



God is our Shelter in the Storm

Psalm Shelters in the Storm

**Six Bible studies from the Psalms
To give you comfort and understanding when life gets rough**

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Bible Studies in this series

<p>Creation and Fall – 6 studies to look at the creation and fall of mankind. We will look at the perfection and plan of God’s creation and how man tarnished the creation with sin.</p>	<p>Jesus’ Miracles in John’s Gospel – 7 studies on the miracles of Jesus in the gospel of John. Each miracle has a meaning that tells us something important about Jesus’ person and ministry.</p>
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<p>Storm Shelter Psalms – 6 studies on some of the psalms to turn to when life hits you hard. Wrestle with the psalmist as he learns to trust the Lord in difficult times.</p>	<p>Upper Room Conversations – 6 studies on the conversation that Jesus had with the disciples around the last supper table. Learn what was so important to Jesus that He just had to share it with the disciples.</p>
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<p>Daniel: Godly Living in a Pagan World – 6 studies to encourage us as we live in a world that has become harsh to God. It will make all the difference to keep our faith in tough times.</p>	<p>Paul’s first missionary journey – 6 studies on the conversion and first journey of Paul. See Paul as he grows and learn what the life of the Christian was meant to be.</p>
<p>Power of Prayer – 6 studies on the power and help that we receive in prayer. Follow the saints in their prayers and learn from them how valuable prayer can be for you.</p>	

Introduction

They were real people like us with their struggles and fears in life. Maybe that is why we love the psalms. They resonate with our emotions and not just our minds. We feel their pain and their joy as it pours out in their cries and their celebrations. We also see the hand of God in their lives wiping away their tears as He hears their complaints. We see God working to heal, rebuild, and protect their lives as they walk with Him. Most of all we see the relationship that God is building in their lives. These are people who are growing in their faith. They experience the sadness that we often feel but they act differently in their pain. Instead of looking at themselves, they look upward to heaven and to what God can do to help them. Their faith changes how they act and what their future will be.

I think we relate to the psalms because we have some of the same struggles. We have struggles in our life where we need a friend. We have times when we are overtaken by fear when we know that faith would be better. We have times when we feel so guilty from our sins that we just don't feel like we can approach God. These psalms answer those challenges and more. We could try and make it on our own without God but that would be foolish. It would be like being hungry and thinking we can do without food. God wants to help us in our needs whether that is a need for forgiveness, faith, or protection. God is the shelter that we need in the storms of life. These psalms will help us to draw close to the Lord when our life is falling apart. Here we will find the answers that we need.

The psalms also can lead us to change our lives. So often, we think we have God's answer but we don't understand the question. We don't know what it means to have a shepherd and what He will bring to our life. We expect God to take away problems instead of helping us to transform our fear into faith. We minimize the joy of forgiveness and try to ignore the sin instead of confessing it. Finally, we keep God at a distance instead of being confident that the throne of grace is but a prayer away. One of the joys of the psalms is that they will change our understanding of ourselves and God. They will surprise us with new insights about the relationship that we can have with God. As you study these psalms and take refuge in the hands of the shepherd, look for God's solutions to your problems. Let Him open your eyes and your heart so that you can take the storms of life with faith and confidence in God.

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How to use this Bible study

Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. The questions will help you understand what is going on and apply it to your own lives. The leader's guide provides answers for the questions that can be used in a Sunday Bible class or a small group. In a small group setting, you may find it helpful to copy the four-page leader's guide for each person. There are also student guides provided in the back of the book. In a large setting, it may be easier to copy those guides so that each of the members of the class has a student guide for personal use. Notice that there are also three questions at the end of each lesson that can either be discussed as you meet together or assigned for people to think about in the coming week.

My prayer is that you and the members of your group or class can grow through these studies. The answers in the leader's guide may challenge you to find deeper meaning and application for your lives. Often we try to overcome problems in life by ourselves. The goal of this study is to help you find God's help in the troubles of life and to learn what that help should look like. Often we want to tell God how to help us. He often has a better way if we will just listen to Him. As you study, realize that many of the questions have no single answer but are meant to help people find God's help in your trials. If you need to take more than one week per lesson, do so and enjoy the discussion and the learning.

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May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow in His grace.

1. Help from the Shepherd

Psalm 23

Big idea: The shepherd is there to help with the struggles of life.

Psalm 23 tells of the Great Shepherd who cares for His sheep and equips them for ministry (Heb. 13:20-21). Certainly, this psalm has a message for the sorrowing, but Psalm 23 focuses on what Jesus does for us "all the days of my life" and not just at death (v. 6). While many see David, a "young shepherd boy," lying on his back in the pasture and pondering the things of God, he probably wrote this psalm late in his life, possibly during the rebellion of Absalom (2 Sam. 13-19). In it, David deals with some of the problematic things he experienced during his long walk with the Lord. While people of all ages love and quote this psalm, its message is for mature Christians who have fought battles and carried burdens.

This psalm begins with five powerful words: "The Lord Is My Shepherd." "The" shows that He is the only one. There is no other. "Lord" expresses His power to do all things and His love and faithfulness to us. "Is" tells us that this is not a past event but a gift that we will have all our lives. "My" shows that God wants a personal relationship with us. "Shepherd" shows how He loves and cares for us all our lives. The 23rd Psalm is for all those who are facing difficulties or challenges in life. In six short verses, this beloved psalm describes our relationship with the Lord and our walk with Him in life. It is a help to all those who struggle through the pain of life or fear what lies ahead.

The psalm brings the comforts and the delight of living in God's great goodness and mercy. It is no wonder that so many people remember its words by heart. It is a psalm that we can recite over and over again when life is difficult for us. It is a psalm that we can use to keep Satan away and to calm our hearts. It is a psalm worth pondering verse by verse because it is filled with images that we can use when life is filled with some crisis or when we need a helping hand. The shepherd is there to help us through the dark valleys of life and to provide all that we need. He fills our lives with His care and tenderness each day we walk with Him.

1. What is your greatest fear in life right now? How does it threaten your peace of mind or sense of security?

Answers will vary and let the group discuss the different responses that they might have. Some might be afraid of something big in the news and others will be frightened by something happening in their personal life.

Read Psalm 23

2. Verse 1. What do you know about sheep? How do they depend on the shepherd?

Several things come to mind. Sheep lack a sense of direction. They are virtually defenseless and are easily frightened. They are not very clean since they do not lick themselves or roll in the grass. They seldom can find water by themselves. In short, sheep are pretty defenseless. They depend on the shepherd for protection and guidance so that they know where to go. The text is going to compare the believer to a sheep and show that we need to depend on the Lord for all our needs and wants. One other noteworthy thing is that the sheep's wool does not belong to them. The shepherd keeps the fleece clean and owns the wool. This psalm of helpless sheep going through tough times is a good analogy of humanity.

3. How are we like sheep? Why do we need the shepherd?

Sheep aren't smart. They tend to wander into running creeks for water, then their wool grows heavy, and they drown. They need a shepherd to lead them to "calm water" (Ps. 23:2). They have no natural defense—no claws, no horns, no fangs. They are helpless. Sheep need a shepherd with a "rod and ... walking stick" (Ps. 23:4) to protect them. They have no sense of direction. They need someone to lead them "on right paths" (Ps. 23:3). So do we. We, too, tend to be swept away by waters we should have

avoided. We have no defense against the evil lion who prowls about seeking whom he might devour. We, too, get lost. We need a shepherd. We need a shepherd to care for us and to guide us.

4. What does it mean to you that David can say of the Lord, “I shall not be in want”? What would that look like in your life?

It starts straightforwardly with the simple words, "The Lord is my shepherd." "Lord" is emphatic here. It is the Lord who makes our faith distinctive. No other person fits - not Mohammed, not Buddha, not Gandhi. "My" personalizes the relationship, revealing intimacy and closeness. "Shepherd" is the most comprehensive and intimate metaphor in the Psalms. The shepherd lives with his flock and is everything to it—guide, physician, and protector. The last phrase, "there is nothing I lack," means that God will fulfill my deepest personal needs and that I will find meaning and true identity in him. In short, I don't need God plus anything or anyone. All my emotional and psychological longings for significance and security will find fulfillment in the Lord.

5. Verse 2 What does it mean that “He makes me lie down in green pastures”? Why does God have to make us lie down?

The psalmist starts with a word picture to help us understand. Sheep can get easily spooked and will run over each other if threatened or startled. The shepherd has to force them to lie down and be calm. He will catch them and get them to feed quietly on the grass beneath their feet. In our hectic lives, God sometimes has to use events to force us to slow down and rest. It may be an illness or something else that knocks us off our feet. It may be a time where we collapse from busy lives. In those times, we need to stop and ponder what the shepherd is trying to teach us. It is a time to feed on His wisdom and to take time to rest.

6. What happens when people don't rest as the Shepherd desires? When have you experienced difficulties because you did not listen to the master's call for rest?

Our bodies and minds need rest. We can be distracted by the world and often distract ourselves. In those times where we are entirely alone, we have time to think. The thoughts may be frightening, but they give you a time to reorder and prioritize your life. That may be why the Lord doesn't ask us to lie down; He needs to force us. Like little children at bedtime, we often don't know what is best for us. God, like parents, makes us lie down since we need that time for spiritual growth and rest from the pressures of the world. Let your mind slow down and spend time with the Lord. In Him alone is real rest. Let the class discuss when they have felt exhausted and how they dealt with it. Let them also look at how a time of rest with the Lord could help them more.

7. Verse 3 Why is it necessary for sheep and us to be guided by Jesus as we walk through life? What happens if no one encourages you to “get moving”?

Sheep are not put out to pasture and just left there. The sheep need a shepherd who will lead them and keep them from dangerous places. They also don't want to leave a site once they find food. They will overgraze an area and destroy the pasture. The shepherd has to force them to move on so that the field will have grass later for them. God sometimes has to force us to move. We go to the wrong places and hang out with the wrong people and end up in trouble. God has to move us on. There are also times when God has to get us moving. We get afraid of going anywhere at all. Our shepherd must get us up and get us moving so that we don't become fat and lazy sheep.

8. Where do you need guidance right now from the Good Shepherd? Why is He the right person to guide your life?

The Lord renews us physically and emotionally. We need to trust the Bible as our guide along the path of life. We need to listen to what it says and come to know God intimately. If we believe Him and become close to Him, our paths will be straighter and more pleasant (Prov. 3:4-6). Let the class talk about where

they need guidance from the Lord. God will help them because He loves them. It is just the nature of our God. As we listen and follow Him, we will reach His destination for us and do so with the fewest obstacles.

