



# **Sermon Series by Season**

**Rev. Mark Etter, author  
Bethany Lutheran Church, Erlanger, KY**

**Vol. 2 Part C  
Summer**

***“Daniel – Godly living in a pagan world”***

***“Psalms - Praying when life hurts.”***

***“Colossians – Christ is all you need”***

**Other sermons and Bible studies at  
[www.32daysdevotions.com](http://www.32daysdevotions.com)  
Contact me at [32daysdevotions@gmail.com](mailto:32daysdevotions@gmail.com)**

# The purpose of this volume.

Churches are often vacant for long periods or are in locations where it is difficult to find pastors to fill the pulpit when they are vacant. This series of four books is my humble attempt to help vacant congregations. The fifty-nine sermons, divided into four sections by the seasons, will give congregations an option on Sundays that it is hard to get a pastor. The sermons are arranged in series, covering a specific section of scripture or topic. Some are meant to cover a season. Others will fill the long weeks between Pentecost and the beginning of Advent.

This is the third of four volumes of sermons that will cover the church year. The 59 sermons in the volumes can be used during the season indicated or as a sermon series at any time of the year. There is no cost to using these sermons, so I encourage you to use them freely, with or without citation of authorship. God gave them to us as a gift at Bethany, and we want to pass them on to you. Feel free to pass them on to others so that as many as possible may share in what the Lord has given all of us. You are also allowed to edit them to fit your specific location or preaching style. May the Lord bless you as you learn and grow from His word.

## Table of contents

### Daniel – Godly living in a pagan world.

- |  |       |
|--|-------|
| 1. Faith Tested. Dan. 1:1-21             | p. 3  |
| 2. Dreams and Destinies Dan. 2:24-47     | p. 6  |
| 3. There is no other God. Dan. 3:1-30    | p. 9  |
| 4. Don't mess with God. Dan. 4:19-34     | p. 12 |
| 5. Forgetting God's lessons. Dan. 5:1-31 | p. 15 |
| 6. Living with an advantage. Dan. 6:1-24 | p. 18 |

### Psalms: Praying when life hurts.

- |                                   |       |
|-----------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Plea for vindication. Psalm 26 | p. 21 |
| 2. Plea for strength. Psalm 39    | p. 24 |
| 3. Plea for forgiveness. Psalm 51 | p. 27 |
| 4. Plea for protection. Psalm 57  | p. 30 |
| 5. Plea for the nation. Psalm 80. | p. 33 |

### Colossians: Christ is all you need

- |   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1 Thanks, Jesus, but I want more! Col. 1:1-20                       | p. 36 |
| 2. Doing what it takes to build the church in Christ. Col. 1:24-2:5 | p. 39 |
| 3. Captive to false "truth" Col. 2:8-23                             | p. 42 |
| 4. So you want paradise? Col. 3:1-17                                | p. 45 |

## Copywrite 2024

These sermons may be used in local churches or small groups. They may not be sold in any other publication or distributed in print or electronically outside the local ministry.

## **Daniel – Godly living in a pagan world.**

Daniel is the story of Godly living in a pagan culture. Taken as a teenager, he and his friends assert their desire to remain faithful to the Lord even though they are captives in a foreign culture. His faith influenced the great kings of Babylon and Persia over a 65-year ministry. God will reveal the rise and fall of kingdoms as Daniel interprets dreams and a message on the wall. He will speak to Nebuchadnezzar and his grandson Belshazzar about the cost of pride for them and the kingdom. His witness will cause some of the most powerful men in the world to acknowledge the true God and give Him glory. Daniel's walk with the Lord brought him honor from powerful men and showed the true nature of the Lord to the kingdoms of the exile. Daniel loved the Lord so much that he could not live without the Lord. God was the source of Daniel's blessings and the one who gave him great opportunities to witness.

### **1. Faith Tested**

#### **Daniel 1:1-21**

#### **Big idea: Balancing faith and foreign culture**

**Daniel 1:1-21** 1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god. 3 Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility-- 4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. 5 The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. 6 Among these were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. 7 The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego. 8 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." 11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. 15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead. 17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. 18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them in, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. 21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

### **The challenge of culture**

#### **Daniel – A teenager thrust into a godless culture.**

Russia invades America in 2025. The brightest kids from each high school and the children of some of the wealthiest and most influential families are all taken as prisoners and taken back to Russia to be educated and indoctrinated. Parents are powerless to do anything about it. It sounds impossible, but it is the beginning of the book of Daniel. Daniel and other teenagers from royal and wealthy families are torn from their families and taken to Babylon. Daniel and his friends will be forced to endure a 500-mile trek to a new nation under armed guard.

