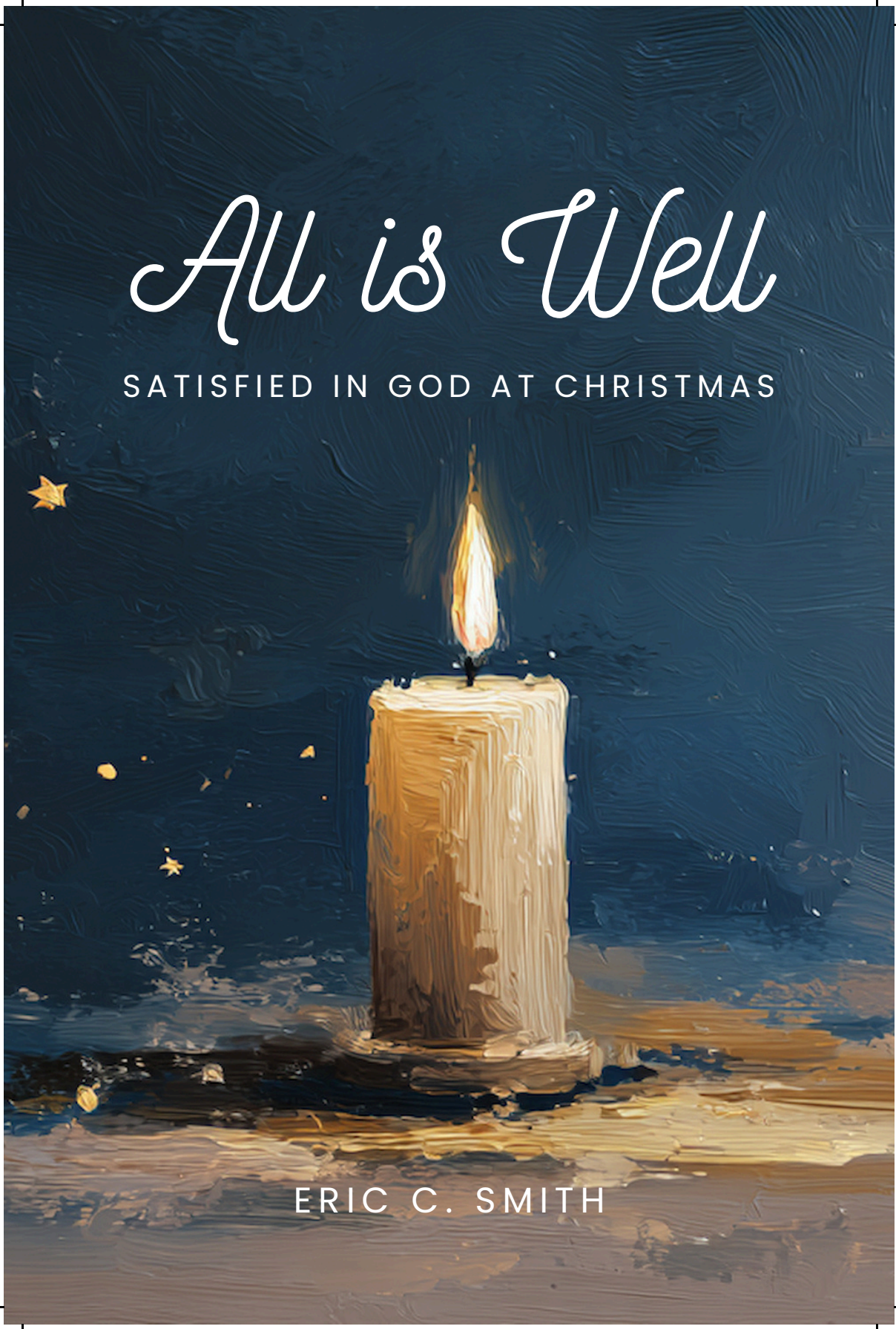
All is Well

SATISFIED IN GOD AT CHRISTMAS



ERIC C. SMITH

All is Well
Satisfied in God at Christmas

For Hershael and Tanya York
With love, admiration, and much gratitude for many kindnesses.

"The cheerful of heart has a continual feast."
Proverbs 15:15

December 2026
Savannah, Tennessee

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Occupying the People of God with the Word of God
Acts 18:5

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Introduction

The Christmas season can be unpredictable.

Coming down the stairs into the living room, I found a few of my brothers- and sisters-in-law at the fireplace, struggling with a lighter. I enjoy few things more than a roaring fire on a cold day, so I offered to help. I crouched before the stack of logs, gave the lighter a few clicks, and was rewarded with a flame. That's when time stood still for me—much as I imagine it did on many occasions for Wile E. Coyote. At the same moment I saw that first orange spark, I also heard a faint hissing sound.

I had forgotten that my father-in-law had also installed a gas line in his wood-burning fireplace to help get things started. The burner was hidden from sight by the logs on the grate, but it had apparently been running wide open for some time. My small flame set off an explosion that knocked me back and sent my family running and shouting.

That's how it can be at Christmas: one moment you're gathering around a cozy hearth, the next you have no eyebrows. Our best-laid plans can be violently overturned. Many of our fondest desires are foiled. We tend to load the holidays with unrealistic expectations that evaporate faster than the propane that was pouring out of the burner that day. No wonder so many of us reach the end of Christmas feeling deeply dissatisfied.

That's why I love spending December in the psalms. The selections in this book are not traditional Christmas readings. You won't find here any explicit prophecies of the coming Messiah, or familiar quotations from Advent services. What you will find are real people like us, navigating the same fallen world that we do, finding their way to the same truth we all desperately need to discover: true satisfaction is found in God alone. I love the way the hymn-writer John Newton put it:

Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasures,
None but Zion's children know.

If I find my joy in simply knowing God, then whatever may be "wrong" in my life, all is well. If I set my hope on anything less than the Lord, then whatever may be "right" in my life, nothing can truly be well. "The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply," David says, but "You make known to me the path of life. In your presence, there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:4, 11)." We need this message all year long, but perhaps never more than at Christmas.

I dedicate this little book to my Southern Seminary colleague Dr. Hershael York and his wife Tanya, encouraging friends and esteemed servants of the Lord. And I wish you all a most merry Christmas, free of explosions and full of the all-satisfying presence of God!



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DAY 1



A Christmas Peril

PSALM 73:1–15

It turns out that the most wonderful time of year is also the most dangerous. Our friends in the insurance business tell us that, with all the holiday travel, December is the leading month for car crashes. There are also more house fires in December, as we overload our receptacles with Christmas lights, do a lot of extra cooking, and forget to blow out the Christmas candles. With all those gifts under the tree, you may not be surprised to know that theft and robbery also go way up (just ask Kevin McCallister). But today, a man named Asaph describes the deadliest holiday danger of all.

Asaph describes for us here a narrow escape he had, one he compares to almost stumbling over a cliff (2). But he was never in physical danger—it all took place in his *heart* (a word he uses six times in the psalm). What peril almost got Asaph? *Envy* (3).

Watching others enjoying prosperity he thought he deserved more. It may sound like a lowkey threat to us, but it almost destroyed Asaph's faith. We rarely discuss envy at Christmas. It's so ugly, petty, and unpleasant. But, like those house fires, we are most susceptible to it at this time of year. Psalm 73 tells us how to survive it.

Asaph's trouble began "when I *saw* (3)." Envy starts by looking around at other people. Perhaps you pick up a Christmas card, and see a family's perfect photo, printed on swanky linen paper, featuring a

report of their year's triumphs. Or maybe you see their social media updates, everyone dressed so stylishly, relaxing in a palatial home, or enjoying a glamorous trip. Perhaps you see a neighbor looking so healthy and skinny, or a family with both parents, a happy marriage, high-achieving kids, and the grandkids living nearby. There's no denying that whenever we see people dripping with "prosperity (3)" and compare that to our own perceived struggles, it leads to envy.

Now I have learned that we can envy anyone, at any time, for any reason—including the sweetest, humblest, godliest, most deserving of people. But what puts an edge on Asaph's envy is the prosperous folks he sees are wicked (3). They live like there's no God (10). They ignore their Bibles. They are selfish and arrogant…and their lives are amazing! Meanwhile, Asaph says, I'm over here trying so hard to do it God's way. Yet they seem to live under God's smile while I'm under his frown (13–14). This is not how things are supposed to be, especially if you go back and read Psalm 1, where the *righteous* are supposed to prosper and the *wicked* are supposed to perish. "What happened to Psalm 1?!" Asaph grumbles. "What's the point of being good?"

This all leads us to two observations. First, envy always makes us miserable. You can have a lot of fun with most sins for a little while (which is why we do them), but envy is a living hell from start to finish. It leads Asaph, as it will lead us, down a dark road of self-pity (13), bitter ingratitude (14), and anger (21). Asaph is probably in a truly difficult situation, but envy can ruin even the best of life circumstances. The second danger that Psalm 73 points out is that envy restricts our relationship with God. It causes Asaph to doubt that God is *good* to his people (1). It creates a crisis of faith.

Asaph never voices his envy (15). This is all for the best, as we will see tomorrow. But it means that all of this miserable tumult is taking place on the *inside*, hidden from view. It is possible for a believer to spend all of Christmas like that. Do *you* recognize it?

DAY 2



Climbing Mount Clear

PSALM 73:16-22

I had seen the holiday movie *Home Alone* a dozen times, but only when watching it with my kids recently did it hit me: Kevin McCalister's master plan to escape and to catch the bad guys all comes together… when he sits in that church! Check for yourself. The director may not have intended any symbolism in the scene. But today's reading reminds us that church is just the place to go at Christmas when you need a new perspective, a fresh vision, a winning strategy for life.

Asaph, as we saw yesterday, is eaten up with envy. Ungodly people are living their best lives, while he simply struggles along. It's all so unfair! God seems so unjust! Envy has him questioning everything. But, to his credit, he never voices his complaints (15). He has the maturity to know that his bitter observations would discourage the rest of God's people, and could even cause them to stumble in their faith. So in an act of loving responsibility, he suppresses his frustration. There's a lesson in that. But by v16, all this bottled-up envy is churning. He's in his feels. He's spiraling. He's crashing out.

Then in v17 it all changes. His circumstances don't change—his perspective does. Why? He goes to church! "*Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*" Until now, Asaph has been living exclusively by sight. He has been judging reality by his own wisdom. But when Sunday rolls around, he drags his miserable, envious self into the sanctuary. And God interrupts his pity-party with eternal truth.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan compared going to church to scaling what he called "Mount Clear." From that elevation, the air is much clearer, and you can see further and better. That's how it was for Asaph. It was just an ordinary church morning. But he hears God's Word. He joins the singing. He witnesses the sacrifices. He chats with God's people. And the fog clears. He sees beyond the present moment to "the end." We can't accurately evaluate all that God is doing by this present, fleeting moment! He sees past his immediate, personal problems to God's big purposes. ("What if God is allowing the wicked to ascend, only to place their foot on a slippery place and fall?") He sees past appearances to reality: the world's current prosperity is a dream with a rude awakening coming. He sees past his feelings to God's promises.

These aren't *new* insights for Asaph. He is a *worship leader*, who had sung all these truths many times. But today, old truth washes over his heart in a *fresh* way. Now, he's embarrassed by how he's been acting, and how bad his attitude has been (21–22). He's been charging around like a mad bull! Now he's back declaring that basic truth from v1, the truth that he was beginning to question: God *is* good to his people (28)!

This happy transformation all hinged on just going to church. Amazing things can happen in that weekly assembly of God's people. I know it sounds simplistic, and maybe even a little self-serving, coming from a pastor like me. But I can't help that. "Going to church" is what older Christians called an "ordinary means of grace." Like Bible-reading and prayer, it's one of those simple, repetitive, non-flashy routines that God designed to tether you to truth, lift your eyes from this world, shake you out of that dream you stumbled through all week, interrupt your self-pitying monologue. If you want a renewed perspective this Christmas, try climbing Mount Clear!