9. Verse 4 What dark valleys are there in life? As you think of David, what dark valleys did he have to go through?

Verse 4 is central to the psalm. David is speaking to the shepherd instead of about him. Notice that God is beside us and not ahead of us helping us through any challenging experience in life that makes us afraid. We will always have trouble spots in life. What a comfort it is that we have the Good Shepherd beside us to show us where we are going and to protect us from the things that cause us to worry or fear. David spent most of his life in trouble. Before he is king he is running from Saul, later, he is a king warring with his neighbors, and toward the end of his reign, his house (family) rises in rebellion against him. David was confident of God's protection, just as David's sheep had been "confident" of David's protection when he was their shepherd in the Judean hills. That doesn't mean that we will be exempt from trouble. It does mean that God will stretch out His hand on our behalf.

10. Verse 5 An essential part of the shepherd's duty was to feed the flock. How well does the shepherd take care of his sheep?

Flat places in the hilly country were called "tables," and sometimes the shepherd stopped the flock at these "tables" and allowed them to eat and rest as they headed for the fold. After each stressful day's work, the shepherd aimed to bring the flock safely back to the fold where the weary sheep could safely rest for the night. Sometimes at the fold, the shepherd would spread out food in a trough, because sheep lie down and relax after they have eaten. The text says that he will give us an overflowing cup. The picture is that the wine reaches the rim and then tumbles over the edge. The goblet is not large enough to contain the quantity. David wants us to see that our lives are not large enough to hold the blessings that God wants to give. He pours and pours until the blessings flow over the edge and down on the table.

11. Verse 6 How does David sum up his walk with the Lord?

Just as a shepherd would lay each night at the door of the sheepfold and recall the blessings of the day followed by thanks, David looks over his long life and has the same conclusion. He had sinned dramatically during his life but had always returned to the Lord. David knew that the Lord would take care of him after death. God's goodness and mercy would follow him all the days of this life and the next. God's goodness will bring David and all believers home to be with God in heaven.

12. How does dwelling with the Lord bring prosperity to our lives? What is the prosperity that God brings to His people?

We often define prosperity only in terms of money. David defines real success differently. Rather than being pursued by our enemies, God blessings will continue to follow us through life. We will have more than what we need through life. God loves us despite knowing our faults. If we learn to accept that love, we will know our imperfections and how little those matter to God. Let the group think about the many ways that God has blessed them in life. Let them think about what it will mean to be in God's house forever.

13. In this one psalm are several truths about God which are reflected in other parts of scripture. Which one of the names below is most helpful to you?

There are several truths about God in this psalm that are used in other places in scripture. Here are a few:

"I shall not want"—Jehovah-Jireh, "the Lord will provide" (Gen. 22:14)

"still waters"—Jehovah-Shalom, "the Lord our peace" (Judg. 6:24)

"restores my soul"—Jehovah-Rophe, "the Lord who heals" (Ex. 15:26)

"paths of righteousness"—Jehovah-Tsidkenu, "the Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 33:16)

"you are with me"—Jehovah-Shammah, "the Lord is there" (Ezek. 48:35)

"the presence of my enemies"—"Jehovah-Nissi, "the Lord our banner" (Ex. 17:15)

"anoint my head"—Jehovah-M'Kaddesh, "the Lord who sanctifies" (Lev. 20:8)

Let the class look at these names and ponder which ones have been the most meaningful to them. This psalm is beloved for it covers so much of the fantastic character of God. Let the group talk about God's character and how it has touched their life.

For now or later - taking the next step

1 What would life be like if God were not our shepherd? What promise would you miss most?

2 What wants and dark valleys are you facing now that you need the shepherd's care?

3 What blessings do you want at God's table today? What does it mean to you that you have God's blessings all your life?

2. Prayer for the anxious

Psalm 27

Big idea: Faith is a better answer than fear.

David's life was not easy. The Septuagint says that David wrote this "before he was anointed" which probably means that it was written during the time that Saul and his men were hunting him. It was a time when evil men (v.2) came to destroy him and when an army (v.3) was hunting him down as he hid in the desert. It was a time when David learned to live by faith instead of fear. Instead of worrying about every difficulty that surrounded him, he looked at what the Lord could do and saw his life from heaven's point of view. The Lord was all that David needed.

Fear is still an emotion that can trigger a "fight or flight" response in people. When afraid, some people muster all the courage they can and stand their ground, whether or not it's a wise choice. Others flee at the first sign of trouble so they can live to fight another day. David gives us a third choice. We look to the Lord and see that He is our light and salvation. We trust God instead of trying to find solutions based on our abilities. Like David, we may start with fear, but find that faith is a better answer. We look for the Lord to give us His wisdom to handle the situation and look for His help to take care of us when we find the trouble larger than we can handle.

The secret for David was fellowship with the Lord and obedience to His commands (v.4). David took the time to worship the Lord and listen to God's directions. The fool will go through life on his own. The wise will spend time with the Lord and will follow His commands. We can't expect the Lord to protect us if we are not giving ourselves into His care and if we are ignoring God's advice and help for our lives. Fear can be combatted only by faith. Faith only comes when we live in a close relationship with our God and when we trust Him so much that we obey what our Lord tells us to do.

1. If you could ask one favor of God today, what would it be?

David will desire to be with the Lord (v.4). If this is during the time of being hunted by Saul, it may be that his wish is to see the tabernacle again since he is living in the desert far away from God's house. Let people explore what their desires are. We all have needs and troubles in life. One thing may stand out for many of the class. I think I am with David in that the most important thing is to be with the Lord. He will take care of all the other things I need.

Read Psalm 27:1-6

2. Verse 1 What three qualities of God does David name in verse 1? Why would these be meaningful to someone who is continuously running for his life?

God is his light, salvation, and stronghold. David didn't close his eyes to the circumstances around him as terrifying as they must have been. He chose to look by faith at the Lord and examine his life from God's point of view. The three qualities each show a different attribute of God. The light reminds us that God sees and knows all. He shines and exposes all. Salvation tells us that God rescues us from danger. We know that he will be triumphant. Stronghold reminds us that nothing can overcome God and that we are safe in his care. All of those would be a comfort amid trouble. God has things well in hand.

3. How is fear the opposite of faith? What happens when people do not turn to the Lord during their troubles?

Let the group contrast fear and faith. Fear is the sense that the situation is too big for you to handle and that things will not go well. Faith is the knowledge that nothing is too big for God and that He can overcome any enemy and handle any trouble. David's courage is not empty words, but faith-filled confidence. He stays close to the Lord and is victorious. The people in our day who do not turn to the

Lord in trouble are on their own. They must overcome evil or trials by their own cunning. Sometimes it is enough, but often it is not enough to see us through.

4. Imagine a life without fear. What would that look like? What would change in your life?

In honesty, I don't think even David had a life without fear. This psalm is the product of someone who thinks about fear and how the Lord has helped David with his anxiety. The point of this study is that we can lessen our fear by the measure of our faith. Instead of sleepless nights tossing and turning with every problem, we can turn to the Lord in prayer and lay our burdens on him. Instead of wondering how every change in the economy or government will affect us, we live in confidence that the Lord can take care of anything that can happen to us in the future. Focus with the class on how such confidence will help us with fear. Take time to imagine how living with faith might appear.

5. Verse 2 What has been David's experience in perilous times? Who do you think David is giving credit for sparing his life?

In this verse, David is giving God credit for his victories. You get a sense that this section is a little autobiographical. The evil man could be Goliath or could be Saul. Either way, the Lord has caused them to stumble as He kept David safe. The army that comes against him could be the Israelites under Saul, the Philistines, or the Amalekites. David eluded the Israelites and conquered the enemies of Israel even before he was king. With God as his light, there was no darkness of the enemy to fear. Realize that David was not boasting idly. He had been battle-tested and had seen God deliver him time after time.

6. Verse 3 How has this experience changed David's attitudes? Where is his source of confidence coming as he lives in precarious situations?

The mood here is one of confidence based on God's deliverance in the past. He lived for a decade on the run with his people and the nations around Israel trying to destroy him. No one ever succeeded, and David believes that no one ever will. He is confident because he trusts in the Lord. God will overcome for God is stronger and wiser than all of his enemies. Others might be afraid, but David will be confident and inspire confidence because he has seen the hand of God work again and again.

7. How have difficult times strengthened your relationship with the Lord? How does crisis make you turn to the Lord and victory in crisis help you trust the Lord?

David looks back at the many times that evil men and armies came to do him harm. The Lord was there in each instance. It is often a difficulty that shows us the real strength of God and the value of our faith. It is easy to trust in ourselves when life is going well. It is the difficulties of life that often bring us to our knees and looking up to heaven. Let the class share times that the Lord helped them in crisis. Ask them how such challenges have led them to trust the Lord even more. Encourage them to write down a list of times that the Lord has helped or a description of one episode when the Lord worked a miracle in their life. Have them put them in their bibles so that they can use them to gain confidence when they find themselves in fear.

8. Verse 4 What is the one thing that David wants more than any other? Why do you think that fellowship with God is so important to David?

The secret to David's confidence was his connection with the Lord. He took time to be in fellowship with the Lord and to get directions from God. He needed that time of worship to seek the answers that only the Lord could give. He needed that time with the Lord so that the Lord could mold David into the king he was to become. In the near east, when a visitor entered a host's tent, the host was personally responsible for the protection and care of the visitor. David uses that image to show that as he dwells with the Lord, God will protect and provide for His servant and bring him safely to the dawn of each new day. Seeking the Lord is relying on God and living with him every day of your life.

9. How is the house of God a comfort for all believers? What do you hope to receive when you come weekly in worship to the Lord?

We come to the Lord to receive strength and wisdom from Him. Too often people think that we come to worship for God's sake. The truth is that we are there for our enrichment. The house of the Lord is an oasis amid a troubled world. It is a place where we know that we can meet the Lord and receive the comfort and help that we need in life. We also find ourselves surrounded by others who God can use to help us and to encourage us in our journey. Let the class discuss what their hopes are for Sunday worship. Let them see how an attitude of receiving from the Lord changes how we perceive Sunday worship and how our lives would be less without it.

10. How could you strengthen your dependence on the Lord? What would build up faith so that you push away fear?

David knows that the key is to dwell in the house of the Lord (verse 4). We know by heart that the answer is Bible study, prayer, and worship. Have the class discuss concrete ways to build those into your life. Can you start a small group bible study? Is there something particular that you would like to study so that you can gain wisdom? Is there a prayer partner at your church who could mentor you or keep you faithful? Our problem is that we often know in our minds what we should be doing but never get around to doing it in our lives.

11. Verse 5 As David stays close to the Lord, what has the Lord done for him? How does this experience cancel fear?

Intimacy with God in his temple brings security from all external dangers. God will keep David safe as David spends time with the Lord. God will also set David high on a rock so that he is out of the reach of those who want to destroy him. The two images show the safety and security of the person who is in the care of the Lord. Fear comes when we rely on our resources to keep us safe. Faith relies on the Lord and trusts him to take care of the situation no matter how strong the foe or what God's outcome for us will be.

12. Verse 6 How did David plan to respond to God when the Lord delivered him and kept the promises that He had made to David? How do you think that impacted the people around him?