These bright and best young men will be mixed with teenagers from other captured nations in Babylon. They will be trained, and many will be forced to use their skills for the Babylonian nation. They will have few choices and be little more than enslaved people in this country. This book is about how one

man balanced faith and his opportunities to serve in a foreign culture. He would rise from virtual slave to the highest administrator in the country, sharing God with four powerful pagan kings. He would bring God to a godless nation.

### **Helping our children face a godless culture.**

So, what does that have to do with us? Ask any child what living out their faith in school today is like. I am old, and I remember when it was fashionable or at least OK to admit that you went to church. Wednesdays were reserved for church activities because schools saw how it improved kids. Times have changed, and American culture is not kind to the Christian religion. Our kids are so busy that it is hard to have time for God. Sundays are not sacred days. Sports, groups, and even charity events are scheduled for Sunday morning.

Being a Christian in school is not cool. It gets hard to dress our kids modestly. The hip music is filled with swear words and talk about having sex with someone. Even Christian churches are filled with kids who don't believe the Bible stuff. I feel sorry for our kids and what they face. Daniel has much to teach adults and children about survival in a culture that doesn't honor the Lord. His story is authentic, and as we see in this book, he will face the real possibility of death for living his faith. Yet, he will thrive in the foreign culture because he honors his God.

### **Daniel's Dilemma**

**To be useful to God, we must fit in. v.4** *young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians.*

It was an honor to be trained as an officer in the king's palace, but it was also indoctrinated in Babylonian ways. They were to speak Babylonian and have Babylonian names. They were to learn the science and literature of this new place. In short, they were to become Babylonian. Nowhere in this book does it said that they staged a sit-in or any protest. They were not against learning or opposed to the opportunities that it presented. They must have studied hard, for they will be at the top of the class. They became Babylonian and were thus able to minister to Babylonians.

I think the church often makes big mistakes when dealing with our culture. We throw everything we don't like out and expect others to accept our "Christian" ways. We picket things we don't like and badmouth people who say something that interferes with our lives. We need to learn from our culture. There is a lot in science or business that we can learn from. Non-Christians write good books that contain a lot of truth. If the church does not engage in its culture, how will we ever serve it? How can we impact the people around us?

**To be useful to God, we must not defile ourselves v. 8.** *But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.*

Daniel and his friends did find places where they could not give in. The first place had to do with food and the Jewish food laws. Others would start worshipping idols or eat anything that the Babylonians gave them to eat. These were things that went against the Bible and its teachings. They drew a line here because they refused to go against God's will. They knew that God had a reason for His laws and that the things would hurt them. They didn't make a fuss about it or scream or demand that Babylonians eat like Jews. They just said that they were going to follow God.

We and our children would do well to follow that path. There are things in our culture that go against our faith. Sports activities that prevent kids from worship or clothes that show more flesh than is wise may be things that everyone else is doing, but Christians should avoid them. That doesn't mean that you swear at the kid with his underwear showing above his pants or try to sue the soccer league for having Sunday games. You can't expect someone not Christian to understand God's ways. Simply live your life following the Lord.

**Be courteous and teach them God's ways are best v.12** *Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food,*

What happens if the world tries to force you to do something against God's will? Daniel's solution was letting non-Christians test God's ways to see if they were best. He proposed a test where they would eat only Kosher foods so that the Babylonians could see what worked. He did so by being gracious to the people in authority. He even agreed that he and his friends would accept Babylonian ways if God's ways did not turn out better. He was so confident that God knew what He was doing that He proposed a way to teach others and change their thinking.

Courtesy is still the best way. Why not try to teach others when life attempts to force you to go against God's will? Someone wants you to work on Sunday. Can you offer to work Saturday or come in at about 10 AM so you can go to early service instead? Can you ask for a slight change in a cheerleading outfit that makes it less revealing? Can you find a quiet alternative to that paper praising evolution? It may take more work, but it could also develop a more comfortable costume or a better way of teaching kids. Rudeness gives you nothing.

### **Lessons for us**

**Balancing the world v.17** *To these four young men, God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.*

Daniel and his friends walked a fine line. They learned all they could from the schooling as they became part of that culture. It gave them years of service and tremendous influence in this new place. They graduated at the top of their class and were assigned places of power and authority. Yet, they also kept their faith. It became their most precious asset, for God gave them opportunities and wisdom others did not have. They had character and values that few could fault. They had a God they could call upon in prayer and depend on when things got tough. They had the best of both worlds.

