

PSALMS:
LESSONS IN PRAYER

*How To Enjoy Richer,
Deeper And Fuller
Conversations With God*

ERIC ELDER

Psalms: Lessons In Prayer
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ABOUT THIS BOOK

The book you're about to read is based on thirty-one of the 150 psalms in the book of Psalms from the Bible. I've chosen these particular psalms because they each highlight different aspects of prayer, such as when to pray, how to pray, what to pray for, and how to hear God's voice during your intimate conversations with Him.

While I've quoted portions of these thirty-one psalms in this book, I'd love for you to read them in their entirety, whether in your own Bible or online at websites like biblegateway.com, blueletterbible.com, or biblestudytools.com. To further aid you in gaining the most from these psalms, I asked my wife, Lana, at the outset of this project, if she would be willing to read and record each of the thirty-one psalms so you could listen to them as well as read them—which she was very glad to do.

To make these readings even more special, my family and I then set each of Lana's readings to music, recording some classical piano pieces from the 17- and 1800s to accompany each psalm. I've listed Lana's readings on the following page, which you can listen to at theranch.org or wherever music is streamed or sold. The album is called simply *Lana's Psalms*.

I've also included a reading plan for those of you who would like to read through the entire book of Psalms as you go through this devotional. The plan is set up so you can read all 150 psalms in either thirty-one days or thirty-one weeks, depending on how many psalms you want to read per day, whether five psalms per day or five psalms per week. The devotionals in this book usually highlight one of the psalms out of every five listed in the reading plan.

However you do it, may God speak to you through it!

Eric Elder

READING PLAN

Day or Week	Psalms to Read					Highlighted Psalm
1	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	5
2	6 <input type="checkbox"/>	7 <input type="checkbox"/>	8 <input type="checkbox"/>	9 <input type="checkbox"/>	10 <input type="checkbox"/>	8
3	11 <input type="checkbox"/>	12 <input type="checkbox"/>	13 <input type="checkbox"/>	14 <input type="checkbox"/>	15 <input type="checkbox"/>	13
4	16 <input type="checkbox"/>	17 <input type="checkbox"/>	18 <input type="checkbox"/>	19 <input type="checkbox"/>	20 <input type="checkbox"/>	19
5	21 <input type="checkbox"/>	22 <input type="checkbox"/>	23 <input type="checkbox"/>	24 <input type="checkbox"/>	25 <input type="checkbox"/>	23
6	26 <input type="checkbox"/>	27 <input type="checkbox"/>	28 <input type="checkbox"/>	29 <input type="checkbox"/>	30 <input type="checkbox"/>	30
7	31 <input type="checkbox"/>	32 <input type="checkbox"/>	33 <input type="checkbox"/>	34 <input type="checkbox"/>	35 <input type="checkbox"/>	34
8	36 <input type="checkbox"/>	37 <input type="checkbox"/>	38 <input type="checkbox"/>	39 <input type="checkbox"/>	40 <input type="checkbox"/>	37
9	41 <input type="checkbox"/>	42 <input type="checkbox"/>	43 <input type="checkbox"/>	44 <input type="checkbox"/>	45 <input type="checkbox"/>	42
10	46 <input type="checkbox"/>	47 <input type="checkbox"/>	48 <input type="checkbox"/>	49 <input type="checkbox"/>	50 <input type="checkbox"/>	46
11	51 <input type="checkbox"/>	52 <input type="checkbox"/>	53 <input type="checkbox"/>	54 <input type="checkbox"/>	55 <input type="checkbox"/>	51
12	56 <input type="checkbox"/>	57 <input type="checkbox"/>	58 <input type="checkbox"/>	59 <input type="checkbox"/>	60 <input type="checkbox"/>	62
13	61 <input type="checkbox"/>	62 <input type="checkbox"/>	63 <input type="checkbox"/>	64 <input type="checkbox"/>	65 <input type="checkbox"/>	63
14	66 <input type="checkbox"/>	67 <input type="checkbox"/>	68 <input type="checkbox"/>	69 <input type="checkbox"/>	70 <input type="checkbox"/>	69
15	71 <input type="checkbox"/>	72 <input type="checkbox"/>	73 <input type="checkbox"/>	74 <input type="checkbox"/>	75 <input type="checkbox"/>	100
16	76 <input type="checkbox"/>	77 <input type="checkbox"/>	78 <input type="checkbox"/>	79 <input type="checkbox"/>	80 <input type="checkbox"/>	77
17	81 <input type="checkbox"/>	82 <input type="checkbox"/>	83 <input type="checkbox"/>	84 <input type="checkbox"/>	85 <input type="checkbox"/>	84
18	86 <input type="checkbox"/>	87 <input type="checkbox"/>	88 <input type="checkbox"/>	89 <input type="checkbox"/>	90 <input type="checkbox"/>	88
19	91 <input type="checkbox"/>	92 <input type="checkbox"/>	93 <input type="checkbox"/>	94 <input type="checkbox"/>	95 <input type="checkbox"/>	91
20	96 <input type="checkbox"/>	97 <input type="checkbox"/>	98 <input type="checkbox"/>	99 <input type="checkbox"/>	100 <input type="checkbox"/>	96
21	101 <input type="checkbox"/>	102 <input type="checkbox"/>	103 <input type="checkbox"/>	104 <input type="checkbox"/>	105 <input type="checkbox"/>	103
22	106 <input type="checkbox"/>	107 <input type="checkbox"/>	108 <input type="checkbox"/>	109 <input type="checkbox"/>	110 <input type="checkbox"/>	109
23	111 <input type="checkbox"/>	112 <input type="checkbox"/>	113 <input type="checkbox"/>	114 <input type="checkbox"/>	115 <input type="checkbox"/>	112
24	116 <input type="checkbox"/>	117 <input type="checkbox"/>	118 <input type="checkbox"/>	119 <input type="checkbox"/>	120 <input type="checkbox"/>	118
25	121 <input type="checkbox"/>	122 <input type="checkbox"/>	123 <input type="checkbox"/>	124 <input type="checkbox"/>	125 <input type="checkbox"/>	122
26	126 <input type="checkbox"/>	127 <input type="checkbox"/>	128 <input type="checkbox"/>	129 <input type="checkbox"/>	130 <input type="checkbox"/>	127
27	131 <input type="checkbox"/>	132 <input type="checkbox"/>	133 <input type="checkbox"/>	134 <input type="checkbox"/>	135 <input type="checkbox"/>	131
28	136 <input type="checkbox"/>	137 <input type="checkbox"/>	138 <input type="checkbox"/>	139 <input type="checkbox"/>	140 <input type="checkbox"/>	139
29	141 <input type="checkbox"/>	142 <input type="checkbox"/>	143 <input type="checkbox"/>	144 <input type="checkbox"/>	145 <input type="checkbox"/>	143
30	146 <input type="checkbox"/>	147 <input type="checkbox"/>	148 <input type="checkbox"/>	149 <input type="checkbox"/>	150 <input type="checkbox"/>	150
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LANA'S PSALMS

The highlighted psalms are read by Lana Elder on the album *Lana's Psalms*, available online at theranch.org/lanas-psalms

- Psalm 5 with “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” by Johann Sebastian Bach featuring Bo Elder
- Psalm 8 with “Canon in D” featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 13 with “The Sick Doll” by Pyotr Il’yich Tchaikovsky featuring Makari Elder
- Psalm 19 with “To A Wild Rose” by Edward MacDowell featuring Josiah Elder
- Psalm 23 with “Minuet” by Leopold Mozart featuring Kaleo Elder
- Psalm 30 with “Country Minuet” by Franz Joseph Haydn featuring Marilyn Elder Byrnes
- Psalm 34 with “Intrada” by Christoph Graupner featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 37 with “Sonatina” by Ludwig van Beethoven featuring Marilyn Elder Byrnes
- Psalm 42 with “Rigaudon” by George Frideric Handel featuring “Bo Elder”
- Psalm 46 with “Minuet in G” by Christian Petzold/Johann Sebastian Bach featuring Josiah Elder
- Psalm 51 with “Prelude in C” by Johann Sebastian Bach featuring Lucas Elder
- Psalm 62 with “Anglaise” by Johann Christoph Friedrich Bach featuring Kaleo and Karis Elder
- Psalm 63 with “Minuet in G Minor” by Christian Petzold/Johann Sebastian Bach featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 69 with “Moonlight Sonata” by Ludwig van Beethoven featuring Marilyn Elder Byrnes
- Psalm 100 with “Arietta in A” by Franz Joseph Haydn

featuring Eric Elder

- Psalm 77 with “Prelude in E Minor, Op. 28, No. 4” by Frédéric Chopin featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 84 with “Sonata Pathétique” by Ludwig van Beethoven featuring Bo Elder
- Psalm 88 with “Prelude in C Minor, Op. 28, No. 20” by Frédéric Chopin featuring Josiah Elder
- Psalm 91 with “Clair de Lune” by Claude Debussy featuring Bo Elder
- Psalm 96 with “Fughetta” by Johann Pachelbel featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 103 with “Für Elise” by Ludwig van Beethoven featuring Lucas Elder
- Psalm 109 with “Sarabande” by George Frideric Handel featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 112 with “Noël” by Louis-Claude Daquin featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 118 with “Barcarolle” by Jacques Offenbach featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 122 with “Minuet in F” by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 127 with “Lullaby” by Johann Philipp Kirnberger featuring Kaleo Elder
- Psalm 131 with “Prelude in A, Op. 28, No. 7” by Frédéric Chopin featuring Josiah Elder
- Psalm 139 with “Venetian Boat Song” by Felix Mendelssohn featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 143 with “Solfeggietto” by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach featuring Eric Elder
- Psalm 150 with “Gigue” by George Frideric Handel featuring Bo Elder
- Psalm 119 with “Boléro” by Maurice Ravel, featuring Marilyn Elder Byrnes, plus an Extended Version featuring Eric Elder

Introduction:

CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

John 15:15

I LOVE TALKING TO GOD. It's often the highlight of my day.

For some people, like my friend Dan Mountney, waking up and talking with God brings focus to everything else that happens in his day. "It centers me," Dan says.

For others, like Adrian Rogers, talking to God brings clarity to what God wants him to do. When asked by a reporter if God had spoken to Adrian like the reporter had just spoken to him, Adrian replied, "Oh, no! It was much louder than that."

For still others, like Billy Graham, talking with God is like talking with a best friend. "How do you know God exists?" Billy was once asked. "Because I spoke with Him this morning," he replied.

What about you? How would you rate your conversations with God? As much as I love talking with God, I still feel in many ways that I am just scratching the surface of what my conversations with Him *could* be like.

Five years ago, my late wife Lana and I were talking about prayer. Lana said, "I'd like to learn more about prayer."

I was stunned. Lana's prayer life was already deep and rich and full. She prayed continually, in private and out loud, for me, for our family, for our friends, for missionaries, for entire countries. She prayed for breakthroughs and healings and

restorations. She prayed for forgiveness and for a greater love for others. Yet with all she had learned about prayer over the years, she still wanted *more*.

For me, that was Lesson #1 in going deeper in my own prayer life, to simply know that there's always *more*.

At that same time, I was wanting to take a closer look at the book of Psalms. What was it about this book that made it one of the most beloved books in the Bible? What secrets did it hold that made publishers often publish it by itself, or pair it as the one Old Testament book to go along with the entire New Testament? Why do people seem to quote so often from the Psalms, as Jesus did, more than any other book in the Bible?

By combining my curiosity about the Psalms with Lana's desire to learn more about prayer, we took a deeper dive together into this book to see what we could discover in its depths. We learned that the book of Psalms is really a book of prayers; in fact, it's the oldest prayer book in the world. The word "psalm" means "song" in Hebrew, the language in which the psalms were originally written. And since they are all songs to God, they are often considered prayers as much as anything else—conversations with Him that came from deep in the author's heart.

We learned that over half of those "conversations with God" were voiced by King David, as specifically noted in the text of those psalms, and even more of those conversations clearly alluded to David's authorship based on the situations described within them. I was personally looking forward to learning all I could from this man whom God described as "a man after My own heart" (see Acts 13:22).

What I wasn't expecting was that the next year of our lives would take such an unexpected twist: soon after we began this deeper dive into the book of Psalms and the topic of prayer, Lana was diagnosed with cancer. Ten days later, we were told it

was terminal. And nine months after that, Lana was gone, having passed from this life to the next.

It crushed me, and it crushed a part of my heart at the same time. If I had known this would happen when we first decided we wanted to have a deeper, richer and fuller prayer life, I'm not sure we would have done it.

But I was reminded of this thought again when a friend was telling me how he had recently made a decision to go deeper in his relationship with God. He began by waking up ten minutes earlier each day to read his Bible and pray. The following week, he woke up ten minutes earlier still. And the week after that, he woke up ten minutes earlier still, continuing this pattern until he was now waking up an hour or more earlier than usual so he could have as much time with God as possible.

He then told me about several things that had gotten increasingly harder in his life during this time: his work situation, family's health and his finances.

It reminded me of the difficulties Lana and I had faced soon after we made our decision to go deeper with God. I was tempted to say something to this effect when my friend said something that stopped me:

"I am so glad I decided to do this with God," he said, "because if I hadn't, I don't know how I could have gotten through this time in any other way."

My friend was right. He was absolutely right. If Lana and I had not committed ourselves to a deeper walk with God, I don't know how we could have gotten through what we had to go through, either. And how much better is it to be on the path of going deeper with God *before* life throws its worst at you, rather than waiting till it hits you full on? The time I've spent grounding myself in God, and in my relationship with Him, is

the one thing above all else that has helped me through some of the most difficult challenges in my life.

So here it is, five years since Lana and I decided to take that deeper dive into the topic of prayer as seen through the lens of the Psalms, and now I'd like to share with you some of the lessons that I've learned. Along the way, I'll also tell you about some of the miraculous answers to prayer I've seen and some of the amazing conversations with God I've had, many of which are no less miraculous or amazing to me than those I read about in the book of Psalms. The same God who walked with David through his highs and lows is the same God who has walked with me through mine—and who will walk with you through yours.

God doesn't just have things He wants you to do. He wants true intimacy with you. He wants to really talk to you, as a friend talks to a friend.

Jesus captured the heart of His Father when He spoke about this idea to His disciples:

"I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

God truly wants to have a friendship with you. And you would be crazy to turn down a friendship like His. As Robin Williams sang in Disney's classic animation, *Aladdin*:

"You ain't never had a friend like me."

I pray God will speak to you in a special way during your time with Him, both while we're doing this study together, and on your own for the rest of your days. I can think of nothing more incredible than to be able to talk personally with the God

who created you, who knows you better than you know yourself, and who loves you like no one else on earth ever could.

I'm looking forward to our time together. I hope you are, too.

Will you pray with me?

Dear Jesus, I am so thankful that we can come to you each and every day, all day, at any time during the day, and have a conversation with You. You are so loving and gracious, so kind and helpful, so wise and so knowledgeable about all things, including me. Help me as I go through this day. Walk me through every situation I face. Help me to learn all that You want me to learn as we walk through this study of the book of Psalms. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Lesson 1:

MORNING PRAYERS



Psalm 5



AS I WAS READING THROUGH the book of Psalms, I was looking for secrets to having a more effective prayer life. I didn't get very far into the book when I found one:

"In the morning, O Lord, You hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before You and wait in expectation" (Psalm 5:3).

There's something about morning prayers that make them hopeful. After a night of rest, it's time to start a new day, a fresh day.

I've often prayed in the morning, waking up, taking out my Bible and a journal and a pen, then sitting quietly before God. But what I noticed differently in this Psalm is that the author, David, came to God with a spirit of expectancy.

David didn't just come to God with a list of requests. He came with hope in his heart, expectant that God would answer. David knew the goodness of God. He knew that God was with Him. He knew that God was *for* him, just like He is *for* each one of us.

Our prayers have a purpose—not just because they quiet our hearts or help to organize our thoughts. Our prayers have a purpose because they involve another Person. They involve

Someone who knows what you're facing and who has the wisdom and ability to do something about them.

God really does know what you're going through. He really does care. And that's why you can come to God with the pieces of your life and ask God to help you put them together.

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases David's words in *The Message* translation of the Bible:

"Every morning you'll hear me at it again. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on Your altar and watch for fire to descend" (Psalm 5:3, MSG).

Those words are so hopeful—so helpful. When I read these words I began doing this in my mind's eye, with my own prayers. I began laying out the pieces of my life on God's altar, with expectancy in my heart, then watching throughout the day for God's fire to descend—just like it had descended in times past when people offered their sacrifices to God's on an altar.

And I began seeing answers, that very day!

After having just written in my journal about what I should do for the day, I got a text from a neighbor at 7:05 a.m. offering to bring over lunch. Then I received word that an anniversary party was cancelled, which I had been wondering if I should attend or not. Then, after taking a morning walk with my wife and praying with her about a situation our daughter was facing, our daughter texted to say how God had just worked it all out! It was as if God were underscoring the words of David for me about laying out the pieces of his life on God's altar, then waiting in expectation.

It's good to pray at night or at the end of a project, as that allows us time to reflect on what God has done and to give thanks for what's been accomplished. But in order to be most effective, it's also important to offer our prayers up to God on

the front end, inviting Him to speak and to work and to be involved in whatever we're facing.

Martin Luther famously said:

"I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer."

God *wants* to be a co-laborer with you. He has things He wants to accomplish in and through you. And when you talk about those things with Him up front, He can help you sort them out and let you know what He can do and what you can do. In that way, you can bring it to pass *together*.

Not every answer comes right away, but that doesn't mean we still can't have expectancy in our heart. The past few weeks, my kids and I have been praying every morning for some royalty checks to be deposited in my account for some music I've written and produced. While I normally receive these checks monthly, and they help to pay for the ministry that we do, the checks were delayed because of a new arrangement between the music companies involved. Every morning we've been praying, and every day we've been hopeful for an answer. At the same time, I've been working with the music companies, sending emails and making phone calls and having online chats, trying to help move the process along. I'm doing everything I can, but I'm trusting God with those things I can't do. So every day we pray for the people involved in this process—the computer programmers, the accountants, and the decision-makers—asking God to give them wisdom as they work out the details.

Then this past Friday night, for the first time in months, I started seeing those deposits coming into my account. One, two, three, four of them! As the night went on, there were more: five, six, seven, eight! The deposits kept coming as the

system started working again! I praised God, together with my kids, knowing that relief was on the way!

Come to God in the morning. Sit down with Him and go over your day. Ask Him what He wants you to do. Ask Him to do what you know you can't do. Then be on the lookout for His answers. They may not come that day, but they might! And they may not come the next day, or the next month, as I had hoped while waiting for my missing royalties.

But even if you don't see an answer right away, don't think that God isn't working on your behalf. Remember what God told Daniel, through an angel that God sent to him twenty-one days after Daniel had begun praying:

"Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them" (Daniel 10:12).

God hears your prayers the moment you utter them. So why not utter them the first thing in the morning? Invite God into your day. Let Him order your steps. Lay out the pieces of your life on God's altar, then wait in expectation. (Please note the P.S. for today after the prayer.)

Will you pray with me?

Jesus, thank You for loving me the way You do. Thank You for caring for me. Thank You for creating me with a purpose in mind, with good works that You want me to do. Help me, Lord, to accomplish those works today. Help me to know that You'll be with me, working right alongside me, doing what only You can do, while I do whatever I can do. Help me to see the answers to my prayers, whether today, tomorrow, or down the road. Help me to trust You and look to You with a spirit of expectation, knowing that You are good, that You are kind, that You are loving, and that You are ultimately for me. In Jesus' name, Amen.

P.S. As I mentioned earlier in “About This Book,” when I first contemplated writing this series of messages about prayer, I asked my wife, Lana, if she would be willing to read and record each of the thirty-one messages I was going to use in this series. Lana had a beautiful reading voice, and she had recorded other Scripture passages in the past, which I paired with some beautiful music to accompany them in the background. I had sometimes even invited her onstage with me when I would preach so she could read the passage on which I would be preaching, as her voice was so calming and beautiful.

Soon after we planned out the series, Lana was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. We were shocked, but we were committed to prayer and to this series, no matter what. Lana went ahead and recorded all thirty-one passages, plus a few more, knowing that no matter what might happen to her, God’s Word, once sent out, would not return without accomplishing that for which God sent it.

It’s been almost five years now since Lana recorded these passages for this series. And while she passed from this life to the next just a few months after she recorded these psalms, just as a radiant flower blooms one day and then fades the next, she knew that God’s Word would *never* fade away. As it says in Isaiah:

“The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:7-8).

