

Timeless Beauty and  
the Power to Persevere from

# The Lord of the Psalms

Devotions in Psalms from

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Chaplain of the Oklahoma House of Representatives

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# Introduction: Heart Songs

## CIRQUE GERMANO-MALAGA Section Musique

Examen 1er trimestre 2014-2015 du 13 au 19 décembre

Élève : *Walter...*

Instrument : (Piano) Violon Guitare - Chant Batterie

Professeur : M. *Car...*

> Musique	4,50	/5
> Technique	5,50	/5
> Solfège	5,50	/5
> Posture	4,50	/5

MOYENNE  
**16,24 20**

Observations : *Bonne musicalité Efforts à soutenir*

Handwritten musical score for piano, featuring multiple staves with notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *pp*, *ppp*, *poco ritard*, and *tempo*. The score includes the lyrics "Do \* Do \* Do \* Do \* Do \* Do \* Do" repeated across several lines. The handwriting is in black ink on aged paper.

\* In certains originaux éditions et en quelques photocopies éditions cela ne pouvait se faire.

\*\* In certains éditions cela est écrit.



## Where These Devotions Come From

I want to first thank Speaker Charles McCall for asking me to continue serving as chaplain for the Oklahoma House of Representatives in this second regular session of the 57th Legislature. His confidence in me is most humbling. I also thank every member of this esteemed body, for your generosity towards me since first launching a ministry in Oklahoma a number of years ago.

Allow me to briefly share my mind on this appointment as the Chaplain of the Oklahoma House of Representatives. This office is not mine, but the chaplaincy for this House belongs to the **members** of the House of Representatives. It is a ministry of encouragement and prayer, regardless of person, position, party, or the policies you take up. It is a service based in the simple belief that before they are a politician or elected official, they are people on a journey of public service and leadership.

Each Thursday, the chaplain is afforded a brief time for a devotional message and my plan in the Spring of 2020, if you will forgive my training with its undue bias toward alliteration, is to spend a Session in the Psalms.

Why the Psalms? When I stand before the members of the Oklahoma legislature each week, I do not deliver a Bible study. My purpose is to share a brief message that might inspire, encourage, and even steady their hearts and minds as they perform their weighty task as representatives of the people of Oklahoma. I would never pretend to be wise enough, or graced enough to accomplish this with my words, thoughts, or beliefs. Instead, I must look to something beyond myself. I look to something that transcends time and culture and is a proven source of wisdom and strength in generations past, present, and future.

# Introduction: Heart Songs

## I can think of no better place than the Psalms of ancient Israel.

- They Possess for us Timeless Beauty
- They Contain for us the Power to Persevere
- They Present to us the Person of God

## They Possess for us Timeless Beauty

Even skeptical or cynical critics of the Old Testament will speak to the extraordinary beauty found in the Hebrew Psalms. Their use of parallelism, acrosticism, and imagery have the ability to lift the saddest of hearts. You might ask why beauty matters at all. In the face of cruelty, injustice, tragedy, and division, the best and sometimes only defense is something beautiful.

- “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” Psalm 23 tells us, “I will fear no evil... [for] surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.”
- “I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Psalm 139:14
- “Those who sow in tears will reap songs of joy.” Psalm 126

As poems of faith, the Psalms have something for any of us and all of us. They are beautiful, have stood the test of time and are themselves, timeless.

**While the Torah presents itself as the divine word imparted to the people of Israel, the 150 poems in the Book of Psalms represent a range of human voices: the sounds of lament and of thanksgiving to God, individuals extolling God’s beneficence or imploring God to bring rescue and redemption.**

**In short, the poets in this ancient anthology give voice to sentiments we all share and seek to express at one time or another in our lives. The Book of Psalms is among the most popular and widely read of all the books of the Hebrew Bible. Its continual subjects may be God’s workings and God’s relationships with humankind, but its passions are our own.**

— Rabbi Peretz Rodman

## Introduction: Heart Songs

### They Contain for us the Power to Persevere

We find honesty about the human condition in the Psalms. Their words are not hollow or unhelpful. They give language to the deepest sorrows we feel. Right now, our society faces unprecedented levels of despair, depression, and suicide. Just as most, if not all of us, know the blessing of joy, hope, faith, and love, we also know the pain of grief or the sting of betrayal.

We know what we ought to say when things are good, but what do we say in the face of something that is simply wrong – and when ability to do anything about it is beyond us?

**Laments outnumber every other kind of psalm in the Psalter; almost a third of the psalms belong to this category.**

— *Edward Curtis*

One of my favorite writers was Charles Spurgeon, the nineteenth century British Pastor and the most prolific writer in church history. He compiled hundreds of pages of comments on the Psalms published in a three volume work entitled the Treasury of David.

In his introduction, Spurgeon writes,

**Although this introduction was the work of my health, this volume of notes on the Psalms is the product of my sickness. When protracted illness and weakness laid me aside...**

**I resorted to my pen.**

— *Charles Spurgeon*

## Introduction: Heart Songs

Spurgeon was plagued by debilitating depression. Whether his illness was physical or his struggle was depression, it was in the Psalms that he found the power to persevere.

Earlier this week, we took a moment to reflect on the tragedy in Moore, Okla. The senseless and needless loss of life when a car ran into members of a high school track team while training. I said then that sometimes words simply fail. That is when the psalms can help us the most. They give us words that are not just hopeful, but honest. In their honesty we find true power to persevere.

### The Psalms Are Also Songs

You may be familiar with Nik Ripkin, who wrote the book *The Insanity of God*. That book is the product of 15 years of travelling the world and interviewing hundreds of people, recording stories of persecution and perseverance. I had the opportunity to meet Nik and organized a conference in DC where he spent three days recounting what he learned through those interviews.

I will never forget when he told me the one thing that most consistently came up in his interviews:

**When facing the harshest of circumstances, threats to family, and their very lives... it wasn't a passage of scripture, or a brilliant sermon or Bible study that sustained them... it was the songs they would sing.**

— Nik Ripkin

Ripkin calls them **Heart Songs**. When what we need most is the power to persevere, that is when our hearts most need to sing. That is why the Psalms have remained for generations, the great song-book of faith.

## They Present to us the Person of God.

When the writers of the New Testament record the words of the Holy Spirit, *the Spirit of God quotes the Psalms more frequently than any other Old Testament passage*. The main character presented throughout these 150 Psalms is most often called, the Lord. Over the next few weeks, I ask you to consider the LORD of the Psalms. What He is like. What He promises. What He provides.