David has confidence that the Lord will keep His promise and will make David king as Samuel anointed him for that purpose. Fear and shame can bring a person down. Hope overcomes fear for it takes comfort in the deliverance that we firmly believe God will bring. Joy opposes shame for it knows that the Lord will be victorious and his people will be lifted not beaten down. David will sing praises so that everyone else has the confidence that he has in the Lord. God has been good to David and David knows that God will be good to all those who trust in him.

13. How will you respond when God does answer your prayers? How might you encourage others to trust the Lord as you have done?

David responds with song and music so that everyone knows what the Lord has done. I find that people are eager to ask others to pray when they need help but seldom ask others to praise the Lord with them when God has answered a prayer. We must share how God has answered prayers so that others might be encouraged to pray as well. People need to see that the Lord does listen and help us in our time of need. Let the class suggest ideas of how they or the congregation you are part of might take time to praise the Lord publically.

For now or later - taking the next step

1 How has the Lord been light or a source of strength in your life over the last couple of months? What has driven you to find shelter in the Lord?

- 2 If you were not able to attend worship for a month, how much would it affect you? What would you miss most?
- 3 What lessons do you think that the Lord still needs to teach you? Why do those lessons matter?

3. Joy in Forgiveness

Psalm 32

Why suffer from guilt when God wants to forgive and heal.

This psalm rejoices at the wonder of God's forgiveness. Some think this psalm should be paired with Psalm 51 and David's confession of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. In Psalm 51, David promised to teach "transgressors your ways" (v.13), and the title Maschil can mean a song of instruction. Having begged for mercy in Psalm 51, this psalm recounts the joy of being forgiven and feeling the grace of God. Instead of being destroyed, David is retained as king, and the grace of God covers his sins.

This psalm gives us the reason for confession. We cannot hide our sins ourselves. We cannot cover it up and make it disappear. God can take away the guilt and make sin as if it never happened. If we try to ignore our sin, our bones waste away. We feel the pain and the blame as a heavy load on our lives. The only way to deal with sin is to give it to the Lord. He alone can forgive and can restore. Our temptation is to pretend that the sin is not that bad and bring ourselves pain and sorrow in the process. David waited over a year before the Lord finally sent Nathan the prophet to confront David over his sin. The psalm makes it clear that it was a painful year.

When we sin, we need to confess so that the Lord can deal with our sins and can restore us. The sheer joy that is shared in this psalm warms our hearts. The sadness and pain described in the period before confession should move us to confess as soon as possible. God accepts us and loves us. God wants to forgive our sins. It is with that confidence that we must approach our Lord seeking His mercy. The Bible stresses the happiness of those whose sins have been forgiven. The guilt is gone, and the sin is pardoned. Why should anyone remain burdened with guilt when the Lord is willing to deliver us and help us rebuild our lives?

1. What was something you got blamed for as a kid at home or in school? How did it feel when your parents confronted you with what you did?

Answers will vary and could be a fun time of sharing if people open up. Some things that we did as kids were nothing major like stealing cookies at home. Others were more serious like getting in a fight at school. Focus not on what they did but how they felt. Let them wrestle with how it felt at times when people didn't know what they did, but they did.

Read Psalm 32

2. Verse 1. What joy does David begin this psalm? What emotions do you sense in David at this time?

Instead of starting with a catalog of his sins, David began with a song of praise for everyone to hear. It is a celebration from one who has been forgiven and who has had the burden of sin lifted off his life. Paul will quote verses 1-2 in Romans 4:7-8 to show that forgiveness comes as an act of God's grace apart from the law. Here David has felt that grace and is feeling relief from the pain of sin and feels gratitude at the immense mercy of God. If this is written at the time of his transgression with Bathsheba, this joy came after almost a year of trying to hide what he had done.

3. Verse 3. How had the unconfessed sin made David feel? What is the cost of trying to keep your sins away from God?

David tells of the pain that he had felt and admitted that it was foolish to try to hide his sins from God. Many have said that "God does not permit His children to sin successfully." One pictures the Lord disciplining David for almost a year and making him miserable in the process. He became a physical wreck who began to look and feel like an old man. He had pain in his body and groaning in his soul. It

finally forced him to come before the Lord. The only good thing about this experience was that it pushed David back to the Lord.

4. How did the unconfessed sin affect David? Why is sin such a heavy load?

David became a physical wreck. The ordinarily healthy and robust David became a sick old man. There were pains in his body and groaning in his soul. Surely the people around David noticed the change in him and were concerned. Sin is a heavy load because our guilty conscience accuses us every day. We have an internal disease that we can try to ignore, but we cannot cure it. The longer and longer things go, the heavier and greater the burden becomes. Simple things remind us of what we have done, and we struggle with the constant fear of someone finding out and seeing our guilt. It makes us sick.

5 Verse 5. How did David respond to the pain and the “heavy hand” of God? How did the pain motivate David to seek the Lord?

We know that the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David to confront him with his sins and let him know that you can't hide sin from God. The intervention led to confession and absolution. One wonders if David was relieved that he didn't have to hide what he had done any longer. The burden of sin was lifted even if the consequences of that sin would still have to be paid. It is noteworthy that David did not offer any excuses but freely admitted his wrongdoing. Forgiveness is not a negative thing. It takes away the pain and helps us move forward on the road to recovery.

6. Why is full confession the only way? What happens if we confess some of the sins but try to hide part of what we did from God and others?

David offers no excuses for his sin. He admits that he is guilty before God. We cannot make half a confession because confession is to agree with God that what we did was wrong. If we admit part and try to hide the rest, it is not a confession because it does not uncover the whole deed. We may decide to hide part to make it look like we were not as guilty as others. That is lying, and God knows the truth. There is no advantage in taking only part of infection out of the body. You must get rid of the whole virus, or the disease will never heal. If David had tried to justify some of what he did, it would be like he was saying that grace was not entirely necessary. The truth is that all was sin and all should be thrown before the mercy of the cross.

7. Verses 6-7 What is the lesson of this experience for David? What is the assurance that we have when we pray?

Sin takes us down. We need to pray and ask forgiveness before it is too late and we feel so distant from God, or we find ourselves so afraid that we will not approach God. David would exchange hiding his sins for a safe place with the Lord. In this, God's forgiveness is not a negative thing. It is the first step on the road to recovery. God removed his troubles and put a wall of protection around David. David would reap the consequences of his sin, but God would be there to help him through his problems as well. If David kept trying to hide his sins, they would continue to fester. Out in the open, David could begin to heal.

8. Why is God the only hiding place when we sin? From what are we hiding?

Danger and temptation are all around us. Only when we are with the Lord, do we find security and help. A proper hiding place has the strength, and only God is strong enough to help us deal with the temptations and dangers of life. Prayer time with the Lord is like a safe room. It is a quiet time where the world outside can rage, but we find ourselves safe in the shelter of the Lord. Sin and guilt had racked David with pain. Now he was surrounded by the Lord's deliverance and the promise that the Lord would help him put his life back together. Those who are in the word will find that God's wisdom helps them flee temptations that defeat others.

9. How does God always respond to the person who repents? Why is God so eager to forgive and to restore the saints?

God wants to forgive those who repent. Forgiveness and mercy have always been part of his nature. He announced it to Moses (Exodus 34:6, 7); he revealed it to David; he dramatically showed it to the world through Jesus Christ. While we fear God's wrath, we should embrace His love and His mercy. It is who He is, and He has shown that mercy from the moment of Adam's sin throughout the Bible to the present. When we confess our sins, God cancels the debt, and it's no longer on the books. Why? Because Jesus paid the debt on the cross, and His blood cleanses the record and the heart of the offender.

10. Verse 8-9. What lesson does David want to share with the people? What does he want them to avoid?

David wants them to be willing to come to the Lord in full repentance and not stubbornly resist the desire to confess. When he had lusted after Bathsheba and killed her husband to cover up his sin, he had been no better than an animal. David had stubbornly tried to fix things himself without any regard for the Lord. It was only after the Lord had taken him by the bit and bridle and led him to the truth through the words of Nathan the prophet that David had confessed his sin and was free from the pain and suffering he had brought on himself. He wants people to see the forgiveness of the Lord and to throw themselves on God's mercy instead of having to be forced by pain to come to the Lord.

11. What keeps us from confessing our sins to the Lord? What do you think makes us afraid?

Like a mule, we are stubborn, and we think that we can hide our sin from the Lord. From the time of Adam and Eve who hid in the bushes when they committed the first sin, man has tried to hide his sin or pretend that it does not exist. We are afraid of God's punishment and are fearful of disappointing God. We can't hide our sins from God. We can only come to Him so that He can cover our sin. We should not be afraid of God but rather be scared of the continued damage that sin will do to our lives. Sin always has consequences, and we can try to fix things ourselves or let the Lord help us through the consequences of sin as we feel the mercy of His salvation. Only a dumb animal will keep God away and experience the horror of sin and its effects all by themselves.

12. Verse 10. What promise does David give to those who trust in the Lord? Why is that promise real?

The wicked will have nothing but sorrow. Satan may advertise sin as liberty or freedom, but it is a hard way to go. It is the way of sadness, heartbreak, failure, and guilt. Those who seek the Lord will find God's forgiveness and help in life surround them and gives them joy. Why live with sin when you can be forgiven? Why live in guilt when you can indeed be free? Why try to make it on your own and solve your problems when you can have the protection and guidance of the Lord. David calls people to live with the mercy of God surrounding them as it surrounds him. God's promise is trustworthy because of his love for his people and because of the gift of forgiveness and salvation in the cross.

13. What woes affect those who do not have God in their life? Why are they likely to experience more problems when they don't have confession and forgiveness to help?

Take time to discuss the sins that surround us when people do not have a desire for God's forgiveness or mercy. The wicked envisioned here are the enemies of God; the righteous are those who live in faith. They are not perfect, but they confess their sins and acknowledge their duties in the household of faith. Among the enemies of God, anger and jealousy escalate as one person and then another retaliate against real and imagined sins against them. People have lives that are caught up in sexual immorality or violence and pay the price of broken lives for themselves and others. Many live their life pursuing false goals of happiness through money or power and end up with little to show for it at the end of life. It is much better to live in God's love and follow His will all your life.

For now or later - taking the next step

1 When have you felt the “heavy hand of God on you for your sin?

2 What is your experience when you did confess to the Lord? How did your confession feel?

3 What would you like to share with others from this psalm and your own experience of confession and forgiveness?

4. Longing for God
Psalm 42-43
God is nearer than you think and ready to help

Picture a Levite or Priest living in Babylon and longing to worship at a temple that has been destroyed by those who have taken him captive. He lives in an ungodly nation (43:1) and is unable to worship God as he had done for so many years. He remembers what it was like to live in the Holy Land near the Jordan River (42:6) and longs to be back near the place of God and his roots instead of living in a foreign land. His heart is broken, and He cries day and night (42:3) as people question him and mock the true God. He has no reason to believe that he or any other living Jew will ever return to the Promised Land except for the hope that he has in the Lord. God can do what we can't do. With the Lord, there is always hope since the Lord is faithful. It is that characteristic of God that the psalmist comes back to again and again.