I hope as you go through this devotional you will take time to listen to the recording Lana made of each psalm which goes with that devotional for the day. For instance, you can listen to today’s psalm, Psalm 5, paired with “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” by Johann Sebastian Bach featuring our son, Bo.

Psalms: Lessons in Prayer

I pray as you listen that God will fill your heart with a spirit of expectancy that He *will* answer your prayers. You can listen to the rest of the album, *Lana's Psalms*, at this same link anytime online on The Ranch website, or buy a copy for yourself wherever music is streamed or sold. Here's the link to the whole album:

<http://theranch.org/lanas-psalms>

Lesson 2:

MAGNIFYING PRAYERS



Psalm 8



I SET UP A TELESCOPE ONE NIGHT to look at the moon and the stars. My kids couldn't believe what they were seeing: how detailed and three-dimensional the moon looked, hanging there in space; how many stars there were—hundreds, thousands, millions—all glittering in the night sky.

They could hardly believe that each star was like our own sun—some bigger, some smaller, spread all throughout space! Each flicker of light that looked like it was no bigger than the head of a pin was, in fact, full of power, warmth, and wonder like our own sun—and there were a shining multitude of them everywhere we looked!

All this revelation, all this insight, all this awe came from simply holding a type of magnifying glass up to what we normally see on a regular basis nearly every day.

As I was reading through the psalms and looking for secrets of effective prayer, these words from Psalm 8 stood out to me:

“O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! ... When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?” (Psalm 8:1a, 3-4).

Something happens inside us when we hold up a magnifying glass to the world around us. It opens us up to seeing the incredible work that God has created in a new way. And that fresh perspective can help us to see our own problems in a new way as well.

King David, who wrote these words from Psalm 8 nearly 3,000 years ago, was struck with the same awe and wonder as my kids on the night I set up a telescope for them. As he considered the heavens, the work of God's fingers, the moon and the stars which God had set in place, he burst out in praise! "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!"

And that made David look at his own life in a new way, saying, "What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?"

Yet David realized that God was mindful of him. God did care for him. In fact, the same God who took such care to create the world that David saw created him with the same care—and not only created him with care, but considered him worthy to take care of the incredible creation around him!

God, it seems, has a magnifying glass of His own. When He looks at us, He looks with such detail that He can count the number of hairs on our head (see Luke 12:7). He cares for us so much that He has created us in His own image, and given us the task of caring for the rest of His whole creation.

If you wonder if God cares for you, just take out a magnifying glass today, literally, and look at one or two things in God's creation. You'll get a new perspective on your own life almost immediately.

This is what happened to William Wilberforce, a member of parliament who played a major role in ending the slave trade in England in the early 1800s. He came to faith one day, not by looking up into the sky, but by looking down into the majesty of his garden. What he saw there so fascinated him that he

plopped down on the wet grass to take a closer look. What he saw was the marvel of a spider's web.

The movie *Amazing Grace* captures this faith-defining moment in the life of Wilberforce like this, as his butler finds him in the garden and wonders aloud what he's found:

"It's God," said Wilberforce. "I have 10,000 engagements of state today but I would prefer to spend the day out here getting a wet arse, studying dandelions and marveling at... bloody spider's webs."

"You found God, sir?" the butler asks.

"I think He found me," Wilberforce responds. "You have any idea how inconvenient that is? How idiotic it will sound? I have a political career glittering ahead of me, and in my heart I want spider's webs."

Wilberforce found God by looking closely at a spider's web, or, as he puts it in the movie, "I think He found me."

I learned something new about spider's webs just last week. My son told me that he learned in his biology book that a spider's web is sticky only on certain strands of the silk it weaves, but that other strands aren't sticky at all, so that it doesn't get stuck when scurrying around on its own web. God somehow endowed the spider with the ability to spin different types of silk depending on the need.

I must have missed that fact when I took biology, but it was a little tidbit which enlarged my awe and wonder of God once again. How God instilled in a spider the wisdom and ability to know how to spin a web at all, or which silk to spin for which purpose, made me consider not only how clever the spider is, but how clever the God who created the spider is! And if God did this for a spider, imagine what He's done for me, whom God says He has created as the pinnacle of all He has created on the earth, made in the very image of God Himself!

That thought makes me want to burst out in praise to God as well: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the

earth!” And it made me look at the situations I’m facing today in a new way as well.

What loomed large and overwhelming to me as I began my prayers suddenly seemed puny in comparison to what God could do in each of those situations. Heal a cut? Mend a relationship? Breathe new life into something in my life that has died?

What seemed improbable just moments before thinking about God’s majesty suddenly seemed no problem for the God who placed every star in the sky and knows each one by name (see Psalm 147:4)!

The God who holds creation together can certainly hold my life together as well. By magnifying God and His creation, I can see how small—how manageable—my own problems are in comparison. Whatever I face, God knows how to handle it.

If you’re facing problems today that are overwhelming you, take out a magnifying glass. Literally. Take a look at one or two things around you today—your fingerprint, a flower, or even a spider’s web. Or take out a telescope and look at the nighttime sky. Or just take a look around you at any ordinary object, but look closely to see the colors, the shapes, the details that you may have overlooked before.

Then marvel and wonder at the God who created all that makes up everything you see. Marvel and wonder that the same God who created each of these things created you with the same care—and has believed in you and trusted in you enough to put you in charge of the care of His incredible creation.

Will you pray with me?

Jesus, thank You for your magnificent creation. Thank You for including me in your plans when You created the world. Thank You for Your promise to finish the work You’ve begun in me. Help me to sort

Eric Elder

out the things I'm facing. Bring order to my world. Bring peace to my heart. Bring wisdom to my mind. I ask all this in Your name, Amen.

Lesson 3:

RAW PRAYERS



Psalm 13



ONE OF THE BEAUTIES of reading through the psalms is that it touches on so many emotions that you don't have to read very far into it to find something that will match what you're going through. And when you find that something, you can pour out your heart to God in prayer, often using the same words that you're reading on the pages in front of you.

Within just a few psalms, we've already seen David's emotions range from eager expectation to awe-filled wonder to today's psalm, in which he pours out some raw prayers full of pain and sorrow. Psalm 13 starts with these words:

"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide Your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalm 13, 5-6a).

This is a man in pain, a man in anguish, a man who's wondering if God is even listening any more. In The Message translation of the Bible, David's words are paraphrased like this:

"Long enough, God—You've ignored me long enough. I've looked at the back of Your head long enough" (Psalm 13:, 5-6a, MSG).

Those are some raw words. They're guttural. And they express the real sorrow in his heart..

Maybe you've felt this way before. Maybe you feel this way right now. If so, let me encourage you to say some raw words of your own to God. The pain you're feeling is real, and it's really okay to express to God how you're really feeling. God can take it, and there are times when you just need to say it like David did.

I was speaking to a group of people a few weeks ago who were going through various tragedies in their lives. They had lost husbands or wives, sons or daughters, friends or family members. They were dealing with divorce. They were trying to find their way out of addictions. They were experiencing pain at its worst, and I was asked to speak to them on the topic [Worshipping God in the Hard Times](#).

I don't usually say certain words. They're not part of my normal vocabulary. But during my talk, in an unscripted moment, I covered the microphone and said out loud what I knew many in the room were feeling. I said, "In some of these dark times, you just say, 'God, this really sucks.'" Nods of agreement began throughout the room.

When the night was over, one of the leaders of the group told me that my talk had really touched the people. And the one thing they said that impacted them the most was the moment when I covered the microphone and said what I said. In that moment, they said, they knew that *I knew* exactly what they were going through, and that opened them up to hear the rest of what I had to say.

Sometimes we need to get really honest with God, too—to say exactly what's on our hearts—even if it's not "pretty," or "religious," or what we think we're "supposed" to say. Sometimes we just need to just let it all out—lay it all out—

before God, who sees our pain and knows what's on our hearts already anyway.

Sometimes we read the psalms, or sing them in songs, and they begin to sound so holy, so poetic, so “nice,” that we can miss just how raw they really are. Eugene Petersen, who translated the Psalms from the original Hebrew into English for The Message translation, said this in his introduction to the Psalms:

“In English translation, the Psalms often sound smooth and polished, sonorous with Elizabethan rhythms and diction. As literature, they are beyond compare. But as *prayer*, as the utterances of men and women passionate for God in moments of anger and praise and lament, these translations miss something. *Grammatically*, they are accurate. The scholarship undergirding the translation is superb and devout. But as *prayers* they are not quite right. The Psalms in Hebrew are earthy and rough. They are not genteel. They are not the prayers of nice people, couched in cultured language.”

I can only imagine the types of words David and the 400 men with him used while they were hiding out in the caves of the desert while the king and his army were hunting them down to kill them. The men with David were described as “All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented...” (1 Samuel 22:2a). I can guess that at least a few of their conversations were far from genteel.

And I can believe that at least a few of David's conversations with God sounded just as earthy and rough. I can hear it in the English translation, but only if I really think about what he was really going through and how shocking it is that he really said some of the things he said to God. It's not like David suddenly switched into his “religious” voice when talking to God. He just said it like it was. He told God what He was feeling, in a way that he really felt it.

But then somewhere along the way, while pouring out his pain to God, David begins to praise Him instead. He begins to sing to God that no matter what he's going through, he still trusts in God's unfailing love. No matter what happens, he still praises God for having been so good to him. The psalm ends with these words:

"But I trust in Your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in Your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me" (Psalm 13:5-6).

How can a man go from pouring out his pain to pouring out his praise in the matter of a few sentences? We see the same thing happen in the book of Job, where Job, who has just lost nearly everything that was dear to him in a single day, tears his robes and falls to the ground. Yet he didn't just fall to the ground and lie there. The Bible says "he fell to the ground in worship," saying:

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21).

Somehow, Job was able to pour out his pain and pour out his praise, nearly simultaneously. Somehow, like David, Job knew he could still trust in God's unfailing love—no matter what.

If you're in pain today—in anguish—or if things look so bleak you're not sure how you'll be able to stand it, let me encourage you to try doing what David did, what Job did, and what I at times have had to do: pour out your pain to God, in words that are real and raw, then pour out your praise to Him as well, trusting in God's unfailing love for yourself.

You might feel like God is being slow to show up, taking His dear sweet time to answer your prayers. You might wonder if

He's even listening at all, because you feel like the only thing you can see is the back of His head. But the truth is, God is listening. He does care. And He *is* answering your prayers, even if you can't see those answers yet, or even for a long time.

Pour out your pain. Keep trusting in His unfailing love. And you might just find yourself like David, pouring out your praise as well, saying, "for He has been good to me."

Will you pray with me?

Jesus, thank You for giving us David's example of how to pray raw prayers, guttural prayers, prayers that truly express what's on our hearts. Thank You for letting us see how David and Job and others have been able to not only fall down when they're in pain, but to still worship You as they fall. Help us to talk to You like they did, and help us to trust in You the way they trusted in You. Thank You for being so worthy of our trust and praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 4:

PLEASING PRAYERS



Psalm 19



IN MY PREVIOUS MESSAGE, I talked about the value of saying “raw prayers,” prayers that pour out to God exactly what’s on your heart, without regard for whether it sounds pretty, or religious, or even kind. God can take it—and He already knows what’s in your heart anyway. Sometimes you just have to say it.

But in today’s message, I want to talk about the value of saying “pleasing prayers,” prayers that are also honest, but which are intentional about being pleasing to God. As a parent, I’m glad when my kids feel the freedom to come to me and express their raw emotions that they’re feeling on their hearts, without holding back for fear of what I might think. While it might sting sometimes, and their perceptions may not always be right, it helps to know what they’re honestly thinking so we can work through their thoughts together. But I’m also glad when they intentionally take time to say things which they truly believe, and which they know will please me .

Such is the case in David’s prayer today, which he ends with these words:

“May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Psalm 19:14).

This entire Psalm is filled with “pleasing words,” words which David carefully and intentionally poured out to the God who gave him life.

He starts by talking about how glorious God is, and how His creation declares His glory to the ends of the earth:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Psalm 19:1-4a).

I can see how those words would be pleasing to the God, the Creator, the One who created the earth and everything in it. Then he continues by speaking poetically about how magnificently the sun crosses the sky:

“In the heavens He has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat” (Psalm 19:4b-6).

Then he launches into a carefully worded *anaphora*, a grammatical technique of emphasizing an idea by repeating that same idea in different ways. The Psalms are some of the first writings in the world to use this technique which has been subsequently used by writers like Shakespeare and speechmakers like Churchill:

*“The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.
The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever.*

*The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous.”
(Psalm 19:7-9).*

When I read this Psalm this week, I thought, “Imagine the care and thoughtfulness David must have put into crafting his words of praise to God in this way. He took a topic that was dear to him and dear to God’s heart, and then through repeating phrases, was able to express to God what he was feeling deep inside.”

I wondered what it would do for my prayer life if I could be as careful and thoughtful in my prayers to God as David was in this Psalm. It seemed like so much work, though, so I just continued writing in my journal as I normally do. But what came out of my pen next surprised me! It was a fully formed anaphora of my own!

*“A desire for alcohol is not only for alcohol, but for relief from pain.
A desire for a person is not only for that person, but for relief from
loneliness.
A desire for food is not only for food, but for relief from hunger....”*

My poem went on for several more lines, describing the various things that people crave to bring relief from real pains. I was surprised at how easily the thoughts flowed from my mind to the paper in front of me. At the end of my thoughts, and my conversation with God, I wrote:

*“Thank You for my mind and the ability You’ve given me to think. It’s
remarkable. Thank You.”*

And as I wrote those words, along with my thanks and praise to God for something I saw that He had created—my mind—I felt a touch of what David must have felt when he wrote his words, giving thanks and praise to God for something he saw

that God had created—the heavens and His Word. Any father would be pleased to hear his children think and speak about those things in the world around him which the Father had a hand in creating. It shows honor and respect and true thankfulness.

There's a time and place for "raw prayers," prayers that just pour out whatever's on our hearts to God, however they might sound. But there's also a time and place for "pleasing prayers," prayers that are carefully crafted to express other truths on our hearts that *also* bring pleasure and praise to the God who gave us life.

These aren't words to butter up God to get what we want, but to honestly acknowledge Him for who He is, realizing how good and right and wise and perfect He is in all of His ways, and in all that He's created—including us.

We can trust Him and trust His Word, even when He says things we don't want to hear. We can trust Him that He really does know best.

What words could you speak today that would be pleasing to God? What insights has He given you into His ways or His Word or His creation that could bring out your praise for Him that is truly in your heart?

Why not take some time to voice those thoughts to Him, to write them out with a pen and paper, or type them out on a keyboard or keypad, or voice them out in a song or a poem?

Let the words within you flow out from your heart as a stream of praise to Him, as David's words did when he said:

"May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer" (Psalm 19:14).

Will you pray with me?

Father God, thank You for letting us see that David not only poured out his pain, but also his praise, in a way that ultimately brought pleasure and glory to You. Help us to do the same, being honest and real with our problems and pains, but also with our praise and adoration. Help us to think carefully and intentionally about ways we can bring glory to You, both in our hearts and in our words that flow out of them. Let them be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 5:

COMFORTING PRAYERS



Psalm 23



THERE ARE MANY WAYS to look at today's psalm, Psalm 23, which is perhaps the most famous psalm in the book of Psalms, and perhaps the most famous passage in the whole Bible. Today, I'm looking at what we can learn from Psalm 23 about praying more effectively.

Prayer often involves asking for God's help or wisdom, and the struggle of knowing to do or how things will work out in a given situation. The beauty of this prayer, however, is that it is simply an invitation to let God comfort you; a chance to put your whole faith and trust in Him; to let Him take full control of your life and your situations; to allow Him to lead you beside still waters, lie down in the green grass, and restore your soul; and to put your trust Him, knowing that no matter what comes your way, He'll be with you.

Listen to the words David wrote:

*"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
He leads me beside quiet waters,
He restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for You are with me;*

*Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”
(Psalm 23:1-4).*

David was a shepherd, and he knew that good shepherds watch out for their sheep. When David was a shepherd, he had attacked and killed a lion one day and a bear another, all to protect his precious sheep. He knew the care that shepherds take of their sheep. So when he faced troubles of his own, it's not surprising that he talked to God in terms that he understood well: “The Lord is my *Shepherd*.”

Sometimes we just need to let God's comfort pour over us—to slow down long enough to let Him speak His soothing words to our hearts.

One way I've found to do this—to slow down and let God speak deeply to *my* heart—is to take time and savor not just every thought in a portion of Scripture, but every *word*.

Take the first sentence of Psalm 23, for instance. It has only five words: “The Lord is my Shepherd.” But if you'll focus on each and every word, you'll see how God can use a simple sentence to speak volumes to your heart.

Think about the first word: THE. THE Lord is my Shepherd. Not “a” Lord or “some” Lord or “any” Lord, but THE Lord, THE One and Only God, THE Lord of all creation, THE Author and Perfecter of your life. That's your Shepherd. That's the One you're talking to. That's your Lord. “THE Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Think about the second word: LORD. The LORD is my Shepherd. What's a lord? A lord is a master, a ruler, a caller of the shots. And if God is *your* lord, that means that you're not! He's got this. And He's not just ANY lord, He's THE Lord, THE Ruler over all, THE One Who's got the whole world in His hands, including you. He's totally trustworthy, because He's THE LORD.

Then think about the third word: IS. The Lord IS my Shepherd. It's not "The Lord WAS my Shepherd, years ago, when I needed Him to save me, or when He showed up that one time in a special way." It's not "The Lord WILL BE my Shepherd, some day in the future when I get my act together or clean things up a bit." But it's "The Lord IS my Shepherd, right now, today in the midst of everything I'm going through." The Lord IS your Shepherd, if He really is. And if He's not, then there's no reason to wait even one more minute—you can make Him your Lord today, right now! Then you'll be you'll be able to say, like David did, "The Lord IS my Shepherd! I shall not want!"

You're getting how this works. Let's do two more, and you can think through them with me.

Think about the fourth word: MY. The Lord is MY Shepherd. What does that say about you, that the Lord is *your* Shepherd? If He's *your* Shepherd, that means He's actually, truly concerned about *you*! Not just the world in general, or the people around you, but *you*! When Jesus told the parable about the good shepherd, what did He say about that shepherd's heart for the one lost sheep—out of the hundred that He had? He said that the shepherd would go after that one sheep because He didn't want even one of His sheep to be lost. God really cares about *you*, personally. He is *your* Shepherd, just like He is *mine*. "The Lord is MY Shepherd, I shall not want."

Now let's finish with the last word: SHEPHERD. The Lord is my SHEPHERD. What's a shepherd's job? To look after the sheep. That's their whole job! They take the sheep out to green pastures to get food. They lead them beside still waters to get water. They let them lie down to take a rest. They protect them from wild beasts. And they bring them back home again when the time is right, leading them through the gate when it's time to sleep. "The Lord is my SHEPHERD, I shall not want."

We've only looked at five simple words in this psalm, but you can see how those simple words can speak volumes when you slowly focus on each one, letting God speak to your heart. And perhaps you can see why David concluded this prayer to God with the words that he did, knowing that the Lord was *his* Shepherd:

*"Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Psalm 23:6).*

If you ever need comfort from the Lord, take your time, and let Him speak to you. Don't hurry through it. Come back to Him and His Word again and again, meditating on a few more words, and a few more until the comfort of God pours over your heart. Let His goodness and love follow you today and tomorrow and all the days of your life.

I think God knew we could all use a bit of comfort now and then. No wonder this is the most famous passage in the Bible!

Will you pray with me?

Father God, thank You for being our Lord and our Shepherd. Thank You for David's example of coming to You and receiving Your comfort and goodness and love. Help us today as we continue to spend time in Your presence, whatever we do next, to know that Your goodness and love will follow us throughout this day today, and all of our days ahead, if we'll keep putting our faith and trust in You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 6:

REJOICING PRAYERS



Psalm 30



TODAY'S PSALM REMINDS ME that there are seasons for everything. Here in Illinois, summers are hot, over 100 degrees Fahrenheit many days. Winters are cold, often below 32 degrees for many days, with snowstorms that block us in our homes for hours. Spring and fall are beautiful, with budding flowers and blossoming trees in the spring, and changing leaves and crisp, cool nights in the fall.

As George Carlin says (in what is probably the most accurate weather forecast of all time):

“The weather will continue to change on and off for a long, long time.”

The seasons in our life change, too. And as much as I sometimes wish things would never change, there are definitely times when I wish they would: like living through the pain of losing my wife to cancer, for instance. Thankfully, God promises that the hard times we go through won't last forever, that the pain we may be facing now can one day be behind us.