DAY 3



All I Want for Christmas

PSALM 73:23-28

Long ago at a Wednesday night Bible study, I broke the ice by asking everyone at the table to name their favorite Christmas song. I called first on a young mom, who named Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You." I agreed that the holidays would be incomplete without the pop classic, and then moved on, not thinking much about it. But years later, my friend shared how embarrassed she was when everyone after her named "O Come All Ye Faithful" or some other sacred song. "It was just the first thing that came to mind and I blurted it out!" she explained. "I felt so unspiritual!" We shared a good laugh, and now I remember that story every time the song comes on the radio.

But it also came to mind when I got to today's reading. I simply can't think of a better summary of what Asaph tells God than, "All I want for Christmas is you!" Maybe my friend's choice wasn't so unspiritual, after all.

Asaph now leaves church to exactly the same life he had before: same life, same problems, same enemies. Nothing has changed—yet everything has changed! Asaph is not the same man we met in vv1–16. Instead of looking at what everyone else has and stewing in envy, he is absorbed in his portion as God's covenant child, and *rejoices*! He has something far better than anything the world can offer: he has God himself!

I have God's companionship (23). "Nevertheless I am continually with you." Each day, in all circumstances, through every season of life. I am never alone. God is so near to Asaph, so personally committed to him, that he can say, "you hold my right hand." Think of it: God himself, holding my right hand, leading me! Even when I am balled up in envy and self-pity, accusing God of mistreating me, he never leaves me!

I have God's conduct (24). "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory." God is my personal Guide through life, just as he was for Israel in the wilderness, with the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Down every winding path, he shows me the way that I should go. By the wise counsel of his Word and the personal direction of the Holy Spirit, he keeps me from wandering off and falling. He protects and provides for me at every turn on this journey. That's the miracle that you as a believer experience, every single day, until God finally welcomes you home to perfect, eternal, undeserved glory. On that day, we will sing, "Jesus led me all the way!"

I have God's contentment (26). Reminded of all he has in God, Asaph now soars with praise: *"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire beside you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."* Do you see how far Asaph has come? He is no longer grumbling over his portion in life. He doesn't envy the wicked, or want anything the world offers. Asaph knows that the Lord is his *eternal* treasure. Riches and possessions, fame and beauty, success and achievements, even our own health and strength will all eventually fail us. God alone is the portion who can never be taken from us—not even in death! He is ours *forever*. So Asaph has stopped looking around at all the "good" things he wishes he had; the only "good" he seeks is to be near the Lord. *"But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works."* God really *is* good to his people (1). And in Jesus, at Christmas, we know it best of all.

DAY 4



Why All this Blessing?

PSALM 67:1-2

In 1887, missionary Charlotte "Lottie" Moon wrote a letter home to her fellow Southern Baptists from China. She was proposing a special offering for international missions, to be collected in December. *"Need it be said, why the week before Christmas is chosen? Is not the festive season when families and friends exchange gifts in memory of The Gift laid on the altar of the world for the redemption of the human race, the most appropriate time to consecrate a portion from abounding riches and scant poverty to send forth the good tidings of great joy into all the earth?...But I wonder how many of us really believe that it is 'more blessed to give than to receive'?"* Lottie Moon, a tiny woman at only 4'3" tall, was making some enormous connections: between celebrating Christmas and joining God's mission, between enjoying God's blessing and spreading it to the ends of the earth, between giving and gladness. We find the same in Psalm 67.

The occasion is a big, happy, harvest celebration (6). God's people have come to the end of a prosperous year, and are up to their necks in God's blessing (6). It's not so different from the kind of Christmas celebration we are all hoping to enjoy. The question is, how does God want us to respond to his extravagant blessing at Christmas?

It starts with a prayer we can all get behind: *"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us!"* That's what I'm talking about! "God, treat us better than we deserve! Pour out your favor on us!

Back up the truck and unload whatever spiritual and material blessings you've got! Forgive our sins, grow our 401ks, keep our vehicles running and our bodies healthy, give our kids straight teeth and good grades! Shine down on us, like a loving father beaming at his kids on Christmas morning!" We love that prayer! And we should. God loves to hear us pray it! We not only find it here in Psalm 67, but in the famous Aaronic Benediction of Numbers 6:22–27.

But the prayer doesn't stop in v1. The *sentence* doesn't stop in v1! There is no period at the end of the verse, just a pause—a comma, and a *Selah* —before completing the sentence in v2: *"May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine upon us…THAT your way may be known on the earth, your saving power among all nations."*

The entire psalm turns on the little word "that." God here reveals his purpose for all this blessing he sends into our lives. Yes, he wants us to enjoy it and thank him for it (1 Tim 6:17). But God also wants that blessing to flow *through* us, especially to those who don't know him. This is what God told Abram when he first called him: "I will bless you…and you will BE a blessing (Gen 12:2)!" God sends blessing *to* us so he can send it *through* us. He wants to be gracious to more people, and he wants to use *us* to do it!

The truth is, most of us have a hard time getting past v1: "God, bless *US*!" God is inviting us to join him on mission, but you and I get stuck back at the *Selah*, just thinking about me, myself, and my blessings. But if Psalm 73 can save us from envy at Christmas; Psalm 67 can save us from selfishness. It is possible for God's people to be very blessed, yet also very bored, whiny, and unhappy—because we never get our eyes off of self, and onto God's greater purpose: making him known, ministering to others, showing his heart to the people around you! That's where the Christian life gets fun! Lottie was right: it really *is* more blessed to give than receive. Do you believe it?

DAY 5



The Passion of God's Heart

PSALM 67:3-5

I watched with a smile as my three kids celebrated the gift they just unwrapped: the complete, hardbound set of *Calvin and Hobbes*. It's just a silly comic strip series, and it was only one of many gifts that morning. But this moment hit me a little different because *I* had loved *Calvin and Hobbes* when I was their age, and I had introduced it to them. Even in something so trivial, it makes me happy when my kids enjoy what I enjoy. How much more when they love the things that are the most important to me? In today's text, God's children catch their Father's passion for the nations to know him!

The "peoples" in Psalm 67 are the nations, tribes, and clans outside of Israel. Think of the Philistines and Amalekites, the Egyptians and Assyrians. What do they have in common? They are Israel's sworn enemies! They bow down to idols, reject Yahweh's standards, and are usually warring against Israel. Yet in the middle of their harvest meal, the Psalm 67 singers pray that they would join them in praising Yahweh! Why?

They had read the book of Genesis, that's why! In Genesis 1–2, they read that Yahweh is not just Israel's private deity, but the one Creator and Lord. Those other nations don't belong to Baal, Dagon, or Ishtar, but to Yahweh! He made them in his image, to know him in a loving relationship, and to glorify him with the rest of his creation. But they also read Genesis 3, where sin led all people into deception, and

separated us from our Creator. They read of sin's tragic fallout in the stories of Cain, the Flood, and at Babel. In that last episode, all people ganged up to defy God by building a tower to Heaven for their own glory. That's when God judged them, confusing their languages, scattering them across the earth, and forming all the different "nations (Gen 10–11)."

But finally these psalmists read Genesis 12. In the shadow of Babel's judgment, Yahweh visited an idol-worshipper named Abram, and called him by grace to walk with him by faith. Yahweh promised to make Abram a great nation, living in a special land under his extravagant blessing. Every Israelite loved that story! But the singers in Psalm 67 are focused on one specific element of Abram's call. God said, *"I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing … and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed* (Gen 12:3)." Did you catch that? God did not call Abram and create Israel so that all the other nations could just go to hell. God wanted his blessing to flow from Israel, out to "all the families of the earth!" Just a few verses after Babel, God is already launching a rescue mission to save the nations! They still belong to him! He still loves them! They are now deceived, lost, and sorrowful. But God wants them to know his saving power! He wants to guide them in his truth and bring them under his wise judgments! He wants to make them glad and sing for joy! *That* is the passion of God's heart! And he wants to use his people to reach them.

In Psalm 67, God's people catch God's passion for the nations. As they bask in his blessing, and praise him in Jerusalem, they know he deserves the worship of all peoples on earth! So they pray, "Yahweh, make it happen! Let the peoples praise you! Save them! Bring them under your rule! It will make them glad, and bring you glory!"

We will apply this psalm in more detail tomorrow, but I hope you are already beginning to make the Psalm 67-connection in your own life. As God richly blesses us at Christmas, he wants us to catch his passion for the peoples of the earth to praise him!

DAY 6



Unleash the Blessing

PSALM 67:6-7

Pickwick Lake is one of the biggest attractions to the place where I live. It covers something like 48,000 acres and is 50 miles long, stretching from southern Hardin County, Tennessee, down into northern Alabama and Mississippi. Pickwick regularly hosts national bass fishing tournaments, and I've been playing on it since I was a baby. But what amazes me most about the lake is that it is manmade, created during the 1930s by the TVA: two major dams hold back the waters of the Tennessee River to flood the valley and form this amazing lake. Now hold onto that image.

Let's review the big picture of Psalm 67. It's the end of a very prosperous year, and God's people are celebrating a bountiful harvest. Picture lots of smiling families and individuals, feeling grateful and relieved, filing into church to praise God before sitting down to a massive feast. All are aware that God is responsible for these blessings. They also know that, while God wants them to enjoy his gifts, he has a further purpose, too: God wants them to use his blessing to make his way known on the earth. God wants all nations and peoples to experience his saving power, and join his glad praise! And God wants to use his blessed people to make that happen. God does not want his people to build a dam around their lives, keeping his blessings back all to themselves. He doesn't bless us so that we'll spend our lives lounging in a giant lake of personal comforts and luxuries. God wants his

blessings to flow through us, out to the world! He wants us to open the dam, so that we can be conduits, channels, spillways of grace!

This is why it's so fitting for us to think about world missions at Christmas. On the surface, this is the most *inconvenient* time of year to think about it! December is so crowded with activities, special events, and family gatherings. We're spending money on Christmas gifts and giving to local charities. I look out at our church in December and know that many busy, tired, financially-stretched people are looking back at me. In that moment, it can feel like a reach promoting the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions, or packing shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child. Why toss in one more thing, now, for people on the other side of the world?

Psalm 67 tells us. Our God is out to make his saving power known among all peoples, and he calls us to join that mission. He wants us to deploy his rich blessings for his global mission. In the midst of our demanding, pressure-packed lives, when we are so tempted to focus only on ourselves and our families, when we are often passionate about the most trivial, fleeting things—it delights God's heart when his children catch his passion for all the peoples to praise him. When we lift our eyes to something bigger than ourselves. When we open the dam, and let his blessing flow.

That's how Psalm 67 ends. The people not only ask God to bless them (1); they are confident God *will* (6–7). They see his grace and faithfulness in these harvest blessings and know that he will never stop blessing his people…so that we can join in making him known, to the ends of the earth. As we step out in faith to join God in ministry, service, and generosity, we can trust that he will always supply our needs. The blessing will never run out! "You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way (2 Cor 9:11)!" Will you unleash the dam of God's blessings from your life to the world? You might just find that it is the happiest, most satisfying Christmas of all.

DAY 7



True Happiness

PSALM 32:1-2

Of all the Christmas gifts you've ever received, does one stand as the best? Is there one you were most surprised, and excited, to open? Psalm 32 is David's testimony about the best gift *he* ever got: a clean conscience. A restored relationship with God.

You may be familiar with Psalm 51, David's confession of sin after the Bathsheba episode from 2 Samuel 10–11. Psalm 32 is a companion piece to Psalm 51, probably reflecting on the same events, but with a major difference. Psalm 51 is David's raw, gut-wrenching confession in realtime. But in Psalm 32, enough time has passed for David to gain further perspective. He wants to teach us what he learned from the experience. And where Psalm 51 is heavy, even painful to read, Psalm 32 is exuberantly happy! No one knows happiness like the forgiven man (1–2)! That's what David tells us today in vv1–2, with four vivid word-pictures for sin and forgiveness.

"Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven." Transgression is rebellion against authority. Imagine God drawing a boundary line, telling you, "don't cross it." You see the line. You hear the command. You understand it all perfectly. And you step across it. That black-and-white defiance of God's wise and loving authority is *transgression*. There's no excusing or explaining it; transgression deserves God's judgment, and we know it. So how happy, David says, is the one whose transgression is *forgiven*! The picture here is of a heavy load being lifted

off of you and carried away. What a relief!

"Blessed is the one whose sin is covered." The familiar word "sin" means "to miss the mark." Think of the health rating signs in a restaurant. To earn a 99 or 100, an official has inspected their facility and found them clean, healthy, and responsible. But I've seen TV chef Gordon Ramsay discover some stomach-turning stuff in restaurants. When he confronts them with the evidence, their laziness and filthiness is exposed. They're humiliated. They've fallen so short of the standard. That's just what sin is (Rom 3:23). Now imagine God bringing all that evidence in your life to light…and covering it. Neither of you have to look at it anymore. You start fresh! How happy you would be!

"Blessed is the man against whom Yahweh counts no iniquity." Iniquity is to be twisted out of one's intended shape. Some boards in my wood-shop are so warped, no tool can flatten or straighten them. The problem is on the inside. They are unusable. Iniquity is that persistent, internal twist in our character. It's not just that we occasionally do wrong; we continually do wrong, because we *want* to! So imagine the Lord seeing into your heart, so twisted out of the shape he intended for it, and not *counting it against you*. It's like the bank choosing not to mark your debt in its books! How happy!

"How happy is the one in whose spirit there is no deceit." David thinks now of the dishonesty we practice when we sin. The cover-ups. The hypocrisy and fakery. The tension and the worry that we'll be found out. It's awful! David discovered that true happiness is finally getting all of that mess out before God, and having nothing to hide. You don't have to be perfect to walk with God; you just have to be honest (1 John 1:7).

And so we learn today how to be truly happy this Christmas. Are you? Can you lie down with a clean conscience? You can't medicate, distract, or atone your way to happiness. You must take your sins to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. It's the only way!

DAY 8



Learning by Example

PSALM 32:3-5

"You don't want to do that," I told him. His right hand was pushing a sharp chisel across the workpiece, toward the left hand he was using to hold it down. "Get that left hand out of the way, or you could slip and stab yourself." Where did I gain all this woodshop wisdom? The scars on my hands and blood on my floor will tell you it wasn't from reading a book. That's how David learned about forgiven sin!

For a long time, David did not walk in the joy of a right relationship with God. Instead, he sinned grievously, and then he "kept silent" about it. For perhaps a year after his great rebellion, he tried to cover up what he'd done. He ordered Uriah's death, and made it look like an accident. He married Bathsheba, and pretended they were a happy family. He went to work every day as king. He sat in church each week. But he never dealt with this rupture in his relationship with God. How did that work out?

It was the most miserable season of his life. *"When I kept silent, my bones wasted away, through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength dried up as by the heat of summer."* Guilt ate David from the inside-out! He physically ached, down to his bones. He had no energy, no focus, no joy. And it never let up: day and night, he couldn't get away from it! On the outside, King David had every earthly comfort and advantage, yet he could enjoy none of it. Guilt does that.

And this was not just a problem in David's head: God was doing this to him, pressing that heavy hand down on him. Why? Because he hated David? No—because he loved him! God loved David way too much to let him be comfortable with what would destroy him! So day and night, God kept the pressure on, until David finally surrendered. After a long, awful struggle, David realized that no consequence he might experience from confessing his sin could be worse than what he was enduring by covering it. So what did he do? "*I acknowledged my sin* (5)." No big speech. No promises to do better. No acts of penance. David just comes clean. He stops hiding and managing. He doesn't explain, justify, or shift blame. He simply owns it. The word "confess" literally means to "say with:" it is to agree with what God says about your sin (see 1 John 1:9).

What did God do when David finally confessed? That's the most shocking part! "*And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.*" To David's astonishment, God didn't send him away or rub his face in his failure. He didn't assign him a list of religious duties to earn his way back or put him on probation to see if he was sincere. God forgave him. He "put his sin away (2 Sam 12:13)." David still faced earthly consequences for his choices, but his vertical relationship with God was instantly restored: his load was lifted, his sin covered, his iniquity wasn't counted, his deceitful spirit cleansed (1–2). How blessed!

If you think about it, God's grace is even more scandalous than David's sin! How could he just forgive David like that? He was planning to send Jesus, at Christmas. God's own Son would go to a cross to bear our load, to have our iniquity counted as his, to be pierced for our transgressions, to cover our sins and carry them away from us.

If your sin is making you miserable today, why not learn from David's example? Bring it to Jesus. That's what Christmas is for! Let's learn from all that blood David spilled in the school of experience. Aren't you ready to be happy again?

DAY 9



Nothing to Lose

PSALM 32:6-11

As St. Augustine lay dying on his bed, he asked friends to write the words of his favorite Bible passage on the walls. He requested Psalm 32. David's story of mercy had become Augustine's. He had experienced the pain of separation from God and the joy of total forgiveness; he now wanted to savor that message all the way to heaven. In these final verses, David invites us to make his story ours, too. "*Therefore, let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found.*" After his sojourn with sin, David asks God to use his experience to teach others. "Everyone" needs to learn this: "uncover" your sin to God in confession, and God will cover it with his grace!

There is a safety to gain (6–7). There is "a time of finding," a window of time after you have sinned when you know you need to make things right with God. Just do it! Come clean! Don't wait around to deal with it. You think you can hide it, or manage it, or fix it. But you can't. While you think you've got everything under control, the consequences keep building, until one day the floodwaters rush in and carry you away. David is saying that, when you sin, God can either bring that flood into your life, or he can be the one who lifts you to safety. If you will confess and take refuge in him, the same God you sinned against will become your hiding place! He will preserve you from the trouble you created for yourself! Instead of the floodwaters of judgment, he will surround you with shouts of deliverance! Which do you want?! There's safety to gain!

There's also a stubbornness to forsake (8–9). David now turns to us and says, "Let me instruct you! Let me counsel you! I know what I'm talking about!" What seems to amaze David as he reflects on his story is how stubborn he was, for so long. He sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba as a mature, experienced believer. He *knew better*! And he knew that the only way to make it right was repentance! He had already written a number of biblical psalms on this topic, for goodness sake! And yet David refused to perform the simplest, most basic thing God teaches his children to do, which is simply to come clean with him. Month after weary, unhappy month, David dug in his heels and tried to do it his way. Now he looks back on this season of stubborn, stupid pride and just shakes his head. "I was acting more like a mule than a man," he admits. All God wants is for you to walk closely beside him. But if you run when he calls, or buck when he reaches out, God knows how to make you yield with a bit and a bridle. As Paul learned, you don't want to kick against these goads (Acts 26:14)! Just walk with him!

There's a sorrow to lose (10–11). These final verses shows us that David's entire experience re-taught him the same simple lesson first announced in Psalm 1: every time I get off God's path, I only get sorrow. I think that I will find life and joy in living my way, but I only find pain and regret. Yet even for sinful failures like me, steadfast love surrounds me when I just trust him. God not only forgives me, but declares me to be righteous, through the finished work of Jesus Christ. He makes my heart upright again.

Making a full confession of our sin is the last thing any of us want to do. But all we will lose is our own guilt and misery. Happiness at Christmas starts with coming clean to the Lord. Like Augustine, make David's story your own! It will get you all the way home.

DAY 10

When it Doesn't Feel Like Christmas



PSALMS 42-43

Sometimes it just doesn't feel like Christmas. Maybe a child's fever suddenly cancels your holiday plans. Or you find yourself living in a new place, missing all your familiar traditions. Maybe there is relational strain in your family, so the gatherings are tense and awkward instead of warm and sweet. I have officiated a number of December funerals through the years—it didn't feel much like Christmas for those families.

If any of that sounds familiar to you, Psalms 42–43 can help. This pair of psalms, which launch "Book II" of the Psalter, is also the first offering from "the sons of Korah." These are the men David appointed as worship leaders in Jerusalem (1 Chr 9:19–21). A quick scan of these psalms reveals it's not feeling much like Christmas for them, either.

Some crisis has upended the happy routine of their lives. They find themselves physically removed from their home in Jerusalem, their service at the Temple, and the worship of God. They are apparently stuck in the far north of Israel (42:6), surrounded by hostile people who mock their faith in Yahweh (42:3, 10). The most natural explanation (especially if you read the next Psalm, 44) is that Israel has suffered some military defeat, which has resulted in either the capture of the sons of Korah, or their temporary displacement from home. Whatever the details, these psalmists are living in a kind of exile: cut off from the places, the people, and the practices that they cherish.

No wonder the psalmist is singing "the blues" in these first, famous lines! He describes his soul, his innermost being, as panting with thirst (42:1). He is like a deer being pursued through the woods, searching for a stream. He is aching, dissatisfied, desperate. That's why he doesn't feel like eating: day and night, his only food is his tears. His soul is "cast down" (42:5, 11); he is feeling *low*. His spirit is "in turmoil within me"—restless churning, unsettled, worked up (42:5). Sometimes he feels like he is drowning in his sorrow (42:7). But the worst of his troubles is that God himself feels so distant. Where are God's comforts? His reassurances? His intervention? Mockers rub the singer's face in these same questions (42:10). He feels alone and forgotten.

The memory of better days intensifies his pain (42:4)! There was a time when he was not stranded out in the middle of nowhere, but right where he was supposed to be: at the Temple in Jerusalem! He was not lonely and isolated, but in a throng of happy brothers and sisters, keeping the festival before the Lord. Instead of being mocked and jeered, he led a multitude of fellow worshipers into God's presence. No tears or groans back then: just glad shouts and songs of praise. That's how life was meant to be!

So, here is the psalmist's complaint: "Nothing is the way it used to be. I'm not where I want to be. I'm away from the people I love. I can't do the things I care about most. Where is God, and what is he doing in my life?"

Does any of that sound familiar? Many believers will make a similar confession this Christmas. If that's not you, praise God! But keep your eyes open and your heart soft for those who are "cast down."

If you can relate to Korah's sons, take heart: we will watch them fight their way back to joy. But for now, is there not comfort in knowing that God understands our lowest conditions? He has even given us the words to pray.

DAY 11



Appearing Before God

PSALMS 42-43

I write this on the back-end of a major ice storm that has knocked out power, water, and massive trees all over our community. Last week, the heavy freezing rain forced us to cancel our church services. Hopefully, we will only have to miss one Sunday. But if you stay away from public worship much longer than that, the situation can get even more hazardous than a winter storm: you can bring on a full-scale spiritual depression. Does that sound dramatic? It is one of the major lessons of Psalms 42–43.

As we saw yesterday, the sons of Korah are worship leaders in the Jerusalem Temple. But now they find themselves driven from home, living among hateful people, feeling lonely, misunderstood, and depressed. No doubt the psalmist misses many familiar comforts, but the supreme ache of his heart is for God's presence in public worship.

This sense of God's absence inspires some of the psalter's most vivid images: his soul "thirsts and pants," for the living God like a deer searching for a stream (42:1–2). "Deep calls to deep:" his own spirit cries to God over the roar of his troubles, but he can't get an answer (42:7). He scrambles for a firm grip on "God, my rock," but wave after wave just keeps pummeling him back down (42:7, 9). His enemies sneer that God has forgotten and rejected him, and he is beginning to see their point (42:8–9, 43:2).

We can understand all that, I think. What may surprise us more is how he expects to recover his sense of God's nearness: by going to church. Of course, he can "pour out his soul" to God in prayer any time (42:4, 8). But private devotions alone can't satisfy his soul-thirst. He's stuck out in the land of Jordan with a lot of pagans, crying out, "*When shall I come and appear before God* (42:2)?" He yearns to get back "with the throng" of God's people, processing into God's house "*with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival* (4)." You can't do that by yourself! So he asks God to intervene: "*Bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, O God, my God* (43:3–5)." He won't be happy until he "shall again praise him (42:5, 11; 43:5)."