It is not always easy, but I encourage our kids to walk the same line. Learn all that you can from your schooling. Be the best you can be to serve others and influence knowing science, math, and good literature. You need to be part of the culture. Yet, hold on to your faith. Most kids today wander through school with no morals or direction. They will amount to nothing. God has given you a moral compass that people will admire. Employers want honest and trustworthy people who have the value of hard work. They want Godly people, even if they won't say it that way. You can have the best of both worlds.

**Opportunities for those "in the world" v.21** *And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.*

You also have to be in the world if you will impact it for the Lord. This verse shows us a lot about Daniel's lifespan and influence. He would live until he was about 90 years old, having served four kings from a succession of conquering countries. His legacy is seventy years of service and influence in a pagan world. Each king learned about the true God from Daniel, and several worshipped God because of what Daniel taught them. Because he was in their midst, serving with honesty and character, people had a better picture of His God, and some came to faith.

You will have to be in the world if you are going to have an impact for God. Don't turn your back on the people at your school, job, or neighborhood. Be one of them and understand their world. People around us need Jesus more than ever. But be part of that world with your faith intact. If you cast aside your character and values just to fit in, you will damage your life. You have a tremendous advantage in this world as you live as God's child. Just do it with courtesy and love as you minister in a world that doesn't know God.

## 2. Dreams and Destinies

### Dan. 2:24-47

**Big idea: Man is imperfect and limited; God is boundless and forever.**

**Daniel 2:24-47** 24 Then Daniel went to Arioch, whom the king had appointed to execute the wise men of Babylon, and said to him, "Do not execute the wise men of Babylon. Take me to the king, and I will interpret his dream for him." 25 Arioch took Daniel to the king at once and said, "I have found a man among the exiles from Judah who can tell the king what his dream means." 26 The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my dream and interpret it?" 27 Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, 28 but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these: 29 "As you were lying there, O king, your mind turned to things to come, and the revealer of mysteries showed you what is going to happen. 30 As for me, this mystery has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind. 31 "You looked, O king, and there before you stood a large statue--an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. 32 The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, 33 its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay. 34 While you were watching, a rock was cut out, but not by human hands. It struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and smashed them. 35 Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver and the gold were broken to pieces at the same time and became like chaff on a threshing floor in the summer. The wind swept them away without leaving a trace. But the rock that struck the statue became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth. 36 "This was the dream, and now we will interpret it to the king. 37 You, O king, are the king of kings. The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory; 38 in your hands he has placed mankind and the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Wherever they live, he has made you ruler over them all. You are that head of gold. 39 "After you, another kingdom will rise, inferior to yours. Next, a third kingdom, one of bronze, will rule over the whole earth. 40 Finally, there will be a fourth kingdom, strong as iron--for iron breaks and smashes everything--and as iron breaks things to pieces, so it will crush and break all the others. 41 Just as you saw that the feet and toes were partly of baked clay and partly of iron, so this will be a divided kingdom; yet it will have some of the strength of iron in it, even as you saw iron mixed with clay. 42 As the toes were partly iron and partly clay, so this kingdom will be partly strong and partly brittle. 43 And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay. 44 "In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever. 45 This is the meaning of the vision of the rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands--a rock that broke the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver and the gold to pieces. "The great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true, and the interpretation is trustworthy." 46 Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. 47 The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery."

### **The limitations of man**

#### **Dreams and death**

King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream for several nights in a row. It is a powerful dream that he knows comes from the gods themselves. He calls his wise men and orders them to tell him the dream and its meaning. He understands that this means the future of his kingdom. None of the advisors can tell the king the meaning of the dream since he will not tell them the dream. Furious, he orders all the wise men, including those in training, to die and their homes to be destroyed. He will not be led astray by them again. He needs answers, and He will find someone else to help.

Daniel is in training and is told he will die. He asks for some time, and he and his friends begin to pray. They plead for mercy from God. Let your name be known, and let people give you glory. Do not let your servants die; use them to show you to the nation. God answers their prayers. The dream is revealed to Daniel with its interpretation. He gives glory to the Lord, acknowledging that the Lord alone is wise

and in control. He raises and humbles kingdoms and kings. Man is imperfect and limited. God is boundless and forever.

### **Man flounders.**

The world is a mess. Democrats and Republicans have dropped the ball on issues like healthcare and the economy, to name just a few things. War seems imminent in places around the world. Terrorists abound in all the corners of the world. People get trampled on, and few seem to care. The American public hears about all this and has become desensitized to much of it. What are we going to do? Congress and the president fight. Nations each have their own agenda. Ultimately, we are sick of political attempts to build a great and noble society as if our politicians were gods.

