psalm 27:1 RSV

Are you afraid of other people? Most of us struggle with fears like that, don't we? We're afraid on a dark night in a strange neighborhood that someone may attack us. We sometimes fear our bosses, supervisors or board members because they evaluate our work. They may decide that we don't measure up. We fear those who don't like us, especially if they are people of influence who can make things difficult for us or damage our reputations. Students fear their teachers, and teachers, if the truth were known, often feel threatened by their students. Sometimes we're even anxious about meeting new people because we are afraid they won't like us.

No one wants to be afraid. We don't like what these fears do to us. When we fear people, we tend to become suspicious of them and hostile toward them. We avoid them whenever possible, and when forced to be with them, we feel uncomfortable. This fear of others can take a good deal of the joy out of our lives. It robs us of our peace of mind, and makes us edgy and nervous. We may put on masks and act insincerely, and that makes us feel down on ourselves. What a relief it would be if we could get rid of all those fears! What a joy it would be to look out on the world and say, "I'm not afraid of anyone."

"Well," you think, "if I were a person of influence or tremendous power, I wouldn't need to be afraid. If I had friends with connections or if I carried my

own gun, or if I took karate lessons, I'd have nothing to worry about." Maybe. But it often happens that people who occupy seats of power feel very insecure in them. And what precautions can really defend us against someone who is determined to do us harm? Weapons and body guards may look impressive to people who don't have them, but they can't protect anyone from fear.

The Freedom of Faith

How do we understand the claims, then, of someone who says he's free from all fear of others? Listen: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall. Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident." Why isn't this man afraid? Because of the Lord, he says, in whom he trusts. When darkness closes in on him, the Lord is his light. When dangers surround him, God is his salvation, his deliverance. And when malicious enemies attack, he has a "mighty fortress." And so he asks triumphantly, "Whom shall I fear . . . of whom shall I be afraid? — what can really harm me, in other words, when God is my defender? The apostle Paul many years later put the same question in a different way: "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

This man of faith tries to imagine the most threatening situations he could possibly face. It sounds like he's been through them. Here are beast-like men with their lies and slanders, intent on devouring him. "When they come at me," he says, "they'll stumble; they'll fall. Their evil designs against me will be frustrated." Or suppose a hostile army surrounds his city. They declare war against him and move in for the attack. "Let them come," he says, "My heart will not fear. I'll still be confident."

How does that sound to you — like the easy bravado of one who lives a sheltered life? Shakespeare has one of his characters say, "He jests at scars that

Whom Shall I Fear?

never felt a wound.” But this man had felt some wounds and had lived through some dangers. He was King David, the man who had wrestled with lions and bears, the man who had faced and felled the great Goliath. David had been hunted like an animal by a vengeful king. He’s the one who says, “Bring on the enemy; let them do their worst. I’ll never cringe and cower.”

In the next lines of the psalm we get a glimpse of his secret. He says:

One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

Who can be free of the fear of men’s faces? The only answer is: the person who looks steadily into *God’s* face. This man has one great aim and he pursues it every day of his life. He wants to live in the presence of the Lord. He wants to enjoy unclouded fellowship with God. He seeks to know him, to behold his glory, to discover his will and to walk along with him all through life. He’s determined to focus his attention solely upon the living God. When we do that, we see everything else in a different perspective.

Do you remember when God’s people were on the borders of the Promised Land and had sent in twelve spies to look things over? Ten came back to tell their fears: “You ought to see the high walls around those cities and the giants that live in them. We haven’t a chance against them.” But the other two, Caleb and Joshua, said, “It’s a beautiful land in there. There are grapes the size of oranges. And don’t worry about the enemy; they’ll be a pushover for us.” What was the difference? The ten saw only the hostile forces and so they felt like grasshoppers in their own eyes; Caleb and Joshua felt like conquerors because they saw the Lord.

Now maybe your problem today is that you have never “seen” the Lord. You’ve had some ideas about him, some theories as to what he is like, but you

have never met him personally in Jesus Christ as your Savior and your King. You have never recognized God as the loving father who gave his Son for you so that you could have life. You have never seen him as the Lord of resurrection and new life. And so for you, for the first time, the call is “turn your eyes upon Jesus; look full in his wonderful face.” Trust him now, and you will begin to experience a faith that can set you free from fear.