As I say, this may come as a surprise. We rightly prioritize our personal faith in Jesus, and often stress that church-going "religion" can't replace this relationship. This is all true, but public worship is still vital to our spiritual health. Under the New Covenant, God no longer attaches his presence to a physical place like the Temple (see Heb 9–10). Yet the living Jesus Christ meets with us in a unique way when his people gather in his name (Matt 18:20). That's why our psalmist finds something essential missing from his life when he can't join the public praise. He sinks into spiritual depression!

We will make the same discovery if we remain absent from the assembly of God's people on the Lord's day. Christian radio in the car, personal Bible studies like this one you are reading, and live-streaming church services are all helpful tools—but they can't replace "coming before God" in worship, publicly identifying with him in the company of his saints. The absence of this in our lives just might be at the bottom of our spiritual depressions. Our souls thirst for it! "*Send out your light and your truth; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling! Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy* (42:3–4)." Why not make that prayer your own?

DAY 12



Preach to Yourself!

PSALMS 42-43

"I'll be glad when the holidays are over," the man said. I knew what he meant. It was the week before Christmas and, as a delivery driver, he had been pulling long days for over a month, dropping off packages to people like me. He was tired, ready to slow down, and be home with his family. But he also smiled as he spoke, because he knew that rest and time with loved ones were on the way. He had hope. It kept him patiently, if wearily, doing his job. The picture tracks closely to the message of Psalms 42–43.

Our psalmist is in a state of spiritual depression, and he doesn't try to hide it. His honest and vivid descriptions of his sorrow make this pair of psalms among the most memorable of the entire book. But there is also more here than a sob session about his many troubles: he is also relentlessly *hopeful*. No matter how many times life's waves break over his head, he refuses to let go of "God, my rock (42:9)."

He is in a miserable season that he wants to conclude as quickly as possible—but he also trusts that God is still with him in it. These roaring waterfalls and crashing breakers are not outside of God's control—they are *his* (42:7). God has a purpose and design in these trials, and the psalmist can trust them even when he can't understand them. In the meantime, God sustained his child with around-the-clock care: showing him steadfast love by day, and reassuring him with songs in the night. He knows that, in the end, the "God of my life" will bring

him through this trial, and he will emerge refined and ready to worship. "Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God (42:5, 11; 43:5)." Believers in Jesus share this same hope in the midst of our own trials.

But our psalmist's hope does not spring up automatically—he has to fight for it!

Did you notice how many times the singer talks to himself in Psalms 42–43? Three times, he addresses his own soul with the same message: "*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God* (42:5, 11, 43:5)." We usually think that talking to oneself is a sign of mental illness! But learning to confront your own heart with the truth of God's Word is one of the healthiest spiritual practices you could ever learn.

In his book *Spiritual Depression*, 20th century preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones claimed that "most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are *listening* to yourself instead of *talking* to yourself." He was right, and he was drawing his observation from Psalms 42–43. Each day, we face a choice. We can either passively listen to our own feelings about our circumstances, or we can tell ourselves the truth about who God is and what he has promised us in Jesus Christ! We do not have to lay down and wallow in our feelings of sorrow, self-pity, and despair. We don't have to let the lies of the world and our own deceitful hearts roar in our ears and shape our view of life. We can resist! We can fight! We can talk back! That's what the sons of Korah learn to do.

Will you? Follow this psalmist's example. Stop listening to yourself and start preaching to yourself! Let the light and truth of God's Word lead you out of those deep waters of sorrow to the rock of God's certain promises. Hope in God! You will again praise him!

DAY 13



Don't Forget to Worship

PSALM 100

On Thanksgiving night, I piled into a small caravan of vehicles. I was with my wife's side of our family, headed to the opening of a massive, drive-through Christmas light show in Mount Juliet, Tennessee. The display has been going for decades, and was once featured on "The Great Christmas Light Fight" TV show. So many cars were lined up on the highway to pull through that local law enforcement was there to direct traffic. Once inside, it has everything that you would want: millions of bright and colorful lights, music playing, live Christmas characters, and even a drive-through concession stand serving hot cocoa, popcorn, and cinnamon bread. About forty minutes later, we were finishing the tour when I noticed a small sign: "Jesus is the reason for the season."

We all know that it's true, but in practice it is also so easy to forget. The show of Christmas is so absorbing. It's all a lot of fun, and I think it has a place (most of it, anyway). But it's also possible to make it all the way through the activity and the flashing lights and the traditions… and wonder if we've missed something vital.

This is why we need Psalm 100. It takes us to the heart of Christmas, by summoning us, and the whole earth, to come joyfully worship God the King. If you think about it, worship is all over the Christmas story, in all of the New Testament accounts. Just take the story of the wise men visiting Jesus in Matthew 2:1–12, for example. Three times in that brief

passage, we run into the word "worship." They follow the star over a great distance "to worship him (2:2)." Herod is a phony, but even he knows the birth of the Messiah calls for worship (2:8). And when the magi finally reach Jesus, "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy…and they fell down and worshipped him (2:10–11)."

Many of our best carols remind us of the centrality of worship at Christmas. In "Angels from the Realms of Glory," each verse summons a different group to drop what they are doing to "come and worship." Whether angels serving in heaven, shepherds in the fields abiding, sages contemplating life's mysteries, or ordinary saints like you and me—whatever has been occupying you, something more urgent now demands your attention! "Come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn King!"

This is the message of Psalm 100. As we consider the whole psalm, notice how relentlessly it refocuses our attention on God himself. In just five verses, there are something like 17 references to God! I find it exceedingly helpful to soak my soul in this message here in the middle of December. It's so right for us to pause our activities and focus totally on him—but it can also be so difficult for us. We're so wrapped up in ourselves. We think we have so many better and more important things to do. If we *do* carve out some time for worship, we congratulate ourselves on really doing the Lord a favor. But Psalm 100 reminds us that it is not only *right* for us to focus on the Lord, but so good for us, too. Have you noticed that the more focused we become on ourselves and our happiness, the more miserable it inevitably makes us? How healthy it is to finally get our minds off of ourselves, our wants, our plans, our problems, and onto our great Savior! What a relief!

Going deeper into the message of Psalm 100 over these next few days will remind us that worship does not belong at the periphery of Christmas, or stuck on at the tail-end as an after-thought. Worship is front and center. Worship is *the point* of it all.

DAY 14



Join the Celebration

PSALM 100:1-2

These first two weeks in December go by in a blur every year for me. The last half of the month slows down slightly, reserved mostly for church and family gatherings. But December 1–14 is an avalanche of parties, programs, and parades. It seems like every group we are connected to is trying to celebrate Christmas, all at the same time! Yet all of that together can't compare to the celebratory energy of Psalm 100. If you go back and read Psalms 93–99, you'll find that a huge, creation-wide party has been building for Yahweh as earth's rightful king. This is the section of the psalter that inspired our carol "Joy to the World," with seas roaring, hills singing, and rivers clapping to receive earth's rightful king (see Psalm 98). Here in Psalm 100, it is as if the King finally arrives, and we are summoned to welcome him in praise. But how are we to respond?

Come shouting (1)! The famous command to "make a joyful noise to Yahweh" is not just an encouragement for bad singers! It describes how a crowd responds when the King they love comes home to them from battle: "*Yahweh their God is with them, and the shout of a king is among them* (Num 23:21)." I think of the crowds shouting "*Hosanna!*" to Jesus on Palm Sunday, or of a college football stadium, roaring out the home team's fight song. This is the response God is commanding from all people on earth at Jesus' arrival! Let out a loud, happy cheer! There is nothing quiet, tepid, or reserved about this praise. It is rowdy! It is wild! Is there any of that in your worship? We all have things that we

get passionate about, and there's nothing wrong with that. But surely we don't want to spend all our enthusiasm on trivial things that won't matter a week from now, and then give Jesus the King whatever is left. *Come shouting*!

Come serving (2)! Worship is not *just* a matter of getting all worked up emotionally. It also involves presenting ourselves for service. The picture behind "serve Yahweh with gladness" is of a knight, or a loyal servant, kneeling before the King, totally available to carry out his will. The words "worship" and "service" are interchangeable throughout the Bible. We often refer to our Sunday gathering as a "worship service," because we are not customers demanding that our wants, preferences, and expectations be met. We are servants, asking how we can honor and obey our King—both during that meeting, and after it is over. And it should come as no surprise that our *attitude* matters. If we do things for God with grumbling, grumpiness, and gloominess—how does *that* reflect on him? So let's serve him instead with *gladness*-what a Christmas witness that would be!

Come Singing (2b)! Charles Spurgeon once commented about this verse that: "Our happy God deserves to be worshipped by a happy people." Amen! That's why we *come into his presence with singing*! If you think about it, Christmas has always inspired happy singing form God's people. Glance over Luke chapters 1–2, and you'll find *everyone* bursting into song: Mary, Zechariah, the angels, the shepherds, Simeon! Luke's Christmas story is like a broadway musical! Why? Because Jesus our King has brought the happiness of heaven down into our miserable world! So we can't imagine coming into his presence scowling, sighing, or sulking. He deserves for us to come singing! Like Isaac Watts said, long ago: "Let them refuse to sing, who never knew our God, but children of the heavenly king may speak their praise abroad."

Now, look back at Psalm 100:1–2. Would anyone watching your life this Christmas season see anything of this? If not, why not?

DAY 15



Motivation for Worship

PSALM 100:3

My mom recently reminded me of the time I played a part in our church's Christmas program, as a toddler. I'm sure that you won't be surprised to know that I was playing Jesus. I wasn't supposed to have a speaking part, but in the middle of the performance I asked in a loud voice: "where are my gummy worms?!" It seems that the director had bribed me to get on stage, and now everyone knew that I was there for the candy.

We understand that the promise of gummy worms is not the best motive for worship. But what *should* draw us into God's presence? Why should we press pause on our busy lives and important tasks to come praise him? Most of us are just about always feeling overwhelmed by the many and diverse responsibilities pressing in on us. Is there really a good reason to ignore all of that and give God our sustained focus? Well, we would probably never ask that out loud. But apparently, God himself knows we could use some worship motivation, and he graciously provides it for us here.

"Know that Yahweh, he is God! (3)" What we *know* about God—who he is and what he has done for us—compels our worship. We tend to associate worship with emotions more than our minds. Certainly, emotions are wonderful. They are God's idea, after all. And sometimes we *feel* so full of joy, love, and gratitude, we can't wait to worship. But often we *don't* feel like worshipping God, for any number of reasons:

life is hard. We didn't sleep well. We're not crazy about the other people who will be there. Other opportunities just seem more fun or important. If you let your constantly-changing mood determine whether or not you worship God, you won't worship much. No, we're compelled by unchanging truth about our King. So what *do* we know about him?

We know that he is God. *I* am not the center of the universe. *I* don't deserve for life to revolve around me. *I* am unworthy of the attention and obedience of the people in my life. How obvious, yet how easily forgotten in my day-to-day life. Worship restores my sanity by reminding me that "Yahweh is God." And of course, so many idols call out to us to make them "god"—money, beauty, pleasure, achievement, and more. But in the clean light of God's presence, we see again that they are all shabby pretenders. None are worthy to occupy the center of our lives. Because we know that Jesus alone is God, we shove everything else down our priority lists, and worship *him* only.

We know that he is our Maker. God *made* you. No truth is more basic, or more profound for getting a handle on your identity. You don't *exist* without him. You *belong* to him. In the course of life, we can all start to think that we are big, strong, impressive, in-control, self-sufficient. But of course, we're not. We're small, weak, helpless, totally *dependent* on him. He is the great Potter, holding our fragile little lives in his hands with great care. Because we know this about him, we reverence him as our Maker.