Leaders are all building on a false foundation. Like the tower of Babel in the Old Testament, they think they can use the resources to build a monument to themselves. Just as bad are the people waiting for these leaders to solve all their problems. Man flounders for policy is based on man and not on God. There are no national days of prayer. There is an arrogance that says that God is irrelevant. Man thinks he is in control of his destiny, but God mocks men who believe they know it all. This dream shows that He alone is in control.

### **The infinite God**

**A. God is in control of history v.28**, *but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. Your dream and the visions that passed through your mind as you lay on your bed are these:*

Nebuchadnezzar is the most powerful ruler of his day. His wisest men can not fathom or interpret the dream the Lord has given. Yet it is the God of heaven who has granted him his throne and his power. God is in control of the future. God knows and shapes the future. As Daniel tells of the kingdoms to come, you have a rare sense of the shape of future history. Babylonia will not be forever. Four coming kingdoms will replace it. The king is to realize that despite his earthly power, he is not in charge. There is a God who is grander than all the others.

America is the most powerful nation, but there will come a day when another replaces her. God has given us the resources and power to shape the world. It is a tremendous responsibility to be a caregiver of this world. Yet, we must not think that we are in control. We need to acknowledge the Lord as we once did. As a nation, we need to seek to be servants of the world and not just masters. God is still in control, and America will be strong only if she serves God's purpose. Our arrogance will be our downfall. God, not man, is in control.

**B. Man will decline v.32** *The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze,*

Sadly, the dream points to how human kingdoms will decline as time goes on. The massive statue changed in value from gold to clay. It changed in strength and power as well. The Babylonians are the head of gold. Over succeeding kingdoms, life will decay until Rome is only iron and clay. When we look at history, we like to think that we are in the golden age with such significant advances in technology and science. Yet, a closer look shows us to be less than the ages before us. How does America compare to ancient Egypt, Rome, or Greece?

For all our advances in science, have we made any progress in war, hunger, or quality of life? Looking at any newspaper will tell of violence on a scale that was impossible in Daniel's day. The media routinely reports on mass hunger and people in refugee camps. Where is the paradise that dreamers talk about? Even in America, we have more people on welfare than ever before. The problem is not something you can buy your way out of. Man is in decline. He has forgotten his Lord and is paying the price with broken marriages and lives.

**C. Man that relies on himself is brittle and will fail v.43** *And just as you saw the iron mixed with baked clay, so the people will be a mixture and will not remain united, any more than iron mixes with clay.*

Ultimately, the world will be brittle, like a mixture of iron and clay. While iron is solid and durable, clay is weak and easily crumbles. Iron makes a nation look strong, but clay makes things fall apart. Such was the Roman Empire, the fourth kingdom in the dream. It was a nation strong with its armies that seemed to be able to conquer the world. Yet, it was a nation filled with intrigue and broken promises. In the days after Christ, emperors rose and fell, with three emperors named in 69 AD alone. It would one day fall apart entirely.

When man relies on himself, a nation is brittle and will fail. Nations break treaties daily, and leaders can grab power that is not to be theirs. Nations have little concern for each other but want whatever makes them wealthy and comfortable. People become selfish and care only about themselves. Man's true strength is not in himself but in his God. Unlike the animals, man can pray to the Lord for strength and help. Man alone can let the Lord refashion us so that we are more iron than clay. Man alone can have the strength that comes from God. As the world relies on itself, it will fail.

### **The power of God's kingdom**

**Victory overall. v. 44** *"In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.*

Amid the fourth kingdom, God will create a new kingdom that man does not rule. It is the kingdom of the church ruled by Jesus Christ. The kingdom will rise during the time of Rome and will be based on the death and resurrection of Jesus. It will rise and will not be able to be defeated by Rome but will change the course of history as this kingdom based on the love and truth of Jesus grows. One day, it would conquer the Roman Empire, and Emperor Constantine would become Christian. Rome will die, but the church will go on.

While there is so much wrong with the world, something is right. It is the love and truth of Jesus that the church still has to offer. Nations will rise and fall because they are based on men. The church will continue, for it is based on the Lord. It alone has the power to change lives broken by sin. It alone can change the world. Money cannot change poverty or war, but the gospel can. When the church uses that power, there is victory. We can have confidence when our lives are based on an infinite God, not a finite man.

**Glory to God to God alone v.47** *The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.*

The emperor of Babylon listened as a Jewish boy explained the mysteries of God and was humbled. All his power and all the power of his gods were nothing compared to the true God, the God of Daniel. Sadly, he would forget God and one day praise himself as the creator of all. Yet, the lesson is there. When we see how the Lord is infinite, we should be humbled and give glory to our God. No one is like Him, and no one is powerful or in control of History like Him. Politicians and the wise can dispel him and act like He does not exist, but the almighty laughs.