**The Psalter bridges the gap between then and now, the ancient world and the present world, probably better than any other book of the Bible.**

— Patrick Miller

### What is He Like?

- An incomprehensibly powerful creator who placed the sun and the stars in the sky. (Ps. 8:3)
- A patient friend who listens to whatever you have to say. (Ps. 66:7-10)
- A gentle shepherd for your soul. (Ps. 23:1)

### What Does He Promise?

- A table set before me in the presence of my enemies. (Ps. 23:5)
- A very present help in times of trouble. (Ps. 46:1)
- The abundance of faithful love. (Ps. 136)

### What Does He Provide?

- A shield around me and more joy in my heart. (Ps. 18:30)
- To be my portion and cup of blessing. (Ps. 16:5)
- Perfect instruction. Precepts that are right. Truth that is radiant. (Ps. 19:8)

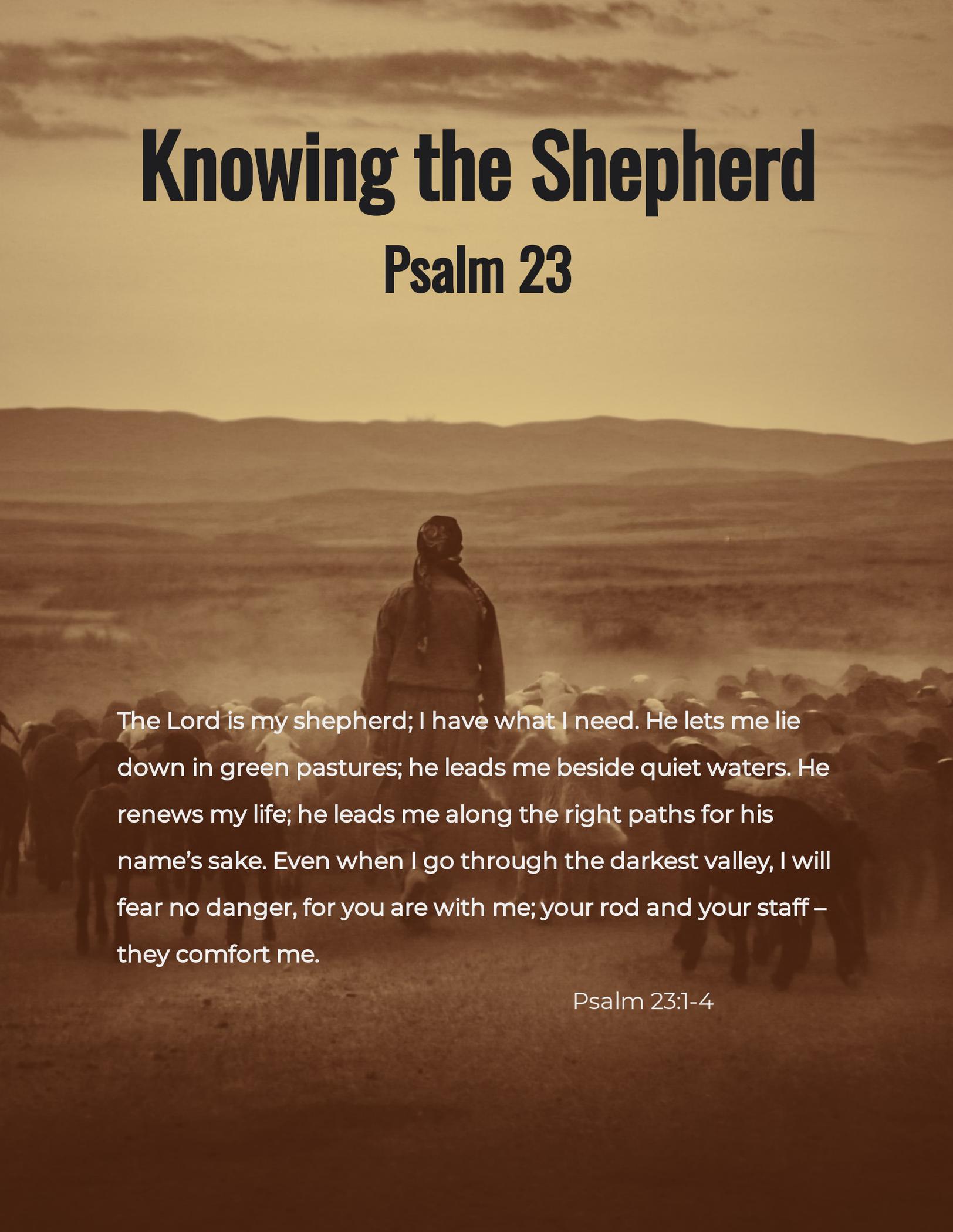
Psalm two ends like this: “So now, you kings and leaders, be wise; receive guidance, you judges of the earth.”

## Discussion Questions

1. Which are among your favorite Psalms? Which do you find most beautiful?
2. Describe a time when the Bible - particularly a Psalm - helped you in the midst of difficulty.
3. Knowing that the New Testament authors quote the Psalms more than any other Old Testament passage, how does this challenge you to think about the Psalms?
4. The following devotions consider what the Lord of the Psalms is like, what He promises, and what He provides. What are attributes of the Lord's character, His promises, or blessings that you hope to discover?

# Knowing the Shepherd

## Psalm 23



The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need. He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters. He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name's sake. Even when I go through the darkest valley, I will fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.

Psalm 23:1-4

# Psalm 23: Knowing the Shepherd

## The Nightingale of Psalms

To begin a session in the Psalms, there is probably no better place to start than Psalm 23. In his introduction to this Psalm, Charles Spurgeon said that “what the nightingale is among birds, that is what this divine verse is among the Psalms...” It speaks to the deepest truth of our lives. Something that we all know and have in common. The truth that however many days of joy and blessing we may have, there are days of sorrow and pain. We all have them.

Spurgeon goes on to write, “what would you say if God commissioned a pilgrim to travel the whole earth and sing one strange melody, in every nation and language... just that one... and when that song is heard and sung in any language it will drive away trouble with every word?” The 23rd Psalm contains words of comfort for all people, in every nation and generation. “It has put more griefs to rest than all the philosophies of the world.”

We learn that grief is not the only problem we face. “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” We also have needs. Some are within our ability to meet, and there are those that we can’t. “He makes me lie down in green pastures, leads me beside still waters, restores my soul.” As strong as you believe yourself to be, and as strong as you very well may be, will still not be strong enough. We all have our limits, get tired, need rest.

Remember, my encouragement to you in these devotions is to consider the Lord of the Psalms. What he is like, what he promises, what he provides. What is he like? There are places in the Psalms that demand we marvel at his incomprehensible power, bow to his sovereign authority over everything that exists. But we see that Psalm 23 describes Him as a Shepherd. That is to say: **he is humble.**

# Psalm 23: Knowing the Shepherd

## The Shepherd is Humble

When a family owned a flock of sheep and needed a shepherd, the responsibility would often fall on the lowest member of the family, often the youngest child. A shepherd was one of the lowest of positions in society, certainly at the time these words were written.

When it comes to caring for your soul, there is no task too small or unpleasant for Him. When I think of the things in my soul that need shepherding, there is some mud and filth in there that I'm ashamed of and would rather hide. But He gets his hands dirty to make my soul clean. He restores my soul.