We know that he is our Shepherd. Though God is awesome in his power and control, we do not worship with cringing fear. We also know that "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." He *loves* us! Through Jesus, our Maker has made us *his own*! He's personally committed to us. Tending us like a shepherd with his sheep. Staying close. Feeding, leading, defending. When we go astray, coming after us to restore us to safety. This is why he sent Jesus at Christmas! What further motivation do you need, to worship God today?

DAY 16



Invited Inside

PSALM 100:4-5

I can't let the month of December pass without sitting all my kids down at some point and making them watch "The Christmas Episode" of The Andy Griffith Show. Without going into all the details, Andy and his friends are throwing a Christmas party inside the jail for a moonshiner and his family. Aunt Bee brings in a big picnic basket full of food, Ellie is serving punch, Barney plays a very skinny Santa Claus, and Andy gets out the guitar to pick out "Away in a Manger." It's really sweet, everyone is having a great time, and they invite the sour old storekeeper Ben Weaver to join them. But he's too proud and mean to come in. He refuses them, and then slips into the alley behind the jail. He stands on a crate, holding onto the cell bars, looking in longingly at the party.

In these verses, God is inviting us to come in close, to find true joy in him. Can you see the progression in these verses? God bids the worshipers to pass through the gates, then enter into his courts, and finally to come right up into his presence, praising and blessing his name. By the finished work of Jesus Christ, you and I understand even better than the psalmist that we can *draw near*. This is what we were made for!

How can you and I possibly access the life-giving company of God himself? That's just it. God doesn't ask us to bring a gift or an offering. We don't have to wear any fancy clothes. We don't have to present him

with an impressive record of how good we've been. God invites you inside with only empty hands and a thankful heart. We have nothing to offer him! In Jesus Christ, God has done it all for us. He has provided it all. He has given it all. "From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace! (John 1:16)." All you need is empty hands and a thankful heart to enter into joy!

I love how Eugene Peterson translates this verse in *The Message*. He pictures guards standing before the big doors of the Temple, meeting the pilgrim worshipers and saying "Enter with the password: 'Thank you!'" Humble, faith-filled gratitude. It's that simple.

But sadly, "thank-you" is just what so many of us are unwilling to say. I think that a lot of us are like Ben Weaver. We're holding onto our pride, anger, discontentment, bitterness, entitlement, victimhood, self-pity, our cherished sins. We choose to hold back. Hiding in our own little dirty alley, holding tight to prison bars of our own making. And all the time, God is lovingly coaxing us inside to the party. Why not let go of whatever is holding you back? Just say the password: "Thank you!" And come on in!

If you need more motivation to come before your God, look no further than verse 5. "*For Yahweh is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*" How true it is. There is really nothing good about us. But he is so good! Our love for him is so weak, so unstable, so unreliable. But "his steadfast love endures forever." We have given him every reason to give up on us, but "his faithfulness is to all generations!" Isn't this what Zechariah, and Mary, and the angels, and all the rest were singing about on that first Christmas (Luke 1:46–51, 67–79; 2:14)? Can't you see his faithful love in your own life this Christmas?

So why not come on inside? You know the password. "Thank you!"

DAY 17



Profile of Piety

PSALM 111

We ate the fudge slowly. One piece at a time. It only comes around once a year, and so it's not the kind of thing you gobble up all at once. You slow down. You savor it. You stretch it out. Some things are worth that! That's how I feel about Psalm 111:1. It's only one verse, the opening line of a new psalm, filled with the same kind of content you can find in all sorts of psalms. But I can't help but think there's something special about the total package of this verse that makes it worth savoring slowly.

Older generations of Christians would say this verse deals with true "piety," a useful word that refers to how we live out our love and devotion to God. If you want to look at real, practical godliness, you could do a lot worse than linger over Psalm 111:1.

First, listen to the voice of true piety. "Praise Yahweh!" To "praise" anything means simply to express our approval and admiration for it. This is something that we do all the time, without ever thinking about it. We praise the great deal we just snagged at the store, the delicious meal we enjoyed at the restaurant, the beauty of the snowfall, the entertaining new TV show we just discovered, the skill of the talented athlete we are watching, and on and on. Praising comes naturally to us and is healthy for us (admiring something outside ourselves is always a small step in the right direction). Praise is also inescapable for us: even the most stubbornly negative person winds up praising a variety of

things, in spite of herself. That's because God made us to praise! But for the pious man or woman, our lesser praises provide a pleasant vocal warm-up for our highest praise: the Lord himself. How can you acknowledge him with your words today? What good things can you say about him? How can your voice glorify him?

Second, observe the heart of true piety. True godliness doesn't just say the right things; it offers up the heart to God. In the Bible, that starts with a spirit of humble thanksgiving. Not smug self-righteousness, no rude demands or proud boasting. No bitterness, jealousy, or self-pity. All of these ugly attitudes and more can hide under a pious-talking, pious-acting exterior. But the godly person knows down deep that I don't have anything at all that I didn't receive first from God, and not a bit of it is deserved (1 Cor 4:7). On my most frustrating and disappointing day, my story is all about God's grace to me through Jesus Christ. So I can't let any of that selfish entitlement slink around in the shadows of my heart. I also don't wait for a feeling of gratitude to spontaneously wash over me. I make a decision to praise. By the power of the Holy Spirit, I choose to say "I will give thanks to Yahweh with all my heart!"

Third, consider the companions of true piety. Godliness begins with your individual choice to praise and thank God with a whole heart. But it doesn't end there! Inevitably, true godliness will lead you out of your house, and into God's house, where a company of God's people meets regularly to seek the same Lord you do. They are "upright," not because they are so good, but because God has been so gracious: he picked them up, set them on their feet, and now leads them down the road of life in a new direction. God delights when his children "congregate" to praise and thank him! There is also a world of practical value in this gathering: all those earnest spiritual commitments we make in private have a way of weakening when we walk alone, or with the ungodly (see Psalm 1). So we meet to encourage each other (Heb 10:25). Will you make this choice?

DAY 18



Studying His Works

PSALM 111

When my wife and I were in college, one of our early dates was to an attraction known locally as "The Christmas Tree House." For most of the year, it was an ordinary ranch-style house on the edge of Jackson, Tennessee. But every December, its owners transformed it—top to bottom, inside and out—into an explosion of Christmas trees and other holiday decorations, open for public viewing. People drove from all over to wander the grounds and rooms, gawking and exclaiming at the works of their hands. That's what we find the worshippers of Psalm 111 doing as they stream into church: studying "the works of Yahweh (2, 3, 4, 6, 7–8)."

God's works are his actions, his deeds, all the amazing things he has done and achieved for his people. Often, the psalms celebrate the glorious "works of God" in creation (see Psalm 8:3–8). The Cavendish Laboratory at Cambridge once posted Psalm 111:2 above its entrance: "Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them!" But the worshipers in Psalm 111 focus especially on all the times God has rolled up his sleeves and worked salvation for them. There was the "redemption" from slavery in Egypt, by the ten plagues and Red Sea crossing (9). Or when Yahweh "provided food" for their fathers in the wilderness, feeding them with manna from heaven every day for forty years (5). Yahweh then went to work on the Canaanites, and gave Israel "the inheritance of the nations (6)." Then he gave us "his precepts" (7),

his trustworthy word to guide us through life. God's people don't sing about our heroic deeds for him: our story is about a Savior who works for the weak and the helpless.

But God saved his most wondrous work of redemption for Christmas! You want "full of majesty and splendor"? How about God sending his own, eternal Son back into our world as a human being? How about Jesus permanently redeeming us from sin and Satan by his own life, death, and resurrection in our place? How about that same living Savior now guiding us through the wilderness of life, feeding and defending and teaching us all the way home to our inheritance in a renewed earth with him? In Christ, God has shown his people the power of his works! Holy and Awesome is his name!

Notice these worshipers are not content with a surface knowledge of Yahweh's works: they "study" them (2). They read about them in their Bibles, listen to sermons and take careful notes, do their own deep dive to understand them better. It may sound intense, but don't we all study what we "delight" in (2)? Whatever it is that we find "wondrous" and "full of splendor," we will give our deep, sustained attention. What is that for you?

The truth is, we are all prone to forget God's saving works for us. Nothing matters more, but we are easily distracted by the far less glorious attraction of the moment. Yet God does not despise us for our wandering attention span. Because he knows how forgetful we are, he "has caused his wondrous works to be remembered (4)." This verse is probably talking about the Passover celebration. Every year, God called his people to rehearse their rescue from Egypt with Scripture readings, songs, a special meal, and other rituals. This annual celebration kept God's saving works fresh and vivid in their memories. This is not so far from what God's people do each Christmas, and Easter, and every single Sunday. If it seems a little repetitive to you, that's the point. We're here to remember that our God is gracious and merciful (4). Praise the Lord!

DAY 19

What Do You Get Out of Worship?



PSALM 32:111

The Ghost of Christmas Present treated Scrooge to many instructive scenes. One that is easy to forget is all the people going to church on Christmas. "But soon the steeples called good people all to church and chapel, and away they came, flocking through the streets in their best clothes, and with their happiest faces." Psalm 111 is like those London church bells on that snowy Christmas morning. It calls us all to join the company of God's people, gathering with thankful hearts to praise the Lord by remembering his great works for us (as we saw on Days 17 and 18).

But what can we expect when we stream *out* of church, back to our lives? What practical results does worship produce in us? What will we get out of going to church?

Worship produces knowledge. The most important thing that happens in worship is we get to know our God! We learn that "his righteousness endures forever (3)." Unlike us, God always knows the right thing to do, and he always does it. We never have to wonder if he has a cruel or cowardly streak; he is completely trustworthy. We discover that God is "gracious and merciful (4)," not rigid and mean, not impatient and severe. Though our love for him is inconstant and unreliable, "he remembers his covenant forever (5)." He is also "powerful (6)," "faithful and just (7)," "holy and awesome (9)," and more! What do you "get out of" worship? We get to know God! He *is* the prize!

Worship produces thankfulness (1, 5). In worship, we remember that God is not only responsible for the dramatic works of salvation. He is also the one who is feeding me three times a day in faithfulness to his covenant (5)! That didn't "just happen." God is showing personal faithfulness to me by meeting the most ordinary, repetitive needs of my life. His care is so consistent that I rarely think about it—but worship reminds me!

Worship produces obedience (7–8). Studying God's works in the past reassures me that I can trust him in the present, enough to obey what he tells me to do. The same God who performed these wondrous works of salvation has also spoken to us in the Bible, teaching us how to live. Though we often think our way is better, God's precepts are all "trustworthy" because they are established forever and ever. Building our lives on obedience to God's words makes us stable and strong in a crazy world.

Worship produces reverence (9–10). In worship, we are reminded that God is "holy and awesome." Our hearts return to their proper posture of the "fear of Yahweh." We reverence him. We are in awe of him. We take him seriously, we want to do what he says "with faithfulness and uprightness (8)," and "practice" all that he has taught us (10). Scripture is constantly calling us back to this basic humility and reverence before the Lord: it is what he has promised to bless. It is the doorway to the good life.

Worship produces wisdom (10). That holy fear of the Lord that we cultivate in worship really is the first step to a safe, successful, and satisfying life (10; cf Prov 1:9)." How could it not be? We are finally aligning our lives *with* the God who made us and the universe, instead of stubbornly going against the grain. Worship gets us ready to live the most effective and enjoyable lives possible in God's world. Who doesn't want that?

DAY 20



Reverence and Reflection

PSALM 112

For years, I had admired a distinctive set of vintage bookends at our friend Amy's house: two grizzled sea captains, wearing those old yellow slickers. They were so striking that I had often commented on them. Then one Christmas, I opened a gift from Amy, and found a set of my own. She had tracked down another vintage set in some antique store. They remain one of my favorite gifts, holding up my books right now.

Psalms 111 and 112 are like those bookends: a matching set. The form of both psalms matches: they are "acrostics," 22 lines apiece, each starting with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. But the content of the two psalms also matches: Psalm 111 taught us about God and his works. Psalm 112 describes the person who lives in fellowship with that God. Psalm 112 follows one of the worshippers we met in Psalm 111 out of church, to observe the kind of life we can expect if we walk with the God of Psalm 111.