As King David said in Psalm 30:

“Sing to the Lord, you saints of His; praise His holy name. For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Sometimes it's hard to believe, but it's true: "Rejoicing comes in the morning."

When I first went through the book of psalms five years ago, looking for ways to pray more effectively, my wife was going through her cancer treatments. Things looked bleak, and they turned out even bleaker, as she passed away just nine months after her initial diagnosis. I couldn't see anything in the future other than blank, gray days of nothingness. There was nothing that I could imagine ahead for me if she were to die.

As I read this psalm back then, I wrote some notes to myself:

"God says that weeping lasts for but a moment, and in light of eternity He's right, even if it seems longer than a moment here. Rejoicing comes in the morning. Wailing turns into dancing."

I couldn't see far enough ahead at the time to know what was going to happen or to know if that would ever be true for me. But it's been five years now since I first took those notes, and I can look back now and see how true those words were. God was right. He really did bring back my joy. He eventually turned my wailing into dancing.

But in the midst of that painful season, I didn't even *want* to think about rejoicing some day. I didn't *want* to think about dancing some day in the future, or any time in the future. I just wanted things to go back to the way they were *before* tragedy hit, *before* our lives were turned upside down.

At that time, I was asked if I would be willing to film an interview to give people hope who were facing terminal illness. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to talk about it. I frankly didn't know what I could say. Saying anything was like admitting that the prognosis in our case was, in fact, terminal. But I felt God wanted me to do it, so I did, and the film team called the short

interview *Eric's Hope*. A few months later, and two weeks before my wife died, a couple more people from the team came to our house to film another interview, this time with our whole family. They called it *Lana's Hope*.

One of the things I remember distinctly at that time was a conversation with the woman who asked me to do the interviews. She was writing a screenplay for a feature film they were going to be making in Hollywood based on a fictional story of a woman facing terminal cancer. She asked me if I wanted to know what happens at the end of the movie. I said, "No, I really don't."

She said, "It's good. You might want to hear it."

I said, again, "No, I really don't."

I didn't want to hear that someday everything would get better for the husband in the movie, or that he got married again or something, and that somehow, some way, everything turned out to be okay. I didn't know how the movie was going to end, but I didn't *want* to know, because whatever it was, it couldn't possibly be better than it was for me and our family before my wife got sick. I couldn't imagine having to live in this world without her, and I didn't want to have to think about it.

But you know what? That Hollywood movie came out last fall in theaters, and online just a few weeks ago, so I watched it Friday night. There were still moments that were hard, but you know what? I realized I no longer had that stabbing pain I once had. And the ending *was* touching, sweet, and hopeful, even if things would never be the same as they were before. (The movie is called *New Life*, and you can watch it wherever movies are streamed or sold.)

My life isn't the same as it was before our lives took that turn. And it never will be. But I have seen God turn my weeping into rejoicing, my wailing into dancing. Things *do*

change, and sometimes, very thankfully so. As Mark Twain is credited as saying:

“If you don’t like the weather in New England now, just wait a few minutes.”

I sometimes wish things would never change. But that’s as unlikely as wishing the weather would never change.

When praying, keep in mind there are seasons in life, too. Too hot? Just wait. Too cold? Hang on a bit. Weeping? Rejoicing comes in the morning. Wailing? God can turn it into dancing.

No, things may not go back to the way they were before. But the truth is that as much as I sometimes wish things would never change, there are *definitely* times when I am thankful that they do.

“Sing to the Lord, you saints of His; praise His holy name. For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

Will you pray with me?

Father God, thank You for the changing seasons, and thank You for the changing seasons in our lives. I pray that You would give us hope today in the fact that some things DO change, that things WON’T always be the same as they are now, and that there are times when that is the BEST way for You to work in and through our lives the way that You want to. Help us to keep putting our trust and faith in You, for as much as things here on earth may change, You never do. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Lesson 7:

SWEET PRAYERS



Psalm 34



I LOVE CHOCOLATE CHIP COOKIES. I especially love them when they're fresh out of the oven, warm and chewy, with the chocolate melting into strands when you pull them apart.

But I know I wouldn't like them as much if a few of the ingredients were missing. If there were no butter, they'd just be a clumpy mass of dough. If there were no baking soda, they'd flatten out on the tray. If there were no salt or vanilla or sugar, they'd be almost tasteless. It takes all of the ingredients, mixed together, to make that delicious, mouth-watering moment when they come out of the oven.

Life does have some very "tasty" moments, but to bring them about, it requires mixing all the right ingredients together. And to be honest, some of those ingredients don't taste so great on their own. I wouldn't want to eat a stick of butter. I wouldn't want to eat a cup of flour. I wouldn't want to eat a spoonful of salt or vanilla, or even a cup of sugar, as sweet as it is, without the other ingredients mixed in.

But sometimes that's what life gives us; the ingredients come to us one by one, then we get frustrated and wonder what in the world is going on. "This isn't what I asked for! This isn't what I prayed about! This isn't the way things were supposed to go!" The beautiful thing about God is this: He mixes it all together for good. Notice the word "together" in Romans 8:28:

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28, NKJV).

God takes all things and works them *together* for good. He’s a Master Chef, and that means God can make something good out of *anything* that life throws our way, even those things that we might think are initially bitter or totally useless on their own.

In Psalm 34, David experiences one of those mouth-watering moments, when everything is mixed together just right. His cookies have just come out of the oven, and he can’t help himself from bursting into song, at one point singing:

“Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him” (Psalm 34:8).

But what makes this moment so sweet, so mouth-wateringly delicious, are ALL the ingredients that went into it. David sings God’s praises because he realizes that only God could turn everything he had gone through into something good.

The heading of Psalm 34 tells us what had just happened:

“Psalm 34. Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left.”

David had been on the run from King Saul, who was trying to kill him. Then David found himself in the presence of another king—an enemy—who might have also tried to kill him.

Thinking quickly, David pretended to be insane:

“So he pretended to be insane in their presence; and while he was in their hands he acted like a madman, making marks on the doors of the gate and letting saliva run down his beard.”

King Achish [his proper name, also called Abimelek as in Psalm 34, which is his title] said to his servants:

“Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?” (1 Samuel 21:13-15).

And it worked! Abimelek sent him away. Then David burst into song. Victory never tasted so sweet—which is why he probably sang, “Taste and see that the Lord is good...”

Individually, some of the ingredients that went into David’s song were pretty bitter. Facing death from one enemy only to find himself facing death from another. But God worked it all together for good, giving him a way of escape (and eventually making David the king over all the other kings in that land). David got a taste of the sweetness of God that day—and he savored every bite.

There are times in our lives when things come together just right, even for that moment, and we could burst into song as well. My encouragement to you today is this: go ahead and burst into song! Pray a prayer of thanksgiving to God for working all things *together* for good.

Savor every bite. Sing a song of praise. Pour out your heart to Him in thanksgiving. You may not be totally out of the fire yet, as David still had obstacles in his way until he finally became king himself. But take time out along the way to give praise to God for what He’s brought you through so far, for what He’s already worked out for good in your life.

I had one of those mouth-watering moments myself yesterday, where I had a few minutes before I picked up my kids from an activity. I decided to go to a nearby park, sit on the grass, and write in my journal.

As I sat down, I read through this Psalm again. I began to thank God for all the things that He had worked out recently in my life: I had been driving a car that kept breaking down, but I now had another car that I had found at a reasonable price; I had been working on a new book that has been a challenge for various reasons, but I had now finished 3/4ths of it so far; I had been going through a long winter here in Illinois, but I was now enjoying the spring breeze and the scent of blossoms in the trees; and I had been hungry for just a little something right before I came to the park, and I had found a vending machine a few hundred feet from where I sat which had a small packet of M&M candies in it—Dark Chocolate Mint M&M's at that, a rare treat—and I was savoring them slowly, one or two at a time while I prayed.

That didn't mean that everything in my life was going the way I wanted it to. It wasn't. And it didn't mean that I didn't still have obstacles ahead that I would have to overcome. But in those moments, I was able to taste and see that the Lord was good—and His goodness just so happened to taste like Dark Chocolate Mint M&M's.

What are *you* going through today that God might be mixing together for your good? Maybe you're still having to eat all of the ingredients one at a time, and they don't taste so good. But maybe there are some parts of your life that have already been mixed together for good, and which *could* taste sweet if you took time to stop and think about it for a few minutes. It wasn't so sweet when my car broke down on the freeway for the final time on a cold winter morning, but it made it all the sweeter yesterday when I was able to roll down my windows once again on a warm spring day. What had been a big deal—and a big pain—just a few months ago, had turned into something extra sweet on an otherwise “ordinary” day yesterday.

If you need help thinking through the things God may have done for you lately, take a closer look at David's psalm of thanksgiving, Psalm 34. Take a look at some of the things God had saved him from that made the victory so sweet when it did come. Maybe you'll find a few things about which you can burst out into song to God today, too.

- I sought the Lord, and He answered me; *He delivered me from all my fears.* (v. 4)
- Those who look to Him are radiant; *their faces are never covered with shame.* (v. 5)
- This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; *He saved him out of all his troubles.* (v. 6)
- The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, *and He delivers them.* (v. 7)
- The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and His ears are attentive to their cry... (v. 15)
- The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (v. 18)
- A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all... (v. 19)

Thank You, God, for mixing ALL things together for good.

Will you pray with me?

Thank You, God, for mixing ALL things together for good. Thank You for the victories You've given us, and for the ingredients we needed to make those victories so sweet. I pray that You would help us to have Your perspective on our lives, not only the sweet times, but the bitter, so that we can enjoy them even more when they all come together. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 8:

DELIGHTED PRAYERS



Psalm 37



PSALM 37 CONTAINS SOME of my favorite verses in the whole Bible, such as this one in verse 4:

“Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

What I love about this verse, and about this psalm is that it talks about the benefits of delighting yourself in the Lord, of enjoying His presence, of enjoying your time with Him. A friend of mine says that when he spends time with the Lord, he often comes away with a smile on his face, even if he didn’t enter into his time with the Lord with one. It’s like spending time with a dear friend.

Changing a frown into a smile is just one of the benefits, though. God goes further and promises that if you’ll delight yourself in Him, He will give you the desires of your heart.

I was sharing with someone yesterday about the first time I fasted and prayed for a period of several days. On the second day of my fast, I was praying for a woman I had dated in college, but we were no longer dating. She was trying to make a decision about a job, and I told her I would pray for her during my time of fasting and prayer that week.

On the second day of my fast, as I was praying for her, I suddenly had an image of her, not in the job that she was praying about, but married and living a different life than the one she was currently living. It struck me that God didn't want her to take that job, but He did have a man in mind for her to marry. I changed my prayers and said, "Yes, Lord, give her a husband."

Before I had even finished saying that prayer, these words came into my mind as clear as any words I had ever heard from Him before: "Why don't you marry her?"

I was stunned! That's not what I was praying about at all! I was just praying for direction for her life—not mine!

I closed my journal and decided I must have been getting delirious from having not eaten. It wasn't that I didn't love her and didn't love dating her. I did. But at the time, I just didn't feel it was right for us to keep dating. It turned out that during our time apart, we both fell in love with Christ and gave our lives to Him, in separate cities, in separate ways. We were now both fully committed to Him first and foremost, and we were beginning to live new lives for the first time.

Maybe God really was speaking to me. Maybe He really did want me to consider that question: "Why don't you marry her?" We lived over 1,000 miles apart and over four hours away by plane. It didn't seem practical. But the question wouldn't leave me for two weeks. I began to pray more intensely, setting aside the next three months to pray about the question, not telling her anything about it.

By the end of those three months, I could hardly think of anything else but marrying this woman! God had put such a love for her in my heart like I had never felt before.

At the end of the three months, I called her to see how she was doing. She said, "I feel like God wants me to quit my job, so

I'm going to quit in the next few months. But I have no idea what I'm going to do next."

I could hardly keep my heart from leaping out of my chest. "I have an idea," I said. I told her what I felt God had spoken to me when I was praying for her three months earlier, and how much I would love to get back together with her again—for life. Now she was the one who went into shock!

She liked her new life in her new city. She liked the new friends she was making. She liked the church in which she had gotten involved. And she liked me, but she wasn't sure she was ready for getting married just yet. Over the course of the next few months, it began to look more and more doubtful that we would ever get together again. But then I read a verse in the Bible, a verse that gave me hope. It was from another Psalm, but with the same theme as the one I quoted above:

"May He give you the desire of your heart and make all your plans succeed. We will shout for joy when you are victorious and will lift up our banners in the name of our God. May the Lord grant all your requests" (Psalm 20:4-5).

As I read those words, they became "living and active" within me, as the Bible says about itself in Hebrews 4:12. Those words filled me with faith that it was okay to ask God for something I wanted, and that if He did ever see fit to answer my request, I would shout for joy! I would lift up my banner in the name of my God! Although I was afraid it might sound a little childish, I prayed, "God, I know I don't deserve it, and I know you won't force someone to do anything against their own free will. But if there was only one gift I could ask from you in my life time, it would be to marry Lana."

The prospect of marrying her still looked very bleak before I prayed, and my heart was still very heavy, but in that moment,

it lifted. I knew I could trust God with the outcome, whatever that may be. And I knew I would indeed rejoice fully if it ever did come to pass.

As both of us prayed and sought the Lord more and more over the next few months while we were apart, God seemed to just keep bringing our hearts together, closer and closer. A year later we were married, on April 29th, 1989—28 years ago yesterday.



Our engagement picture, in a field of Texas bluebonnets.

As I read through Psalm 37 again this week, I was reminded of how true God's Word really is.

"Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

I had set aside time to fast and pray for the first time in my life, “delighting myself in the Lord,” and one of the results of that prayer was that God spoke to me: He put a desire in my heart that I wasn’t even considering. He literally “gave me the desire of my heart.” He put that desire within me, and then He fulfilled that desire on our wedding day.

I’m not saying that we will always get everything we want. I’m not saying that our lives won’t be filled with hard things and hard times. I lost my precious wife to cancer four and a half years ago. But I am so thankful that I delighted myself in the Lord that day when I was praying and fasting. I am so thankful that I asked Him to give me the desire of my heart. I am so thankful that God gave me the 23 years of marriage that we *did* have.

And that gives me renewed confidence to keep asking Him to give me the desires of my heart again today—whatever He desires and wants to put on my heart.

This is just one of the benefits of delighting yourself in the Lord, of spending time with Him. Others are listed all throughout this psalm:

- “He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun” (v. 6).
- “For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land” (v. 9).
- “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous” (vv. 16-17).
- “In times of disaster they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty” (v. 19).
- “I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed” (vv. 25-26).

- *“Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace” (v. 37).*
- *“The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; He is their stronghold in time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him” (vv. 39-40).*

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for giving me the desire of my heart, 28 years ago. Thank You for encouraging me again today to keep delighting myself in You, and to keep asking You to give me new desires of my heart, new answers to prayer for the days ahead. Help me to keep delighting in You in prayer, keep delighting in You throughout my days, keep delighting in you even when I'm having to wait patiently for Your answers. I ask all of this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 9:

DEEP PRAYERS



Psalm 42



PSALM 42 BEGINS WITH the words of one of my favorite worship songs when I first became a Christian:

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

The reason this was one of my favorite worship songs was because it spoke to the deep places of my heart. As a new Christian, I just wanted more and more of God. Thirty years later, I still do.

When you read Psalm 42, you can feel David’s deep hunger, his deep thirst for God.

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” (vv. 2-3).

And as you continue reading, you find out that his deep thirst is borne out of the deep pain in his soul:

“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember You from the

land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon—from Mount Mizar” (v. 4-6).

The beauty of these verses is that it not only describes the problem David is facing, but also the solution he found to his problem: putting his hope in God; praising Him still; and remembering Him from the place where he had taken refuge.

It’s the same solution to the problems we’re facing. I heard from a friend yesterday morning whose week was filled with more than a few problems: a flooded basement, electrical issues, a tax problem, getting sick—all of which led to feelings of stress and loneliness. But like David, my friend found the solution in the simple act of turning to God, of actively hoping in Him and trusting in Him. He took away the feelings of despair. While the circumstances hadn’t entirely changed, my friend’s heart and mind changed—by trusting in Him.

Last year, I was able to visit the area in Israel where David most likely wrote this psalm, for he says in verse 5: “I will remember You from the land of the Jordan, the heights of Hermon.” At one point, we stopped along the trail where we were walking, as we had come to a pool of water where it was easy to picture deer coming and quenching their thirst.

We sang, “As the deer panteth for the waters, so my soul longeth after Thee...” And we called out to God from the depths of our hearts to the depths of His. It was a sweet time of intimacy with our God who has the solutions to all of our problems.



Still waters at the Tel Dan Nature Reserve in northern Israel.

At another point, we saw the raging headwaters of the Jordan River, one of the three tributaries which give birth to that significant river that travels the length of the country. As the water crashed in upon itself, it was easy to see how the waves turned into a metaphor for David's song, describing both the tumult that was going on in his own heart, as well as the peace he found through prayer:

"Deep calls to deep in the roar of Your waterfalls; all Your waves and breakers have swept over me. By day the Lord directs His love, at night His song is with me—a prayer to the God of my life" (Psalm 42:7-8).



Headwaters of the Jordan River at Tel Dan

I don't know what problems you might be facing this week. I don't know what troubles my be besetting your soul. I don't know what waves and breakers are sweeping over you. But I do know what can help you through them. I do know Who can satisfy that deep thirst in your soul. I do know what can change your heart and your attitude so you can keep pressing forward, as it changed the heart and attitude of David 3,000 years ago, and of my friend yesterday morning. David summarized

the problem—and the solution—in the final words of his psalm:

“Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God” (Psalm 42:11).

David spoke to his soul. He asked why it was so downcast and so disturbed. Then he spoke to it again, offering the solution that God is offering you today: Put your hope in God. Sing your praise to Him, your Savior and your God. Bring your deep prayers to the One who knows best how to answer them.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for letting us pour out our hearts to you, from the depths of our hearts to the depths of Yours. Thank You for providing the solutions to our problems, the answers to our prayers. Thank You for giving us Your peace even when the breakers and waves are sweeping over us. We pray that You would bring us that peace again today, right now, throughout the day, and in the days that follow. Help us to keep putting our hope and trust and faith in You, for You are worthy of it all. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 10:

SELAH PRAYERS



Psalm 46



IF YOUR LIFE IS CHAOTIC and you need a little peace, listen to God's advice from Psalm 46:

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10a).

This is perhaps one of the most calming verses in the Bible—and it occurs in the middle of a very tumultuous psalm. So much is going on here that by the time you get near the end, those calming words are a welcome respite.

Here are a few of the verses that lead up to those climactic words:

"...we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging" (vv. 1-3).

"Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; He lifts His voice, the earth melts..." (v. 7).

"Come and see the works of the Lord, the desolations He has brought on the earth. He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth; He breaks the bow and shatters the spear, He burns the shields with fire" (vv. 8-9).

And then comes the verse everyone is waiting for:

“Be still, and know that I am God” (v. 10).

It’s almost like a scene from the musical *Hamilton*, as a whirlwind of chaos swirls around Alexander Hamilton at a critical point in his life. The rest of the actors circle around him, picking up chairs and desks and papers, twirling the objects around him and holding them high. Chaos abounds. Then... everything stops.

Hamilton sings, “In the eye of a hurricane, there is quiet for just a moment...” And there is quiet all around as he sings the rest of the song for the next two and a half minutes.

I love the imagery of that scene. Unfortunately for Hamilton, in that quiet moment he looks *inward*, decides to put his trust in *his own strength*—and it *destroys* him.

The writers of Psalm 46, however, look *upward*, decide to put their trust in *God’s strength*—and it *delivers* them.

How can you “be still” with God in a moment like that? How can you experience His presence when life around you is so chaotic? For me, it comes by literally stopping what I’m doing—whether it’s for just a few seconds or just a few hours—but long enough to “Be still, and know that He is God.”

Ever since taking a typing class in high school almost 40 years ago, I’ve always been a fast typist. And I’ve just gotten faster since then as I’ve worked on computers my entire adult life.

But when I spend quiet time with God, I do it “the old fashioned way.” I take out a pen and a journal. I hand write my notes to God. I try to take notes on what I feel He’s impressing on my heart from His Word and from His Spirit.

I try to write slowly—but it doesn’t always happen. Sometimes I rush, and my letters and words become illegible. But the very act of taking out a pen and a journal to

record my thoughts are one way for me to slow down—to “Be still, and know that He is God.”