At the church where I was an associate pastor in the DC area, there is a great story from the mid-1980s about the pastor of that time. There was a family of political refugees that fled a country in Central Asia. This family lived for many years in a house that the church owned next door. The wife and mother worked at the church as the chef and I had some of her Mediterranean cooking. It was amazing! The husband and father, for a time, also worked at the church as a general handyman.

Now this man had formerly been a high-ranking military officer in his country. He was proud, and rightly so. One day, it came to the pastor's attention that this man was offended and angrily arguing with another staff member because he had been asked to clean one of the church bathrooms.

Rather than discussing the situation, telling whoever it was that came to him to just deal with it themselves, or (what I would probably do) avoid the situation altogether, the pastor got up from his desk, went to the bathroom where the confrontation was taking place. He took off his jacket and began cleaning the bathroom himself.

## Psalm 23: Knowing the Shepherd

When the man saw that there was no job that would be asked of him that this senior leader of the church would not be willing to do himself, he was no longer offended. Everything changed.

### The Shepherd is Gentle

Secondly, as a shepherd he is also gentle in his care of your soul. Listen to the imagery again. He makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. The shepherd knows that you need rest, but finds the most restful place for you to get it. He knows you need water, but finds the most satisfying place for you to drink. A well that is still where you can drink abundantly.

I find the lingering question underneath all my doubt about faith in God is this: Does what God have for me really the best? Is it really my best? Is He really giving me His best? That's a hard question, and there are times that I really do wonder. But Psalm 23 declares: **YES!**

Most often, when I'm not so sure if what I'm getting is really the best, I discover that the god I'm following isn't really the Lord, but a cheap imitation, usually some form of myself. Idolatry is the deepest taproot of sin in the human heart.

The great Reformer, Martin Luther, once said you cannot break any of the Ten Commandments without first breaking this one: You shall have no other gods before Me (Ex. 20:3). The problem with idolatry, is that we are often blind to recognize it in our own lives.

## Psalm 23: Knowing the Shepherd

There were once two friends having lunch in the center of their small town square when they saw a man driving a flock of sheep through the main street. The first man commented, "I thought shepherds would gently lead their sheep? I didn't know they would drive them with a whip like that!" His friend responded, "They don't. That's not a shepherd. It's the town butcher."

The danger of idolatry, is how close to catastrophe I will get before recognizing that I'm following the butcher and not the Shepherd.

### The Shepherd Wants You to Know Him

Finally, as a shepherd, Psalm 23 shows us that the Lord wants to really know you, and wants you to really know Him. Remember that this is a Psalm of David. The youngest son. The one tasked by his father to be a shepherd. David described the Lord as a shepherd because he discovered the Lord really knew him. He could relate to all those days he spent completely by himself caring for the family's flock, protecting and loving them.

David doesn't say the Lord is **a** shepherd but **my** shepherd. The Lord knew David and David knew Him. The promise of Psalm 23 is that the same is true for you.

### What's Your Secret?

I was visiting with a member of this House earlier this week after praying the words from Psalm 23. The representative told me was his favorite Psalm and shared that at one point in history the two most read pieces of literature were the works of Shakespeare and the 23rd Psalm. In light of what this representative told me, let me close by sharing this brief story about a Shakespearean actor who was famous for his reciting of the classics.

## Psalm 23: Knowing the Shepherd

He always ended his performance with a dramatic recital of Psalm 23. Each night, without exception, as the actor began his recitation. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." The crowd would listen attentively and then rise with thunderous applause, in appreciation of the actor's ability to bring the Psalm to life.

One night, just before the actor was to offer his customary recital of Psalm 23, a young man from the audience spoke up. "Sir, would you mind, if tonight, I recite Psalm 23?"

The actor was surprised by this unusual request. However, he invited the young man to come onto the stage to recite the psalm, curious to see how the ability of this youth weighed against his own talent.

Softly the young man began to recite the words of the Psalm. When he was finished, there was no applause. There was no standing ovation as on other nights. All that could be heard was the sound of weeping. The audience had been so moved by the youth's recitation that every eye was tearful.

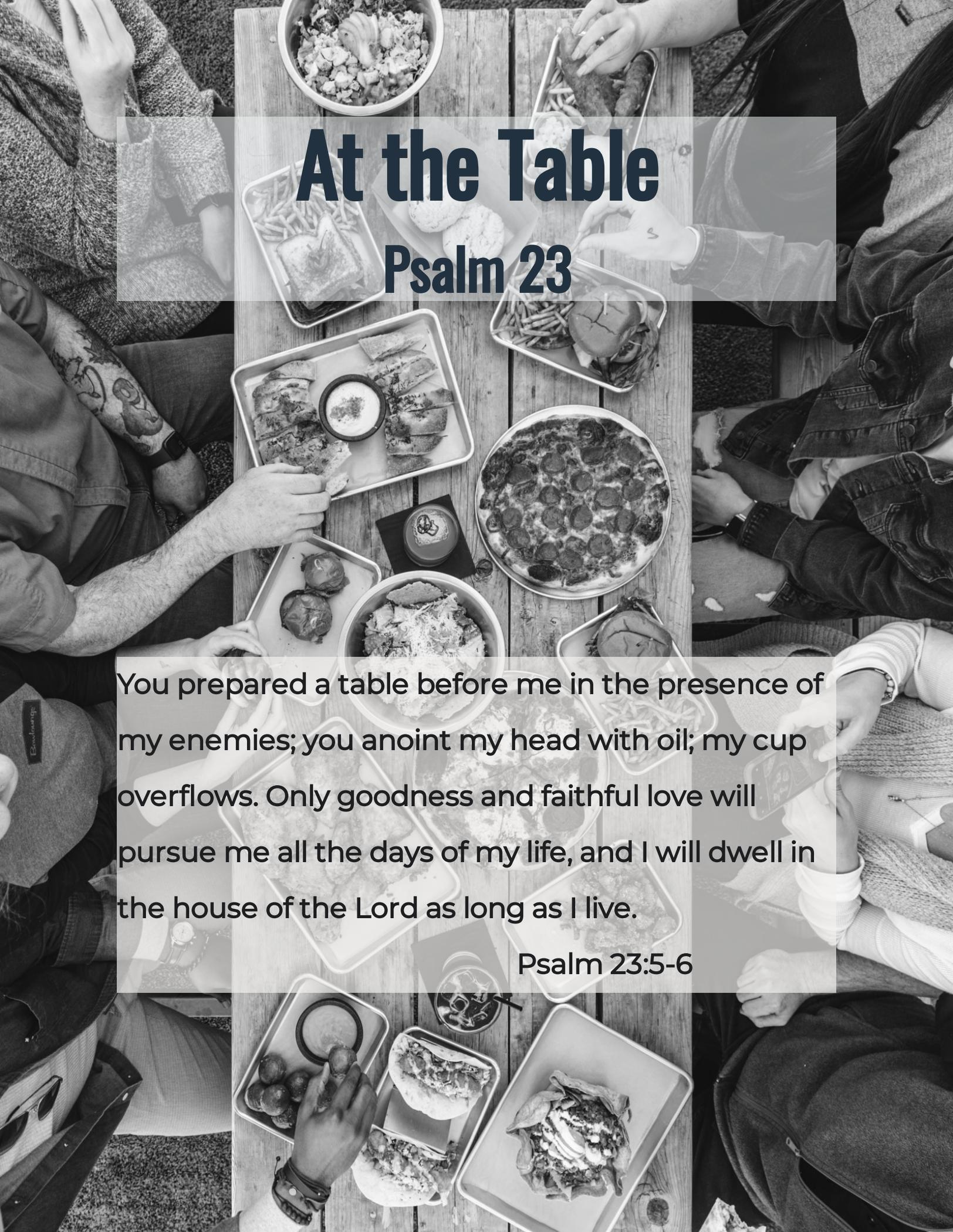
Amazed by what he had experienced, the actor asked, "I don't understand. I have been performing Psalm 23 for years. I have a lifetime of experience and training, but I have never been able to move an audience as you have tonight. Tell me, what is your secret?"