When Old Fears Revive

But suppose that you are already a believer. Perhaps you have been one for years. You know that the Lord is your light and your salvation. You’ve set your heart to seek after him and you realize that you have nothing to worry about. And yet those nagging fears of yours keep coming back. You don’t always feel the confidence of which David sings. In fact, sometimes you are desperately afraid. Those times come to God’s people — even to those of great faith. I was reading some time ago a sermon by Charles Spurgeon, one of God’s most courageous and gifted servants. Hear what he said to his people on one Sunday morning:

He who has been long experienced in the things of the divine life will sometimes be overtaken with a dark night and a stormy tempest . . . This much I know, if it be not so with all of you, it is so with me. While I shall be endeavoring to encourage those who are distressed and downhearted, I shall be preaching to myself — for I need something to cheer my heart. Why, I cannot tell, wherefore I do not know, but I have a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me. My soul is cast down within me. I feel as though I would rather die than live. All that God has done by me seems to be forgotten and my spirit flags and my courage breaks down with the thought of that which is to come.

It brought me much comfort to read that because I have sometimes felt that way myself. We know that our faith sets us free from fear, but those banished fears have a way of stealing back upon us.

David knew that too. In fact, this psalm of sunny confidence has a second stanza of struggle. In the first he feels so sure of God that he cannot imagine how he could ever be anxious again. In the second he is fighting the cold pressure of fear and laboring to make his way to higher ground again. Think of that — all in the same psalm! All in the same life!

We can understand that all too well, can't we? In our best moments, God seems marvelously real to us and our problems look insignificant. It almost seems impossible to us that we could ever be fearful or downcast again. But other times come when we wonder where our faith has gone and when even trifling things can make us afraid. We ask ourselves, "Which is the real person? Who am I, after all? This bold believer or this quivering bundle of fears?" I have no doubt about the answer to that one. If you trust Jesus Christ, the real "you" is the person who sees God with eyes of faith and laughs at fear.

When we do experience anxiety, apprehension, it's a signal to us that we have lost our concentration, just as Peter did when he got out of the boat to walk on the water. We have taken our eyes off the Lord and begun to look at those raging waves. When that happens, we start to sink, and sink fast.

What to Do

David, in the second half of this psalm, shows us what to do when fears overtake us again. Here is his tested four-step formula. First, *call on the Lord for help*. David prays, "Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me." Tell the Lord about your fears. Be honest with him about your inner anguish. Sometimes just airing things in his presence makes them seem less

formidable. He has promised to be your light and salvation: ask him to fulfill that word.

Second, *set your heart afresh to seek after him*. Hear David's prayer: "Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face,' my heart says to thee, 'Thy face, LORD, so I seek.'" We were noticing before how a steady looking toward God cuts every terror down to size. But since our gaze so quickly wanders, the purpose to seek God and walk with him needs to be renewed again and again. Tell him afresh that it's your purpose, insofar as lies within your power, to look away from your surroundings toward him.

Then, thirdly, *confess the faith which you may not feel at the time*. David is feeling lonely, vulnerable, abandoned. Yet he says, "My father and my mother have forsaken me, but the LORD will take me up . . . I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living!" It's easy to confess that when our hearts are warm and when we can see evidences of God's care around us. But to say it in the teeth of adversity, to stand up and confess it in the midst of the battle, that's different. And that's a giant step on the road back.

Finally, *challenge your heart to wait on the Lord*, as David does here in Psalm 27. There come times when you need to talk to yourself. It may be to ask yourself a question: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?" Or it may be to stir yourself up: "Be strong, and let your heart take courage." But keep telling yourself to wait for the Lord. He may not scatter all the clouds immediately. You may still feel butterflies inside, but he will strengthen your heart. No one ever waited for him in vain. You are not responsible to see his face all the time, but only to keep looking in his direction. By and by the clouds will part and the splendor of his sunshine will break through again. Another old psalm says it beautifully, "They looked to him, and their faces were radiant."

Oh, friend, look up to the Lord today. Trust in the living Christ as your Savior and King. If you can truly say, "He is my light and my salvation," then you can

Whom Shall I Fear?

also ask the question that defies an answer: “Whom shall I fear? Of whom shall I be afraid?”

Study Questions

1. Discuss the ways in which you find yourself afraid of other people.
2. How is it possible to be free from such fears?
3. What has happened to us when such fears return?
4. What does Psalm 27 teach us about the road back to triumphant confidence?