There’s also a mysterious word that appears in the psalms which helps me, too. It’s mysterious because Bible scholars haven’t found a well-defined translation of it in the ancient world. But from the context in which it is often used, as best as they can tell, the word means, “stop and listen.” It’s the word, “Selah.” It’s a beautiful word, even without any meaning attached. (It’s so beautiful that one of my friends named their daughter “Selah.”)

The word “selah” occurs 74 times in the psalms (and only 3 other times in the whole Bible, in the book of Habakuk), and it occurs 3 times in today’s psalm, Psalm 46. This psalm is clearly a song, for the Hebrew text at the top of it says, “For the director of music....A song.” The word “selah” then appears 3 times, at the end of verses 3, 7 and 11.

For me, whether it means, “Stop and listen,” or as the Amplified Bible translates it, “Pause, and think of that,” whenever I see it in the Bible, it causes me to take a few extra moments to reflect on the words that precede it.

I say all of this to encourage you in your own prayer time with God to “stop and listen,” to “pause, and think of that.” Or as verse 10 says in this psalm, without having to guess at the original meaning of the words, “Be still, and know that I am God.”

I’d like to give you a chance to do this right now. I know you’re busy. I know you’re trying to get through the day and get on to whatever you have to do next. But if you’re able, take a few extra moments sometime today and read through Psalm 46.

Each time you see the word “selah,” stop and listen; pause and think of that; be still, and know that He is God.

Psalm 46

For the director of music, Of the Sons of Korah. According to alamoṯ (also likely a musical term). A song.

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*

*Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam*

and the mountains quake with their surging. Selah

*There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

God is within her, she will not fall;

God will help her at break of day.

Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;

He lifts His voice, the earth melts.

The Lord Almighty is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

Come and see the works of the Lord,

the desolations He has brought on the earth.

He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth;

He breaks the bow and shatters the spear,

He burns the shields with fire.

“Be still, and know that I am God;

I will be exalted among the nations,

I will be exalted in the earth.”

The Lord Almighty is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress. Selah

Will you pray with me?

*Father, thank You for letting us be still and know that You are God.
Help us to pause throughout our day and throughout our week—
especially when things are so chaotic we can’t think straight. Help us to
know what it means to “stop and listen,” to “pause and think of
that,” to experience those “selah” moments, even with all of the
mystery that this word conveys. We love You, Lord, and we thank You*

Psalms: Lessons in Prayer

for letting us be still and know that You are God again today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 11:

CLEANSING PRAYERS



Psalm 51



SOMETIMES WE THINK our sins are too big for God to forgive. But Jesus didn't die for only the sins that we feel are "petty." He died for *all* our sins, even those which we feel are the most grievous. A sin that leads to death might seem too hard for God to forgive, but if Jesus didn't die for *those*, He wouldn't have had to die at all.

In Psalm 51, David pours out His heart to God in prayer over what are perhaps the most grievous sins he had ever committed—his adultery with Bathsheba, who was another man's wife, and the subsequent cover-up and murder of her husband.

The consequences David had to face from his actions were real, as the child born to him and Bathsheba died. But the cleansing that God poured out on him was real, too, as David poured out his confession to God. Listen to David's heart as he begins his prayer:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are

proved right when You speak and justified when You judge” (Psalm 51:1-4).

David pleads for God’s mercy. He acknowledges the evil of what he’s done. And he acknowledges God’s right to judge him accordingly. Yet he *pleads* for God’s mercy nonetheless.

One of the reasons I find the Bible to be so trustworthy is that it doesn’t gloss over or try to cover up the sins of some of the most heroic figures contained within it. If I think of some of my own sins that are most grievous to me, and if you think of some of your own sins that are most grievous to you, can you imagine having them recorded in a book for everyone to see? Yet I am so thankful that David’s sins were recorded in the pages of the Bible, giving me hope that the same God who forgave David can also forgive me. If I thought that God could only forgive sins that I thought were petty, or if the Bible only recorded sins that seemed trivial, I might think that I could somehow pay the price for my sins myself, doing a few more good deeds, or giving more generously, or in some other way. But David’s words remind me that this is not what God wants. He wants our hearts, broken and contrite:

“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (vv. 16-17).

That is exactly what David offers to God. That is exactly what I offered to God on the night that I put my trust in Him for everything in my life. And that is exactly what every one of us can offer to God, whenever we sin, to whatever extent that we sin, even for those sins which we might feel are the most grievous.

As you pray to God, come to Him and ask for forgiveness for even your biggest of sins. Then let Him forgive you, since the price for those sins has already been paid when Jesus died on the cross in your place. To not accept God's forgiveness—and the joy that is possible from that forgiveness—would be like leaving an Easter basket filled with candy on the counter at the store, a basket for which your father has already paid and which truly belongs to you.

But sometimes we leave our baskets of forgiveness sitting on the counter. We don't pick them up and truly enjoy the healing that forgiveness can bring because we don't feel like we deserve it. We don't! But our Father didn't buy it for us because we deserved it. He bought it for us because He loves us. He doesn't want us to die. He knew we would need it one day, so we could once again feel loved and accepted, cleansed and forgiven—otherwise we might melt in a permanent puddle of shame and regret and guilt, never to rise up again.

None of us has a perfect moral scorecard. But God wants us to know that He will gladly forgive us of any and all of our sins if we will simply acknowledge those sins before Him; pour out our broken and contrite hearts to Him; and trust in Him, that He truly has bought our forgiveness at the price of His Son on the cross.

Don't leave the basket of forgiveness and cleansing and true joy on the counter. That's not why He bought it for you. He bought it because He loves you. He adores you. And He *doesn't* want you to die. By faith, through prayer, God will give to you what He has already purchased for you: forgiveness, cleansing, and true joy.

When David came before God, he acknowledged God's ability to forgive. David said:

“Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity” (vv. 7-9).

Then David called out to God to do a mighty work in his heart; a work that he knew he couldn’t do on his own; a work that only God, the creator of his heart, could do:

“Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn back to You” (vv. 10-13).

If you need a clean heart today, whether it’s the first time you’ve asked God to do this mighty work in your life or the hundredth time, I’d like to lead you in a prayer of cleansing—a prayer straight from the words King David prayed after committing some of the most grievous sins of his life.

Will you pray with me?

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge... You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise... Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones You have crushed rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast

spirit within me. Do not cast me from Your presence or take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners will turn back to You” (Psalm 51:1-4, 16-17, 7-13). In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Lesson 12:

STRONG PRAYERS



Psalm 62



SOMETIMES YOU JUST NEED to lean on God's shoulder; you just need to feel the strength of His power; you just need to rest in the fact that no matter what comes your way, everything's going to be okay, because you know that God is holding you close.

When I read Psalm 62, it helps me to do just that: It helps me to lean on God's shoulder; it helps me to feel the strength of His power; it helps me to rest in the fact that no matter what comes my way, everything's going to be okay, because I know that God is holding me close.

I love the way David begins this psalm:

*"My soul finds rest in God alone;
My salvation comes from Him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation;
He is my fortress, I will never be shaken."
(Psalm 62:1-2).*

God's so strong that when we lean on Him, we can truly find rest. He's our rock. He's our salvation. He's our fortress. We will never be shaken.

As a man, I love being independent: making a way where there is no way, leading the charge through life and helping

others whom God has entrusted to my care. That's how I'm wired. Yet, I also realize that I have limits, that I can't do everything on my own, and that there are times when I need—and I want—someone else on whom *I* can rely, someone else to whom *I* can turn, someone else in whom *I* can place my trust. And that “someone else” is often the God who created me—the God who built the rocks on which I stand.

As one man said to another on a TV show called *When Calls the Heart*:

“You're a self-made man, Mr. Coulter, and you should be proud of that. But no one does it alone. We all need help at times.”

We *do* all need help at times. David was strong. David was a leader. David took hold of life with a passion. Yet, David realized his limits, too. And when he did, he knew where to turn to find someone stronger than himself. He turned to the God who created the rocks on which he was standing.

I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases David's opening words in Psalm 62 in *The Message* version of the Bible:

*“God, the one and only—
I'll wait as long as He says.
Everything I need comes from Him,
so why not?
He's solid rock under my feet,
breathing room for my soul.”
(Psalm 62:1-2, MSG)*

I was reading these words three years ago while sitting on a beach in Cancun—a rare treat for me. I was there for just 48 hours, but they were 48 hours in which I knew I was going to need God's help. It was my 25th wedding anniversary—and I was taking the trip alone.

My wife had passed away just over a year earlier. I didn't know how I would handle it, being all alone—being afraid I might capsize under yet another wave of grief.

But sitting there on the beach, all alone on my anniversary, I came upon Psalm 62. I read David's words, written at a time when he could have easily capsized, too. I took heart when I read how, at such a tenuous time in his life, David leaned on God.

*"God, the one and only—
I'll wait as long as He says.*

*Everything I need comes from Him,
so why not?"*

In that moment, I realized that everything really *did* come from God—even my dear wife whom I had lost and was missing so much. I realized that if God was able to provide a wife for me all those years ago—not to mention every other blessing I had ever enjoyed in my life—that I could trust Him to provide anything I might need now or ever in the future.

I wrote in the margin of my Bible:

"Father, thank You for reconnecting me with this truth; that You are the one and only; that everything I need comes from You—even Lana came from You. You are my source and my strength."

Instead of the wave of grief I had feared, I was overwhelmed by a wave of peace; a wave of love; a wave of rest in the fact *that I knew that I knew* that I could trust God with this, too.

It's hard to wait on God, I know. It's hard to wait when there are bills to pay, people depending on you, or a doctor's report

that hasn't yet come in. It's hard to wait when a baby's on the way, a life mate hasn't appeared, or a job offer hasn't been forthcoming. It's hard to wait in a checkout lane, at a traffic light, or for dinner to get done. It's just plain hard to wait when there's so much living to do!

But David knew he could trust God still—"in the waiting."

*"I'll wait as long as He says.
Everything I need comes from Him,
so why not?"*

If you're facing something today that you're afraid might overwhelm you, I'd like to encourage you to say some "strong prayers" of your own to God, prayers where you truly lean on His strength, rest confidently in His love, and know that He is with you, for you, and is solid as a rock. Take heart from the words of David, which continue in Psalm 62, that what God was able to do for him, He is able to do for you:

*"Find rest, O my soul, in God alone;
My hope comes from Him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation;
He is my fortress, I will not be shaken.
My salvation and my honor depend on God;
He is my mighty rock, my refuge.
Trust in Him at all times, O people;
Pour out your hearts to Him,
For God is our refuge."
(Psalm 62:6-8)*

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for having such strong shoulders upon which we can lean. Thank You for letting us come to You today and rest in Your

arms once again. Thank You for being there for us when we come to the end of ourselves. Take over, Lord, and take us beyond where we could have taken ourselves on our own. Help us to trust in You, to wait on You, and to enjoy this time of waiting while we are with You. You are our rock, our fortress, and our salvation. Help us to never be afraid, knowing that You are for us and with us, now and until the end of the age. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 13:

EARNEST PRAYERS



Psalm 63



IN THE PLAY *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a man named Jack pretends to be a man named Earnest—a name he has chosen for himself whenever he wants to hide his real identity. Ironically, a woman falls in love with him and, believing his name to be Earnest, tells him that she loves his name so much she can't imagine marrying a man who *wasn't* named Earnest.

And so begins a journey of discovery for the man who is *pretending* to be Earnest, on his way to learning the importance of *being* Earnest (in more ways than one).

In our prayer lives, it seems that God is wanting us to do the same: not just pretending to be earnest, but truly being earnest, truly seeking Him from our hearts.

As I look through Psalm 63, I see David doing just that: earnestly seeking God from his heart:

“God, You are my God, earnestly I seek You; my soul thirsts for You, my body longs for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water” (v. 1).

In the heading for this psalm, it says that David wrote it when he was in the desert of Judah. For many of us, we speak of being in a desert figuratively, when times are tough or circumstances are dry. For David, he was literally thirsty and his

body was literally longing for refreshment, for he was truly in a dry and weary land where there was no water.

How amazing then, that David came to God with his thirst and his longing, intentionally remembering from where his help would come. David lifted up his hands to God and sang:

"I have seen You in the sanctuary and beheld Your power and Your glory. Because Your love is better than life, my lips will glorify You. I will praise You as long as I live, and in Your name I will lift up my hands" (vv. 2-4).

Here's a man who knows the importance of being earnest. He lifts his hands to God, knowing that God is the one who can answer the prayers on his heart.

God wants us to do the same. He wants us to lift up our hands to God, intentionally remembering that He is the one who can answer the prayers on our hearts. He is the one to whom we can express our thoughts and desires, our hopes and our dreams, and our belief that He will answer us when we call to Him.

It takes great faith to come to God in this way, to pour out our hearts to Him. Yet great faith is what pleases God the most, when we come to Him believing that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. As it says in the book of Hebrews:

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6).

What about you? Do you believe that God exists? Do you believe He rewards those who earnestly seek Him? It's okay if you can't answer those questions right away. It's okay if it takes

some time to think them through and come to your own conclusions. But in the end, know that it is your earnest prayers that God wants the most, your earnest seeking of Him, and your honest belief in Him.

I was reminded yesterday morning of God's actual presence once again—not His far-off, distant, presence somewhere “out there,” but His manifest presence, right here with me in the very room where I'm writing this message.

I had been pondering a thought yesterday morning that I wanted to send to a friend. So I wrote it out and included a quote that was given to me by another friend 25 years ago. I sent it off.

When my friend wrote back, I had to get down on my knees and praise God. Why? Because my friend had been reading a book at that very moment which included the quote that I had just sent... a quote I had only heard in passing 25 years ago and have never seen in print before or since! To me, it was a sign of God's manifest presence, a sign that He was right there, right then, right with me in my room. My only response was to drop down on my knees and say, “Thank You, Lord. Thank You for being right here with me, right now. Thank You for speaking to me, speaking through me, and speaking to yet another believer in the process.”

When David came to God, he came earnestly. He came full of faith. He came knowing that God was there, and that He was the Only one who could truly quench his deep thirst, truly satisfy the longings on his heart. David said:

“My soul will be satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise You. On my bed I remember You; I think of You through the watches of the night. Because You are my help, I sing in the shadow of Your wings. My soul clings to You; Your right hand upholds me” (vv. 5-8).

David held on tight to God, and God held on tight to him. What a rich picture of a very rich relationship! I long for that kind of relationship with God, too!

I was thinking of this idea again earlier this week, about the importance of being earnest, as I watched one of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movies with my kids. There's a point in the third movie where, in order to make something happen, someone must speak these words to a woman named Calypso: "Calypso, I release you from your human bonds."

When one of the characters does so, nothing happens. Another character says, "He didn't say it right. You have to say it right." So this second character leans over to Calypso and whispers in her ear as if to a lover: "Calypso, I release you from your human bonds." He used the same words, but with an entirely different tone. And when he did, all kinds of things began to happen!

I'm not saying that you have to say just the right thing in the just the right way to move the heart of God. But I am saying that God wants you to come to Him full of faith, truly believing that He's there, that He cares, and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. Because He is there. He does care. And He does reward those who earnestly seek Him.

How do I know? Not only because the Bible tells me so, but because God Himself has confirmed it's so—over and over and over again—as I've come to Him with my own earnest prayers.

I know He'd love to confirm it to you, too. Come to Him with your earnest prayers, and discover for yourself the importance of being *Earnest*.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for letting us come to You, anytime day or night, with those things that are on our hearts. I pray that You would hear our prayers today, answering them as You see fit, giving us a strong

sense of Your presence as we do. Lord, we come to You today in faith, truly believing that You exist and that You reward those who earnestly seek You. And Lord, we pray now that You would satisfy those longings on our heart, longings which perhaps only You truly know are deep within us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 14:

SAVING PRAYERS



Psalm 69



I'M WRITING THIS MESSAGE from the Caribbean island of Trinidad, where earlier this week a tropical storm swept through and threatened to cancel the men's retreat where I was scheduled to speak. But late Friday night, we finally made it to the retreat center, and even at that late hour, the other men arrived, also, eager to hear about the power of God to rescue and save us when we put our faith in Him.

It is this same power that King David called upon from God in Psalm 69, a time when the flood waters were rising in his own life. Listen to David's cry for help at the beginning of this psalm:

*"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold.
I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me.
I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched.
My eyes fail, looking for my God."
(Psalm 69:1-3)*

David wasn't just crying for help. He was screaming... screaming to the point where he had worn out his voice.

What can we learn about prayer from this psalm? For starters, it's a reminder once again that prayer is not always

polite and holy. As my friend who is on this trip with me, Jeff Williams, says, “Drowning men don’t whistle. They scream.”

If you’re going to be honest with God, you can’t pretend that everything’s okay when it’s not. If you’re fine, say so. But if you’re not fine, it’s okay to say that, too.

What also intrigues me about this prayer is that David knows Who to come to for help. He didn’t scream into thin air. He screamed to the God Whom he knew could save him. Listen to his cry as it continues:

*“But I pray to You, O Lord, in the time of Your favor;
in Your great love, O God, answer me with Your sure salvation.
Rescue me from the mire, do not let me sink;
deliver me from those who hate me, from the deep waters.
Do not let the floodwaters engulf me or the depths swallow me up or the
pit close its mouth over me.
Answer me, O Lord, out of the goodness of Your love;
in Your great mercy turn to me.
Do not hide Your face from Your servant;
answer me quickly, for I am in trouble.”
(Psalm 69:13-17)*

There’s something about David’s relationship with God that caused him to keep coming back to God over and over again—even when he felt that God was distant and not answering him. The beauty of this is summed up in the words of a new friend I’ve made here on the island, Pastor Mitchell John, who says, “When we call to someone and they don’t answer, we usually give up and try calling someone else. But David doesn’t change Who he’s calling, Who he’s crying out to, Who he is supplicating. He keeps calling out to God.”

Why would David call out to the God who he feels isn’t answering his prayers? There’s a clue in this psalm as to why. David talks to God in a way that calls on His favor, His love,

His salvation (v13). David knows what God is like. He knows from his previous interactions with God and from his previous experiences. So when David sees no tangible evidence of God in his present situation, he doesn't give up and call someone else. He calls on the One Whom he knows is there—the only One Who is able to help.

So he keeps calling. He keeps crying out. Even when he's losing hope, he knows that his God is the God of hope. So he continues to call, even after his voice gives out. He's obviously wondering, crying and questioning, but in the end, he knows where to turn for help.

What about you? Who do you call for help? How do you pour out your requests when the waters have come up to your neck, when you're sinking into the miry depths with no foothold, when you're worn out from calling and your throat is parched? I'd like to encourage you to keep calling out to God. Keep calling the only One Who can truly save you. Don't hang up and call someone else. Trust in God's favor, God's love, God's salvation.

Maybe you feel like screaming, but you're not sure if it's okay to do so. But if you're going to explore the width and the depth of prayer, take some queues from David and give it a try. If it was okay for David, I think it would be okay for you. You might even need to truly scream! You might want to close your doors first. Or take a walk. Or sit in your car. Or scream into your pillow. But however you do it, don't cry out into thin air. Cry out to the One Who can truly help you best!

Sometimes you need to get really honest with God.

You don't have to pretend with God. You can tell him how you really feel, remembering to thank Him for the good in your life that you do experience, but being honest about the hurts you feel as well.

I've been mulling over a statement lately from a book written by a woman who lost her husband, and how hard it was for her to make small talk with others while she was still dying inside. She said it's like they were asking her:

"Aside from that, how was the play, Mrs. Lincoln?"

Thankfully, you don't have to make small talk with God. If you're in pain, you can say so. If you need help, you can say so. If you're dying inside, you can say so.

Why? Because God already knows, and because He is the only One Who can truly save you. He is the One Who can rescue you. He is the One Who can reach down into your situation and pull you out of the pit.

Listen to David's words, near the end of this psalm:

"I am in pain and distress; may Your salvation, O God, protect me"
(v. 29).

Whether you're drowning or in pain or lonely or heartbroken or suffering or in need of saving, cry out to God. If you've never put your faith in Christ for your salvation, do it today. If you've already trusted God for your eternal life, know that you can trust Him for your life here on earth, too.

Our God is a saving God. Call on Him to save you today.
Will you pray with me?

God, save us! Help us as the flood waters rise around us! Help us as we feel like we're drowning and don't know where else to turn. God, we trust in You, in Your favor, Your love, Your salvation. Help us to be honest with You today. Help us to keep putting our faith and trust in You. And help us to keep looking to You for our salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 15:

PRIMING PRAYERS

Psalm 100



A hand pump and “ball thistles” on the farm where I grew up.