The young man humbly replied, "Well sir, you know the Psalm but **I know the Shepherd.**"

# Psalm 23: Knowing the Shepherd

## Discussion Questions

1. What is it like to need a leader or leadership in your life?
2. Who were or are the best leaders you follow?
3. Describe a good leader. What qualities does it take to lead well?
4. Describe a time when you really needed rest.
5. When have you “camped out” in a valley?
6. What got you out of the valley?



# At the Table

## Psalm 23

You prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord as long as I live.

Psalm 23:5-6

### The Heart of Hospitality is in the Home

There are many the things I love about the Bible and particularly in the Psalms, but among them are the beautiful metaphors. Imagery that grips your imagination and warms the soul. Images that come up over and over. Psalm 23 continues with one of those images: You prepare a table before me. There is something about gathering around the table that is familiar to us. It is a place of identity. Where you always have a sense of belonging. The heart of hospitality is in the home and around the table.

Last Thanksgiving, my wife and I made a quick trip to St. Louis and took our daughters to visit their 95-yr-old great grandmother. She is my oldest daughter's namesake because it had been 91 years since a girl was born in my family. If your name is Harder and you are a woman – you married in.

It was a great trip but what I loved the most was every meal we had at my aunt and uncle's house. The food was good, sure, but it was sitting around the table with my extended family while the kids ran around the house. It was the banter and laughter. Whether it was at my uncle's house, my grandpa's, my brother's or my dad's, it's when we sit around the table together that you really know who you are, where you belong.

Each of our tables are a little different, but there is a deep sense of sameness in all our homes. We are family. This is true at the holidays, of course, but whenever we are together. It is also around the table that we can find the most important thing we need in life: peace... in our lives and in our souls.

## Psalm 23: At the Table

It is at the table where we comfort each other when difficult things happen to us. Another child was mean to my kid at school. Sure, I would like to teach her some really good comebacks – but we talk about forgiveness, self-esteem, how to handle conflict. I have an early morning Bible study every Thursday, and one of the guys this morning talked about significant lay-off's in his company. Maybe you lose your job, face some failure, or the news from the doctor was the last thing you wanted to hear.

It's around the table that you discover – somehow – the world has not ended. This is the peace and comfort the Psalm is all about. In both personal tragedy or the evils of society, Psalm 23 declares **there is hope**. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." That is a peace this world is so terribly missing.

We've seen the despair and brokenness in the world. Humanitarian crises, viral outbreaks, conflicts between nations, violence, and cruelty. Right now, we seem broken and unable to navigate deep division. Yet, the **hope** found from the Lord of the Psalms declares to me that one day the wolf to lay down with the lamb (Isaiah 11:6).

A peace that one day there will be from **every** tribe and tongue, a pure and spotless bride gathered around the throne, falling on our faces, praising aloud and casting crowns before the Lord who reigns forever. (Rev. 4) And He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. And he who is seated on the throne says, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Rev 21).

## Psalm 23: At the Table

That was the peace that Jesus spoke of and modeled. One of my favorite Catholic thinkers today is Bishop Robert Barron, who said,

**In Jesus' day, just as in our day, it is often at the table that the stratification and divisions of society are most on display.**

— *Bishop Robert Barron*

Barron goes on to say, “Who was gathered around Jesus’ table? Saints welcome, sinners welcome. He’s luring Israel back. Whom did he seek? The poor, the sick, the lame, the outcast, the overlooked, the abused, the mistreated, the misunderstood. Those who oppose one another and hate each other are brought together in love and fellowship. All are welcome around the table of our God. Jesus gathers them around the table, always around the table.”

Barron says that Jesus is embodying in himself that prophecy of the wolf lying down with the lamb - in peace. Where do we find Jesus doing this? At the table. When you look around your table, who is there? Who isn't? Jesus taught, “blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons and daughters of God.” The characteristic that most identifies you as a child of God, according to this teaching of Jesus, to being a peacemaker.

Psalm 23 says you prepare a table before me **in** the presence of my enemies. That is a promise. I encourage you to consider this promise in two ways.

## Psalm 23: At the Table

First, there is no opponent or evil scheme, and nothing on this earth that will stop God from giving you every bit of blessing that He has prepared for you.

**Evil men are but men, and God is God; and being but men, they can do no more than men. The Lord will make it clear to all the world, that His people are the generation of His care and love, though living in the midst of deadly enemies.**

— *Obadiah Sedgwick*

It is possible that there is little if anything you can do that will bridge the divide between you and those who oppose you. I don't think you needed me to tell you that. **But it doesn't mean you still shouldn't try.**

The second way you might consider this promise is this. The presence of your enemies at the table the Lord prepares for you could be that those who were once your opponents can be gathered around your table, now as friends. But look again around your table. The tragedy of our time is not that we are divided, but that we are afraid to open our table to those who don't like us or we don't like.

Is it any wonder that the Psalm already said that I will fear no evil, for you are with me? Either way, whether your invitation is accepted or ignored, the offering of peace is best extended around the table. That is where a peace offering is most sincere and sincerely considered.

**Then the promise continues – and my cup overflows.**

# Psalm 23: At the Table

## Discussion Questions

1. What comes to mind when thinking of a banquet table?
2. Describe a favorite memory of gathering around a table with friends or family.
3. Has there been a time of great difficulty and gathering around a table helped you get through it? Describe that time.
4. The Psalm promises that God prepares a table before you **in the presence of your enemies**. Which of the two possible ways to consider the presence of your enemies resonates with you right now? Why?
5. When you think about who normally gathers around your table, who is there and who isn't there, what can you do this week to open your table to new people?

# Proven Integrity

## Psalm 26

Vindicate me, Lord, because I have lived with integrity and have trusted in the Lord without wavering. Test me, Lord, and try me; examine my heart and mind. For your faithful love guides me, and I live by your truth.