Daniel brought God before his nation by speaking the simple truth. As our world fumbles and fails, it does so because it has forgotten the true God. It is time to convey God's truth humbly and without malice. If our world is to have good times, they will only come by acknowledging God. You and I have a choice. We can be part of the fifth kingdom, the stone that will crush the selfish kingdoms of the world with God's gospel message, or we can be part of the kingdoms that will fall. Man is finite, but God is infinite, and His kingdom will endure forever.



### 3. There is no other God

#### Daniel 3:1-30

#### Big Idea: It is about God and not about us.

**Daniel 3:1-30** 1 King Nebuchadnezzar made an image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, and set it up on the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. 2 He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. 3 So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it. 4 Then the herald loudly proclaimed, "This is what you are commanded to do, O peoples, nations and men of every language: 5 As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. 6 Whoever does not fall down and worship will immediately be thrown into a blazing furnace." 7 Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the peoples, nations and men of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. 8 At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. 9 They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, "O king, live forever! 10 You have issued a decree, O king, that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, 11 and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. 12 But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon--Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego--who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up." 13 Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So, these men were brought before the king, 14 and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, "Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? 15 Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" 16 Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. 18 But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." 19 Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual 20 and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. 21 So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. 22 The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot that the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, 23 and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace. 24 Then King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, O king." 25 He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." 26 Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!" So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, 27 and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them. 28 Then Nebuchadnezzar said, "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. 29 Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way." 30 Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the province of Babylon.

#### Who is to be worshipped?

#### Pride says it is all about me.

The statue said that it was all about Nebuchadnezzar. Imagine seeing the statue gleam for miles on the desert plain of Babylon. It was nine stories tall and covered with gold. The desert sun would reflect on it and proclaim the wealth and power of Babylon to all. The king was filled with pride because of all his conquests. Nebuchadnezzar ruled the Middle East, Egypt, and part of Turkey at the height of his power. Such a kingdom brings pride, but it also brings fear. What if someone were to rebel? He wants everyone to be loyal to him.

Pride affects us all. We get a new car, and it is hard not to feel superior to others. Our kids do well in school, and we feel like we are super parents. We get a promotion and feel like we can brag about all we

have done. Success breeds pride. Some pride is good. We should feel good about success, and it is good to celebrate the good things that the Lord brings. It can become destructive when we forget God's part in our success or think God owes us success. Good things should make us celebrate God. The truth is it is about God and not about us.

### **Prayers can say it is all about me as well.**

Pride can affect our attitudes about and our relationship with God. In our society, there are a lot of Christians who act like God is there to make our lives easier. Prayer becomes a laundry list that God is to fill for us. They pray about jobs, illness, and a host of other wrongs. God is supposed to fill those needs and make life easy. That is why they come to church and give money. That is why they are willing to serve God at church and in the community. We pray, and God answers. If God stops answering, they start having doubts about God. They stop coming to church and praying.

Sadly, that is nothing but pride. God is a loving Father who cares about His children. Yet, what happens in our world if a parent gives the child everything that they want? The child is spoiled and can become useless to himself and the world. It is not a blessing for a parent to be that way. God is smarter than that. He will break the pride of His children. It is not about you or me. It is about Him. He knows what gifts you need and when you need them. He knows what will be good for you. Wise people will trust the Lord. This account is the story of three men who did just that.

### **Faith is shown and answered.**

**The test – Bow down and worship v. 5** *As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipes and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up.*

It may be as much as 20 years after the last chapter. Our three heroes are head administrators in the kingdom of Babylon. A decree goes out. When the music plays, it is time to bow down and worship the golden statue, or you will die. The herald doesn't take a vote; he just states the decree. It becomes a test of the faith of our trio. God permits this test to help them grow in faith. He permits this test because He will use it to show His power to the nation of Babylon. That doesn't make the test easy. It makes the test powerful for the trio and for the nation.

We face tests of our faith all the time. Sometimes, Satan uses tests to destroy our faith and separate us from God. It may be an illness where he wants us to curse God as he tempted Job. It may be a temptation to lust or greed that is to separate us from the Lord. Other times, we may be asked to put worship first or be kind to family or neighbors when they deeply hurt us. Sometimes, those tests come from God as He wants us to show to the world as the trio will that God is more important than anything else. Tests come all the time. They are a part of life.