God can seem distant for us as well. It may be an illness that keeps us from worshipping him. It may have been that we drifted away during a tough time in our lives and we don't feel comfortable coming back to the Lord. Life can keep us apart from the Lord. The church may only be a few minutes from our home, but it might as well be thousands of miles away like a captive in Babylon. We remember worshipping with the Lord every week and the comfort that it gave us. We recall the joy of being in worship singing hymns of praise and being part of the caring fellowship. Now we are far away, and our bones suffer mortal agony (42:10) as we ache because we are not with the Lord.

Most of us are not miles away from the Lord even if it feels like it. We have constraints, but God can help us past them. We may be older and need to find someone to drive us to church. We may have to get over our fears and step into the church confident that we belong there as much as we did when we regularly attended years ago. God will always welcome us, and He will help us to find a place where we can feel welcome worshipping Him. There is no reason to be downcast (42:5); we can again praise God and experience the joy and fellowship that we once had. God will guide us (43:3) and lead us to the place where we can worship Him once again. Put yourself in His hands and let Him bring you back to the throne of grace.

1. Have you ever been homesick (in the service, in college, or when a job took you far from home)? What did you miss most about home and how did it affect you?

Let the group discuss their homesickness and why they felt alone. My first parish was a marvelous place with some great people, but it was so different from home that I had some homesickness there. It was a rural parish that was miles from town in rural Nebraska when I had grown up nine miles from St. Louis. I missed the museums, sports, and fast food being less than 45 minutes away. It was a different culture and I never truly felt like I fit in with those caring people.

Read Psalm 42-43

2. Verse 1 How does the Psalmist feel about being so far from the Lord and His sanctuary? What images does he use to express his feelings?

The psalm begins with a sense of great need and discouragement about being so far from God's house. God was the life of his life, and he found that he could not live without the Lord. He talks about being without water and food as pictures of his thirst for knowledge and the presence of God. The psalmist thinks of a deer longing for water in a hot, dry place. Far away from the Lord, he feels like he is in the desert. Sadly, he feeds on his grief and finds himself in great despair.

3. Verses 3-4 How does the distress affect the writer physically and emotionally? What does he miss from the past?

Day and night he feels the separation from the Lord and His sanctuary. He is not helped by those who ridicule him about the weakness of a God who would seemingly abandon His people. Unfortunately, the Jews were ridiculed by the Babylonians who took the defeat of the Jews as a sign that God was weak. Those who were active in their faith had a difficult time. His present grief has made him long for the Lord as he feels the pain of being so far from the Lord. It contrasts with the joys that he had in happier times leading worship and marking the holidays that he had experienced with the Lord. The psalmist would be unhappy until he once again felt the love of the Lord.

4. What would you miss most if you were unable to go to church?

Let the group discuss what they would miss most if they were unable to go to church because of illness or guilt that made them uncomfortable with worship. The psalmist lists things that he misses in verse four such as leading joyous celebrations and holiday services. People in the group might miss the fellowship that they had at church or wish that they could have the kind words of someone to help them during the present trouble. They might miss the festivities of the holidays or some of the special music. Use this as a time to appreciate what we do have so that it seems extraordinary and worth keeping.

5 What are the benefits of worshipping in a group rather than by yourself?

The psalmist could worship by himself or even with other believers in this faraway place. It just wasn't the same. By ourselves, we do not have the encouragement of others when we are struggling. We do not have the joy of helping friends and others as the servant of God. We miss the gifts others use in worship. We may not be able to sing nor enjoy the insights of others as we study together in Bible study. One can keep their faith in a strange place by themselves, but there are joys and a boost that comes when we worship together that we miss when we are by ourselves.

6. Verse 8 How has the Lord protected the psalmist?

Even in this remote place, the Lord was there. God was bringing grace and love into His life even though the temple was far away. He knew that God was still there. God was in full command of the situation, and that made life look different. One is reminded of the disciples afraid for their life when Jesus walks on water to them and brings His calm. Because the Lord is there, the psalmist can come to a place of greater confidence. God would be with him even in the darkness and loneliness of the night. No matter what time of day, the Lord is there. God is the faithful God who cares for His people. He brings a song to our hearts so that the psalmist didn't have to go to Jerusalem to worship God. God was so great and powerful, that the psalmist could worship God right where he was. Life might be difficult, but God was still his rock and stronghold.

7. How does the psalmist counter his depression? How can the Lord be our best friend when we are struggling in life?

The psalmist here remembers God and His character. As we look to the past in scripture and our walk of faith, we have plenty of places where we can see that God has been with us. God will command His angels so we are helped in the daytime and so we sing sweet songs of love at night. We may feel like a waterfall of misery is falling on us drowning us in the pool of sorrow. God is there with us for pains often come from Him to teach us and help us grow. God knows our needs and will be our rock. The psalmist is showing his confidence in the Lord. God is our best friend for He is the only one who can lift us out of our troubles. He has promised to be with us and promised to care for us in our times of need. No other one can do so much for us.

8. Verse 9-10 What does the psalmist accuse God of doing? How has the enemy used the feelings of the psalmist against him?

Even though the psalmist saw God as his rock and place of security and strength, he addressed his emotions honestly by bringing them to God in the form of a question. To ask why God had forgotten him as he professed that God was his rock is the conflict we all feel when we know God is there but struggle to conquer the fears and worries of our hearts. In depression, the battle is often with ourselves. We know that the Lord is with us but we are people of feelings, and those feelings betray us. Satan is using our emotions to attack our faith. Our need is to have confidence in the Lord despite our feelings. God is comforting us and will continue to be at our side so that we can triumph during the storms.

9. What advice does the psalmist give to himself three times that would help every Christian who is feeling down?

As the psalmist looks to the Lord, he has hope. Faith is the only thing that can silence our fears and give us confidence that the future will be different. The three repetitions of this advice rebuke his desperation (42:5), provide him with confidence when he is confused (42:11), and declare the certainty of God's triumph (43:5). He will not surrender to feelings of depression or discouragement. He challenges those feelings with the truth about God and His love for people like Him. God will be there through every problem and trouble. He has been there in our lives, and He will be there again and again. When hope triumphs over our fears, there is a reason to praise God and to sing with joy. The advice of the psalmist is merely to look to the Lord and realize that He will never leave us rather than looking at the size of our problems and thinking that God has failed us.

10. 43:1 Living in a foreign land, what is the psalmist's plea to the Lord?

The psalmist cries out to the Lord and pleads for vindication. He is trying to make sense of his situation. He has grown weary of the accusations of his enemies and wants God to deal with them. God is his stronghold, but he is still dealing with feelings of rejection and persecution. The change in focus is dramatic. He has been feeling sorry for himself in Psalm 42. Now he will look to the Lord and ask the Lord to deal with the situation. He has been dealing with deceitful people who are much of an offense to the Lord as they are to him. He also charges that he would not have this problem if he were not a child of God. God is not acting the way that the psalmist expects and the psalmist is pleading to the Lord to change the situation.

11. Why is the problem not with God? How do our attitudes block us from the joy and delight of the Lord?

It is easy to blame others including God when life takes a troublesome turn. The psalmist in Psalm 43 has come to see that God is the solution and not the problem. God did not cause the distance that we feel. We have moved from God. He does not run away from us. God is still the rock (v.9), and now the psalmist begins to realize that God is the stronghold (v.2) that protects us when others abuse us and when life seems to fall apart. We will see things differently when we stop assuming that God owes us and should keep life comfortable and pleasant. We must realize that God is our friend and protector in life, but we will have problems because we live in a sinful world. Instead of blaming God, we seek Him out. Instead of thinking that God has caused our grief, we begin to see that God is the only one who can help us in times of grief. He can lead us from our troubles to His altar where he can bring us joy and keep us safe.

12. 43:3 What does the psalmist need from the Lord to overcome the darkness that he feels? Why is God the only one who can guide us out of our hopelessness?

The psalmist realizes that he cannot control the situation. He needs the light and truth of God. The psalmist wants the Lord to lead him. These verses are a plea in which he promises to follow the Lord. It is

not a plea for the Lord to deal with the enemy but rather to lead the psalmist deeper into God's presence and to His holy mountain. He wants to come to the Lord's altar and to worship Him wholeheartedly. The psalmist has grown in these short verses. The living God (v.2) has become the God of my life (v.8) and now is the God of joy (43:4). The psalmist is no longer focused just on himself but on God. God knows the future and knows the way for us to go. Only those who follow Him and who live in His light will have joy in sorrow and will overcome the troubles that we all face.

13. The psalmist cried, reminded himself of God's nature, prayed honestly, and encouraged himself with a message of hope. How do you deal with depression and is there something that you can learn from the psalmist that would help you better?

The psalmist is honest about his situation but also is honest about what God can do. Through prayer and pondering, he substitutes confidence in God for the despair he feels because of his inadequacy. What I think that we all can learn from the psalmist is that life's picture changes depending on whether you are looking at yourself or God. Cast your cares upon Him for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Carrying your worries or stresses by yourself means that you have not fully trusted the Lord with your life. Bring those cares to him with tears and fears confident that the Lord is bigger than all your problems. Don't let circumstances control you. Let God control your situation.

For now or later - taking the next step

- 1 What have you learned from the psalm that would help you the next time that you feel depressed or separated from God?
- 2 What is the difference in outcome between remembering the Lord's character and blessings and letting your problems separate you from the Lord?
- 3 The psalmist encourages himself three times in the psalms. What do you need to do to put your hope in the Lord in the dark times of life?

5 God is all I need
Psalm 46
Seek God's protection when things look bleak.

As Lutherans, you may recognize this psalm as the basis for “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” Luther was known to read this psalm in the painful periods of life. The psalm is probably written during the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-19, 2 Chron. 32) after the Assyrians were destroyed by God. Assyria had swept through most of Judah and was at the gates of Jerusalem demanding surrender. Hezekiah decided to trust the Lord, and the Assyrian army was destroyed by an angel of God so that Sennacherib and what was left of his troops retreated and left the city. The psalm is the first of a trio of psalms (46-48) which celebrates this victory and gives praise to the Lord. The psalmist’s theme is simple: we must take comfort in God when things look bleak and when trouble threatens. God alone can save us.

How does one face the possibility of a personal or world catastrophe? We live in an era where floods, wildfires, and tornados wipe out whole towns and upend lives. We live in an age where businesses close, and the stock market swings up and down. We know that our future is threatened at any moment. Many in the world worry about things that they can’t control. They want insurance that will protect them or the government guaranteeing their safety. The Christian knows that the Lord is our refuge. He will provide stability in difficult times. God is the one who will save His church and His people now as much as in the times of Hezekiah. Life may not always be easy, but God will provide our daily bread and keep us from destruction.