I LIVE ON A FARM that has an old hand pump on it. We seldom use it anymore, so to get the water to come out the well, you have to “prime the pump”—meaning you pour a cupful of water down inside the pipe, which moisturizes a leather ring on a cylinder, which creates the suction needed to draw out more water. Just a cupful of water can release a fairly unlimited supply of water!

Sometimes we need to do the same thing in our prayer times with God. Sometimes we’re able to come to Him with a song that’s already in our hearts; a song we’re just bursting to sing to Him. At other times we come to Him with barely a cupful of water, and we need *Him* to pour out a song into *our* hearts.

Thankfully, He can do that, too! All we need to do is to pour out a cupful of praise, thereby “priming the pump,” which then can release a fairly unlimited supply of praise in return!

Psalm 100 is one of those psalms that always seems to help me prime my pump, bringing me quickly into an atmosphere of praise. It's a short psalm, just 5 verses long, and it takes just 30-40 seconds to read. Yet for those who take its words to heart, it can release a strong and steady stream of praise .

Listen to the words of Psalm 100, which is subtitled in the Bible as, "A psalm. For giving thanks."

*"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before Him with joyful songs.
"Know that the Lord is God.
It is He Who made us, and we are His;
we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.
'Enter His gates with thanksgiving
and His courts with praise;
give thanks to Him and praise His name.
'For the Lord is good and His love endures forever;
His faithfulness continues through all generations."
(Psalm 100:1-5)*

Lana and I put this psalm on the cover of our "Order of Service" for the day we got married, so a copy of this psalm was handed to everyone as they entered the doors of the sanctuary. We felt it was a fitting psalm for a day when we were naturally bursting with praise—and it was! There was no need for priming the pump that day! Our hearts were already overflowing with praise!

But there have been other days that I have pulled up this psalm when my heart wasn't naturally bursting with praise, and I've found there's at least a cupful of praise in this psalm to get things going again. A few of the reasons why we can praise God, even on rainy days, are contained within the psalm itself. It begins with a shout! In my last message, I talked about shouting

to God when you're angry or upset. But in this message, I'd like to encourage you to shout out a word of praise to God, joining the rest of the earth in its praise of God as well.

Shout out the word "Hallelujah!" for instance, which simply means "Praise God!" in Hebrew (originally "Halal Yah!"). For some reason, I really love saying it in the original Hebrew! And when I do, it becomes more than just a "Woo-Hoo!" to God; it's a "Halal Yah!" to Him, a praise to the Almighty God Who created me, Who loves me and Who gives me every breath I take. It's a "breathy" word of praise, with no hard consonants, like p's or k's, to interrupt the flow. Just pure praise. Pure breath. Pure worship from my spirit to His. And in return, God has often poured out a good dose of His Spirit back into me—and a fairly unlimited supply at that!

It also helps when I say it with a smile—with gladness, as Psalm 5 says in verse 2. There's something about saying "Halal Yah!" that just makes me smile naturally, too. It's a "whoop-de-doo!" kind of a word to me. "Halal Yah!" It's joyous. It's victorious. And it brings out the true gladness that I know is down in my heart. All of this is from just the first two verses of this worshipful psalm:

*"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before Him with joyful songs."*

The next verse gives me a few reasons for praising God. They speak about how He is ours, and we are His:

*"Know that the Lord is God.
It is He Who made us, and we are His;
we are His people, the sheep of His pasture."*

Now there's a reason to praise God! He's our God! He's the One Who made us, and we are His. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture! He cares for us, because we belong to Him.

The next verse continues, telling us *how* we can come to Him, with thanksgiving and praise, knowing that He is ours and we are His:

*"Enter His gates with thanksgiving
and His courts with praise;
give thanks to Him and praise His name."*

Come to Him with a thankful heart. Come to Him with praise. Then, as you enter His courts, give your thanks to Him; give your praise to His name.

Lastly, this psalm reminds me about some of God's best attributes, as listed in the last verse: His goodness, His enduring love, and His faithfulness which continues through all generations.

*"For the Lord is good and His love endures forever;
His faithfulness continues through all generations."*

I've been contemplating rainbows lately, and the powerful imagery they convey. They're more than something for little kids to have on their stickers, or for big movements to have on their flags. They're signs of God's promises to the world He loves.

I saw a rainbow on my way home from Trinidad this week, and it came at a perfect time. Because of a delay at the airport, I missed one of my connecting flights...which meant I would miss my bus later in the day, which meant my plans for the rest of the night would change, too. As everything was getting

backed up in my mind, I was tempted to get upset with the airlines and the agents and officials at customs.

I decided to praise God instead, trusting Him in the midst of it. I had done everything I could do, and I had to trust Him to do everything He could do. After running to one of my gates and watching the door close as the agent said, “We’re sorry, Mr. Elder, we’ve just filled the last seat on the plane,” I was tempted to be dejected again. Instead, I took a few moments to relax and praise God as I began the long walk to the customer service desk, where I was told I could standby for another flight on the other side of the airport, and I took another deep breath and began another long walk to get there.

When I finally arrived at that next gate, I sat down and saw, out the window in front of me, one of the most beautiful rainbows I’ve ever seen. It was coming down through the clouds and practically touched the plane that was sitting outside the window in front of me. I walked over to the window, and pointing it out to the others around me, we all looked at it in wonder.



God's sign of His perpetual love over the plane I was to board.

About 45 minutes later, the rainbow was still there! I've never seen a rainbow last so long! They called my name, and told me there was one more seat on the plane... THAT plane, the one that we had been looking at for so long! It was that plane that had one more seat on it; a seat with my name on it; a seat with a rainbow of God's promise practically touching it.

Sometimes you come to God with a song of praise that's already on your heart. Other times you need to prime the pump

with a cupful of praise to get things going, changing the atmosphere in your heart as well as the atmosphere all around you. Either way, always know that there's an unlimited stream of praise ready and waiting for you to tap into at any moment. Just turn to God. Give Him a shout of praise. Give Him your best "Halal Yah!" Then let Him do the rest.

Will you pray with me?

Father, we praise you! We worship You with thanksgiving in our hearts! Halal Yah! Help us to bring forth the fullness of the praise that we know is deep within us—and even more, that we know is deep within You. Help us to pour out a song of praise from our spirit to Yours, then give us a good dose of Your Holy Ghost in return! Help us to praise You from the depths of our beings, knowing that You are good, that Your love endures forever, and that Your faithfulness continues through all generations. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Lesson 16:

REMEMBERING PRAYERS



Psalm 77



SOME OF YOU MIGHT FEEL like you're hanging on by a thread today. But I want to remind you that God's got a hold of you with His strong arms, and that the ground beneath your feet is much more solid than you think.

I remember as a kid watching an interview about the filming of the movie *Huckleberry Finn*. The actor who played Tom Sawyer said that when they filmed a scene out on a lake, the boat he was in accidentally tipped over, throwing him into the water.

Not knowing how to swim, he struggled for air and began screaming for help. He truly believed he was going to drown. But in the midst of all this, he could hear people screaming back to him from the shore. What were they saying? Why weren't they coming to help him? Didn't they realize he was drowning?

But when their screams finally broke through his own, he could hear them yelling: "Stand up!" He took their advice. He reached his feet for the ground beneath his feet—ground that he thought wasn't there, but it was! He shifted his body and finally stood straight up. He was surprised to see that he was "drowning" in only three feet of water!

The ground beneath his feet was much more solid than he thought.

I'm not saying that the problems you're facing are trivial. I'm not saying that the waters may not be truly deep. They may be. But what I am saying is don't let the water fool you. The ground beneath your feet is much more solid than you think. If you've put your faith in Jesus, then you've put your faith in the most solid rock available to any of us. He is THE ROCK on which we stand.

Reach out your feet for the ground beneath your feet, the ground that you think might not be there. Shift your body and try to stand upright again. Let God reach down with His strong arms and help you do it. Then know that He's got a hold of you, and that the ground beneath your feet is much more solid than you think.

In Psalm 77, we find that the writer, a man named Asaph, was in serious distress, too. He was crying out to God for help, stretching out his hands to God, but he still couldn't find relief:

*"I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands
and my soul refused to be comforted."
(Psalm 77:1-3)*

But by the end of the psalm, Asaph had found his footing again. He was able to stand again on THE ROCK beneath his feet. How did he do it? How was he finally able to stand again?

As best I can tell, he did it by "remembering." He prayed to God, remembering what God had done for His people in the past. Four times in this psalm, Asaph uses some form of the word "remember":

"I remembered You, O God, and I groaned" (v. 3).

"I remembered my songs in the night" (v. 6).

"I will remember the deeds of the Lord;

Yes, I will remember Your miracles of long ago" (v. 11).

And what did he remember? In his case, he thought back to the times when the Israelites thought they were going to drown, too, yet God saved them from doing so. The armies of Egypt were hot in pursuit of them, and only the waters of the Red Sea stood before them. They had nowhere else to go but to run straight into the sea.

And by God's Spirit—by His very breath, the Bible says—the waters convulsed. They parted to the right and to the left. God's breath dried up the floor of the sea beneath their feet and they were able to walk right through it, on solid ground.

Asaph pictures the scene in his mind as he remembers what God had done:

*"The waters saw You, O God,
the waters saw You and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.*

*"The clouds poured down water,
the skies resounded with thunder;
Your arrows flashed back and forth.*

*"Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,
Your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.*

*"Your path led through the sea,
Your way through the mighty waters,
though Your footprints were not seen.*

*"You led Your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron."
(Psalm 77:11-20).*

I hope you can listen to this psalm in the recording I've posted to go along with it. The music I've recorded is exactly the same in both the first half and the second half of this psalm, but because the words are different in those two halves, the music in those two halves have an entirely different feel. As the psalm begins, it sounds like one of the saddest, most mournful songs of all time. But by the end of the psalm, Asaph's words of remembrance makes the music sound exultant! Triumphant! Victorious! It's the exact same music, but it has an entirely different feel!

What's the difference? The difference is that *Asaph remembers what he knows to be true of God*: God is strong, God can save, and even God's breath can make solid ground appear beneath our feet!

What about you? What can you remember today that God has done for you in the past? Was there ever a time when you felt like you were drowning, but God reached down and saved you? When God helped you as you were in distress? When God made a way for you where there was no way?

As you look back over your life, can you remember any times when it seemed like you couldn't go on, but God helped you through it? When you couldn't see a solution, but God made one appear, as if out of thin air? When it looked like everything around you was conspiring to be your end, but it turned out to be just a beginning of something even better than you could have ever imagined?

If so, think about such things! Picture them in your mind! Let those images flow of God's past victories in your life, and let them encourage you now as you face whatever struggle you might be facing now. Let God reach down with His strong arm and lift you up, shift your position, and help you stand again on solid ground.

If you've never put your faith in Christ before, do it today. And if you've already put your faith in Christ, put your faith in Him again today for what you're facing right now, too. Let Him be the SOLID ROCK on which you stand.

Will you pray with me?

God, help us to remember You! Help us to look to You! Help us remember what You've done in the past so we can put our faith and trust in You again today. Jesus, we know that You're our SOLID ROCK. We know You have saved us in the past and You can save us from this, too. Help us when we're drowning. Help us to get our feet back on solid footing once again. Help us to know that You will work in our lives again today as You've worked in our lives in the past. And Lord, let this day be one that we can look back on again in the future, remembering how You saved us in this trial, this struggle, this time of distress, too. In Jesus' mighty name—the SOLID ROCK on which we stand—Amen.

Lesson 17:

YEARNING PRAYERS



Psalm 84



HAVE YOU EVER FELT your heart *lunging* out of your chest towards something or someone—that feeling that you’re being pulled forward by some kind of invisible heartstrings? That’s what it means to yearn: “to have an intense feeling of longing for something, typically something that one has lost or been separated from.”

If you’ve ever prayed for something with an intensity of heart like that, you know what a yearning prayer feels like. One of the best examples of a prayer like this is found in Psalm 84:

*“How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out for the Living God” (vv. 1-2).*

In this case, the psalmist’s heart is lunging towards God—specifically towards God’s dwelling place, that place where the psalmist knew he could meet with God.

I wrote a song one day about my own longing to be with God, to be in His dwelling place, just to know that He was right there with me. The song is called “My Sanctuary,” and the words begin like this:

*All I want, All I need,
Is to be with You and to know You're near.
All I want, All I need,
Is to talk to You, and to know You'll hear.
And I know There's a place
I can go to feel Your presence,
Oh, Lord, bring me there; bring me home.*

At that moment, as I was writing that song, I felt like God had answered my prayer. Suddenly I was right there with Him; in His presence; in His sanctuary. At that moment, it became my sanctuary, too.

I sang:

*This is my sanctuary, Oh Lord!
This is the place that I call my home!
This is my sanctuary, Oh Lord!
And I know when I'm here I'm not alone!*

God answered that “yearning” prayer on my heart, that intense desire to be *near Him; with Him; close to Him*. I can hardly explain the immense *satisfaction* that I felt in the moments that followed—to be in His presence; to enjoy His peace; to experience His relaxing calm.

Sometimes our hearts long for something or someone, when what we're really longing for is what God alone can provide: His immense satisfaction.

I think it's critical, in those moments when we're yearning for something or someone with a heartache that can't be fulfilled, to turn those yearnings towards God. Why? Because sometimes our deepest longings can only be fulfilled by being in His presence—by being so close to Him that we can truly hear His heart about all of the other things for which we're longing.

I spent a few hours of intense prayer one night at a church in Houston. I was praying to know God's will in regards to a particular woman I was seriously considering marrying. I didn't know what God might want, and I didn't want to make a mistake. All I knew was that I *deeply* wanted to marry this woman—if that's what God would want and what she would want as well.

I took a friend along with me to pray in a small chapel at my church. We knelt on the steps at the front of the sanctuary, pleading with God for His answer.

A few verses from the Bible came to mind about how the Holy Spirit can search out the deep things of God and reveal them to us. The verses say:

"However, as it is written: 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him' but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:10-11).

So we leaned into our prayers, asking God's Holy Spirit to search out the deep things of God to see what He might have in store regarding my relationship with this woman. In my mind's eye, I could picture the Holy Spirit taking off from the place where we were praying, then zooming towards the throne room of God. I felt as if my prayers were getting so close to the heart of God that at any minute His Spirit would return to reveal to me His answer.

But just as I thought that answer was about to come, something else happened. It felt as if the Holy Spirit had finally arrived and entered into God's dwelling place, but as soon as He

did, an invisible door shut fast behind Him. All of our prayers stopped. Our seeking ended. That yearning feeling that had been so intense on my heart was gone. Somehow I knew that our prayers had touched the very heart of God. Even though I didn't know the answer, I knew that everything was going to be okay.

A complete stillness—a complete calm—overwhelmed us. Although this wasn't the answer I was expecting, it brought a peace to my heart that passed all understanding; a peace that was worth more to me than any other answer I could have been given. I simply knew that God had heard my prayers, and that He had it all under control.

A few months later, God *did* reveal His answer to my prayers, both to me and to this woman I was hoping to marry, with a clear and resounding “Yes!” A year later, we were walking down the aisle in the same church, in a larger sanctuary just around the corner from that chapel where I had been praying.

I tell you this story not as a formula for how to get whatever you want from God in prayer. It just doesn't work like that, for all kinds of reasons. I tell you this story to encourage you to bring your intense longings to God—whatever those intense desires may be that are on your heart. By bringing them to Him and spending time in His presence, you can find a peace and a satisfaction that you won't be able to find anywhere else on earth.

The bottom line is that you'll be blessed! That's exactly what the writer of Psalm 84 says will happen:

“Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; they are ever praising You. Blessed are those whose strength is in You, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage...”

They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion” (vv. 4-5, 7).

Don’t let those unfulfilled longings on your heart frustrate you forever. Instead, turn those longings into prayers to God. Bring them before Him—and keep bringing them before Him. Let your heart yearn for God Himself, for His presence, for His sanctuary.

Then, as you come into His presence, recognize that you’re in the presence of your Almighty Father, the One Who loves you more than anyone in the world.

Let His peace overwhelm you. Let His wisdom pour out upon you. Let Him solve the puzzles that you can’t solve on your own. Let His comfort, His courage, and His confidence overtake you so that you can stand up once again knowing that “God’s got this.”

As you do this, I pray you’ll come to the same conclusion as the writer of Psalm 84:

*“Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.
For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
the Lord bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless.
O Lord Almighty, blessed is the one who trusts in You” (vv. 10-12).*

Will you pray with me?

Almighty Father, bring us into Your presence today. Bring us into Your dwelling place. Help us turn our yearnings to You, so You can solve the puzzles we can’t solve on our own. Help us to know anything You want us to do or not do. Help us to know what’s right and what’s wrong in every situation. All we want is what You want, God, for we know and

Eric Elder

believe that whatever You want for us will be best. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 18:

TEARFUL PRAYERS



Psalm 88



I WAS ASKING A FRIEND one day why the book of Psalms seemed to be so appealing to so many people worldwide. I asked him, “Of all the Scriptures, what is it about the psalms that make them so especially beloved?”

He described to me the incredible range of emotions which are expressed in the psalms, then he pointed to Psalm 88 as being one of the deepest, most sorrow-filled passages in the whole Bible. When I read it, I was astounded.

I had read the book of Psalms several times before as part of my regular readings through the entire Bible. But to me, after reading through just a few of them, they all began to blur together. Now, however, after hearing my friend say this, I began to see them in a different light.

My friend said, “Maybe it’s because you hadn’t yet been through some of the things the writers of the psalms were describing.” I knew that he was right. It was only after experiencing some of the deepest pains of life did Psalm 88 really speak to me personally.

While this psalm begins like many of the others, with an appeal to God for help, it doesn’t end there. It ends with some of the most poignant words in all of Scripture. Maybe you’ve prayed a prayer like this before. Here’s how the psalmist begins:

*“O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before You.
May my prayer come before You; turn Your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave” (vv.
1-3).*

Whereas other psalms eventually lift us out of the darkness,
this one just gets darker:

*“I am counted among those who go down to the pit;
I am like a man without strength.
I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave,
whom You remember no more, who are cut off from Your care” (vv.
4-6).*

Then, the psalmist begins to blame God for his troubles:

*“You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths.
Your wrath lies heavily upon me; You have overwhelmed me with all
Your waves.
You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive
to them” (vv-6-8).*

As unthinkable as blaming God may seem, it's also natural.
It's natural to question God's wisdom when things are going
wrong. It's natural to question His ways when we're not getting
ours. It's natural to doubt His love when we don't feel loved by
those around us.

But as *natural* as all of those feelings may be, I'm thankful we
serve a *supernatural* God. The truth is we serve a God Who truly
loves us, Who truly helps us, and Who truly works on behalf of
us—even when everything around us seems to be saying just the
opposite.

I chose to highlight this psalm precisely because of the
depths to which it goes. It's not a rosy, cheery picture of life. It's

not even an appeal to a deeper faith. It's simply a tearful cry of help. Sometimes we just need to cry in prayer. And sometimes we just need to know that someone else has been where we are.

I had another friend who always loved symbols of crosses which were empty, crosses which showed that Jesus was no longer on the cross, but rather has been raised to life and is still alive today.

But one time when my friend was in a hospital, laying in bed in excruciating pain, she looked up and saw a cross on the wall in front of her which pictured Jesus hanging on it. He was wearing a crown of thorns on his head and nails were driven through His hands and His feet. My friend said that in that moment, she was comforted in her own pain for the first time. Why? Because she knew there was Someone Who had experienced the depths of the pain and sorrow that she was experiencing.

Sometimes we need to focus on the fact that Jesus has been raised from the dead and was victorious over death. But other times we may need to remember that He suffered immensely. Walking through His suffering with Him can help us as we walk through our own. As the Apostle Paul says, "I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:10-11). Sometimes it's important to know the power of Christ's resurrection as well as sharing in His sufferings.

My friend who loves Psalm 88 finds comfort in knowing that there is someone else who understands his pain; someone else who has experienced his sorrow; someone else who doesn't try to cheer him up or tell him everything's going to be okay, but who simply walks through deep despair just as he has.

If you find yourself in a dark place today, remember that you're not alone. Listen to the author of Psalm 88 as he pours out the final words of his prayer to God. Take heart that you're not alone.

*"Why, O Lord, do You reject me and hide Your face from me?
From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered
your terrors and am in despair.
Your wrath has swept over me; Your terrors have destroyed me.
All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely
engulfed me.
You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness
is my closest friend" (vv. 14-18).*

Remember the suffering of the author of Psalm 88. Remember the suffering of Jesus. And remember the suffering of those who have read and have loved Psalm 88 throughout the centuries because it helps them to know they're not alone.