**Faith's answer – Worship God v.12** *But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon--Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego--who pay no attention to you, O king. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."*

Amongst the rulers of Babylon were three men who quietly refused to bow down to the pagan god. In faith, they obeyed the Lord and trusted Him to work out the consequences. God had clearly spoken that they were not to worship idols, and they followed His will. They could have pretended to worship or given the excuse that they were in a foreign land and needed to follow its customs. Others would bow down because the idol meant nothing. They would not bow down because their God meant everything. They would stand firm and give honor only to Him.

It is hard when the world calls us to bow down and forget God for the moment. It can be an event that keeps us from worship. It can be a lie that we must tell a client at work. It can be hundreds of ways that Satan tempts us to do something we know is wrong. It is easy to excuse it. Everyone else is doing it. If I don't do this act, I lose my job, and then how will I witness to Joe or be the moral compass around here? If

we judge our response by everyone else, we become someone whose acts mean nothing. To stand firm means that God means everything to us.

**Faith's reward – Untouched by danger v.27** *They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them.*

They stood by God, and God stood by them. This furnace may have been the one that smelted ore to make iron or bronze. The men were thrown in there while it was hot but remained untouched. The Lord sent an angel to be with them and let them know God was with them. When they came out of the furnace, no hair was singed, or piece of clothing was scorched. It was as if they had not been in the fire at all. Everyone crowded around them and saw the power and protection of God. It was a miracle that showed that the true God was stronger than the god of the statue.

Sometimes, God does miraculously help us. The boss who wants us to lie has a change of heart. We are saved because it rained, and the event that would have kept us from church was canceled. Someone intervenes, and those who would force us to forget God must back away. God does do miracles, and they are all over the pages of scripture. Ours is an awesome God who is stronger than Satan and will protect His people. At times, God does it so that everyone can see He is a God to be honored and feared.

**Yet it is not about us.**

**God may choose not to save us v.18** *But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."*

Sometimes, God doesn't save his people. The trio concluded their speech with the words "But if not" because they knew they could not hold God to save them. It was not about them. It was trusting that God would do whatever brought Him glory and showed others how powerful He was. It might mean that God would allow them to die so that other Jews might see how strong their faith was and how great God was. For the trio, worshipping God alone, no matter what the consequences, was its own reward. How could they turn their backs on a God who had blessed them already?

We might say the same about the missionary who dies at the hands of the people they are witnessing or about Saint Peter or Saint Paul martyred for their faith. Even when doing God's work, a miracle is not guaranteed. God used their deaths to advance the kingdom. It is not about us. Just because God doesn't answer our prayers the way we want doesn't mean He is less compassionate or powerful. Faith does the right thing because it will not desert God, and it trusts God to bring glory to Himself and save others because of our righteous actions.

**The greatest thing is the glory of God v.28** *Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him, defied the king's command, and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God.*

Even Nebuchadnezzar sees the power of faith. Nebuchadnezzar gave glory to God not only because God delivered the trio but also because they showed that God was more valuable to them than life. The people around him bowed to his god because they cared about themselves. The god was nothing to them. Bowing to it was an act of preservation. These three were different. Their God was so precious that they would rather sacrifice their lives than lose Him. He was more powerful than Nebuchadnezzar and his god, but God was also dearer to them than the Babylonian god was to his people.

To the Christian, it is not about us. It is about never leaving a God who showed His love for us by giving His son to us on the cross. We have a God we do not want to live without. We must be willing to entrust God with our life and our future. This is a God we cannot live without. Whether or not God gives us what we ask for is never the issue. It is about God. We may be saved as the three were so that God might be given glory, or we might be sacrificed so that people can see the value of faith and how much we value the Lord more than life. **It is about God and not about us.**

#### **4. Don't mess with God**

##### **Daniel 4: 19-34**

##### **Big idea: God will not permit men to play God.**

**Daniel 4:19-34** 19 Then Daniel (also called Belteshazzar) was greatly perplexed for a time, and his thoughts terrified him. So the king said, "Belteshazzar, do not let the dream or its meaning alarm you." Belteshazzar answered, "My lord, if only the dream applied to your enemies and its meaning to your adversaries! 20 The tree you saw, which grew large and strong, with its top touching the sky, visible to the whole earth, 21 with beautiful leaves and abundant fruit, providing food for all, giving shelter to the beasts of the field, and having nesting places in its branches for the birds of the air-- 22 you, O king, are that tree! You have become great and strong; your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky, and your dominion extends to distant parts of the earth. 23 "You, O king, saw a messenger, a holy one, coming down from heaven and saying, 'Cut down the tree and destroy it, but leave the stump, bound with iron and bronze, in the grass of the field, while its roots remain in the ground. Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven; let him live like the wild animals, until seven times pass by for him.' 24 "This is the interpretation, O king, and this is the decree the Most High has issued against my lord the king: 25 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle and be drenched with the dew of heaven. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes. 26 The command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots means that your kingdom will be restored to you when you acknowledge that Heaven rules. 27 Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue." 28 All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?" 31 The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes." 33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. 34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