How do we live with stress each day and live through a catastrophe that threatens to turn our world upside down? I would suggest that we do what Hezekiah did. He took the letter with the Assyrian threats and laid it out in the temple before the Lord. Hezekiah did not bargain with the enemy. He appealed to the Lord. We, too, need to bring our concerns before the Lord in prayer. We put aside the threats of the world and seek the shelter of our God and his mighty arms. When God helps us through the crisis, we need to praise Him publically as the Jews do in this psalm. The world needs to know what God has done for you so that they can seek out God's protection for themselves. In proclaiming God’s deliverance, you push fear away so that you live in God’s arms all your life.

1. America is filled with historical forts. Which ones have you been to and which ones impressed you the most?

I have been to several forts. I like the Fort Boonesborough in Kentucky which was in existence before the revolutionary war and Fort Snelling in Minneapolis. Both do an excellent job of letting you know what life was like during the period that they were in existence. You can almost smell the gunpowder and feel the security of their walls. Let the group tell which forts they have seen and what their experiences were inside the fortifications.

Read Psalm 46

2. Verse 1 What words are used to describe God’s protection for His people?

Refuge and strength describe the protection that God brings to our lives. God is dependable and strong. He shelters us so that we can get back to life with all its responsibilities and dangers. Unlike the concept of a fort where the people just stay inside, God’s protection can go with us wherever we go. Sadly, in times of crisis, the people of Israel were too prone to turn to other nations for help when they should have trusted the Lord and turned to Him. The fact that God is an “ever-present” help means that He is always there in every need that we might have.

3. Verse 2-3 What level of trust should we have in the Lord? How bad can life get and we still are safe in God’s care?

The psalmist considers the most frightening and threatening natural phenomena possible. He then goes on to say that God can handle them all. Since mountains were regarded as places of safety, the thought of them falling into the sea which was a place of chaos was especially overwhelming. The picture is one of the last days of judgment. Even then, we should not fear because God is greater than them all. Fear is to be avoided since having anxiety is showing a lack of trust for the Lord and in many ways robs God of His dignity and Lordship. In our day, these verses show that we have nothing to fear even if the worst natural disaster were to come upon us. God can defeat all our enemies and also the problems of the last days when they come upon His people.

4. What kinds of threats and trouble do people face today? How is God the one who we can depend on?

Our troubles have not usually been invading armies. We are more likely to think of stock market crashes or natural disasters like tornadoes and floods that can destroy our homes and communities. On a personal level, we might have the loss of our job, the death of a family member, or be hurt in a car accident. All of these will feel like the mountains crashing in on us. In every case, there is often nothing that we can do to prevent such a disaster or adequately prepare for it. We need to turn to God who is the one who is powerful enough to protect us and can help us rebuild when disaster comes. In Hezekiah's day, the people were protected from the army, and God helped them rebuild the smaller cities that were destroyed. Let the group talk about their worst fear and how God can help them in their need.

5. What forces threaten the church today? Why should we not fear them? How are those threats something that God will take personally?

The church is threatened by a culture that wants to rewrite the Bible and its commands. Sins like abortion and couples living together are considered acceptable. Crimes like theft, lies, and greed are considered a healthy way of life. The challenge for the church is that when we speak out against sin, we are often regarded as insensitive or bigoted. We need to continue to speak the truth in love. Don't be hard-hearted, but also do not keep quiet. The sins above all have a terrible price that people will pay if they fall into those sins. Since they are God's creation, God takes it personally when the culture tells people that this is OK. When the world tells people that what the Bible says is not valid, God is deeply offended for the scripture is His word. There are times that we need to put those words on the floor of the church just like Hezekiah did and ask the Lord to defend His honor and His values. Let the group talk about how many of the actions of our world are actions against God. Consider praying to the Lord for Him to take action against such evil.

6. Verse 4 One of the challenges for the people in Hezekiah's day was that the people were confined because the Assyrians surrounded the city. What picture is given to show that God will provide for His people?

Fortunately, Hezekiah had built an underground water system that brought water from the Spring of Gihon into the city so that the city which did not have a river (like many ancient cities) would have water. The picture is one of God providing them with everything that they needed for life in such abundance that it would be like a river filling their needs. God will continue to provide for His people as they trust in Him. The focus is that God will be with His people through the challenges and that He will provide for them and give them the security that they could not find as they trusted in themselves or other nations.

7. Verse 5-6 How are God's people protected in Hezekiah's day and ours? What will happen to the enemies of God in those days?

In Hezekiah's day, the helpless Jews woke up one morning to find 185,000 Assyrian soldiers dead outside the gates killed by an angel. Immediately, the people who were starving from the siege had plenty of food and other supplies. God is still sending His angels to protect us and care for us. He is always providing for

us in difficult times. The enemies of God's people will find that they have the Lord to reckon with. In verse 7, the promise is that the Lord of Hosts will be with us. This is the Hebrew name for the commander of the armies of earth and the armies of heaven. The Lord dwells with His people. He is not a God who is far away and must be called. Evil can storm the gates but can't get in when God is our refuge and strength.

8. Verse 5-6 Who is really in charge of the world? How do the nations react to God's rule and why is it a comfort to us that they can't defeat God?

Our world has forgotten that God is in charge. From the voices proclaiming evolution and saying that God didn't make the world to voices that proclaim God is dead and they don't need him, many think that they don't need God and that they can easily defeat Him. For all their protests, God has only to speak, and the nations of the world fall apart. Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia are just two of the modern countries that proclaimed they didn't need God and fell. In Israel's day, Edomites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Romans would all come and go by the hand of God. It is a comfort to us that God rules the world and that our God can bring order to the chaos that man often makes of the world. Let the group talk about the current movements to take God out of our nation and why they are destined to fail.

9. What does it take for God to be with us and for God to help us in our need? How can we prevent God from helping us?

Notice that God must be with us (v.5) for the help to come. Israel was not always with God and often suffered defeat in those times like in the days of the Babylonian captivity. Hezekiah showed wisdom and faith in trusting in the Lord and appealing to the Lord for help in the temple. Christians sometimes fault God for not helping them enough, but they often keep God at a distance by being too busy for worship or for times of Bible study and prayer. When you keep God at arm's length, you cannot expect God to help you in your time of need. You are not listening to the Lord and often do not learn to trust him or live with his values which will help you in your time of need. At times, we are our own worst enemy, and we keep God's help from coming into our lives. Let them discuss what God can do for us if we are active in word or prayer. Let them also talk about the dangers of living your life apart from the Lord.

10. Verse 8-9. This verse describes the fields around the city after the Assyrians were defeated. What do you think the area around the city looked like with 185,000 soldiers dead?

Imagine going to bed hungry and more than a little afraid of the vast army surrounding your city. You wake up and find that thousands of soldiers are dead and the rest of the military left in fear during the night. The destruction of the army would be something that Israel would talk about for days. The Israelites would have an abundance of food and supplies to provide for the city. They would have to take the time to bury or burn the dead so that disease did not spread through Jerusalem in the coming weeks. Their fear had turned to a celebration in a single moment. God had done what they could not do. It is something that the nations would hear about and talk about for years.

11. Verse 10. We are to "be still" when troubles come. What does that mean? Why was it essential for Hezekiah to stand back and not to act on his own?

To be still is to have faith. Our temptation is to try to fix everything ourselves. "Be still" could be termed "take your hands off." Hezekiah could have tried to negotiate some kind of truce or solution. The people would have then become vassals of Assyria and lived in poverty. Because Hezekiah was still and did not reply to the Assyrian threats, he allowed God to do the miracle. He challenged God to do something instead of trying to do something himself, and then he waited for the time that the Lord knew was best. There is a time to obey God when He tells us to act. Until that time comes, we will accomplish far more by praying and allowing God to work in His own time and way.

12. Verse 10 If you were in a fort, why did you need to trust the strength of the walls and not run outside? If God is our fortress, why do we need to be still and trust Him instead of trying to save ourselves?

When you are in a fort, the best place for you is to stay inside the walls and not run aimlessly outside its protection. If God is our fortress, we will be in danger if we live outside His commands or if we try to fix our problems without His help. To lie or to steal to get out of some issue is to live outside God's help and will often make things worse rather than better. To try and fix things ourselves without the Lord's guidance often tempts fate. We do not have His protection or His wisdom. The idea here is not that we should stop the activity and blissfully stand in one place. Be still means to trust. You continue to live with God's values and attitudes in life and let God take care of the big problems that are too big for you or for me to handle.

13. Why is it so important for God's children to proclaim God's victories in our lives?

When the Lord helps us, we need to make sure that others hear of God's provision so that they can put their trust in Him as well. Hezekiah led Israel by His faith. Others may have wanted to negotiate or panic, but he calmly focused them on the Lord and did not let them dwell on the threats of the Assyrians. Your faith and especially God's deliverance of us can inspire others to trust the Lord in national disasters or their problems. Just like fear can spread like wildfire, faith can do so likewise. To proclaim what God had done publically could make this event a national reminder when the next disaster hit. As we share our blessings, we create memories that we can recall when we find ourselves struggling.

For now or later - taking the next step.

1. What challenges are you facing now in your life? Which of the promises in this psalm touches your situation right now?
2. Do you believe that God is in charge of the world? What makes you think that? What comfort does it give you if you believe that He is in charge?
3. What challenges do you face in "being still" before God? Why do you think it is so important to have faith when trouble comes?

6 Safe in God's hands
Psalm 91
The closer we get to God, the safer we are.

Psalm 91 begins with the simple principle that those who dwell in the shelter of the Lord will rest securely. It differs from the previous psalm in that Psalm 90 focuses on the difficulties of life while Psalm 91 is about the dangers of life that are all around us. In this Psalm, the author will describe the Fowler's snare and deadly pestilence (v. 3), terrors in the night (v.4), and times when thousands die next to you (v.7). Life can be terrifying, but God can handle it all. In verse 2, the author gives his testimony and tells us all that he refuses to live in fear but keeps reminding himself that God is His protector and safety in life. He has no reason to fear what lies ahead.

We live in an era of fear. Terrorists work to get us afraid to travel outside the safety of our homes. The media has warnings about the food we eat, the scams that are out to get you, and the global warming that will destroy the planet. The message is clear. The world is falling apart, and evil people are out to get us. Protect yourself and don't trust anything. As we cower in fear, the psalmist has a better response. Trust God and let Him take care of the unknown. None of the terrors of the Psalmist's day or ours are too difficult for God. We can rest secure as we let the Lord take care of the horrors that surround us. We live by faith and not by fear.

In the tornado ridden Great Plains, there is wisdom in taking shelter in the storm cellar. The winds may destroy the home and the barn, but those in the shelter are safe and secure. If you wander outside, you will often die or be hurt. Those who live their lives in weekly worship and daily study and prayer will remain close to the Lord. He will warn them of dangers and will be able to protect them from the terrors all around them. Many live dangerously by keeping God at a distance and being surprised when danger overtakes them. A better scenario is to live our whole lives in the shelter of God so that He can deal with things too dangerous for us. The psalm reminds us that the closer that we get to the Lord, the safer that we will be.