The first feature of the man's life is his reverence. The final lesson the congregation in Psalm 111 learned was "the fear of the Lord (111:10)." Psalm 112 now opens on one man who took that message to heart. He didn't leave his reverence for God in his pew: he applies the fear of the Lord all week long. Monday through Saturday, he remembers that he lives under the gaze of the God who made him. This produces an attitude of reverence and lifestyle of obedience. He "greatly delights" in God's commandments! His obedience is not reluctant, half-hearted, or

offered with a bad attitude (which is no obedience at all). This man has become convinced that walking God's way really is the best way. So he obeys with joy! Is there any of this "joyful reverence" in your life? Not simply gritting your teeth and keeping the rules because you "have to." Not looking for the lowest threshold of obedience, or asking how much you can get away with. But genuinely delighting to know and do the will of God (see Ps 1)? This is the heart of true godliness, possible only by the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit.

The second feature of the man's life is his reflection. How would this man's friends and neighbors describe him? "He is gracious, merciful, and righteous (4)." He is not cold, harsh, severe, or judgmental. He is kind and patient. He gives people the benefit of the doubt. He forgives. He "deals generously and lends (5)." The man enjoys God's material blessings, but he also shares them with an open hand. He helps, he gives, he serves, putting himself out for the good of the people around him, especially those who can't possibly pay him back: "He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor (9)." He also "conducts his affairs with justice (5)," which means there is nothing sneaky about him. He acts with integrity in his business and personal dealings, treating people the way he wants to be treated. You know you can trust him. What a wonderful guy!

But if you will look closely at the description of this Psalm 112-man, his character and actions should sound very familiar: this is just how Psalm 111 described the Lord! This is no accident, but a basic biblical lesson: the more time we spend walking with the Lord, the more we begin to reflect his character. We will resemble whatever we worship (see Psalm 115:8). We will become like what we behold. That's why it's so important for us to spend extended time with Jesus, gazing upon him in his Word and worshipping him with his people. "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18)." What are you worshipping these days? It will always be reflected in your life.

DAY 21



The Good Life

PSALM 112

Advertisers are working overtime at Christmas. Some use humor, like when the M&M's run into Santa in the living room. Others are nostalgic, like the Coca-Cola polar bears who have trained us to associate Christmas with a glass bottle of Coke. Many are sentimental, showing us families coming around a table over Pillsbury Cinnamon rolls, Stouffers Dressing, and Folger's Coffee. Some are just plain crazy: like the husband discovering on Christmas morning that his wife bought him a brand new Lexus! But all of them in one way or another are selling us a vision of "the good life:" inviting us to join all these other happy people who have found fulfillment and satisfaction while using their products.

Of course, none of that is reality. They are selling an image, a mirage. Those products are all fine, but Psalm 112 reminds us that the good life is not something that we can buy (try making those payments on that new Lexus for a few months and you'll see what I'm talking about). The "good life" of settled happiness and human flourishing, true peace and lasting prosperity, comes only through walking in the fear of the Lord.

That is what the man of Psalm 112 has discovered. He fears the Lord, and, as a result, he is "blessed (1)." "It is well with him (5)." He lives under the smile of Almighty God. The Bible is not shy about declaring that there is true reward in walking in the fear of the Lord: both in this life and in the life to come. We should not be either.

God's rewards are personal. Every day, this man enjoys a good life that money can't buy. For instance, his life has stability, like a well-rooted tree or a house built on a rock (6). You can't put a price on that! And, because he spends life doing good to others, his generous life attracts favor and honor from God and man (9): "His horn is exalted in honor." Furthermore, this man's life will matter long after he is gone. "He will be remembered forever (6)." "His righteousness endures forever (3, 9)." That is remarkably strong! He will leave a blessed memory here on earth for a long time (Prov 10:7). He will be remembered by God himself forever. That's a good life!

God's rewards are material. We have said that the good life is not found in material things, but in walking with God. Yet it is also true that the godly man who walks in the fear of the Lord enjoys the material blessing of the Lord: "*Wealth and riches are in his house* (3)." This does not mean that obeying God will make us fabulously wealthy, or that we should use God to get earthly riches. What it does mean is that the material blessings the godly man enjoys are no accident. The roof over his head, food on his table, and gifts under his tree did not "just happen" through his own hard work and good management. This is the blessing of a kind and faithful God! His gifts should be received gratefully, enjoyed happily, and shared generously (9; cf 1 Tim 4:1–5).

God's rewards are generational. This godly man's good life spills over onto his children: "His offspring will be mighty in the land. The generation of the upright will be blessed (2)." These children see their dad not only doing time in a pew or talking a religious talk, but striving to walk uprightly with God. It makes them want to do the same. Their lives grow sturdy and significant, because of choices he made for the Lord. The generational reward of godliness is a key feature of God's covenant promises (Deut 7:9), and celebrated in many psalms (see Ps 127–28).

Where are you looking for the "good life" today? It only comes through walking with God!

DAY 22



Hard Candy Christmas

PSALM 112

As I write this today, it seems that the whole world is in mourning over the recent death of Dolly Parton, the Queen of Country Music. It reminded me of a song she cut back in 1982, "Hard Candy Christmas," referring to a holiday when all the family can afford is a piece of hard candy for each of the children. The lady in the song has also fallen on hard times, trying to figure out what she's going to do next in life and admitting that she's "barely gettin' through tomorrow." It's not the jolliest song to play three days before Christmas! But it is also realistic. It describes how a lot of folks are feeling this week more accurately than "Simply Having a Wonderful Christmas Time."

For the past few days, we have studied the picture of the godly man, or woman, in Psalm 112. We noted two days ago the *reverence* with which this person walks before God, and how his or her life has begun to *reflect* the Lord's own beautiful character. Yesterday, we saw that there is great *reward* in walking with God: personally, materially, and generationally. But today I want to draw our attention to how realistic this godly man's picture is. While obedience to God's commands does yield rich rewards in his life, he also knows what it's like to trust the Lord through a "hard candy Christmas!" That's why the last major theme of the godly person's life is *resilience*.

Though the man of Psalm 112 walks in covenant relationship with God, he still has his share of problems. He often finds himself navigating life

in the "darkness" (4). Circumstances can leave him feeling lost, confused, uncertain which way to go next. All he wants is a little light on his path so he'll know where to step, but no light comes. Life can be disorienting, scary, and lonely for him. Have you ever been in the dark? He also receives his share of "bad news" along the way (5). His love for God does not exempt him from learning that the factory is shutting down, or that a friend has been in an accident, or that the scans don't look good, or that his kids have been making some poor choices. Walking with the Lord is not a way of ensuring that we will never get bad news. Sometimes like Job, those bad reports pour in one after another (Job 1:13–21).

Did I mention that the man has "adversaries (8)?" In the end, a godly life will lead to honor and vindication. But in the *middle* of a godly life, there will be plenty of people who don't like you, are jealous of you, criticize you, and work against you. Sometimes they can get downright hostile: angry, wicked people who gnash their teeth at you (10)!

Clearly, the godly life is far from trouble-free (John 16:33; 2 Tim 3:12)! Yet in his challenges, the godly man remains resilient. The blessing of God rests upon him (1). In those tense and uncertain moments, "light dawns in the darkness for the upright (4)." God always supplies the needed guidance, and shows him the way that he should go. He knows that he will receive bad news, but "he is not afraid of it (7)." He doesn't live in fear, anxiety, or dread. He lives with courage, boldness, resilience, and risk-taking faith. "His heart is firm, trusting in Yahweh (7)." And even those hateful adversaries don't get under his skin. "His heart is steady," and "he will not be afraid (8)." Why not? He has read his Bible—like Psalm 1, for example. He knows that "the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Ps 1:6)" His hope in God will not be put to shame. So he keeps walking with God "until he looks in triumph on his adversaries (8)"—no matter what kind of Christmas it is this year. Resilience. Steadfastness. It's essential to the godly man's picture. How about yours?

DAY 23



Telling the Story

PSALM 78:1-8

"The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down toolhouse." Maybe you recognize that quote, from the opening lines of Barbara Robinson's *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* (1971).

That group of rough, mean, trouble-making kids wind up in a church's annual Christmas Pageant—to the horror of the church. It turns out that the Herdmans had never even heard the Christmas story. So as they listen to it at the first play practice, they ask many questions. They are shocked that Jesus is born in a stable, amazed that angels invited poor shepherds to meet him, and enraged that King Herod tries to kill him. They are so fascinated, they check out Bibles from the library to study further. By the end, the Herdman kids are profoundly moved by the gospel story—and transformed. And this bored, jaded church wakes up to the wonder of Christmas, too.

I thought of that story as I read these opening lines of Psalm 78 today. Here we have the worship leader Asaph (you may remember meeting him earlier this month), calling the people together, to re-tell an old story that many of them had been hearing their entire lives. It was the story of "The glorious deeds of Yahweh, and his might, and the wonders that he has done (4)." Asaph wants to tell these children about all the

great things that God has done for his people through the years! As we read through Psalm 78:9–72, he talks about God delivering the people from slavery in Egypt by his wonders (12), and dividing the Red Sea so that they could pass through it (13). He led them through the wilderness with a cloud in the daytime, and all night with a fiery pillar (14). He provided for them miraculously, splitting the rocks open to give them water to drink and raining down bread from heaven (15–25). Asaph takes the story all the way up to God raising David from the sheepfolds to be the shepherd-king Israel needed (70–72).

As I say, it would have been a very familiar story to most of the people gathered there. But not to every one. Asaph seems especially focused on the *children* hearing this story. Some of them (and perhaps a few adults, too) are hearing it for the very first time.

Did you notice how Asaph describes the story of God's great deeds? "I will open my mouth in a *parable*; I will utter *dark sayings* from of old (2)." He's describing the plan of God's salvation like it's a mystery, a secret, something that is "hidden" (4). That's just what the story of God's salvation is for all of us, until someone shares it with you. As Paul will say later, "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Rom 10:14)."

By re-telling this old story, Asaph is letting these children in on the secret of life: knowing the faithful God who is at work right now in saving this world. He is not "hiding" it from them, but leading them straight to the buried treasure. God *commanded* his people to do this, passing down the story of his redemption, and how we can fit into it, from one generation to the next (5–6). It's a command that applies all year long, but it seems to me that Christmas presents a golden opportunity to obey it. Don't grow bored with the Christmas story—it really is so much better than any of us can know. Who can you tell?

DAY 24



To a Thousand Generations

PSALM 78:1-8

Do you have a favorite Christmas tradition?

One of my favorites happens at our annual Christmas Eve service. I invite all the children to the front with me, where we sit on the steps in front of the pulpit. I open my Bible to the Christmas story in Luke 2, reading with as much enthusiasm, and eliciting as much participation from them, as possible. I love everything about it: kindergartners running down the aisles, sweet babies carried by new moms, expressive pre-schoolers helping me tell the story, and even the older kids who know it's the last year they'll humor me and their parents with this ritual. By now, some of my former participants have graduated high school, and will soon have children of their own joining me.

All this brings me back to Psalm 78, which I am finding an especially potent Christmas text this year. Here we find Asaph gathering the children around, passing down the story of God's mighty, saving deeds to the next generation (5–6). Not simply so they will know the facts of what happened, but "that they should set their hope in him (7)." The goal in passing on God's story is so that these children find their way into it. It is so that they would personally trust in the true and living God, and not waste their lives serving some false-savior. Asaph does not want the next generation to "forget his works," but to know and treasure and rejoice in the gospel long after he is gone. He wants them to not just know Bible trivia, but to "keep his commandments," loving

God enough to obey him, walking with God in his way, all the way home to heaven. Avoiding the stubbornness and sin and heartbreak some of us have known (8).

Asaph's own fathers had invested these truths in him. And their fathers had done the same for them. Following this ritual as far back as anyone could remember: opening the testimony of God's glorious deeds, recounting the story of his faithfulness, teaching the truth and wisdom of his commandments. One generation handing down the treasure of knowing God to the next. This is the marvelous, multi-generational plan of God.