##### **The proud and mighty are warned.**

There will always be the proud and mighty. In the text, Nebuchadnezzar has forgotten everything the Lord taught him. It has been decades since Daniel interpreted the dream in chapter 2, or the trio was spared from the fiery furnace. The proclamations of Nebuchadnezzar that God was the true king have long been forgotten. Thus, God again warns the king in a dream. A tree grew large in a field, but the Lord cut down the tree and left only a stump bound with iron and bronze. The command went out that a person become like an animal drenched with the dew and living in the fields for seven years.

Daniel, with fear, must tell his king that the dream speaks about him. He must warn him to renounce his pride and acknowledge the true God. Only then will God spare him from this punishment. In His mercy, God warns the king that He should not play God but must acknowledge the true God. The lesson that God wants all men to learn is that He will not allow people to pretend that they are God or that they have created what makes a nation great. We are only creatures and subjects. He is the creator and the king of kings. God will not allow men to play God.

### **Take comfort; God is in charge.**

Daniel is distressed in the text, and there are times that I am as well. I watch world leaders like Russia's Putin think that they can play God, annexing a portion of the world for themselves. I see politicians thinking that they are above the law, a blessing to all of us, and should be worshipped. Too much of the media and the politicians have no use for God right now. They have solutions for all our nations' problems. They are convinced that if we band together, we can solve poverty, health care, education, and all of man's issues. None of it works well. The problem is that they have left God out of the solution.

This passage comforts me because it reminds me that all nations, politicians, and those who think they are in charge are not in charge. They may act like gods, but their pride will cause them to fall. They are still under the control of the almighty God, who will let them go only so far. God watches over the poor and the widow. He lets the leaders go so far and then snaps the leash. Our trouble is that he often thinks in decades and centuries when we want help in hours or days. Yet, take comfort. Our God is in charge. This story is one of punishment and grace for the proud.

### **God shows that He is supreme.**

**God is in charge no matter what people think v.17** *so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.'*

Nebuchadnezzar is older now. He has had years of defeating his enemies and has completed several impressive building projects that we still marvel at. He can now rest at home and pat himself on the back for all that "He has accomplished." The dream is to remind him of God's hand in it all. God laughs as scientists talk about the Big Bang theory of evolution. The theory has at its core that man is getting better and is now controlling his destiny. God laughs. All man must do is to look and see that things are not better. The world would fall apart if He were not in control.

God laughs as politicians take God out of schools, holidays, and our culture and then proclaim that if you give them enough money, they can solve the problems of the world. How much money will it take to educate our kids when they come from broken homes and lives? Without God, change is a myth. God laughs at terrorists and world leaders who attempt to change the world. He lets their enemies hunt them down with drones and wiretaps. He lets them live in as much fear as they try to instill in others. Their kingdoms will fall, but God will remain and will be with His people.

**Acknowledge God, and prosperity comes to you v.27** *Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue."*

Daniel sees what the king has forgotten. Daniel has lived and will continue to live his life honoring and obeying the Almighty God. He is troubled because he sees how the Lord will assert His sovereignty. He sees that Nebuchadnezzar has crossed the line. He cares about this king and begs him to repent and humble himself before the Lord. He calls upon the king to do God's will, for God's will is the only way to avoid punishment and continue in the prosperity the Lord has given him.

As people who see God's sovereignty, we should pray for the world's leaders and ask them to acknowledge the Lord. It is not a matter of picketing but of prayer. It is not a matter of wanting disaster but wanting dialogue so that the world can have the Lord's prosperity. We think we are too small, but Daniel was only one man. God will give us opportunities to speak, and there may be some who will listen. The answer to broken schools and poverty is not more money. It is more God so that God can change the hearts of men and women to help them to live moral lives.

**Judgment comes to the proud v. 31.** *The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, "This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you.*

The king may have listened and changed some of his ways for a while. Yet, twelve months later, he was as proud as ever, and God had enough. The king proclaims his power and majesty, and God speaks from the heavens and curses the king. At once, the king becomes like a wild animal. God gave the king a whole year to repent and heed the warning, but the king either ignored the warning entirely or had a short-lived repentance. The proud king was quickly reduced to a wild animal. He thought he was better than all; now, he would not even be like the lowliest man.