1. What is the worst storm you have ever been caught in? How did you survive?

Let the group share their stories. Once when my family was camping in Nebraska, we saw a solid black band of clouds coming toward us. The wind picked up, and we scurried to pull down the tent and get the sleeping bags in the car. We headed for a motel in town just as the storm hit. As the wind howled and the rain came down in sheets, we spent the night safely in a hotel. If we had stayed outside of town in the campground, I doubt that we would have made it. In the motel, we were safe and dry in the raging storm.

Read Psalm 91

2. Verses 1-2 What four names does the Psalmist use for God in the first two verses? What do those names represent?

The four names are most high, almighty, Lord, and God. Most High refers to the fact that He is higher than the kings of the earth and all the false gods of Satan. Almighty tells us that this is a God who can handle all situations. Lord refers to the one who made a covenant with His people and is faithful to His promises. God reminds us that His greatness and glory surpass anything that we can imagine. The names together are to encourage us to trust Him. We want to live in the shelter of this God where we can dwell safely. We want to live in His shadow for that means that we walk so closely that His shadow falls on us and His protection is near. His shelter is further described as a refuge and fortress where we will be safe because our God is so strong and powerful.

3. Verses 1-2 Sum up the central principle of the psalm in your own words. What does the psalmist want us to learn about fear and faith?

The first verse of this psalm boldly states that those who seek protection with God will find peace and safety. Verse 2 is the psalmist's testimony that he has found that principle to be accurate by the witness of his own life. Saints who abide in the Lord will not avoid trouble, but they will have the Lord who will protect them during the crisis and help them rebuild their lives from the consequences. The journey of life can be terrifying, but God can handle it, and He gives a great advantage to those who He protects and cares for. The world may be big, but God is bigger and can handle everything that the future may bring.

4. Verse 3-6 What does the psalmist reveal are his own worst fears?

The author is afraid of "the fowler's snare" and pestilence in verse 3. Both are unseen perils that strike people of all ages and types. The snare is a metaphor for all the evil plots that surround us. People try to take our money and our life to benefit their own. The second is the ravages of illness that could wipe out whole populations from infectious diseases. That was more common in the days where drinking water was not always pure, and there were no vaccines or antibiotics. He also fears the terror by night which could be merely speaking of all the terrible things that can happen in a place where good lighting was not typical. All of these are difficulties that can creep up on a person quickly and catch even the most diligent person. We can't protect ourselves from these things, but God can and will help His people.

5 How do the fears of the psalmist compare to the concerns you have for the future? How do you typically deal with your worries and is it working?

The fears of the psalmist were things that he could not control. Let the class talk about their worries. The concerns of our era may have to deal with terrorism especially if someone has to travel for their job. It may be contamination of the food or water that we eat or the fear of running out of money in retirement. The concerns may be more personal as they deal with family or health issues. To deal with such fears, we may try to be cautious and may have money saved for upcoming emergencies. Those can be good things. We may, however, spend a lot of time worrying and curb our activities in fear. That usually is no help. Those who have the Lord as their shelter and refuge will live life with a measure of safety because they trust that the Lord can handle what the future brings even if they are not able to do so.

6. Verses 7-8 What further assurances does the psalmist give to the believer?

Verses 7 and 8 sound like the description of a battle. The point is that God's protection can conquer any odds. His care is so great and so specific to His people that many may struggle around them, but the Christian who has faith in God will survive and often thrive. Verse 8 may refer to one of the many times that the Jewish people saw their enemies punished by God. It might have been the Egyptians who lost their firstborn in the 10th plague before the Exodus or any of the battles that God brought victory for the Jewish people. The two verses show the contrast of what will happen to the believer and the unbeliever. God will protect His people, and the wicked will face God's wrath.

7. Verses 7-8 If Christians are protected and others are left to their own devices, what dangers do non-Christian friends and family face? How can you help them when they struggle?

We often don't think about how well we are protected when we stay close to the Lord and how vulnerable our friends and family who don't know Jesus are. We all face the same dangers but we have Jesus at our side, and they don't. They face Satan and the rest of evil by themselves and often get creamed. We may pray for them asking Jesus to help them, but the fact that they don't recognize Jesus or will not listen to Him limits the help that they can get from Him. The greatest gift that we can give our friends and family is to help them know Jesus as their savior and friend. Introduce them to Jesus and invite them to worship before problems come so that they have that protection. Pray with them and tell them how the savior helps

you when they are struggling because sadly some will only be open to Jesus when their lives have crashed. Don't let your family be simple for Satan to attack. Help them know Jesus' love and protection.

8. Verses 9-10 What conditions does the author place on God's protection?

God's protection comes only to those who trust the Lord. Just because a person was of the Jewish nation didn't mean that God would protect them. Security came to those who made the Lord the center of their life. They lived with God in a healthy relationship of worship and prayer. Living with God was not just something that they imagined that they did but was a real part of their lives. The reason for such a distinction is understandable. If you are not close enough to God for Him to help you or are not listening to His wisdom in His word, it will be hard for God to protect you from your foolish acts that ignore His knowledge.

9. Verses 9-10 What does God's protection mean for us in a world where bad things happen to good people?

Somehow we want the Lord to make our lives easy and free from any kind of pain. That would be like asking that the stock market always goes up and never down. The truth is that life has its ups and downs just like the market. With stocks, it is those who do not panic but rather follow specific rules and learn to be wise in their investments that will weather the downs as well as the ups. Those who trust in the Lord are not immune to bad things. They believe in their Lord and let Him bring them through the tough times. He can even use difficulties to teach us and prepare us for events that lie up ahead. As we trust in the Lord, the troubles of life do not destroy us. We see a happy future ahead rather than being upset and anxious about each day.

10. Verses 11-12 What role do angels play in our lives?

This is the Old Testament's sole mention of angels as guardians of God's people. The Old Testament does speak of them as messengers for the Lord as He exerts influence on governments and rulers (Dan. 10:20). They also execute God's judgment on the wicked (2 Kings 19:35) and accompany God as He speaks to His people (Gen. 18). In the New Testament, we find that they watch little children (Matt. 18:10), deliver God's servants from prison (Acts 12: 7), and bring the unsaved to hear the gospel message (Acts 10:3). God can use the angels to accompany, defend, and protect His people in many ways against the influence of evil in their lives.

11. Verses 14-16 What seven promises does God make in these three verses?

God says that because we love Him, He will rescue us, protect us, answer us, be with us, deliver us, honor us, and show us His salvation. God gives us His presence, protection, honor, provision, and eternal life. The promises together show that God will influence every aspect of our lives and bless all the parts of our lives. His mercy encompasses every phase of our lives and leaves none of it outside His provision and protection. There is a mountain of blessings that come for those who humbly serve and follow the Lord. Why would you ever want to live outside His love and protection?

12. What condition is there for those who want God's protection?

Again, the condition is just that we love Him and stay near Him. The word love translates a Hebrew word that means "to cling to or be passionate about." Such a person will never leave the Lord but always wants to be near God. God's promises will not come to those who do not choose to be people of God. He can help those who act in such a way that opens them up to the blessings. We need to be people who listen to God, talk to the Lord in prayer, honor and adore God, tell others about our God, and are willing to make sacrifices so that God comes first. Putting God first puts us in a position where it is easier for God to help us in every kind of need.

13. How has your attitude changed toward the dangers of life? What is the key to having faith in your future?

We think that worship is something that we do for God. While that may be true, being near God and honoring God is a benefit to us. We can choose to live in or outside of God's protection and blessings. We can enter heaven by the skin of our teeth or cultivate a relationship with the Lord all our lives so that His benefits and shelter come to us every day. Many people live dangerously by keeping God at arm's length while proclaiming that they are His children. The truth is that the closer we get to the Lord, the safer that we will be. We can live in fear of the future and of the world or we can rest secure in the Lord's arms and let Him take care of the world around us.

For now or later - taking the next step

1. What dangers are you experiencing currently or could experience soon?
2. What simple habits could you build in your life that would help you give all your fears to the Lord?
3. How might you encourage a friend who is facing fear right now to trust the Lord?

1. Help from the Shepherd

Psalm 23

Big idea: The shepherd is there to help with the struggles of life.

Psalm 23 tells of the Great Shepherd who cares for His sheep and equips them for ministry (Heb. 13:20-21). Certainly, this psalm has a message for the sorrowing, but Psalm 23 focuses on what Jesus does for us "all the days of my life" and not just at death (v. 6). While many see David, a "young shepherd boy," lying on his back in the pasture and pondering the things of God, he probably wrote this psalm late in his life, possibly during the rebellion of Absalom (2 Sam. 13-19). In it, David deals with some of the problematic things he experienced during his long walk with the Lord. While people of all ages love and quote this psalm, its message is for mature Christians who have fought battles and carried burdens.

This psalm begins with five powerful words: "The Lord Is My Shepherd." "The" shows that He is the only one. There is no other. "Lord" expresses His power to do all things and His love and faithfulness to us. "Is" tells us that this is not a past event but a gift that we will have all our lives. "My" shows that God wants a personal relationship with us. "Shepherd" shows how He loves and cares for us all our lives. The 23rd Psalm is for all those who are facing difficulties or challenges in life. In six short verses, this beloved psalm describes our relationship with the Lord and our walk with Him in life. It is a help to all those who struggle through the pain of life or fear what lies ahead.

The psalm brings the comforts and the delight of living in God's great goodness and mercy. It is no wonder that so many people remember its words by heart. It is a psalm that we can recite over and over again when life is difficult for us. It is a psalm that we can use to keep Satan away and to calm our hearts. It is a psalm worth pondering verse by verse because it is filled with images that we can use when life is filled with some crisis or when we need a helping hand. The shepherd is there to help us through the dark valleys of life and to provide all that we need. He fills our lives with His care and tenderness each day we walk with Him.

1. What is your greatest fear in life right now? How does it threaten your peace of mind or sense of security?

Read Psalm 23

2. Verse 1. What do you know about sheep? How do they depend on the shepherd?

3. How are we like sheep? Why do we need the shepherd?

4. What does it mean to you that David can say of the Lord, "I shall not be in want"? What would that look like in your life?

5. Verse 2 What does it mean that "He makes me lie down in green pastures"? Why does God have to make us lie down?

6. What happens when people don't rest as the Shepherd desires? When have you experienced difficulties because you did not listen to the master's call for rest?

7. Verse 3 Why is it necessary for sheep and us to be guided by Jesus as we walk through life? What happens if no one encourages you to “get moving”?

8. Where do you need guidance right now from the Good Shepherd? Why is He the right person to guide your life?

9. Verse 4 What dark valleys are there in life? As you think of David, what dark valleys did he have to go through?

10. Verse 5 An essential part of the shepherd’s duty was to feed the flock. How well does the shepherd take care of his sheep?