Psalm 26:1-3

# Psalm 26: Proven Integrity

## You Might Not Want To Drive Over That Bridge

I was talking a few days ago to my best friend who lives and works in Washington DC while he was driving home from work. As he was driving across a bridge that goes over the Washington Memorial Parkway, he said there was an accident – that a truck had hit the bridge. He said it's crazy because it seems a truck hits that same bridge at least twice per month. He hoped they would get it cleaned up quick so he could get across it.

I told him that if it gets hit that often he might consider **not** driving across that bridge. I don't think he appreciated or followed my advice, but I could tell he was thinking about it. The bridge looks solid, but is it? How much pounding can it take? Surely, it gets inspected!

When it comes to the things that really matter, it's not a question of appearance, or function, or convenience, but integrity. Psalm 26 begins and ends with a plea and declaration – “Vindicate me, Lord, because I have lived a life of integrity.”

How do you define integrity? Do you believe yourself to be a person of integrity? Integrity is seen by what you do – and what you say – but integrity is proven by the strength and composition of a substance, and a person. Integrity is always tested because strength of character is not proven in a moment, but over a lifetime.

## Tests come from outside

Tests may come from those who mean you harm, oppose you and accuse you, or malign your character and reputation. How will you respond, not if, but when this happens? These are the painful hits to your soul just like those trucks smacking into that bridge.

## Psalm 26: Proven Integrity

How many can you take before you crack and crumble, before you answer in self-righteous anger or some other way? When the testing of our integrity comes in this way, the tactics of our enemies are often to accuse us, then isolate us.

Sometimes we have friends and allies who will defend us. My friend I just told you about is one of those people in my life. But it may not actually be the best because he's the kind of friend who would go to war for me even if he knew I was wrong. Then there are also times when we stand by ourselves. David was by himself, but not alone.

Psalm 26 reminds us that our reputations are in the hands of the Lord. He will never leave us nor forsake us, even when it doesn't feel that way. He's there. An engineer inspecting the bridge that gives you the confidence it will stand, no matter how many hits it takes. **We focus on our integrity, the Lord established our reputation.**

### Tests come from within yourself

It was an invitation that David offered to the Lord in verse two, "Test me, Lord, and try me; examine my heart and mind." Such an invitation is courageous. It takes courage to be vulnerable in self-reflection just as it takes courage to face an enemy in battle.

Self-reflection accepts the fact that you may not be as right as you thought. Tests also come from above. The Lord accepted David's invitation.

### The Lord tests us in two ways

He tests us with truth. Verse three says, "I live by your truth." Truth is the level ground on which you can plant your feet, stand, live, and lead.

## Psalm 26: Proven Integrity

What do you base your life, your beliefs, your principles, and priorities on? Is it something you've constructed? Were taught? Does it remain firm and intact when it's not applied to just your life, culture, context, or experience?

We should never stop assessing the truth on which we stand. Integrity is not a function of the truth, but your faithfulness to it.

**We don't believe something by merely saying we believe it, or even when we believe that we believe it. We believe something when we act as if it were true.**

— Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the character of Christ*

We pass the test of truth through faithfulness. Faithfulness is fidelity to that foundation and truth. Faithfulness to the truth is how we establish **integrity**. Verse three shows us that the Lord's integrity is proven by his "faithful love that guides you."

Love is the second way that God tests your integrity. The Lord is not cruel in testing, but kind. He is also gentle, but God's love is **not** delicate. The love of God is like a crucible burning away the parts of us that compromise the integrity of our souls. Just as a goldsmith fires the metal when forging a wedding ring so hot that all that remains is pure and then can be reformed with perfect integrity and beauty. It is solid. Strong enough to withstand accusations and assaults.

The relationship between God and people is described throughout the Psalms and writings of the prophets as the marriage between a bride and His Son. God will make sure it is a marriage that will always endure – never fail – and of faithful love from both God and you.

# Psalm 26: Proven Integrity

That sort of integrity will never happen by my effort, but only by God's mercy. Spurgeon said of this Psalm,

**It will be seen that the declarations which the Psalmist now makes of integrity, are no assertions of human merit, but acknowledgments of divine mercy.**

— Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*

The testing of your integrity will never be easy or pain free. It is hard and can be hurtful. It will test your friendships and your faith. Cling to mercy when the testing comes, whether it is by the malicious actions of others, by the courageous vulnerability of self-reflection, or by the loving refinement of the Lord. How do you do that?

David tells us how he did it in verse eight, by setting his eyes on the house of God – the very place where His glory dwells. We can do the same. St. Augustine wrote in his Confessions, “**Not my merits, but Thy mercy, before my eyes.**” And your integrity will be proven in time.

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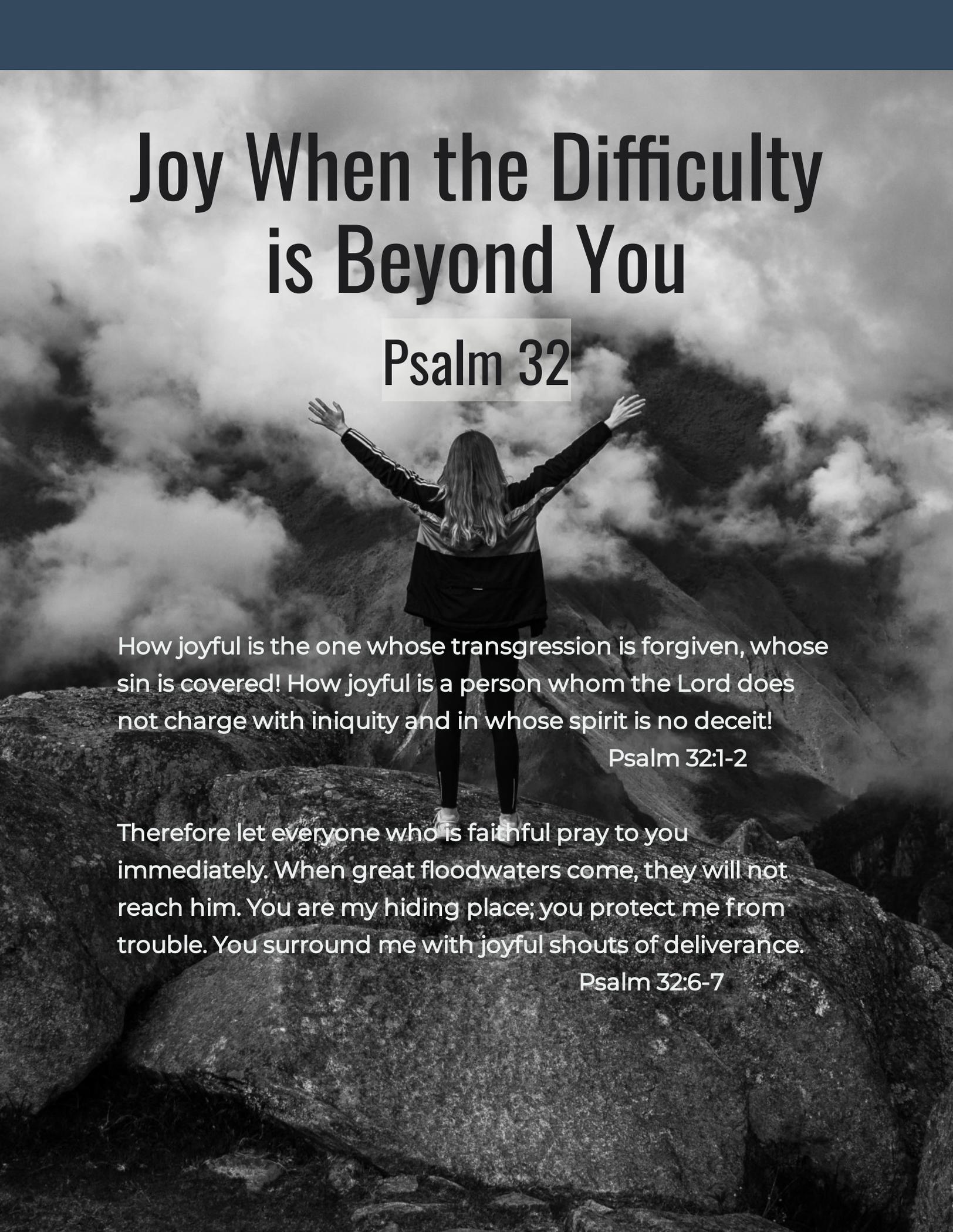
## Discussion Questions