If you are trusting in Jesus this Christmas season, there is a good chance someone in the generation before you loved you enough to let you in on the secret of the gospel. They told you the Christmas story, and showed you how your little life fits into God's magnificent plan of redemption. Parents, grandparents, pastors, Sunday School teachers. There was a godly man in my church growing up named Jerry Bradshaw. He had a beautiful shock of white hair, a warm smile, a jolly laugh, and a magnificent southern accent. Every year, he gave us kids a paper sack with an apple, an orange, and a peppermint stick in it, and told us about Christmas and the love of Jesus. You may have your own people like this in your story. We are so grateful for them.

God did not invest that saving truth in us so that we would keep it to ourselves. He calls us to pass it on (5). It's *our* turn to testify to the coming generation! Not only because we want *them* to find their place in God's story. We look beyond the horizon of our own lifetimes, when these children will rise up and tell the *next* generation about the mighty deeds of God's Son (6). While I am reading the Christmas story to the children on the steps, God's heart is on *their* grandchildren. Unborn, yet already known and loved by him. What a beautiful, breathtaking vision. Will you share in it?

DAY 25

The God of Christmas Morning



PSALM 36

Christmas is, for many of us, our favorite day of the year. It is a day of "light and gladness and joy and honor," a "feast and a holiday (Esth 8:16–17)."

It gets started early at my house with music playing and children racing down the hall into the living room. The gifts on display there are met with shouts of surprise and delight, choruses of "thank-you's," and calls for pocket knives and batteries. We transition at some point into a leisurely breakfast and a reading of the Christmas devotional. The rest of the day is gloriously unstructured and unhurried. No deadlines to meet, no responsibilities to juggle, no calories to count. We visit with family, exchange greetings with friends, and reminisce about Christmases past. We indulge in bottled Cokes and in boiled custard, in afternoon naps and in homemade fudge. We play outside if the weather is mild, tossing footballs, or riding go-karts, or firing off guns. If it's cold outside, we may hole up around the fireplace, play a board game, or watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. It is a day of extravagant enjoyment.

And so we turn to Psalm 36, where David reminds us that all the earthly joys of Christmas Day provide one of our clearest windows into the heart of God.

From the start, sin's great lie has been that God is mean, stingy, and restrictive. He is a sour, bad-tempered miser, withholding good things

and watching carefully for anyone who may be enjoying themselves (Gen 3:1–7). Psalm 36 exposes this lie. It reveals God instead as the supremely good, glad, giver. This is the blessed, or happy, God (1 Tim 1:11), who "goes overboard" in blessing his children. The God of Psalm 36 is not sticking to a tight budget; he lets it get out of hand. In both spiritual and material gifts, God is exuberantly generous, scattering his gifts with both hands. He is the God of Christmas morning.

Consider the sheer immensity of God's goodness (5–6). David raids creation's most sprawling features to describe the enormity of God's heart. His "steadfast love extends to the heavens," and "his faithfulness" reaches beyond "the clouds." Picture yourself standing out on some plain in Montana's Big Sky Country: God's personal, loyal love covers the lives of his people like the heavens overhead and surrounds you like all that clean, fresh air. Meanwhile, God's righteousness "is like the mountains," soaring and strong, ancient and immovable. You can trust him completely. His "judgments," his wise words and decisions, are as profound as "the great deep." How vast is God's goodness! How boundless! Go, explore it for yourself: you will never reach the edge.

Now admire his lavish hospitality (7–9). God the Creator is a gracious host, who invites the children of man to take refuge under the shadow of his wings (7). There is plenty of room for us all! He shades us and he shields us, and then he shares his bounty with us. He isn't serving up tapwater and sardines; we "feast on the abundance of your house." As the King James has it: "They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shall make then drink of the rivers of thy pleasures." We're talking about ribeyes and twice-baked potatoes, followed by carrot cake and strong black coffee. There is nothing cheap, tight-fisted, or begrudging in him: this is the God who "richly provides us with everything to enjoy (1 Tim 6:17)." Does *that* God sound like a Scrooge to you?

In the end, there could be no more appropriate picture of this God than "the fountain of life (9)!" He is the Source: eternally-flowing,

ever-refreshing, endlessly-giving. Out of his own fullness, he pours into our lives every good gift (Js 1:17), new mercies each morning (Lam 3:22–24), and pleasures forevermore (Ps 16:11). In his light, we see light, discovering truth, goodness, and beauty for the first time. Is this how you think of God?

Now, glance up briefly at David's sketch of "the wicked (1–4)." We linger here only long enough to note how small and sad he is next to the mighty, mirthful giant of a God we just met. It is so clear that the further a man gets from God, the more impoverished his life grows. His life does not expand, but contracts. Sin has not liberated this man as it promised to do; it has enslaved him. Instead of standing taller, he keeps curving deeper in on himself. No package is so small, it has been said, as a man wrapped up in himself.

Of course, this only throws God's grace at Christmas into even sharper relief. In his most reckless act of generosity, God sent his Son Jesus into the world to save foolish sinners just like the man we meet in Psalm 36:1–4. For those whose hearts loved transgression, who did not fear the Lord, who flattered themselves that they would never be called to account, who set themselves "in a way that is not good." In other words, God sent his son Jesus to come after people just like you and me.

At Christmas, the steadfast love that is larger than all outdoors took on flesh, born as a tiny baby in a manger. In him was life, and that light was the light of man (John 1:4; Ps 36:9). He went to a cross and died in our place, paying for every low, sneaky, selfish sin we will ever commit. He rose from the dead to fling open the gates to the fountain of life to us. By faith in Jesus, we can step out of our cramped slum of sin and self, into the wide open spaces of his steadfast love! We can take refuge under the shadow of his wings, feast on the abundance of his house, and drink from the river of his delights! From his fullness, we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:16). Have you?

So let us celebrate with all our might, knowing that we belong to the good and generous God of Christmas morning. Receive his gifts with humble thanks and childlike wonder. Enjoy yourself to the fullest, with a conscience washed clean by the blood of Christ, and a heart made merry by his unfailing mercies. "Go your way," said Nehemiah on another festive occasion, "eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Neh 8:10, KJV)."

Merry Christmas!

DAY 26



Testify!

PSALM 107:1-3

In 1870, George Müller lost his beloved wife of 34 years. At her funeral, he announced his text: Psalm 119:68 "Thou art good and doest good." He had three points: "The Lord was good, and did good, in giving her to me. He was good, and did good in so long leaving her to me. He was good, and did good, in taking her from me." In his most devastating loss, he saw the goodness of God to him. And he said so.

That's Psalm 107. It's a song that is teaching us to look back on our lives and interpret the story God is writing. We're tempted to see our lives only as a story of trouble and trials, pain and problems, unfair treatment and unmet desires. We are so often just looking for an excuse to get salty and sulky and balled up in self-pity. But the truth is, God is using your life to tell the story of his goodness. Your life story is about the enduring mercy and *steadfast love* of the Lord, *delivering* you from one trouble after another. Bringing you into the company of the redeemed. Calling you to thanks and joy!

If you were around any small children over Christmas, there is a good chance that at some point you heard their parents whispering to them, "What do you say?" Or "Go tell them thank-you." That's because expressing gratitude does not come naturally to us. *Ingratitude* is instinctive! We don't need lessons to blurt out "I'm hungry!" "It's hot!" "My turn!" "She hit me!" Or "No fair!" But we must be trained to say "thank-you." That's what these opening verses are for. Teaching us the

language of gratitude! *"Oh give thanks to Yahweh for he is good! For his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of Yahweh say so*."

It's the first day back in church for the exiles. They lost the Promised Land after years of willful sin. Got carried far from home. Squandered God's gifts. Ruined their lives. Many psalms express their misery and regret and beg God to intervene, like Psalm 106:47: "*Save us, oh Yahweh our God, and gather us from among the nations*." And to their shock, God did! He came after them. Found them. Freed them. Brought them home. Gave them their lives back! A stunning reversal! Now he's gathered them at church. And what does God want in return? Just a simple "thank you!"

They'd heard the command in v1 all their lives. It's so familiar, it rolled off them like a non-stick pan. But now they've been *redeemed*. They'd experienced God's *goodness* to them at their worst. His *hesed*: steadfast, loyal, inexhaustible love is finally sinking in! And all he wants is for them to finally learn to say "thank you." Just acknowledge his goodness. He doesn't want them to repay him. They can't! But they can "offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell his deeds in songs of joy (22)!" Thank you!

God wants us to learn this language as we close out the year. Our instinct is to look back with *ingratitude*. To compare and complain. To dwell on disappointments, talk about our troubles and losses, and to silently accuse God of neglect. While we forget all those cries he answered. Ingratitude is the root of all our sin (Rom 1:21). It's where the poison enters our system. Don't let that be you! We've been redeemed! He gathered you in! His mercy endured with you all year long. He loved you in January, in June, and all the way to the last week of December. He's been so good.

So, *say so*.

DAY 27



All Through the Blood

PSALM 107:4-32

An old song says: "Some through the waters, some through the flood, some through the fire, but all through the blood" Whatever your details, we all had to be redeemed. We all had to come through the blood of Jesus. We've all got our reason to testify to the goodness of God in our lives. That's what this section of Psalm 107 is about. Like all pastors, this psalmist knows that we are no good at giving thanks. So he helps us! He goes around the room, pointing to us, rehearsing our stories and reminding us of God's steadfast love in our lives. The details are different. But the plot is the same! We get ourselves into all kinds of trouble; God's steadfast love gets us out. So give thanks!

"Some of y'all were stranded (4–9)." These folks were on a journey and lost their way. Wandered off the path and got stranded in a desert. When supplies ran out, and they were ready to give up, they finally cried to the Lord. And he delivered them! He led them by a straight way to the city they sought. Hasn't God done this for you? When *you* strayed from the path and lost *your* way? When you were hopelessly wandering, hungry and thirsty? He found you! He led you! He fed you! Thank him for his steadfast love!

"Some of y'all were shackled (10–16)." These folks got rebellious: "God's not telling *me* what to do!" So God brought them low. They wound up doing hard labor on a chain gang, sitting in a dark dungeon. Finally, in misery and guilt, they cried to the God they'd rejected. And he

delivered them! Has God not done this for you? When you forged your own shackles? Found yourself doing hard time for your own stubborn sin? When you deserved nothing, his love led you out into light and freedom! Won't you thank him?

"Some of y'all were stupid (17–22)." "*Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their inquiries suffered affliction* (17)." God told them exactly how to avoid pain and sorrow. They did just the opposite, then suffered the consequences. They got addicted, indebted, and diseased. And as the gates of death were opening for them, they finally cried to God. And he delivered! Hasn't he done this for you? Healed you of your own self-inflicted pain? When no one felt sorry for your stupid tail, and everyone was done with you. God didn't say "*Serves you right*." He delivered you! Thank him!

"Some of y'all were storm-tossed (23–32)." A group of mariners headed out on business. These were smart, competent, ambitious men with a plan to make money. They felt big, self-sufficient, in control. Then God showed them otherwise. A storm picked up their little boat and plunged it back down, over and over. All that courage and confidence melted. They felt small, helpless, and terrified. So they called out to God! "*He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed, then they were glad that the waters were quiet, and he brought them to their desired haven* (29)." Hasn't God done this for you, when the storms of life stripped you of your pride? Won't you thank him?

These four stories are just a sampling of how God's steadfast love comes to our rescue. Can't you see yourself here? Can you fill in your own details? God is teaching us how to think about our own stories. It's not about me and my successes. It's also not about my self-pitying problems and victimhood. My life has been about God delivering me time and time again, using my weakness to showcase his steadfast love!

Is that how you tell your story?