11. Verse 6 How does David sum up his walk with the Lord?

12. How does dwelling with the Lord bring prosperity to our lives? What is the prosperity that God brings to His people?

13. In this one psalm are several truths about God which are reflected in other parts of scripture. Which one of the names below is most helpful to you?

For now or later - taking the next step

1 What would life be like if God were not our shepherd? What promise would you miss most?

2 What wants and dark valleys are you facing now that you need the shepherd’s care?

3 What blessings do you want at God’s table today? What does it mean to you that you have God’s blessings all your life?

2. Prayer for the anxious

Psalm 27

Big idea: Faith is a better answer than fear.

David's life was not easy. The Septuagint says that David wrote this "before he was anointed" which probably means that it was written during the time that Saul and his men were hunting him. It was a time when evil men (v.2) came to destroy him and when an army (v.3) was hunting him down as he hid in the desert. It was a time when David learned to live by faith instead of fear. Instead of worrying about every difficulty that surrounded him, he looked at what the Lord could do and saw his life from heaven's point of view. The Lord was all that David needed.

Fear is still an emotion that can trigger a "fight or flight" response in people. When afraid, some people muster all the courage they can and stand their ground, whether or not it's a wise choice. Others flee at the first sign of trouble so they can live to fight another day. David gives us a third choice. We look to the Lord and see that He is our light and salvation. We trust God instead of trying to find solutions based on our abilities. Like David, we may start with fear, but find that faith is a better answer. We look for the Lord to give us His wisdom to handle the situation and look for His help to take care of us when we find the trouble larger than we can handle.

The secret for David was fellowship with the Lord and obedience to His commands (v.4). David took the time to worship the Lord and listen to God's directions. The fool will go through life on his own. The wise will spend time with the Lord and will follow His commands. We can't expect the Lord to protect us if we are not giving ourselves into His care and if we are ignoring God's advice and help for our lives. Fear can be combatted only by faith. Faith only comes when we live in a close relationship with our God and when we trust Him so much that we obey what our Lord tells us to do.

1. If you could ask one favor of God today, what would it be?

Read Psalm 27:1-6

2. Verse 1 What three qualities of God does David name in verse 1? Why would these be meaningful to someone who is continuously running for his life?

3. How is fear the opposite of faith? What happens when people do not turn to the Lord during their troubles?

4. Imagine a life without fear. What would that look like? What would change in your life?

5. Verse 2 What has been David's experience in perilous times? Who do you think David is giving credit for sparing his life?

6. Verse 3 How has this experience changed David's attitudes? Where is his source of confidence coming as he lives in precarious situations?

7. How have difficult times strengthened your relationship with the Lord? How does crisis make you turn to the Lord and victory in crisis help you trust the Lord?

8. Verse 4 What is the one thing that David wants more than any other? Why do you think that fellowship with God is so important to David?

9. How is the house of God a comfort for all believers? What do you hope to receive when you come weekly in worship to the Lord?

10. How could you strengthen your dependence on the Lord? What would build up faith so that you push away fear?

11. Verse 5 As David stays close to the Lord, what has the Lord done for him? How does this experience cancel fear?

12. Verse 6 How did David plan to respond to God when the Lord delivered him and kept the promises that He had made to David? How do you think that impacted the people around him?

13. How will you respond when God does answer your prayers? How might you encourage others to trust the Lord as you have done?

For now or later - taking the next step

1 How has the Lord been light or a source of strength in your life over the last couple of months? What has driven you to find shelter in the Lord?

2 If you were not able to attend worship for a month, how much would it affect you? What would you miss most?

3 What lessons do you think that the Lord still needs to teach you? Why do those lessons matter?

3. Joy in Forgiveness

Psalm 32

Why suffer from guilt when God wants to forgive and heal.

This psalm rejoices at the wonder of God's forgiveness. Some think this psalm should be paired with Psalm 51 and David's confession of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. In Psalm 51, David promised to teach "transgressors your ways" (v.13), and the title Maschil can mean a song of instruction. Having begged for mercy in Psalm 51, this psalm recounts the joy of being forgiven and feeling the grace of God. Instead of being destroyed, David is retained as king, and the grace of God covers his sins.

This psalm gives us the reason for confession. We cannot hide our sins ourselves. We cannot cover it up and make it disappear. God can take away the guilt and make sin as if it never happened. If we try to ignore our sin, our bones waste away. We feel the pain and the blame as a heavy load on our lives. The only way to deal with sin is to give it to the Lord. He alone can forgive and can restore. Our temptation is to pretend that the sin is not that bad and bring ourselves pain and sorrow in the process. David waited over a year before the Lord finally sent Nathan the prophet to confront David over his sin. The psalm makes it clear that it was a painful year.

When we sin, we need to confess so that the Lord can deal with sin and can restore us. The sheer joy that is shared in this psalm warms our hearts. The sadness and pain described in the period before confession should move us to confess as soon as possible. God accepts us and loves us. God wants to forgive our sins. It is with that confidence that we must approach our Lord seeking His mercy. The Bible stresses the happiness of those whose sins have been forgiven. The guilt is gone, and the sin is pardoned. Why should anyone remain burdened with guilt when the Lord is willing to deliver us and help us rebuild our lives?

1. What was something you got blamed for as a kid at home or in school? How did it feel when your parents confronted you with what you did?

Read Psalm 32

2. Verse 1. What joy does David begin this psalm? What emotions do you sense in David at this time?

3. Verse 3. How had the unconfessed sin made David feel? What is the cost of trying to keep your sins away from God?

4. How did the unconfessed sin affect David? Why is sin such a heavy load?

5. Verse 5. How did David respond to the pain and the "heavy hand" of God? How did the pain motivate David to seek the Lord?

6. Why is full confession the only way? What happens if we confess some of the sins but try to hide part of what we did from God and others?

7. Verses 6-7 What is the lesson of this experience for David? What is the assurance that we have when we pray?

8. Why is God the only hiding place when we sin? From what are we hiding?

9. How does God always respond to the person who repents? Why is God so eager to forgive and to restore the saints?

10. Verse 8-9. What lesson does David want to share with the people? What does he want them to avoid?

11. What keeps us from confessing our sins to the Lord? What do you think makes us afraid?

12. Verse 10. What promise does David give to those who trust in the Lord? Why is that promise real?

13. What woes affect those who do not have God in their life? Why are they likely to experience more problems when they don't have confession and forgiveness to help?

For now or later - taking the next step

1 When have you felt the "heavy hand of God on you for your sin?

2 What is your experience when you did confess to the Lord? How did your confession feel?

3 What would you like to share with others from this psalm and your own experience of confession and forgiveness?

4. Longing for God

Psalm 42-43

God is nearer than you think and ready to help

Picture a Levite or Priest living in Babylon and longing to worship at a temple that has been destroyed by those who have taken him captive. He lives in an ungodly nation (43:1) and is unable to worship God as he had done for so many years. He remembers what it was like to live in the Holy Land near the Jordan River (42:6) and longs to be back near the place of God and his roots instead of living in a foreign land. His heart is broken, and He cries day and night (42:3) as people question him and mock the true God. He has no reason to believe that he or any other living Jew will ever return to the Promised Land except for the hope that he has in the Lord. God can do what we can't do. With the Lord, there is always hope since the Lord is faithful. It is that characteristic of God that the psalmist comes back to again and again.

God can seem distant for us as well. It may be an illness that keeps us from worshipping him. It may have been that we drifted away during a tough time in our lives and we don't feel comfortable coming back to the Lord. Life can keep us apart from the Lord. The church may only be a few minutes from our home, but it might as well be thousands of miles away like a captive in Babylon. We remember worshipping with the Lord every week and the comfort that it gave us. We recall the joy of being in worship singing hymns of praise and being part of the caring fellowship. Now we are far away, and our bones suffer mortal agony (42:10) as we ache because we are not with the Lord.

Most of us are not miles away from the Lord even if it feels like it. We have constraints, but God can help us past them. We may be older and need to find someone to drive us to church. We may have to get over our fears and step into the church confident that we belong there as much as we did when we regularly attended years ago. God will always welcome us, and He will help us to find a place where we can feel welcome worshipping Him. There is no reason to be downcast (42:5); we can again praise God and experience the joy and fellowship that we once had. God will guide us (43:3) and lead us to the place where we can worship Him once again. Put yourself in His hands and let Him bring you back to the throne of grace.

1. Have you ever been homesick (in the service, in college, or when a job took you far from home)? What did you miss most about home and how did it affect you?

Read Psalm 42-43

2. Verse 1 How does the Psalmist feel about being so far from the Lord and His sanctuary? What images does he use to express his feelings?

3. Verses 3-4 How does the distress affect the writer physically and emotionally? What does he miss from the past?

4. What would you miss most if you were unable to go to church?

5 What are the benefits of worshipping in a group rather than by yourself?

6. Verse 8 How has the Lord protected the psalmist?

7. How does the psalmist counter his depression? How can the Lord be our best friend when we are struggling in life?

8. Verse 9-10 What does the psalmist accuse God of doing? How has the enemy used the feelings of the psalmist against him?

9. (11) What advice does the psalmist give to himself three times that would help every Christian who is feeling down?

10. 43:1 Living in a foreign land, what is the psalmist's plea to the Lord?

11. (43:2) Why is the problem not with God? How do our attitudes block us from the joy and delight of the Lord?

12. 43:3 What does the psalmist need from the Lord to overcome the darkness that he feels? Why is God the only one who can guide us out of our hopelessness?

13. The psalmist cried, reminded himself of God's nature, prayed honestly, and encouraged himself with a message of hope. How do you deal with depression and is there something that you can learn from the psalmist that would help you better?

For now or later - taking the next step

1 What have you learned from the psalm that would help you the next time that you feel depressed or separated from God?

2 What is the difference in outcome between remembering the Lord's character and blessings and letting your problems separate you from the Lord?

3 The psalmist encourages himself three times in the psalms. What do you need to do to put your hope in the Lord in the dark times of life?

5 God is all I need
Psalm 46
Seek God's protection when things look bleak.

As Lutherans, you may recognize this psalm as the basis for “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” Luther was known to read this psalm in the painful periods of life. The psalm is probably written during the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18-19, 2 Chron. 32) after the Assyrians were destroyed by God. Assyria had swept through most of Judah and was at the gates of Jerusalem demanding surrender. Hezekiah decided to trust the Lord, and the Assyrian army was destroyed by an angel of God so that Sennacherib and what was left of his troops retreated and left the city. The psalm is the first of a trio of psalms (46-48) which celebrates this victory and gives praise to the Lord. The psalmist’s theme is simple: we must take comfort in God when things look bleak and when trouble threatens. God alone can save us.