[Additional Reading Suggestion: All of Psalm 26](#)

1. What is the relationship between faith and obedience in this Psalm?
2. If God were to test and try you today, how would you do?
3. Describe a time when your character or reputation was questioned.
4. What does vindication look like according to this Psalm? How does it compare to our expectations?
5. How do you maintain integrity during times when your reputation is being challenged? Share two or three ways to focus on your own integrity.

# Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

## Psalm 32



How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How joyful is a person whom the Lord does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit!

Psalm 32:1-2

Therefore let everyone who is faithful pray to you immediately. When great floodwaters come, they will not reach him. You are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance.

Psalm 32:6-7

# Psalm 32: Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

## We Are Not Okay

This is the season of Lent. It is often observed by the discipline of self-denial, with the goal of taking time for self-reflection. The result can be taking stock of the many ways we are blessed, but also to consider our limitations and needs.

Just admitting that I have limitations and needs does not come easily. And I'm hell-bent on finding the ability within myself to resolve my failures myself. I can say that I'm wrong, or messed up in some way – but I'm probably just projecting a false humility or managing your perception of me, because I care far more than I should what people think of me.

When I do something wrong or fail to meet expectations, I'm prone to lie. To tell you that I did it right and then work like mad to try and make that true. But eventually I will hit a wall. There's nothing more I can do or say. It's in those moments when I have to face a hard truth about myself.

It was the same truth that the Apostle Paul writes of in Romans 7:19, "I desire to do good, but can't. I don't do the things I want to do, but I do the evil things I don't want to do – wicked man that I am – who will save me from this body of death!"

It may be easier to see the failures in others, but a moment spent in honest reflection shows it in ourselves. Call it human nature, inexperience, living in a broken world, or sin, we see it all around us. We are prone to selfishness and deceit, even unintentionally or by the honest mistakes we make.

The great story of history – the season of Lent – and Psalm 32 remind us how the failures and shortcomings that we all have make life hard at times and even cause pain to ourselves or others.

# Psalm 32: Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

These are times when:

- Difficulties seem beyond us
- Wisdom and understand elude us
- Our failures and shortcomings seem to define us

Psalm 32 addresses each and teaches us that all three grow out of the same root problem: **we are not okay**.

## Difficulty and Trials Will Come

The world confronts us with difficulty and trials, sometimes because of the actions of others, but often because of the decisions we make ourselves. If the same root problem is beneath them all then the **solution** is also the same.

Whatever is broken in us can be fixed. Weakness replaced with strength, and failure with redemption. There is a way to live the fully human life, and whenever the Scripture or spiritual teachers talk about it they use the same word: **Asher**. In English, it's often translated as blessed, or happy, or joyful. That's the subject of Psalm 1: "**blessed is the one...**" and it was the subject of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "**blessed are you.**"

We refer to these teachings as **Beatitudes** and Psalm 32 begins with one. How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" Failure is redeemed in forgiveness. How does this play out in those times when difficulties are beyond us?

# Psalm 32: Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

## Failure Is Redeemed in Forgiveness

In 2015, I led a small team on an exploratory trip to an Eastern European country. Our church had worked for years in a neighboring Central Asian nation where we'd spent years doing ethnography, cultural engagement, and Bible translation work.

Due to changing geo-political realities, we needed to consider a different approach because we just weren't sure we could continue to be effective by going there directly. Wanting to stay engaged, we began exploring new ways to work in a neighboring country.

I'm not sure what it is for you, but for me, I really know what I'm good at when I lead small teams on international trips. I just get that work. I understand it. In my work and leadership, I have a lot of insecurities and my approach is more **fake it till you make it** than I care to admit. But not when I'm leading international trips. This trip was no exception. We drove for miles across the region having meetings in mountain villages for days.

Every meeting was filled with opportunity for new work, areas of partnership, and opportunities. It was the most successful trip I've ever had. Our time was drawing to a close and we were headed back to the capitol city for a great dinner and one final meeting. We were then off to the hotel and on an early flight back home the next morning. I can tell you that what happened next was so much more than what it sounds like. Ultimately, every person in our van fell asleep including the driver.

## Psalm 32: Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

At 70 mph, we drifted off the side of the road and woke up just before running head on into a huge roadside sign. The van flipped and barrel rolled four and a half times before coming to a stop upside down. I was in the passenger seat and did the one thing you really aren't supposed to do. I unbuckled my seat belt and fell on my head. We got out of the van and shattered the back glass to begin helping the others get out. The next few hours were a bit of a blur.

One member of our team had lost all feeling in her legs and it wasn't until about 30 minutes later that I realized I couldn't actually stand up. She and I were taken by ambulance to a hospital in the capitol city. Now, there was no skill, or ability, or experience that I could draw upon. As much as I know what I'm doing when leading trips, I was totally powerless. We were in trouble. We didn't speak the language. We needed help.

From the moment news of our situation got out, there were more people praying for us across the world than I know and we met person after person who came to our aid. From the nurses on our floor at the hospital to members of the same church we were working with who began collecting our luggage.

I found out later that while I was in the hospital, I was actually interviewed by a special police division. Being a group of Americans, they thought we might've been targeted. How I answered their questions was very important.

Depending on my answers, they might require me to remain in the country until the investigation and subsequent proceedings were completed. But we knew we needed to get home. They took great care of us, but when you need I.V. medication, a language barrier is frightening. We needed to get home.