DAY 28



Learning from Reversals

PSALM 107:39–43

These last few days of the year, I always remember the old Roman god Janus, pictured as a face looking both backward and forward. That's where we get our name for the month of "January." It's the ultimate time for looking back, on the old year, and looking forward, on the new. That's why these final verses of Psalm 107 are so appropriate for today. Think about this final verse: "*Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things; let them consider the steadfast love of Yahweh* (43)." The psalmist is urging us to think about all we've learned from these stories of deliverance in Psalm 107. Don't forget what we've seen! Attend to the many stories of God intervening for you when you least deserved it. Considering his love in the past will make us wiser in the future.

This psalm has taught us that God loves to display his goodness and steadfast love through what we could call "reversals." He loves to interrupt the flow of things, and turn the whole story around. Can you see that theme in these verses? "*He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell, and they establish a city to live in; they sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield…he raises up the needy out of affliction and makes their families like flocks. The upright see it and are glad, and all wickedness shuts its mouth* (35–42)." As long as I stay low before the Lord, humble and grateful, he delights to raise me up. He turns my deserts into pools of water.

But the reversal works the other way, too. If I get proud and haughty, if I lift up my heart and begin to think that I don't really need the Lord. He can reverse my prosperous and comfortable situation.

That's what he did with these exiles when they got arrogant and entitled in the Promised Land. God sent the Babylonian army through the front door, and the next thing they knew, they were marching away from Jerusalem in chains. God "turned their rivers into a desert, springs of water into thirsty ground, a fruitful land into a salty waste (33–34)." He can do it to us. One day when you have the world by the tail, God can grab you by both feet, turn you upside down, and shake every dime out of your pockets. I would rather the Lord not do that in my life! That's why I want to thank my way through this new year, humbly declaring his goodness and steadfast love to me.

Talking with Jeremy Isbell, my friend and our church's worship leader, he observed that families had requested the same song at the last dozen or so funerals we had done. It's called "The Goodness of God," a worship song based on Psalm 23. Here's the chorus:

All my life you have been faithful
All my life you have been so, so good.
With every breath that I am able
I will sing of the goodness of God

Why has this song become the new standard at Christian funerals? I think that when a Christian believer reaches the end of life and surveys the long journey they've taken, the message of that chorus becomes so obviously true. All my life, he *has* been faithful. All my life, he *has* been so, so good. And finally, we see it. And so we just want to say, "thank you." I can't think of a more appropriate song for a Christian funeral.

But Psalm 107 is also reminding us that we should not wait until the end. Sing it all the way through life!

DAY 29



Confidence

PSALM 27:1-3

In 1939, Germany was bombing London. A man named Martyn Lloyd-Jones was the pastor of Westminster Chapel there in the city. One Sunday, while he was praying in the service, a bomb fell a few yards from the church. The building shook. Plaster fell from the ceiling onto the heads of the worshipers. Lloyd-Jones paused, then finished his prayer. An assistant came up to dust him off, and he preached his sermon. Even as the bombs fell, the church kept meeting, and Lloyd-Jones preached his sermon.

In this next year, we can expect our own share of attacks, dangers, and uncertainties. But God can make us fearless. Confidently trusting him and passionately seeking him, even as the bombs fall. That's Psalm 27. For many years, this has been my New Year psalm. I love it! And it opens in these first verses with the confidence we can proclaim.

David is brimming with confidence in these opening lines! "Whom shall I fear?" "Of whom shall I be afraid?" He's almost swaggering! If you grew up in the 1990s like I did, you may remember the "No Fear!" t-shirts that were so popular back then. Well, that's David at the beginning of Psalm 27. He's not scared of anything or anybody!

But if you will notice, David's confidence is not because *he sees himself* as big, strong, and in-control. No, David is aware that he is small, weak, and out-of-control! But little David is in a personal, covenant

relationship with a great, big God. So even though David can't handle much, Yahweh can handle anything!

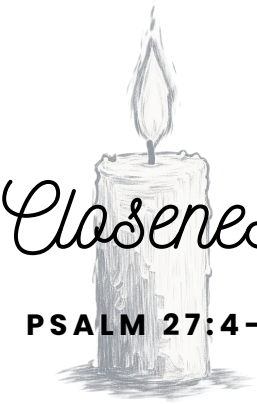
He says, "Yahweh is my light!" So I don't have to fear the darkness, the unknown, the 'what-ifs?' I don't need to be afraid of what I can't see. Furthermore, "Yahweh is my salvation!" That means I don't have to fear the danger or the problems that I *can* see! We are no longer talking about the possible dangers that I imagine may be out there in the future. David means, "When I land in very real trouble, I have a personal God who is committed to saving me." So even though we, like David, are fragile, helpless, and vulnerable, "Yahweh is the stronghold of my life!" That means any storm can blow into my life, and howl as loud and shake as hard as it wants. I could never stand up to it on my own, but I'm hidden down deep in the shelter of God's care, resting easy.

You could say that David has supreme confidence in Yahweh. Where does that come from? How do you develop such a bulletproof assurance in God's personal care?

Life. David experienced God's protection in the worst-case scenarios time and time again. He can recall "*evildoers assailing me to eat up my flesh, my adversaries and foes*." That's as scary as it gets. From his youth, David has faced lions, bears, and giants who said they'd kill him and feed him to the birds (1 Sam 17:44). Yet every time, often at the last minute, it was *they* who stumbled and fell. He's seen the odds stacked against him like crazy! Saul's whole army encamped against him, making war on him alone! Yet time and time again David escaped. Some call him lucky. David says, "I have a covenant God who 'bound my life in the bundle of the living (1 Sam 25:29)."'

Because David experienced God's protection through so many dangers in the past, he can face the future saying "*my heart shall not fear*;" and "*I will be confident*." Can you say that as you face the uncertainties of a new year? There will be dangers and struggles, but you can belong to Someone bigger. No fear!

DAY 30



Closeness

PSALM 27:4-6

Did I ever tell you about the time I almost died? After thirty years of resistance, I finally agreed to a regimen of allergy shots. The allergist mixed a brew of all the toxins I'm allergic to and shipped it in vials to my family doctor. Every week, a nurse injected me with a slightly larger dose, so my body would build a tolerance. But one of those vials was a bit stout. And one second after the injection, my face turned red, my head pounded, and my throat closed. As the lights started to go out, nurses frantically shot me with epinephrine, Benadryl, and whatever else they could find. Needless to say, I survived, and never took another allergy shot. But my first words when I saw my wife afterward? "We're going to eat fried catfish tonight." I had learned that life was too short to live on salads. Narrow escapes have a way of clarifying what is really important in life.

That's what David is saying, at a far more profound level, in Psalm 27:4–6. God has just brought him through a string of his own brushes with death, and it has got David straightening out his priorities. "*One thing have I asked of Yahweh, that will I seek after. That I may dwell in the house of Yahweh all the days my life*." As I said, danger and deliverance have a way of clarifying what is most important. After all David has been through, he knows that only "one thing" matters in life, and it's not making money, looking good, fitting in, being successful, or any of those other fleeting pursuits we tend to idolize. Only one thing matters in this life, and that's staying close to the Lord.

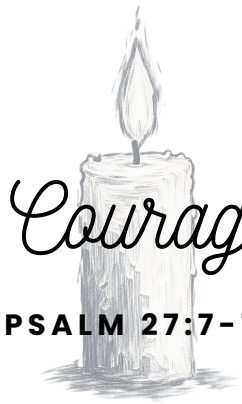
David's whole life's ambition is now just keeping near to the God who has saved him.

It seems David is thinking here especially about getting near to the Lord in public worship, which has been a theme of this book. Notice how David mentions meeting with God in "*the house of Yahweh*," inquiring in "*his temple*," hiding in "*his shelter*," and "*his tent*." David is not just thinking about singing to the Lord in the pasture during the night watches (though that's good to do, too). David longs to go to church! He wants to hear the Scriptures, join the prayers, offer praise. David has wanted lots of beautiful things in his life, but worship is where he encounters the only beauty that really satisfies his soul. This is where he can go to "*inquire of the Lord*," and find the guidance, wisdom, and fresh vision he needs for his life (is he thinking of 1 Sam 21:1–9?).

And notice that David is not waiting to worship when life is calm and orderly. No, he's running into church *while* his life is falling apart! "*For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble*." 'Shelter' literally means "lion's lair:" when I draw near to God in my trouble, he pulls me inside his den! Who's coming in after me *there*?! "He will conceal me under the cover of his tent." It's like God is this mighty sheik, who lets David hide in his tent, taking responsibility for his safety. So David still has enemies all around him, snarling and snapping (6). But God "lifts me high on a rock," far out of their reach. So even *with* all his pressures and opponents, David commits to worship God: "I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy, singing and making melody to the Lord."

How about you? Has life clarified for you what is really important? In this new year, something will be the "one thing" you seek above all else. What will it be? Don't waste this year seeking trivial nonsense that doesn't matter, while living at a distance from the God who saves you. Make David's prayer your own. In the midst of my real, messy life, I *will* seek the Lord like never before.

DAY 31



Courage

PSALM 27:7-14

As I flip back through my calendar, I am struck by how this year has been shaped by all the things I never saw coming last January. Happily, much of my life has followed the same familiar pattern I could have plotted for you twelve months ago. But I'm amazed now by how many times that pleasant rhythm was disrupted by unpredictable events, positive and negative. An accident and a surgery for a child canceled a trip. A moisture problem in my house required a new roof. We had a death in our family. We pivoted from one vacation plan to another at the last minute and had a wonderful time. Old friends unexpectedly moved away, and new friends unexpectedly moved into our lives. I'm sure the same is true for you, too. In big ways and small, life can change so quickly.

This is apparently what has happened to David in Psalm 27:7. Out of nowhere, all that confidence from v1–6 vanishes, and David sounds desperate and scared. "*Hear, O Yahweh, when I cry aloud; be gracious to me and answer me*!" V8 starts strong: "*You have said 'Seek my face.' My heart says to you, your face, Yahweh, do I seek*"—but it tumbles into the doubt of v9: "So hide *not* your face from me!" He talked so much about God sheltering him in 5–6, but in 9-10, he seems nervous that God won't: "*Turn not your servant away in anger, O you who have been my help. Cast me not off; forsake me not, O God of my salvation*!" David doesn't sound like a warrior, but a friendless, homeless, beggar. 10: "*For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but Yahweh will take me in.*" Even the

marvelous verse 11 reveals desperation in David's heart: "T*each me your way, O Yahweh, and lead me on a level path…because of my enemies! Give me not up to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me and they breathe out violence*." Translation: "God, I'm terrified! Get me out of here!!!"

The tone-change between 1–6 and 7–12 is so stark, so abrupt, so bipolar that many scholars assume two different psalms got accidentally smashed together. But there is a much simpler explanation. We all know how quickly a new crisis can erupt in our lives, plunging us from the faith of v6 to the fear of v7. These crises may be relational, financial, physical, or emotional. We can go ahead and predict it for the new year. We may feel very confident in the Lord as we begin January. But February's coming. Or maybe your crisis is lurking in April. Or will it be July? Maybe October is going to be your month. The truth is, most of us will take this slide from v6 to v7 many times between now and this time next year. You may not find it comforting, but it is terribly realistic. I need an honest Bible, don't you?

So how does David end this wild ride of a psalm in v13–14? Well, his problems from v7–12 are all still there. Nothing has been resolved. But he does not let his fear swallow him whole. Instead, David does the same thing that you and I will have to do many times over in this unpredictable new year. He reminds his heart of the truth he believes. "I believe that I shall look upon the goodness of Yahweh in the land of the living (13)." David knows where his life is headed! He has received many pale previews when he has gazed upon the beauty of the Lord in his temple. One day he will look upon the Lord's goodness fully and face to face. Not here in this land of trouble and death, but *in the land of the living*. This is our true home, where we all ache to be every day, even when we don't recognize it! Through Jesus Christ, that is our destiny, and nothing in this new year can take it from us. If I *didn't* believe that, how could I make it? But I do. Whatever comes my way this year, *I am on my way to the land of the living*. So I am waiting on Yahweh. And my heart takes courage.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