Will you pray with me?

Father, we don't like suffering. We just don't like it. But Father, we know that somehow we can experience a fellowship with You and a fellowship with Your Son through suffering in a way that we could never experience through any other means. Father, help us to keep turning to you, even with our tears. Help us to know that You understand our suffering more than anyone else could ever understand. Help us to take comfort in the fact that You've been where we are, and that You'll walk with us through this, too. We love You, Lord, and we come again to You today in Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 19:

PROTECTIVE PRAYERS



Psalm 91



IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU LOVE needs God's protection today, I hope you'll read this message.

One of the most frequent types of prayers I pray are prayers for God's protection—for myself and for those I love. While Jesus tells us not to worry, one of the reasons He has to do so is because there's so much to worry about!

My dad had a card he kept on the window sill by the kitchen sink in our home growing up. It said, "Worrying must work. 90% of the things I worry about never happen."

I'm sure that card was a reminder to him, as it often was to me, that many of the things we worry about are not worth worrying about, as they will simply never happen. As the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne said over 400 years ago: "My life has been filled with terrible misfortune; most of which never happened."

The truth is, however, that there are still plenty of things that can and do happen to us and to those we love. What do we do about those? God gives us His answer in Psalm 91, a prayer that is filled with words of trust in God's protection, no matter what might come against us.

Listen to the psalmist's opening words, as he puts his complete trust in God:

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’

Surely He will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence.

He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge;

His faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.

You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.

A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you.”

(Psalm 91:1-7)

I love the imagery of this psalm, which pictures God as a refuge and a fortress, a safe place in the midst of trouble.

The psalmist imagines himself coming to God as a fledgling bird would come to his father, taking refuge under his father’s wings. The psalmist says things like these: “He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge,” “Surely He will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence,” and “You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day.”

There is great protection when we put our trust in God. Even though “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand,” this psalm continues by saying, “but it will not come near you.”

I would never be able to count the number of times I have prayed a prayer of protection over myself and those I love. Every time I turn on the car and back out of the driveway, I pause to pray out loud that God would be with us, that He would protect us, and that we would be able to bless His name

as we go about our day, and that He would bless us as we do. Every time my kids are out late, or someone I know is sick or hurting, or one of my friends is going to be home alone, I pray God's hand of protection over them.

I don't take these prayers for granted, and I don't say them superstitiously, as if somehow by uttering the words versus not uttering the words would act like a magic charm to protect those I love. I say these prayers because I truly believe that prayer works, that when we put our trust in God, we are putting our trust in the One who can truly protect us and dispatch His angels to guard us in all our ways.

The psalmist says as much as he continues:

"You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked.

If you make the Most High your dwelling- even the Lord, who is my refuge-

then no harm will befall you, no disaster will come near your tent.

For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;

they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

You will tread upon the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

'Because he loves me,' says the Lord, 'I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges My name.

He will call upon Me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.

With long life will I satisfy him and show him My salvation.'"

(Psalm 91:8-16)

I don't know about you, but as I read these words, a great peace washes over me. A great comfort and calm comes into my heart. A great trust rises within me. I can breathe a little easier,

knowing that God's got this. He's got it all under control. Even when life seems out of control, I can rest in the fact that God is bigger than anything else that can come against me. Nothing can touch me or those I love unless there is some greater purpose He has in mind.

A friend of mine describes God's protection like the guardrails along the far edges of the road on each side to keep us (our lives) from careening off the edge. While there are plenty of obstacles, pitfalls, breakdowns, tickets for speeding, flat tires—multiple things that can and will happen on our journey—ultimately the providential protection of God will indeed keep us on the road He has designed for us.

If you're needing God's protection today, don't worry. As Jesus said, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34). Instead, put your trust in God. Put your trust in Him for *everything* in your life, as well as the lives of those you love.

Pray that God's hand of protection would be with you as you face the terrors of the night or the arrows that fly by day. Trust that He will command His angels to guard you in all your ways. Know that when you call upon Him, He will answer you. Though a thousand may fall at your side, or ten thousand at your right hand, it will not come near you.

God is worthy of your trust. Keep praying, and keep putting your full faith and trust in Him.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for being a refuge and a fortress, a God in whom we can trust. Thank You for walking with us through the craziness of life, promising that when we put our trust in You, You will protect us when we do. Father, help us to keep trusting in You, even when we face terrors at night or arrows during the day, knowing that You are our

shield and our rampart, a strong wall that protects everyone who take shelter within. Lord, help us not to worry about tomorrow. Help us not to fear what we face today. Instead, help us to pray, and to keep putting our trust in You, all along the way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 20:

SINGING PRAYERS



Psalm 96



SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO sing your prayers. Music gives your prayers an added dimension, an added lift.

As Hans Christian Andersen said: “Where words fail, music speaks.”

When we combine our words with music, it takes our words to a whole new level.

Psalm 96 begins with these words:

“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth” (v. 1).

Then it goes on to list a number of things about which we can sing to Him:

“Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day.

Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples.

For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; He is to be feared above all gods.

For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.

Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and glory are in His sanctuary.

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering and

come into His courts.

*Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness; tremble before Him,
all the earth.*

Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns'” (vv. 2-10a).

The psalms were originally songs, as the word psalm *means* “song.”

Even more specifically, the word psalm comes from the Greek word “psallein,” which means “to pluck,” or to play a stringed instrument, such as a harp.

When we sing songs to God today accompanied by the piano or guitar, we’re actually doing what people have done for thousands of years: putting words to music to give them an added dimension, an added lift.

How can singing lift your prayer life? How can music make your prayer life more effective?

For starters, it can make your prayers more memorable. I have a friend who had trouble remembering anything. But she said that when she was a child, if someone put an idea to music, she remembered it for life.

There’s something about a melody that makes ideas more memorable.

Here in the U.S., when I was a kid, I learned the entire preamble to our constitution because School House Rock set those words to music. Most kids in the U.S. in my generation can sing it by memory still to this day: “We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice and ensure domestic tranquility...”

We also learned about English in the same way, singing songs like “Conjunction Junction”: “Conjunction junction, what’s your function? Hooking up words and phrases and clauses.”

Advertisers, of course, use music to make their products more memorable, and again, here in the U.S., most people in my generation can fill in the blanks in a song like this:

*“Oh, I wish I were an _____,
That is what I truly want to be.
For if I were an _____,
Everyone would be in love with me!”*

(For those not from the U.S. or not from my generation, the answer is “Oscar Meyer Wiener,” a famous brand of hot dogs here.)

But more than just making words more memorable, by putting our words to music, we can make our words more precise, more specific. By adding rhythm and rhyme to our melodies, we can take deep spiritual truths and turn them into “sound bites” which can speak volumes into people’s hearts.

John Newton was a former slave trader who renounced his ways when he put his faith in Christ. When he wrote out his testimony, he did so by combining rhythm and rhyme and setting his words to music. By doing this, people all over the world now know his “testimony in a nutshell,” which begins like this:

*“Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.”*

When you take time to turn your prayers into songs, you can make your prayers more precise, more specific, and more memorable, too.

Has God put a song in your heart? Is there a way you combine that song with a prayer that's on your heart and sing it out to Him?

My encouragement to you today is to try singing out your prayers to God. Try putting a melody to the thoughts that are within you. Try adding some rhythm and rhyme to make them more precise, specific and memorable.

Try singing a new song to God, as the first line of Psalm 96 encourages us to do:

“Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth”

If you need some ideas for topics, you could use some of the topics that are listed in the rest of the psalm. Sing about His salvation, His glory, or His marvelous deeds. Sing about His creation, the heavens, or His glory and strength. Sing about His splendor, or about what it means to you that “The Lord reigns.”

Maybe you play an instrument, maybe you don't. Maybe you have a melody that is uniquely your own, or maybe you can borrow a melody from somewhere else. But if you want to take your prayer life farther and deeper—and help others go farther and deeper in their prayer lives, too—consider “singing a new song to the Lord.”

When you do, you'll find that the words you speak to God will be more precise, specific and memorable, maybe even being repeated and sung by others to help take their prayer lives farther and deeper as well.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for giving us music and rhythm and rhyme. Thank You for putting songs in our hearts that others have written to take our own prayer lives deeper and farther than we could on our own. Help us to bring out new songs from our hearts as well, so that we can

give expression to our thoughts in a way that goes beyond the words themselves. When our words fail or seem to fall short, help us to put them to music to give them an added dimension, a lift. Speak to us, as we consider new ways to speak to You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

P.S. One of the reasons I've been setting the Psalms to classical music this year is to give them an added dimension, an added lift, too. If you haven't listened yet to any of the songs from *Lana's Psalms* that go with this devotional, I hope you will! I love the result! You can listen anytime at theranch.org or wherever music is streamed or sold.

Lesson 21:

PRAISING PRAYERS



Psalm 103



WE'RE LOOKING THROUGH the psalms to find ways to make our prayer lives more effective. One of the most powerful ways is to include “praise” in our prayers, to include some words of acknowledgement that God is worthy of our praise. Doing so has benefits for us and for God.

If you’ve ever been in a conversation with someone that has *not* included any kind of praise and has *not* included any thoughts or words of thankfulness or gratefulness on any level, you know how hard such conversations can be.

But a spoonful of sugar really does help the medicine go down, as Mary Poppins sings. More than that, your words of praise will help to recapture the best of your relationship with God, a relationship built on trust that He is worthy of your praise, and that you are the apple of His eye—no matter what your circumstances may be.

Psalm 103 gives us an example of a prayer filled with praise, a prayer that opens and closes with the words, “Praise the Lord, O my soul.” This psalm of David begins like this:

“Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name.

*Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits—
who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,*

*who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,
who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed
like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:1-5).*

One thing I especially love about this psalm is that David's words of praise seem to be truly flowing from the depths of his being. His words aren't simply in the category of saying something just to "fake it till you make it." His words are true words of praise, words of faith. "Faith it till you make it" might be more like it, as David truly puts his trust in God's goodness and God's benefits.

"Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name," David says. Then he begins to list God's benefits specifically:

- *who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases,*
- *who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion,*
- *who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's*

David had seen God do each of these things. He had seen God forgive his sins. He had seen God heal his diseases. He had seen God redeem his life from the pit, crown him with love and compassion, and satisfy his desires with good things. David remembered what God had done in the past, and trusted God to do so again in the future.

If you've noticed my prayers at the end of these messages, you'll see that I often start with the words "Father, thank You..." and then go on to list some of the things for which I am truly grateful to God. I have journals filled with these types of prayers. Not because my days are always so rosy and cheery,

but because I've made a commitment to myself to try to begin my prayers with words of thanks to God, no matter what else might be going on in my life.

Sometimes I have to push aside the things that are pressing down on me so I can find some words of praise. I know they're within me. I just have to bring them out. So I'll start by writing the words, "Father, thank You..." and think of something that has happened in the past 24 or 48 hours for which I am truly thankful.

This morning, my prayer would go something like this: "Father, thank you for my daughter coming home for this weekend. Thank You for my family gathering together and eating and laughing and crying and watching movies. Thank You for the sunny days when we could be outside and for the rainy ones when everything was watered well."

If this was all you were to read in my journal, you would think I had a most blissful weekend. All in all, it was quite pleasant. But if you read further, you'd find that there were multiple concerns that were on my heart: accidents and injuries, bills that need to be paid, and relationships that need to be ironed out.

If your life is like mine, it's usually a mixed bag of things which are praiseworthy and things which are difficult. By praising God on the front end, however, and praising God again at the end of the conversation, I find it brings balance to my prayers, encouragement to my soul, and blessings to both God's heart and my own.

If you need some ideas to prime the pump of praise in your prayer life, read through Psalm 103. See if you can say any of the words of that psalm with true praise from the depths of your being. Then let your faith begin to flow, putting your trust in God once again for everything in your life.

I'm going to do this myself today as well. If you'd like, you can pray though the rest of Psalm 103 with me here, as I look through the words of David and turn each line that resonates with my heart into a prayer of praise to God. As I often start in my journal, I'll just start with the words, "Father, thank You..." then I'll begin to list those things from this psalm which I can truly say with words of praise from my heart.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You...

- *that You are compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.*
- *that You will not always accuse, nor will You hold Your anger against us forever.*
- *that You don't treat us as our sins deserve.*
- *that as far as the east is from the west, so far have You removed our sins from us.*
- *that You have compassion on us, as a father has compassion on his children.*
- *that even though our days are like grass and quickly forgotten, Your love is everlasting.*

Thank You for being so worthy of our praise. We praise You Lord, from the depths of our souls. We praise Your holy name. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 22:

AVENGING PRAYERS



Psalm 109



IS IT EVER OKAY TO ASK GOD to bring vengeance on someone who is acting maliciously toward us? If David's prayers are any indication of what we can or can't ask of God, then the answer is "Yes."

It's not an easy answer, though, as God's viewpoint on our troubles is not always the same as our own. We can sometimes be wrong in our assessment of others, and we can sometimes minimize our own guilt while magnifying the guilt of others.

Still, there are times when the malice of others is so evil, so awful, and so clear, that it is altogether fitting and proper to ask God to intervene on our behalf, to spare us from further harm, and to bring about justice on those who are acting contemptuously.

Listen to David's prayer in Psalm 109, and see what you think. David begins by explaining the problem as he sees it:

*"O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent,
for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me;
they have spoken against me with lying tongues.
With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause.
In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer.
They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship" (vv. 1-4).*

So far, so good. The harder part for me to read is what David says next, when he begins to ask God about very specific ways he wants God to intervene! Listen to David's boldness:

"Appoint an evil man to oppose him; let an accuser stand at his right hand.

When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him.

May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.

May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.

May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes.

May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.

May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children.

May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation.

May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.

May their sins always remain before the Lord, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth.

For he never thought of doing a kindness, but bounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted.

He loved to pronounce a curse- may it come on him; he found no pleasure in blessing- may it be far from him.

He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil.

May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied forever around him.

May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me" (vv. 5-20).

Those are some pretty strong words! But there have been occasions in my life where I have felt like saying some strong

words like that to God in prayer, too. And if we're going to be honest in our conversations with God, part of being honest means saying things that might not sound as holy or as pious as we think we should sound.

And the truth is, calling on God to bring a stop to wickedness IS holy and pious. Jesus didn't hold back from calling a spade a spade when He said things like, "You snakes! You brood of vipers!" or "You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are" (Matthew 23:33 and 23:15).

There are times when we might need to call a spade a spade, too, asking God to intervene to bring an end to wickedness.

I like calling prayers like these "avenging prayers" because asking God to bring about vengeance is different than taking revenge on someone ourselves. God is the ultimate judge, and calling on Him for justice is calling on Him to do one of the things He is fully qualified and fully capable of doing.

Noah Webster, in his 1828 dictionary, said this about the difference between the words *avenge* and *revenge*: "To *avenge* and *revenge*, radically, are synonymous. But modern usage inclines to make a valuable distinction in the use of these words, restricting *avenge* to the taking of just punishment, and *revenge* to the infliction of pain or evil, maliciously, in an illegal manner."

Calling on God to take action to do what is right and just is very different than asking someone to do something underhanded and equally evil or malicious in return for what they've done to us.

Like David, when I've come to the place where I've had to call on God to bring an end to something evil or wicked that is happening around me, I've taken careful stock of the situation and the people involved first, then I've asked God to bring

about justice on His terms. And, at times, I have seen Him act surprisingly swiftly in response.

In one situation, a man was repeatedly abusing those around him, including me. The man refused to respond to civil requests to cease and desist, and refused to back down from his destructive tirades. When I finally got the courage to call on God to bring an end to his swath of destruction, two days later the man resigned from his position and left town. It was as if God had answered my prayer in a way that David wanted God to answer his, when David said: “May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.”

God is gracious. God is loving. God is kind. Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished. As the Bible says:

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished” (Exodus 34:6b-7a).

I sat in a courtroom one day when a friend of mine was on trial. I was there to testify to his good traits, but I was also there to admit that he had made some really bad decisions that were very harmful to others. While I wanted the judge to be lenient in some ways, I also didn’t want the judge to ignore the harmful things that had been done.

In reading the verdict, the judge commended my friend for the good he had done, and the judge offered the court’s help to turn my friend’s life around. Yet the judge also said, wisely: “The people in this room who have come to support you think you’re a good person, and frankly, I believe you’re a good person, too, but one who’s made some bad decisions. And this court and our society and those you have wronged are not going to tolerate the commission of crimes. There may have been issues

in your life that contributed to those decisions, but there are always going to be issues. This verdict is to get your attention, to require you to make restitution for the wrongs you've done, and to help you to turn your life around."

I felt the judge's sentence was extremely fair, well-reasoned, and compassionate, yet he did not leave the guilty unpunished.

I am thankful that God, being the best judge, is willing to step in and intervene in situations where it would be dangerous and potentially even more destructive for us to try to take matters into our own hands. That's when avenging prayers come in, calling on God to bring about justice. As the Apostle Paul says in the book of Romans:

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:17-19).

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You that You are a good Father and a good Judge. Lord, for those who have wronged us, help us to call on You for help in bringing about justice and bringing about a change in their hearts. Help us to step out of harm's way and let You step in to take up our cause. We pray that You would bring an end to the wickedness of those who are acting maliciously against us, and that You would cause Your light to drive out any remaining darkness. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 23:

FEARLESS PRAYERS



Psalm 112



LAST WEEKEND, I SHARED *my testimony* with the largest live audience I've ever shared with before. Needless to say, I was more than a little bit nervous.

But I took comfort from two things that I'd like to share with you today: 1) that a healthy fear of God is more important than an unhealthy fear of people and 2) that fearless prayers lead to incredible blessings.

You'll find these same principles at work in Psalm 112, which begins with these words:

*"Praise the Lord. Blessed is the man who fears the Lord,
who finds great delight in His commands.
His children will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed" (v. 1-2).*

A healthy fear of God leads to all kinds of blessings. Why? Because following God and His ways inevitably leads to an abundant life, both here on earth and in heaven forever. God doesn't give us His wisdom—His commands—to hold us back from the fullest life possible, but to bless us with the fullest life possible.

Listen to the blessings that Psalm 112 says will follow when we fear God and take delight in His commands:

*“Wealth and riches are in his house,
and his righteousness endures forever.
Even in darkness light dawns for the upright,
for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man.
Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely,
who conducts his affairs with justice.
Surely he will never be shaken;
a righteous man will be remembered forever.
He will have no fear of bad news;
his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord.
His heart is secure, he will have no fear;
in the end he will look in triumph on his foes.
He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor,
his righteousness endures forever;
his horn will be lifted high in honor” (vv 3-9).*

And listen to what happens when we don't take delight in God's ways:

*“The wicked man will see and be vexed,
he will gnash his teeth and waste away;
the longings of the wicked will come to nothing” (v. 10).*

Does this mean that only good will come to those who follow God, and only bad will come to those who don't? Of course not. A simple look at anyone who has committed their life wholeheartedly to their Father in heaven shows that sometimes bad things happen to the best of people, Jesus being the prime example. But listen to what Jesus has to say about a healthy fear of God:

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the

very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:28-31).

When I told a friend a few months ago that I was asked to share my testimony in front of this live audience, my friend said, "Aren't you afraid?" I said that I was, but that I loved talking about Jesus more than anything else, for it is in Him that I've found my hope—and I couldn't wait to share that hope with others.

I said, "If telling people about the most closely held secret of my life means that I can also tell people about how Jesus has worked in my life, then it's worth it. It's not that I'm *not* afraid. I am. I'm just compelled to push through my fears to share what Jesus has done for me."

The truth is, there's coming a day when everyone's secrets will be made known. Everyone's sins will be revealed. My hope is that by revealing *now* how Jesus has helped me to deal with my secrets, others will put their faith in Him so they can deal with theirs.

As Jesus said in the same passage I referenced above:

"So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs.... Whoever acknowledges Me before men, I will also acknowledge him before My Father in heaven. But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in heaven" (vv. 26-27, 32-33).

Just listening to Jesus' words reminds me that the words I speak, and the words I don't speak, are massively important and eternally significant. We can be afraid of those who can kill our bodies, or we can be afraid of the One who can send both body and soul to hell.

As the days got closer for me to share my testimony last week, my fear factor kept increasing. But I took great comfort in the two truths I shared with you at the beginning of this message: 1) that a healthy fear of God is more important than an unhealthy fear of people and 2) that fearless prayers lead to incredible blessings, both for us and for all those around us.