## Psalm 32: Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

Thankfully, the pastor I was supposed to meet with that night happened to also be an immigration lawyer and he was in the room with me. They would ask a question. I'd look at him nod or shake his head... then answer. I never met him before that moment but I'm pretty sure he became my attorney.

At 10:00 pm that night, I walked that member of our team out that hospital. The use of her legs came back. We made our original flight and landed back in the states 18 hours later. All of us survived. All of us were able to get needed medical treatment, and we all healed.

### What does this story have to do with forgiveness or salvation?

It was just an accident, right? But what about the driver? We harbored no ill-will toward him. He was devastated. Further, it was his personal vehicle and the source of his livelihood that was lost. He could go to jail depending on how I answered those questions. That might have even been just. All mistakes - even unintentional ones - have consequences.

We didn't want that and it was within my power to say so. But what do you do with the difficulties that are beyond you? When they are because of the failure of another person? You focus on what is in your control: forgiveness and trust in the salvation and freedom that comes through forgiveness.

News of our accident ignited a prayer network that connected people in villages across that country. I've been back to that country three times since then and have incredible friendships with people doing wonderful work there. There is so much good happening and we all agree: **there is joy.**

# Psalm 32: Joy When the Difficulty is Beyond You

I know this story could've ended much worse than it did. Even if it had, Psalm 32:6-7 are not merely words on a page for me. I lived them. Let everyone who is faithful pray to you immediately. When great floodwaters come, they will not reach me. For **You are** my hiding place and You protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance.

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## Discussion Questions

[additional reading suggestion: Psalm 51](#)

1. Can you relate to a time when you made a mistake or failed in some way, but rather than admit your mistake you tried to cover it up or justified your actions?
2. How does the world respond to the failures and shortcomings of others? How is that different from the way God responds?
3. In what ways do you consider yourself as a **forgiving** person?
4. Consider a time when someone wronged you in some way. Did the situation result in forgiveness? What were the steps it took to get there?
5. What are experiences from your life, or events in history, where you saw failure redeemed through forgiveness?
6. Take a few moments for self-reflection and consider the areas of your life where you are falling short or failing. Pray to God and ask not only for forgiveness, but how you might be able to forgive someone else, restoring and strengthening your relationship.

# Finding the Good

## Psalm 16

Lord, you are my portion and my cup of blessing; you hold my future. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

I will bless the Lord who counsels me — even at night when my thoughts trouble me. I always let the Lord guide me.

Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

Psalm 16:5-8

# Psalm 16: Finding the Good

## What Really Matters

The whole world is affected by this global pandemic. It is a global phenomenon and a shared experience, but it impacts each of us in unique ways. Let me be clear, the events that led us here are not good. People are hurting, sick, dying, and grieving.

I'm sure you've seen, as I have, the incredible stories of kindness, compassion, the selfless way so many are working tirelessly to treat those who are infected. We also see how businesses, churches and faith communities are innovating. In a time of social distancing, we are not disconnecting. In a way, we also have a moment to consider what really matters in our lives and will go to great lengths to nurture those things.

Even in the midst of what is bad, there is good to be found. That's the great promise of Romans 8:28 – God is able to work good out of all things. Nothing is beyond God's power to redeem. But how do we find the good in the midst of any and all circumstances? We get a guide for how to do just that in Psalm 16.

David opens Psalm 16, saying, "Protect me, God, for I take refuge in you. I said to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; I have nothing good besides you.'" The first step to finding good in any circumstance is knowing where to look. James said every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of Lights (Jas. 1:17). God is always giving good things, even if they are hard. It takes a lifetime to learn this lesson. Look back on your life and recall the good.

# Psalm 16: Finding the Good

## There is good in our past

Verse 6 says, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” That is certainly true of me. I grew up in a house of love, in a place that was safe, and in a time that was full of joy. I moved to DC and met my wife, had two daughters, accomplished work that I was proud of and ultimately served a church ministering to people around the world.

I find myself, now, in a place of opportunity to encourage you, pray for the leaders of our state, and I get to see the best of what can happen through your leadership even when you navigate complex challenges and conflict. I can say there is good in my past, and I am grateful and it gives me hope.

What about you? Where have the boundary lines fallen over the course of your life up to now? I know it wasn't always easy, sorrows are behind you, but so are blessings.

## There is good in our present

Verses seven and eight go on to say, “I will bless the Lord who counsels me – even at night when my thoughts trouble me. I always let the Lord guide me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”

The funny thing about the past is that we have the benefit of seeing how it all turned out. Be careful because that can create a false confidence. C.S. Lewis also warned of what he called **chronological arrogance**. Because we are the most advanced society ever, we must have it figured out where those who came before us did not.

## Psalm 16: Finding the Good

We may know more now, have better technology, and access to information, but we don't really know how the events of today will turn out. That's always going to be true. Especially when what we face is difficult. I lay down at night and my thoughts trouble me.

Even so, I find the good today because I know where I can find direction. "I bless the Lord who counsels me. Because he is at my right hand, I am not shaken."

### There is good in our future

"For you will not abandon me to Sheol; you will not allow your faithful one to see decay" (v. 9). Sheol is often translated as "Hell" in English, and it can mean the place where God is not – to be totally separated. Maybe you look back on your past and do see some good. But you also went through hell.

Maybe you feel like you are going through hell right now and it keeps you up at night. But if you know where to look for the good, can see God in your past, have comfort from God in the present, then you can trust your future to God. After all, what are six weeks to an eternal God? What are six years for that matter, or 60, or even 600?

The Psalm ends, "You reveal the path of life to me; in your presence is abundant joy; at your right hand are eternal pleasures." When you think about your future, think about this:

Six thousand years from now, there will be abundant joy and eternal pleasures you discover for the very first time. That sounds absurd, and it is, **unless the God who made that promise somehow proves he can raise the dead.**

# Psalm 16: Finding the Good

## Discussion Questions

1. When have you struggled to believe the Lord is good? What helped you most in that situation?
2. What is required to believe the Lord is both good and sovereign?
3. What has God done that causes you to trust He is good?
4. What happens to our attitude and our struggles when we believe that God is both in control of everything and that he is good?
5. What are good things you've discovered during times of great difficulty - perhaps such as during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020?

# Finding Unity

## Psalm 133

How delightfully good when brothers live together in harmony! It is like fine oil on the head, running down on the beard, running down Aaron's beard onto his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon falling on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord has appointed the blessing -  
life forevermore.

Psalm 133

## Quarantine Fatigue

A new phrase is trending right now: **quarantine fatigue**. I'm sure mental health experts will be digging deep into it. On it's face, quarantine fatigue is pretty intuitive. I could tell you pretty quickly how extended social distancing is affecting me.

We truly are blessed because of the availability of digital communication tools. We can still connect. But it's not the same. There is something about about being together that's built deep within us. One consequence of quarantine fatigue for me is that a particular Psalm keeps coming to mind.