How does one face the possibility of a personal or world catastrophe? We live in an era where floods, wildfires, and tornados wipe out whole towns and upend lives. We live in an age where businesses close, and the stock market swings up and down. We know that our future is threatened at any moment. Many in the world worry about things that they can’t control. They want insurance that will protect them or the government guaranteeing their safety. The Christian knows that the Lord is our refuge. He will provide stability in difficult times. God is the one who will save His church and His people now as much as in the times of Hezekiah. Life may not always be easy, but God will provide our daily bread and keep us from destruction.

How do we live with stress each day and live through a catastrophe that threatens to turn our world upside down? I would suggest that we do what Hezekiah did. He took the letter with the Assyrian threats and laid it out in the temple before the Lord. Hezekiah did not bargain with the enemy. He appealed to the Lord. We, too, need to bring our concerns before the Lord in prayer. We put aside the threats of the world and seek the shelter of our God and his mighty arms. When God helps us through the crisis, we need to praise Him publically as the Jews do in this psalm. The world needs to know what God has done for you so that they can seek out God's protection for themselves. In proclaiming God’s deliverance, you push fear away so that you live in God’s arms all your life.

1. America is filled with historical forts. Which ones have you been to and which ones impressed you the most?

Read Psalm 46

2. Verse 1 What words are used to describe God’s protection for His people?

3. Verse 2-3 What level of trust should we have in the Lord? How bad can life get and we still are safe in God’s care?

4. What kinds of threats and trouble do people face today? How is God the one who we can depend on?

5. What forces threaten the church today? Why should we not fear them? How are those threats something that God will take personally?

6. Verse 4 One of the challenges for the people in Hezekiah's day was that the people were confined because the Assyrians surrounded the city. What picture is given to show that God will provide for His people?

7. Verse 5-6 How are God's people protected in Hezekiah's day and ours? What will happen to the enemies of God in those days?

8. Verse 5-6 Who is really in charge of the world? How do the nations react to God's rule and why is it a comfort to us that they can't defeat God?

9. What does it take for God to be with us and for God to help us in our need? How can we prevent God from helping us?

10. Verse 8-9. This verse describes the fields around the city after the Assyrians were defeated. What do you think the area around the city looked like with 185,000 soldiers dead?

11. Verse 10. We are to "be still" when troubles come. What does that mean? Why was it essential for Hezekiah to stand back and not to act on his own?

12. Verse 10 If you were in a fort, why did you need to trust the strength of the walls and not run outside? If God is our fortress, why do we need to be still and trust Him instead of trying to save ourselves?

13. Why is it so important for God's children to proclaim God's victories in our lives?

For now or later - taking the next step.

1. What challenges are you facing now in your life? Which of the promises in this psalm touches your situation right now?

2. Do you believe that God is in charge of the world? What makes you think that? What comfort does it give you if you believe that He is in charge?

3. What challenges do you face in "being still" before God? Why do you think it is so important to have faith when trouble comes?

6 Safe in God's hands
Psalm 91
The closer we get to God, the safer we are.

Psalm 91 begins with the simple principle that those who dwell in the shelter of the Lord will rest securely. It differs from the previous psalm in that Psalm 90 focuses on the difficulties of life while Psalm 91 is about the dangers of life that are all around us. In this Psalm, the author will describe the Fowler's snare and deadly pestilence (v. 3), terrors in the night (v.4), and times when thousands die next to you (v.7). Life can be terrifying, but God can handle it all. In verse 2, the author gives his testimony and tells us all that he refuses to live in fear but keeps reminding himself that God is His protector and safety in life. He has no reason to fear what lies ahead.

We live in an era of fear. Terrorists work to get us afraid to travel outside the safety of our homes. The media has warnings about the food we eat, the scams that are out to get you, and the global warming that will destroy the planet. The message is clear. The world is falling apart, and evil people are out to get us. Protect yourself and don't trust anything. As we cower in fear, the psalmist has a better response. Trust God and let Him take care of the unknown. None of the terrors of the Psalmist's day or ours are too difficult for God. We can rest secure as we let the Lord take care of the horrors that surround us. We live by faith and not by fear.

In the tornado ridden Great Plains, there is wisdom in taking shelter in the storm cellar. The winds may destroy the home and the barn, but those in the shelter are safe and secure. If you wander outside, you will often die or be hurt. Those who live their lives in weekly worship and daily study and prayer will remain close to the Lord. He will warn them of dangers and will be able to protect them from the terrors all around them. Many live dangerously by keeping God at a distance and being surprised when danger overtakes them. A better scenario is to live our whole lives in the shelter of God so that He can deal with things too dangerous for us. The psalm reminds us that the closer that we get to the Lord, the safer that we will be.

1. What is the worst storm you have ever been caught in? How did you survive?

Read Psalm 91

2. Verses 1-2 What four names does the Psalmist use for God in the first two verses? What do those names represent?

3. Verses 1-2 Sum up the central principle of the psalm in your own words. What does the psalmist want us to learn about fear and faith?

4. Verse 3-6 What does the psalmist reveal are his own worst fears?

5 How do the fears of the psalmist compare to the concerns you have for the future? How do you typically deal with your worries and is it working?

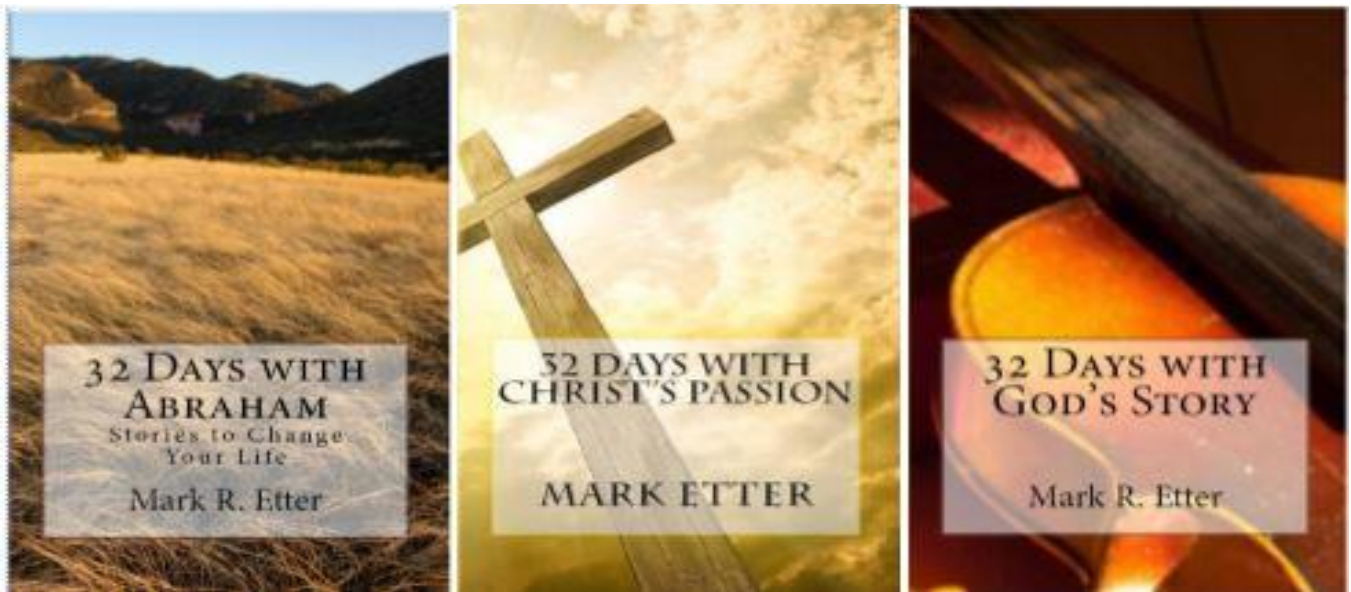
6. Verses 7-8 What further assurances does the psalmist give to the believer?

- 7. Verses 7-8 If Christians are protected and others are left to their own devices, what dangers do non-Christian friends and family face? How can you help them when they struggle?**
- 8. Verses 9-10 What conditions does the author place on God's protection?**
- 9. Verses 9-10 What does God's protection mean for us in a world where bad things happen to good people?**
- 10. Verses 11-12 What role do angels play in our lives?**
- 11. Verses 14-16 What seven promises does God make in these three verses?**
- 12. What condition is there for those who want God's protection?**
- 13. How has your attitude changed toward the dangers of life? What is the key to having faith in your future?**

For now or later - taking the next step

1. What dangers are you experiencing currently or could experience soon?
2. What simple habits could you build in your life that would help you give all your fears to the Lord?
3. How might you encourage a friend who is facing fear right now to trust the Lord?

Also Available from Rev. Mark Etter



32 devotions to grow your faith and 12 reproducible Bible studies to share in your church or small group available on Amazon in softcover or Kindle

These three books are designed to be a tool that brings you closer to Christ. Each book has 32 devotions with depth to help you dig below the surface and understand the context. Each devotion is based on a single story and lays out the events in an organized way to help you comprehend the deeper meanings in the passage and then apply them to your life. Each book also includes twelve bible studies that are meant to be shared. You can copy the student guides for your church or small group bible studies. The student guides are formatted for easy reproduction. Each Bible study is connected to one of the devotions and to a leader's guide so that you can feel confident leading others to understand God's word. The hope is that you enjoy the book with its devotions and studies and let the Holy Spirit change your life through them. God is ready to sit down with you through these studies and change your life.

About the author

Rev. Mark Etter has been a pastor for over thirty-five years and is currently the pastor of Bethany Lutheran Church in Erlanger, KY. Rev. Etter has published several books of Adult Bible studies and numerous devotions and youth studies with Concordia Publishing House in St. Louis. He has been active in the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod as an LWML counselor, evangelism chairman, coach for pastors, and circuit counselor. He is currently serving part-time as a regional facilitator for the Ohio District of the LCMS. He and his wife, Joan, have three grown children and two grandchildren.

Did you know?

How well do you know the psalms and the comfort that they can bring? Here are seven questions that are answered in this study. The page and question number in this study are given after each question.

1. Why does God make us lie down in green pastures according to Psalm 23? (Page 5, Question 5)
2. How does dwelling with the Lord bring prosperity to our lives? (Page 6, Question 12)
3. What is the one thing David wants more than anything else? (Page 9, Question 8)
4. What was the cost to David of keeping the sin of adultery quiet for a year? (Page 12, Question 3)
5. How do we overcome the times when God seems far away? (Page 17, Question 7)
6. What does it mean to “be still” when troubles come? Why is stillness helpful? (Page 22, Question 11)
7. How can you help non-Christians you love when they face trials? (Page 25, Question 7)

Studies are reproducible so that only one copy of the study is needed by the class or small group. You have flexibility when the class you thought was going to be 15 suddenly becomes 25. You are free to copy and distribute the two-page student guides for a large formal class or the four-page leader’s guide for a small group. The focus is to get deep into the text and apply the lessons to your life. Each of the six chapters contains an introduction to help you get the big picture and is followed by thirteen questions to help you dig into the truth. Look for the other studies in the series and may the Lord bless your time in the word.