Are there some fearless prayers you need to say today?

And if so, will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for reminding us that we can come to You with our fears, and that as we pray boldly, You can reduce our fears immeasurably, knowing that You will bless those who walk in Your ways. Father, help us to be bold in our witness to You. Help us to share with others the hope we have found in You. Help us to pray fearless prayers, knowing that You will answer those prayers with incredible blessings, both for us and for all those around us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 24:

DAILY PRAYERS



Psalm 118



THERE ARE MANY FAMOUS QUOTES in the Bible, especially in the book of Psalms. But there's one quote in Psalm 118 that helps keep me going each day. The quote is this:

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (v. 24).

I've talked several times in these messages about *special* prayers you can say to God when you're facing *special* problems. But today I'd like to focus on the value of *daily* prayers, *thanking God for each day you're alive*.

Thanking God for each day is not only important when things are going good, but also when things are going bad.

I've mentioned in one of my earlier messages that a few months before my wife died, a film team asked if I would be willing to record [a short message to offer hope](#) to others facing terminal illness. I didn't think I could do it, as I was still trying to find my own reason for hope in the face of the most significant loss in my life.

But I agreed to do the interview, and at one point during the filming, God filled me with incredible hope for myself, too. I was finally able to say that even if the unthinkable happened to my wife, I knew God would still have a reason for me to live.

“My role,” I said, “is to find that reason, fulfill that reason, and walk in that reason.”

While it was a struggle for me to finally get to that point, trying to imagine living life without her, I truly believed those words were true. And here I am, five years later, having found that reason again, fulfilling that reason, and walking in that reason. God has continued to call me to purposeful living, day after day after day.

I know there’s a reason that I’m here. And I know there’s a reason you’re here, too. This *really is* “the day the Lord has made.” I am so thankful for today, and I am continuing to rejoice and be glad in it.

What about you? What kind of day are you facing today? What is God speaking to you, calling you to do and think and be? I know it can be hard some days to believe that God has a calling on your life, but God *really does* want you to know your purpose for living even more than you want to know it. And He *really does* wants you to live THIS day to the fullest, too.

Let me encourage you to say a fresh prayer to God again today, committing THIS day to live for Him and saying, “This is the day the Lord has made; I will rejoice and be glad in it.” Then say it again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, and the next, so that you can keep making the most of *every day* the Lord your God gives to you.

If you need some help in your heart to do this, here are a few cues from the writer of Psalm 118 for how he was able to do it, even when life had him on the ropes at times.

He remembered God’s love endures forever:

“Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; His love endures forever.

Let Israel say: ‘His love endures forever.’

Let the house of Aaron say: ‘His love endures forever.’

Let those who fear the Lord say: ‘His love endures forever’” (vv. 1-4).

He remembered how God had set him free:

"In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and He answered by setting me free.

The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"
(iv. 5-6).

He remembered that God is God and not anyone else:

"The Lord is with me; He is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in man.

It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in princes.

All the nations surrounded me, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off.

They surrounded me on every side, but in the name of the Lord I cut them off.

They swarmed around me like bees, but they died out as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the Lord I cut them off.

I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me" (v. 7-13).

He remembered who gave Him his voice to sing and to praise:

"The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.

Shouts of joy and victory resound in the tents of the righteous: 'The Lord's right hand has done mighty things!'

The Lord's right hand is lifted high; the Lord's right hand has done mighty things!'

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the Lord has done.

The Lord has chastened me severely, but He has not given me over to death" (v. 14-18).

He remembered the Lord with thankfulness:

“Open for me the gates of righteousness; I will enter and give thanks to the Lord.

This is the gate of the Lord through which the righteous may enter.

I will give You thanks, for You answered me; You have become my salvation” (vv. 19-21).

He remembered the Lord for doing miracles:

The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes” (vv. 22-23).

And he remembered that THIS is the day the Lord has made:

“This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (v. 24).

If you need to get your mojo back, do what this psalmist did, and do it daily. Remember that God’s love endures forever. Remember that He has set you free. Remember that He is God and not anyone else. Remember that He is the one who gave you your voice to sing and to praise.

Remember the Lord with thankfulness. Remember the Lord for His miracles. And remember that THIS is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for giving us another day of life. Thank You for giving us a purpose and meaning for today and hope for our future. Thank You for Your eagerness to reveal that purpose and meaning and hope to each one of us. Help us to walk out the calling that You have in mind for us, living each day to the fullest and fulfilling every single thing You want us to fulfill. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Lesson 25:

PEACEFUL PRAYERS



Psalm 122



WE HAVE SIX MORE LESSONS in the book of Psalms, as we learn about prayer and how to make our prayer lives more effective. As we pull into this final stretch, I think today is a good time to talk about recognizing God's answers to our prayers when they come.

Sometimes we're praying for something intensely, expecting the answer to come in a certain way. But when the answer *does* come, we sometimes don't recognize it, because it comes in a way we hadn't expected.

Today's lesson highlights this point, as the topic is praying for peace. "Peace" is a funny thing. I've seen people who are in the midst of chaos, with pandemonium all around them, yet who are experiencing true peace. But I've also seen people who are in the midst of extreme calm, with utter stillness all around them, yet who are experiencing true turmoil.

When we pray for peace, we sometimes miss God's answer when it comes, because God makes His peace available to us in ways we don't always grasp.

First, I want to look at the importance of praying for peace in our circumstances and how God can truly answers those prayers. But second, I want to look at the importance of praying for peace *regardless* of our circumstances and how God can truly answer those prayers, too.

In Psalm 122, David encourages people to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. For a man who had lived most of his life fighting battles against his enemies, I'm sure his prayers for peace were heartfelt. In Psalm 122, David says:

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.' For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, 'Peace be within you.'" (vv. 6-8).

What I love about David's prayer for peace is that God answered those prayers! After years of fighting war after war after war, David *did* experience peace in Jerusalem. As it says in the book of 2 Samuel:

"...the Lord had given him rest^A from all his enemies around him" (2 Samuel 7:1b).

And the peace that David prayed for and experienced lasted into the next generation, as his son, Solomon, later said this after he had become king:

"But now the Lord my God has given me rest on every side, and there is no adversary or disaster" (1 Kings 5:4).

Praise God that He answers our prayers for peace in very physical and tangible ways!

I'd also like to point out, however, that God answers our prayers for peace in ways we sometimes miss because we're expecting that peace to come in another form.

One night, my family was invited by a Jewish man to take part in his family's Seder Meal, the traditional Passover Meal which is celebrated by Jewish people every year.

At the end of the meal, the man who had invited us asked if we had any questions. Since so many of the traditions he talked about referred to the long-awaited Messiah, I asked him what he thought of Jesus--and why he didn't think Jesus *is* that long-awaited Messiah.

He answered, "When the Messiah comes, he will bring peace. As I look around, I don't see peace. So clearly Jesus can't be the Messiah we're looking for."

While I appreciated his answer, I couldn't help thinking that he had missed the fact that was so apparent to me: Jesus *did* bring peace! But the kind of peace this man was expecting wasn't the kind of peace that Jesus brought.

Here's how Jesus described the peace He has offered to each one of us:

"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid ... I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 14:27, 16:33).

The peace Jesus describes is the same peace I experienced when I first put my faith in Him--and which I've continued to experience still, over 30 years later. Had I not experienced this miraculous peace of Christ in my heart, I might still be waiting for another Messiah, too--one who could give me peace as the world gives peace.

But because I've experienced the peace of Christ, I am fully convinced He *is* the Messiah--because no one else could give me the kind of peace that He has given to me.

The Apostle Paul describes this inner peace--and how to get it--like this:

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7).

This peace has carried me through sickness and job loss, anger and fear. It has carried me through tornadoes and hurricanes, mishaps and miscarriages. It has carried me through grief and despair, sorrow and sadness.

Praise God that He answers our prayers for peace in ways that transcend understanding, no matter what is going on in the world around us!

If you need peace today, let me encourage you to pray for it. Put your faith in Christ for everything in your life, from the forgiveness of your sins to the circumstances that you’re facing today. Pray for God to bring peace into your heart. Pray for God to bring peace to the world around you. And like David, pray for the peace of Jerusalem, even today.

Know that God *can* and *will* answer each and every prayer you pray. Then don’t miss His answer when it does come--as it may come in a way you never expected!

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for offering us Your peace--a peace that passes understanding--and for making it available to each and every one of us. Help us to know and to experience Your peace in our hearts. Help us to know and experience Your peace in the world around us. And help us to see Your peace come upon the city of Jerusalem, the city where Jesus the Messiah lived and died and rose again from the dead. We pray all of this in His precious name, Amen.

Lesson 26:

BUILDING PRAYERS



Psalm 127



I AM A FUTURIST. By that, I mean I spend a good deal of time thinking about the future. In fact, I was employed by a Fortune 10 corporation for about 10 years with the specific purpose of advising them on the future of various computer technologies and how those technologies would impact their corporation.

I worked with researchers at Apple and IBM, MIT and NASA. I read papers, went to conferences, and subscribed to dozens of magazines and mailing lists devoted to the study of the future. In many ways, I am now living in the world that I foresaw 30 years ago when I first began doing this type of research.

The funny thing about the future, though, is that we can only predict so much. We're not omniscient—or all knowing—like God is. Without Him, our predictions about the future are only best guesses based on what we can see and the trends that are taking shape.

If we're going to have any success at predicting the future—and making the most of those predictions—we need God to guide us. There's nothing sadder, as others have wisely said, than to spend your whole life climbing the ladder of success only to find, once you reach the top, that your ladder is leaning against the wrong wall.

King Solomon put it like this in Psalm 127:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat...” (Psalm 127:1-2a).

How can we know if our ladder is up against the right wall? How can we know if the Lord is in our building projects, or if we’re just spinning our wheels needlessly? As Stephen Covey says:

“If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster.”

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to get to the wrong place faster! I don’t want to get to the top of the ladder only to realize my ladder is up against the wrong wall! I want every step I take to move me forward, not backward.

But how can I know if the things I’m doing are really what God wants me to do?

That’s where “building” prayers come in: prayers to God to show me if the house I’m working on is the house God *wants* me to work on—or if it’s time to move on.

By staying in touch with the Father on a regular and consistent basis, He can guide our steps. He can show us if we’re headed down the right path, and He can turn us around if we find we’re on the wrong one.

I’ve worked on many houses over my lifetime—literal houses—cleaning, restoring, remodeling, and renovating them. None of them for pay. All of them for love. I’ve worked on houses for my own family, for my extended family, and for others to enjoy. Each and every time, I have to ask God, “Is this

a project You really want me to take on?" Because it's way too much work to spin my wheels endlessly.

And I can say that each time, I have reached various points where I have seriously questioned if God has really asked me to work on it or not. Each and every time, I've reached points where I've had to return to God, again and again, asking for His guidance, His wisdom, and His strength, because it takes way too much time, effort, and resources if He's *not* in it.

I'd like to say I've never wasted one minute, never wasted one penny, never wasted one ounce of strength. I'd like to say those things, but I can't. I've had to regroup and backtrack too many times for that to be the case.

But what I can say is this: there's not one minute I've spent in prayer that hasn't been well-invested. There's not one penny for God's thoughts that hasn't made a return. There's not one ounce of effort on my knees before God that hasn't given me strength. Even though I've made mistakes along the way, and even though I've begun to climb some ladders God hasn't wanted me to climb, He has always helped to redirect me to the ladders He *has* wanted me to climb.

Sometimes God redirects me in ways that are subtle and gentle, other times in ways that are abrupt and painful. But always, He redirects me in ways that keep moving me forward in the right direction for my life—His direction.

There are times when I've been tempted to think that I've just wasted months of energy—mental, physical, and spiritual energy. But at those times, God has reminded me of this:

Time spent seeking My will with all your heart, soul, mind and strength is never wasted. It's always invested, and it will pay huge rewards for years to come.

What about you? What kinds of "houses" are you building where you need God's guidance? Are you building your job? Your career? Your house? Your health? Are you building a

relationship? A friendship? A mentorship? A family? Are there some ladders you're climbing where it would be helpful to know if they're up against the right walls or not?

If so, let me encourage you to pray. Pray some "building" prayers of your own. Ask God for His wisdom, His strength, and His resources to either keep you moving forward or to show if it's time to start climbing another ladder.

One of the most beautiful promises God offers in this psalm comes at the end of the verses I quoted from King Solomon earlier. Here are those verses again, this time with God's promise included at the end of them:

"Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for He grants sleep to those He loves" (Psalm 127:1-2).

There have been a few times, even this week, where I have been working on a project and God has simply said, "Now's the time to rest." I've protested: "But I've got so much more to do!" And God has said, "Sometimes the best next thing you can do is to get some rest." And I've literally gone back to bed for a while.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to be building *anything* in vain. I don't want to rise early and stay up late in vain. I want every moment to count. And sometimes that means getting some rest so you'll be fresh to start "building" again.

God has reminded me this past week again that if I'll keep bringing my projects to Him in prayer—keep putting my efforts into His hands—He'll make the most of every one. He'll guide me when I need guidance. He'll redirect my steps when I need redirecting. And He will give me rest when I need rest, too.

Keep coming to God in prayer. Keep asking Him for *His* direction. And keep trusting that the time you spend seeking God's will is never wasted. It's always invested, and it will pay huge rewards for years to come.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for promising to never leave us alone. Thank You for walking with us every step of the way. We pray that You would guide us today as we move forward with the projects that are on our hearts. Show us which ones are on Your heart, too, and help us to work on them, with You, together. Father, we look forward to the future, knowing that we won't be alone there, either, knowing that You will be with us always, even to the end of the age. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 27:

QUIETING PRAYERS



Psalm 131



SUSANNA WESLEY HAD 19 CHILDREN, two of whom went on to found the Methodist church. How did she ever find a place to spend quiet time with God?

Easy! She sat in a chair and threw her apron over her head! Her children knew not to disturb her during her prayer time.

My late wife Lana and I had six children. Lana was so encouraged when she heard that story about Susanna Wesley that she decided she could make a quiet place in our home to meet with God, too (she didn't have an apron). She cleaned out a 2-1/2 by 2-1/2 square foot space in our closet and laid some blankets on the floor to make it soft. She added a box of tissues, some worship music, and a bag of Nestle Caramel Treasures.

Whenever she needed some quiet time, she would go into her prayer closet, close the door, and put on her music. She read her Bible, sang, prayed, laughed, cried and even danced in that little space. She found it quieted her soul and gave her strength to go on with the day. Lana later recorded a message, called [My Prayer Closet](#), about why she created this special space and how it helped her in her walk with God.

Today's psalm contains a similar theme. In Psalm 131, David says that he "stilled and quieted his soul." Listen to his words in this, one of the shortest psalms in the Bible:

*“My heart is not proud, O Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have stilled and quieted my soul;
like a weaned child with its mother,
like a weaned child is my soul within me.
O Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore” (Psalm 131:1-3).*

Although this is a short psalm, it packs a lot of wisdom into those three short verses about quieting your soul.

David begins by saying, “my heart is not proud” and “my eyes are not haughty.” It’s amazing how pride can cause our souls to become stressed or distressed.

When we worry about how we’ll look in the eyes of others, we can quickly lose our peace. Our minds become preoccupied with how to avoid being thought of as “less than” or “a failure” or “dumb.” We spend money we don’t have to impress others or eat more than we should to make ourselves feel better. We often end up on losing more than we gain, digging ourselves into even deeper difficulties.

If we can take a cue from David instead, we would pray that our hearts would not be proud and our eyes would not be haughty. With nothing to lose in terms of trying to impress others, we can save ourselves from a great deal of grief. By embracing who we are, and not who we aren’t, we can find peace and contentment that can’t be found in any other way.

David goes on to say, “I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me.” This may sound anathema in today’s culture, but sometimes we need to lay down our striving for “great things,” in order to gain something even greater: our peace. With so much to do and so much to accomplish, we sometimes miss the joy of doing those things

along the way. I'm all for trying to make the most out of life, but that also means stopping from time to time and asking God what *His* agenda is for you each day.

I've sometimes been stunned, when praying through my list of things to do, that God will highlight only *one* of them for me to work on for that particular day. "Just do this one thing," God seems to be saying, "and you can have the rest of the day to do whatever else you want." I've found it incredibly freeing, both mentally and physically, to let God set my agenda for the day.

Then David says those words I love the most in this psalm: "But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me."

One of the most peaceful things I've ever witnessed in my life is my wife nursing our children. She would often nurse them for months and even years until they no longer felt the need to nurse. They knew they could come to their mother any time for the peace and comfort of being held in her arms, even after they had been weaned. That calm and peaceful feeling they had while resting in their mother's arms was available to them long after the nursing was over. There is, perhaps, no picture in my mind that is more peaceful.

How can we have that kind of peace with God? By saying "quieting" prayers. By coming to Him not only when we have a great need, but even at those times when we simply want to rest in His arms, to let Him hold onto us, to let Him pull us in close. Even as I write this, I'm encouraging myself to just let God hold onto me, calming me with His peace. I encourage you to do the same, just like David encouraged his fellow Israelites to do with God in the last words of this psalm:

"O Israel, put your hope in the Lord both now and forevermore."

Where are you putting your hope today? If you're putting it in yourself, and your ambitions, and your appearance or accomplishments or achievements, you'll find your peace will be elusive and can falter as quickly as any of those things can falter. But if you'll put your hope in the Lord, both now and forevermore, you can find peace, no matter what else happens to you in life.

Like Susanna Wesley, who found peace in the midst of a houseful of children by simply putting her apron over her head, you and I can find peace by coming to God anytime in prayer.

Ask God to quiet your soul today. Ask Him to give you His peace. Keep putting your hope in Him, both now and forevermore.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for David's example of quieting his soul in the midst of his building, ruling, and defending a great nation. Lord, thank You for the examples of people like Susanna Wesley and my wife Lana who were able to carve out spaces and places to find peace in the midst of their own busy lives. Help each one of us to do the same, starting today. Quiet our souls and help us find peace even now as we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Lesson 28:

SEARCHING PRAYERS



Psalm 139



ONE OF THE MOST INTIMATE MOMENTS I've ever had in a conversation with God came while reading today's psalm, Psalm 139.

I was on a ski trip with my family in northern Illinois. I had just quit my secular job to go into full-time ministry. I had quit my job by faith, knowing that God had called me to do it, but not because I had anything particular lined up ahead of time to do next. I only knew that God wanted me to seek Him, day by day, and to stay as close as possible to Him.

I had no special resources tucked away for this time without a job: only about 10 days' worth of salary in the bank and three kids at home. Because we had planned this trip months in advance with another family and had already paid for it, we decided to go, but I was extra nervous about the idea of skiing as I had also given up my health insurance when I quit. If any of us had any kind of accident on the slopes, we would be completely on our own.

When it came time to ski, I sent my family with the other family to the hills, but I stayed back at the rental house to pray. Although I felt as close to God as I had ever been, my level of anxiety about the future was equally high.

As I began to pray, God showed me my next step—and it petrified me. He wanted me to take the 10 days' worth of salary

in the bank and invest it in a trip to Israel, a country I had never visited before, and a country I had never even *considered* visiting before. I felt stretched in my faith beyond anything I had ever known before, and I thought I would break. “This couldn’t really be what God is saying, is it?” I thought.

I laid down on the couch to take a break from praying when God spoke to my heart in a way that I can only describe as very personal. He knew my anxiety level was at an all-time high, and He wanted to reassure me that yes, He was with me in this, too. He said, very quietly, “Open your Bible, Eric, and read the third line down.”

“Open it to where?” I thought.

“Just open it,” He said, “and look at the third line down.”

“Are you serious, God? This is not a game! This is not Bible roulette!”

But not knowing what else to do, I did what I felt He was saying. Still lying down on the couch, I opened my Bible and looked at the passage on the page. It began with these words:

“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” (vv. 1-3).

There I was, lying down on the couch, and as I read the third line down, two words leapt out as if they were emblazoned with fire, supported by all the other words I had just read:

“You discern my going out and my LYING DOWN; You are familiar with all my ways.”

It wasn’t just “like” God was speaking to me, God WAS speaking to me! If you’ve ever had a moment where you know

that you know that God is real, that He is right there with you, and that He has something very, very important to say to you, this was that kind of moment.

Immediately I was flooded with peace. With comfort. With full trust, knowing that as long as I stayed close to God, He would lead me and walk me through anything He ever called me to do.

As I read the rest of the psalm, I saw that God knew me better than I could ever know myself, that there was nothing hidden from Him, and that there was no where I could go where He would not come with me.