Psalm 133 opens saying, "Behold how good and pleasant it is when people dwell together in unity." Right now, the idea of dwelling together sounds pretty good. What's even better is to dwell together in unity. The great promise God makes is this: **unity in the midst of diversity is possible**.

The great institutions and movements in history and the various philosophies of politics and economics all attempt to make that same promise. And there are some really good ones out there. Some deliver more than others. Eventually, they can come up short. Is real unity in the midst of diversity possible?

The Apostle Paul opens his letter to the Ephesians with this promise: "Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ. For he chose us in him, before the foundations of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him..." a few sentences later, Paul writes, "...the good pleasure of his will, he lavished on us in the Beloved One" (Eph. 1:3-6).

# Psalm 133: Finding Unity

## Unity is Our Destiny

Paul believed dwelling together in unity is not only possible, it is inevitable. There is a very important thing to understand about the unity David is talking about in Psalm 133. This unity is not everyone being exactly the same.

David was a musician. We can know what he means when we speak in musical terms. There are times when a choir will sing in unison. That means every voice singing the same note. The sound is strong, powerful.

Then there are times when a choir will sing in harmony. Singing different notes that blend together to make a beautiful sound – a rich chord. The sound is not only powerful, but epic. The unity of Psalm 133 does not require us to abandon the things that make us unique. Diversity is the key to epic harmony.

The Proverbs go to great lengths to convince us that no one person has it all figured out. None of us, even the best of us, can see what is true, good, and beautiful. We need each other. We all have blind spots and we need the perspectives and experiences of each other. Different people, with different ideas, working together for the good of all.

The promise, which Paul said was intended since the beginning of time, was for people to dwell together in unity even in the midst of diversity. Does that sound impossible to you? This Psalm has something to tell us about how we achieve it.

## Unity is Something to Behold

Verse 1 says, “Behold.” To behold is to be looking for it and when you find it, take it in. Unity in the midst of diversity is happening around us all the time. It may not be quite on the scale we would like, or believe it will one day be. But it’s there.

## Psalm 133: Finding Unity

So pay attention when you find it. Let me tell you what I'm seeing. For the past many decades, most of my life, we have slowly accepted that the political division in our country is irreconcilable. Despite this, in the face of certain circumstances – usually challenges – partisan divides evaporate.

You may think of the image of all the members of Congress standing on the steps of the Capitol in a demonstration of solidarity after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In the last three weeks alone, major legislation has moved through the Oklahoma State Capitol and other legislation through the United States Congress with near unanimous support.

I'm not commenting on the content of these bills, just the fact it happened. Our differences remain, and they are important, but differences are not the same thing as division. Perhaps our division isn't as deep as we've been led to believe.

Where do you see unity in the midst of diversity today? Neighbors helping each other. Six weeks ago, the idea of going to the grocery store for an elderly neighbor who lives down the street almost sounds absurd. Now it is commonplace.

### **Unity is both Good and Pleasing**

When you do find unity and truly take it in, what do you notice about it? One Hebrew scholar says, it is good because it reveals God's heart and intention for humanity. It is pleasant because unity makes life so much more enjoyable, certainly than seasons of constant bickering and contention. We all know that is true, so why wouldn't unity be our primary goal? At all times?

## Psalm 133: Finding Unity

With something that is so good and pleasing, is it any wonder that reasonable people – who act in good faith – have so much trouble achieving unity? Or when we do, we struggle to keep it. It says a lot about the human condition. How we can hold on to offenses or are uncomfortable with people and ideas that are different than us. I also believe that there is a common enemy that we all share. A spirit of division and hostility.

But a common enemy can be a good thing. The whole world is singularly focused on fighting one shared threat – and it is historic. Now that we see just how good and pleasing unity is, David wants us to think deeper about what it's like. He uses a few metaphors, meaningful images that resonate in our minds.

### **It is like an anointing of fine oil**

At the time this Psalm was written, to anoint a guest in your home with oil showed respect and complete hospitality. To generously welcome them into your home and around your table. Fine oil was fragrant, and refreshing. The Psalm says it runs down the head all the way down to the collar of his robes – an image of lavish and abundant blessing.

It isn't just a drop on the forehead but blessing that seems like it will not stop! In the Psalm, it is Aaron who is anointed, who represents the priests. For them to be anointed meant they were prepared fulfill their role. To pray for others. To declare peace and forgiveness for every wrong committed. To care for the poor and compassionate service. That's what happens when there is unity.

## Psalm 133: Finding Unity

To close this little Psalm, David transitions from metaphor to give the plain meaning of what this unity is. Verse three says unity is a blessing and that blessing is eternal life, living in harmony with one another and with God. Living this way is something David knew well and is revealed throughout the many Psalms he wrote. Knowing God as he did is part of what the Bible means when David was called **a man after God's own heart** (Acts 13:22).

I had the privilege to meet one of the most prominent philosopher theologians of the latter half of the 20th Century, Dallas Willard. I met him at a conference in Chicago back in 2011. His writing and work has taught me much over the years but I will never forget what I heard him say at that conference. He was making a comment about the Apostle Paul's writing and thinking. Willard concluded,

**Paul knew Jesus better than some of the disciples.**

— Dallas Willard

That is an incredible idea. The disciples spent years learning at Jesus' feet. They were personally trained by him. Though Paul never had that experience, he could know Jesus just as well – if not better than they did. If that is true of Paul then it can be true of us. We have not spent years learning at Jesus' feet, neither were we personally trained by him.

We can know the great promise and blessing of unity that Jesus provides and nothing can stop him from giving us. It is exactly what Psalm 133 tells us to look for and what Paul tells us we are destined to achieve: **eternal life, dwelling together in unity with one another and with God.**

# Psalm 133: Finding Unity

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you experienced unity in the midst of diversity.
2. What keeps us from achieving unity?
3. When we do achieve unity, what keeps us from maintaining it?
4. Which metaphor from the Psalm, describing unity, is more meaningful or seems to stand out? Why?
5. What are actions you can take or people you can engage this week that can promote unity in your life, work, or community? What's stopping you?

# The Lord of the Psalms

This collection of devotions from the Psalms were delivered on the floor of the Oklahoma House of Representatives during the 2020 Legislative Session in the weeks before COVID-19 arrived in the Oklahoma.

## About Dr. Joel W. Harder

Harder is the President of Oklahoma Capitol Culture and Chaplain of the Oklahoma House of Representatives. He has several years of experience working in international leadership development through local churches, nationwide nonprofits, and political arenas. Over the course of his career, Harder has worked with young professionals, elected officials, and policymakers in Washington, D.C. and developed leadership conferences for faith and community leaders held in Central Asia, West Asia, and Eastern Europe.

Harder is the author of *When Leaders Matter: How Civility, Integrity, and the Leaders We Need Are Possible*, published in 2020 by Insight International, Inc. Learn more at [www.JoelWHarder.com](http://www.JoelWHarder.com)