Over the following days and weeks, I followed God's leading day by day, going to Israel, seeing Him work and walk with me in ways He had never done before, beginning the ministry that I am still doing today, 22 years later (but that's a story that would take a whole 'nother book).

I share this story with you before sharing the rest of Psalm 139 because I want you to know that God is with you just as much as He is with me. He knows your heart as well as He knows mine.

Although God highlighted two words for me that day in a way that made them leap off the page and into my heart, the experience served to underscore the truth of EVERY WORD in Psalm 139. EVERY WORD in the psalm is true, and EVERY WORD in it applies equally to you as it does to me.

With that in mind, if you're anxious about today, if you're unsure about what God is calling you to do next, or if you're needing some encouragement that God is really with you—and *will be* with you no matter where you are or what you do—read the following words from Psalm 139 and let them sink deep into your Spirit. Invite God to search your heart and know your anxious thoughts, trusting that He can and will lead you in THE WAY everlasting, if you will stay as close to Him as possible:

*"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.*

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

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.*

If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,'

even the darkness will not be dark to You; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You.

For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

*My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be.*

How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with You.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

(Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24)

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for knowing us so deeply, so intimately. Thank You that there is nowhere on earth, or off the earth, that we could go and NOT have you with us. Lord, You know us better than anyone else knows us, better even than we know ourselves. Search us, O God, and know our hearts; test us and know our anxious thoughts. Reveal to us anything that we would ever need to know; anything that is not right and needs to be corrected, and lead us in the way everlasting, the way that leads to an abundant life in every possible area of our lives. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Lesson 29:

GUIDING PRAYERS



Psalm 143



IF YOU NEED GUIDANCE IN YOUR LIFE, wondering which way you should go, let me encourage you to pray a prayer that David prayed in Psalm 143:

*“Show me the way I should go, for to You I lift up my soul....
Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God;
may Your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (vv. 8b, 10).*

I was asking God to do this very thing a few weeks ago—to show me the way I should go. (I seem to be asking God to do this nearly every day! But for today, I want to tell you three ways God answered my prayers recently.)

I was on a trip out west with my youngest daughter, as we were visiting my middle daughter for a few days in California. There were several things we planned to do on our trip, but there were a few things we really *dreamed* we could do, but they seemed nearly impossible.

As a backdrop for Story #1, my youngest daughter is a huge fan of *America’s Got Talent*. She’s been watching the show all season, and when she found out we were going to be in LA the same week as the filming of the final episode of the show, she wondered if she might be able to see the show and some of the performers she had been watching all year.

I checked into the idea, but the show was already sold out. A few days into our trip, however, I was praying that God would do something special for her—and He did! Even though we couldn't see the finals of the show, we decided to go down to Hollywood the day afterward to see some of the sites.

We parked at a friend's house near downtown Hollywood and started walking towards the area we wanted to see. About five minutes into our 15-minute walk to our destination, my daughter noticed a group of guys walking towards us on the other side of the street. She looked at me and said, "Dad, that's Light Balance, the dance group I've been watching on TV!"

I looked closer at the guys across the street and saw they were all wearing matching T-shirts with the letters "LB" printed on them. And just as we were looking at them, they looked as us! There was no one else on either side of the street, and no cars coming in either direction. It was just us and them!

I told my daughter to wave and say "Hi" since they were already looking at us, and she did. They all stopped and waved back!

We crossed the street, said hello in person, and were able to tell them how much we liked watching their performances all season. We asked if we could take a picture with them, which they were very happy to do.

One of them took a picture of us all, we said goodbye, and went on our way—my heart rejoicing! Not because I got to meet Light Balance, although I was very happy to meet them! My heart was rejoicing because God had answered my prayer to do something special for my daughter. It was one of the highlights of our trip, and it felt like God had specifically guided us to that very spot at that very point in time.



“Light Balance” with my daughter and me

You might think this story is just coincidental, and I might, too, except for story #2.

My middle daughter, who lives in LA, really loves a famous singer—and she has for most of her life. One of her hopes has been to meet him someday, to truly hang out and be genuine friends. During our time with her, I had been praying that God would fulfill some of the special desires that she’s had on her heart as an encouragement to her that she’s at the right place at the right time.

She often attends a mid-week service at a church in LA, so we all went together for the night. The church was meeting that week in a hotel ballroom in Beverly Hills because their normal venue was being used for something else that night.

Just before the service started, the singer she has loved for so long happened to walk in and sit down less than 30 feet away from us!

I told her that God had truly put her in the right place at the right time, and that He would continue to do so as she just kept staying close to Him. Who knew, I said, what God might bring about?

Two weeks later, she happened to be at an event for the church, and not only was this singer there, too, but they had a chance to chat and even share a laugh together about something they both thought was hysterical! It was a brief encounter, but I pray it is the first of many such encounters that will continue to fulfill one of the desires that has been on her heart for many, many years.



Mid-week service in Beverly Hills

You might consider this a chance encounter, too, but the evidence in my mind that it was God who was leading our steps just kept mounting with story #3.

I had a desire on my heart that week in LA, too. I wanted to visit a particular place I had never visited before: a beach about an hour away from where my daughter lived. I didn't think we'd have time to go there, so I didn't mention it. I just asked God that if there *were* a way, that *He* would make it possible.

As the days passed, although it looked like it probably wouldn't work out, I just kept it close to my heart, trusting Him with whatever happened.

And then it happened! I had planned to see another friend who lived there in LA, but his schedule was tight as he was headed out for the weekend. He said he could get together, but it would really help him out if I could give him a ride afterward to a boat dock where he was going to be taking an express boat to his next destination. I looked on the map to see where he needed me to take him, and it was 2 miles from the very place I had been wanting to visit!

I hadn't mentioned it to him. I hadn't mentioned it to my daughters. I had only mentioned it to God in my prayers—a prayer that I thought would be nearly impossible to answer!

I was able to visit my friend, drop him off at the dock, then spend a few precious hours in the spot I only dreamed might possible just a few days earlier! God had done it again, guiding and directing to the right place at the right time.



A walk on the beach

Individually, any of these stories might seem random or coincidental. But collectively, the fact that each story represented each of the different desires on our hearts and different answers to our prayers—any one of which seemed fairly unlikely and nearly impossible—these stories encouraged me that God really does answer our prayers for guidance and direction. He really can put us in the right place at the right time to fulfill His will as well as our desires.

Maybe you feel dismayed today that God hasn't been answering YOUR prayers. If so, you're not alone. Even David felt this way as he began his prayers for guidance to God:

*“O Lord, bear my prayer, listen to my cry for mercy;
in Your faithfulness and righteousness come to my relief...
my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed...”*

I spread out my hands to You; my soul thirsts for You like a parched land.

Answer me quickly, O Lord; my spirit fails.

Do not hide Your face from me or I will be like those who go down to the pit.

Let the morning bring me word of Your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in You” (vv. 1, 4, 6-8a).

If that’s you, today, let me encourage you to keep praying the rest of David’s prayer, too, for God’s guidance and direction in your life.

“Show me the way I should go,

for to You I lift up my soul....

Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God;

may Your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (vv. 8, 10).

Just as God answered David’s prayers 3,000 years ago, and just as God answered my prayers a few weeks ago, I trust and pray that God will answer your prayers—even today.

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for letting us come to You with our prayers for guidance and direction. Thank You for making a way where the way seems nearly impossible. Thank You for Your love, Your faithfulness, and Your encouragement to us to keep praying for guidance and direction, knowing that You care about even the smallest details of our lives. Show us the way to go. Lead us by Your Holy Spirit. Guide us into Your perfect will for our lives, today and forevermore. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Lesson 30:

LIFELONG PRAYERS



Psalm 150



MAYBE YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT the wife who told her husband: "You haven't told me you love me in years!"

To which her husband replied: "I told you I love you on our wedding day, and if that ever changes I'll let you know."

Some people approach their relationship with God the same way. Maybe they got saved one day many years ago, but they rarely, if ever, tell Him how much they love Him anymore.

Or maybe they've put off talking to God their entire lives, hoping to do all the living they can before coming to Him. They think "I'm going to live the way I want to live until the last moment, *then* I'll put my faith in God."

What they don't realize is that waiting like this would be like waiting to fall in love until the last moment of life. They'd be missing out on so much "life" that they could have had all along the way.

Today, I'd like to encourage you to make a lifelong commitment to prayer with God. As long as you still have breath, I hope you'll still be praising the Lord.

As the final line of Psalm 150—the final psalm in the book of Psalms—says:

"Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord"
(Psalm 150:6).

As long as you have breath, praise the Lord.

Praise Him wherever you go. Praise Him for His acts of power. Praise Him for His surpassing greatness. Praise Him with instruments and dancing. Just say it, even now: Praise the Lord!

Psalm 150 is an exuberant psalm, filled with praises to God from the first word to the last. Listen to the joy that is expressed in this psalm:

“Praise the Lord. Praise God in His sanctuary; praise Him in His mighty heavens.

Praise Him for His acts of power; praise Him for His surpassing greatness.

Praise Him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise Him with the harp and lyre,

praise Him with tambourine and dancing, praise Him with the strings and flute,

praise Him with the clash of cymbals, praise Him with resounding cymbals.

Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.”

(Psalm 150:1-6)

The beauty of making a commitment to lifelong prayer with God is that your conversations with Him will never end—not even when you take your last breath here on earth.

My wife was interviewed just a few weeks before her imminent passing into heaven. The interviewer said: “Lana, you don’t seem fearful of death. Why is that?”

Lana said: “I’m actually *not* fearful of death, and the only thing I can attribute it to is just having followed God for so long, waking up and talking to Him each day, throughout the day, He’s helped me through many things. And since I am talking to Him all day long, death will be just like meeting Him and talking to Him all day long.”

Lana's conversations with God didn't end when she took her last breath, and they have continued ever since—now face-to-face.

What a glorious thing to have a lifelong conversation with God here on earth that lasts into eternity.

I have some friends who, after years of knowing them, I still feel like I'm only now *really* getting to know them. I suppose that's one of the reasons God promises to give us an eternity with Him—it will simply take that long for us to even come close to knowing Him the way we'd want to know Him.

After 30 years of following God with all of my heart, soul and mind, I'm still discovering new things about Him nearly every day—when reading His Word, when interacting with His people, when experiencing a nuance about His grace or forgiveness or love that I've never experienced before. I'm continually surprised that there's still more to learn, more to know, and more to understand about Him and this amazing life He's given us.

As I close today, I'd like to remind you of one of my favorite “breathy” prayers, a prayer that is little more than a breath. I mentioned this back in Lesson 15, half-way through this study, and it's worth mentioning again as we talk about about “letting everything that has breath praise the Lord.”

The prayer is simply this: “Halal Yah!”

It's Hebrew for “Praise Yahweh,” or “Praise the Lord.” I call it a “breathy” prayer because there are no hard consonants in the phrase. When you say it out loud, you're just using your breath to say a prayer of praise to God. “Halal Yah!” There are no harsh sounds, no guttural stops in the middle, just a gentle glide of your tongue to the front of your mouth to form the “P” sounds. Otherwise, it's just pure breath.

If you have breath today, try praying this simple breathy prayer yourself: “Halal Yah!”

Say it a few times, over and over. Breathe in deeply of the breath of this life that God has given you today, then breathe out a prayer of praise by saying: “Halal Yah!”

Let this prayer serve as an exclamation point at the end of everything else you have to say to Him, just as the last words of Psalm 150 serve as an exclamation point at the end of everything else that’s been said in the book of Psalms:

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

Take a deep breath, then say it with me: “Halal Yah! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for letting us come to You today and every day with praises on our lips to You. Thank You for the breath You’ve given us today, whether it’s easy to take those breaths or, for some, perhaps a little harder today than on other days. Yet every day we have breath is a day more that we can still praise You. So we praise You today while we still have breath. Hallal Yah! And Lord, when that day finally comes when we take our last breath here on earth, let us step into eternity with You with praises on our lips, then let us breathe deeply of that heavenly air so we can keep on praising You forever. Thank You, Lord, for inviting us into a conversation that will never end. Halal Yah! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Lesson 31:

AMBER SHELLAC



Psalm 119



SOME STORIES TAKE TIME TO TELL. I don't mean they're *long* stories. I mean they're stories that *take a long time* before you can tell them.

Today, I'd like to tell you one of those stories, a story that started five years ago this month. And through this story, I hope to encourage you to keep talking to God in prayer every day for the rest of your life. God loves hearing what's on your heart, and He has so much He wants to say to you.

I've come to really love my conversations with God, every day, all through the day. I feel like I could have written this verse from Psalm 119 that says:

"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103).

Even His words that are as simple as "Amber Shellac."

One of the reasons I've waited to tell this story is because it involves my wife Lana's casket. It's not something I could talk about right then, as there were too many other important things going on. But I'd like to share it now as a way to show how intimacy with God can be achieved over time.

As the final days of Lana's life here on earth drew near, it became clear to us that apart from a miraculous intervention

from God, Lana was about to experience what we all will experience at some point in our lives: the passing from this life to the next.

Lana and I talked about many things in those final days, some of which involved her wishes for her funeral, including her casket. She didn't want anything elaborate—just a plain wooden box.

She remembered seeing Pope John Paul II's funeral on TV about 10 years earlier, and could still see the image in her mind of the plain wooden casket in which he was carried through the streets.

His casket was made of simple wood in a trapezoidal shape. I found a picture of it online and showed it to Lana. She said: "That's it. That's exactly what I want."



Pope John Paul II's simple casket

I called around locally to see if I could find one, but couldn't. So I searched online and found [a man in Provo, Utah](#), who makes simple wooden caskets just like Lana was wanting.

When I called to talk about our situation, he said he could get one to us within a few days if need be, adding that some people order them years ahead of time just to make it easier for others so there's one less decision they have to make later. Lana thought that was a good idea—and if she didn't have to use it for years, all the better!

With a resolve of strength that only God can give for a moment like that, I placed the order, not sure if we'd be using it within days or, if a miracle occurred, getting to save it away for years. Sadly, it was only a matter of days. Lana passed away on November 15, 2012, and her casket arrived the following day.

I had called a friend when I placed the order, a friend who refinishes furniture, to ask if, when the casket arrived, he could refinish it in a style that matched the pope's casket, as it was shipping to us unfinished. He agreed. So when the casket arrived, he picked it up for me at the shipping office and took it back to his shop.



The unfinished casket I ordered

Now under a deadline to get it ready in time for the funeral, my friend went to the hardware store to buy some stain and finish. But as he looked at all of the options, none of them seemed quite right. He considered all kinds of stains, from cherry to walnut to pine, but each one seemed off for some reason. He walked out of the hardware store with one of the options in his hand, but feeling it just wasn't right. Then it came to him, as if out of the blue: "Amber Shellac!"

He had used it for projects in the past, and he KNEW that this was the answer to the riddle he couldn't solve. Amber Shellac would be the perfect finish! He walked back into the store, found the shellac, and left again knowing he had found the solution. He coated the casket in several thin layers of Amber Shellac, and got it done just in time for the funeral.



Lana's casket with Amber Shellac

Lana's casket was perfect. It was just what she wanted, and just what seemed perfectly fitting for her life: simple, pure, and beautiful. It became the centerpiece of those difficult hours as my family and I stood next to it during the visitation and funeral. From time to time during the visitation, as people came through to talk and pray and offer their condolences, I would reach out and stroke the soft, smooth wood of Lana's casket. It was the closest I could get to caressing Lana herself.

I loved Lana's casket, and I know Lana would have loved it, too. We both loved creating and refinishing furniture ourselves. I have built many things from scratch, including the crib that each of our children slept in as infants and a triple bunk bed each of them used at various times as they got older. Lana

refinished everything from desks and tables and rocking chairs to all the wooden trim in nearly every room of our house.

How does this relate to my intimacy with God? That brings us to this week, five years later.

I've been trying to finish a special project this week, creating a prayer room in our house that Lana had envisioned in our then-unfinished attic. We began work on it before she got sick, with family and friends helping us to begin the conversion.

But when Lana got sick, we had to stop our work. When she passed away, I simply lost heart and could hardly bear to think about finishing the room she had envisioned. I would start, then have to stop again. Then start, then stop again.

This year, however, one of the goals I set for myself was to finish the work on the attic that we had started all those years ago. With the help again of some encouraging family and friends, I was able to make progress and see it take final shape before my eyes. I recently added what for me was the *pièce de résistance*, the pinnacle of this special space: a beautiful fireplace, something which I've always wanted in this home, but have never had.

As I lit the fireplace for the first time a few weeks ago, I praised God that this project which has been so many years in the making was nearly finished. All I needed now was to build a wooden frame and mantel over the fireplace to finish it off.

Loving woodworking and all the options that are available to me, I would normally relish thinking through what kind of wood I would choose and the finish that would go on it. But like a woman in labor, I was also at the point where I just wanted to deliver this baby! I said, "God, help me!" as much out of desperation as out of a true prayer that I believed He would answer.

But as soon as I said, "God, help me!" He did!

I remembered Lana's casket, and the answer God had given my friend five years earlier as he was walking out of the hardware store feeling overwhelmed with options, none of which seemed quite right. And just as God's answer came to my friend as if out of the blue, it came to me the same way, and I knew it was right! The perfect answer to my prayer for help: "Amber Shellac!"

Just last night, after days of designing and cutting and sanding the woodwork around the fireplace, I brushed on my first coat of several to come of Amber Shellac—a beautiful and perfect finishing touch to this project that began so many years ago. I am SO looking forward to sitting in this new space soon, with the fireplace going on a cold winter day and seeking God still more with all of my heart.



My fireplace after the first coat of Amber Shellac

It's taken many years—and many prayers—to get to this place. But none of those years and none of those prayers have been wasted, even when I felt like giving up so many times along the way. Those years and those prayers have, in fact, been building an intimacy between God and me that I'm not sure could have been built any other way.

As John Ortberg says in his latest book on the topic of intimacy (and which is subtitled *Getting Real about Getting Close*):

"Intimacy isn't built on grand, elaborate gestures. It doesn't have to be something deep or dramatic—an elaborate, romantic getaway, a dramatic self-disclosure, or sentimental words. Rather, it's made up of a thousand, everyday moments of interaction" (p. 7).

The same applies to our intimacy with God. Sometimes we think we need to get away for a "special" time of prayer with God to really get close to Him. And there is value and purpose in doing that from time to time. But our intimacy with God isn't built on just those "special" times. It's built, rather, on a thousand, everyday moments of interaction with Him—like calling out for help with a woodworking decision and hearing the words: "Amber Shellac!"

I want to encourage you today, and every day, to take time in prayer with God. Take time to talk to Him. Take time to interact with Him, building your intimacy with Him, moment by precious moment.

I want to encourage you to keep "showing up." Keep walking forward. Keep getting up, again and again. For there's great value in even those little things that you do to keep your faith on track. As my daughter, Karis, said this week [in a talk she gave](#) to a group of people at our church who are going through a difficult season in their lives:

"I was telling a friend recently how proud I was of him for staying steadfast when it would be easy to walk away, for declaring that God will always provide, even when situations aren't easy. I want to start celebrating people for staying planted, for staying steadfast in the midst of storms. We usually celebrate people when they do these great things for the Lord, but we don't always celebrate when people stay, when they show up when it'd be easy to walk away, and I want to start doing that more often because I believe that staying is just as valuable. And I want to tell you that tonight, I'm so proud of you for staying. For coming and hearing this message, for choosing to stay in the house of God, and for placing yourself in a position to hear from Him."

Today, I want to tell you the same. I'm proud of you for reading this message. I'm proud of you for coming back to God again and again. I'm proud of you for sticking it out with Him, no matter what, and returning to Him over and over, even when it might have been easier to walk away.

I hope and pray that this study of the book of Psalms has sparked your interest in going further with God—further than you've ever gone before—so that you can truly enjoy fuller, deeper and richer conversations with Him. May these words be true about your conversations with Him from now on and forevermore:

"How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103).

Will you pray with me?

Father, thank You for speaking to us in little ways and little words, like "Amber Shellac," words which may not mean much to others, but mean so much to us. Lord, thank You for wanting to have a conversation with us, as much as, and even more than, we sometimes want to have one with You. I pray today that You would spark in our

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hearts a love for You and Your Word that will carry us through every day ahead, for the rest of our lives. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DESCRIBED BY *USA TODAY* as “a new breed of evangelist,” Eric Elder is an inspirational author, speaker, and contemporary pianist. Eric is also an ordained pastor and the creator of *The Ranch*, a faith-boosting website at theranch.org.

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