Judgment will come to the proud people of our day. The world leader will have a heart attack and die. The politician will be caught in a scandal and be reduced to nothing. The terrorist who fights for years and accomplishes little more than living in squalor, watching his people die just as fast as the enemy. God will not be mocked. He will give warnings that we never hear to these people. He may be patient with them as well. Yet, the day will come when judgment will be required of the proud and mighty. You will acknowledge the Lord, or you pay the price.

### **God's grace and glory**

**A king restored v.34** *At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored.*

Restoration for the proud was always a possibility. The tree was cut down, but the stump was banded for protection and left in the dream. Seven years would pass, but then the king would look to heaven and repent. Looking to heaven and not to himself, God would restore his sanity and his throne. That his gaze was on heaven suggests both faith and submission. The years had allowed him to think about the lessons he had learned over the years from Daniel. His submission also meant better times for his subjects now that the Lord was honored.

When the people of God speak his will and leaders in business, science, and government listen, there is an opportunity for restoration. As they look up to the almighty, they will find that he restores their fortunes and gives them a chance to lead now that they know the Lord is king. It also is helpful for the people and brings restoration to them. No longer are policies bound to solutions without God, but policies focus on letting God be God. We look to help people build character and godly lives and not just throw money trying to change the symptoms.

**A king gives glory v.37** *Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.*

Seven years before, he proclaimed his kingdom's greatness and power. Now, he knows that man is nothing without God. His kingdom is limited, but God's kingdom includes everything and will never end. The patient witness of Daniel and the influential intervention of God changed the king. When I am worried, I take comfort in knowing that the Lord is always in control. He works behind the scenes. He brings punishment to the proud and brings grace to the repentant. The rulers of this earth and the wise think they are in charge, but God is really in charge.

I also need to keep giving witness to my Lord and His rule. I must keep worshipping Him quietly even if there are consequences, as there were for the trio at the fiery furnace or later with Daniel in the lion's den. I also need to speak his truth so that others can hear. God must be sovereign to me if He is to be sovereign to others. He is in charge, and as I live that and speak that, this will be a better place to live. My life will be where my children and beyond can find His grace. A proud person will not last. God's kingdom will go on forever.

## 5. Forgetting God's lessons

### Daniel 5:1-31

**Big idea: Life is better when you learn from other's mistakes.**

**Daniel 5:1-31** 1 King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them. 2 While Belshazzar was drinking his wine, he gave orders to bring in the gold and silver goblets that Nebuchadnezzar his father had taken from the temple in Jerusalem, so that the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines might drink from them. 3 So they brought in the gold goblets that had been taken from the temple of God in Jerusalem, and the king and his nobles, his wives and his concubines drank from them. 4 As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone. 5 Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote on the plaster of the wall, near the lampstand in the royal palace. The king watched the hand as it wrote. 6 His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way. 7 The king called out for the enchanters, astrologers and diviners to be brought and said to these wise men of Babylon, "Whoever reads this writing and tells me what it means will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around his neck, and he will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." 8 Then all the king's wise men came in, but they could not read the writing or tell the king what it meant. 9 So King Belshazzar became even more terrified and his face grew more pale. His nobles were baffled. 10 The queen, hearing the voices of the king and his nobles, came into the banquet hall. "O king, live forever!" she said. "Don't be alarmed! Don't look so pale!" 11 There is a man in your kingdom who has the spirit of the holy gods in him. In the time of your father he was found to have insight and intelligence and wisdom like that of the gods. King Nebuchadnezzar your father--your father the king, I say--appointed him chief of the magicians, enchanters, astrologers and diviners. 12 This man Daniel, whom the king called Belteshazzar, was found to have a keen mind and knowledge and understanding, and also the ability to interpret dreams, explain riddles and solve difficult problems. Call for Daniel, and he will tell you what the writing means." 13 So Daniel was brought before the king, and the king said to him, "Are you Daniel, one of the exiles my father the king brought from Judah? 14 I have heard that the spirit of the gods is in you and that you have insight, intelligence and outstanding wisdom. 15 The wise men and enchanters were brought before me to read this writing and tell me what it means, but they could not explain it. 16 Now I have heard that you are able to give interpretations and to solve difficult problems. If you can read this writing and tell me what it means, you will be clothed in purple and have a gold chain placed around your neck, and you will be made the third highest ruler in the kingdom." 17 Then Daniel answered the king, "You may keep your gifts for yourself and give your rewards to someone else. Nevertheless, I will read the writing for the king and tell him what it means. 18 "O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. 19 Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. 20 But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. 21 He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes. 22 "But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. 23 Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand. But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways. 24 Therefore he sent the hand that wrote the inscription. 25 "This is the inscription that was written: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, PARSIN 26 "This is what these words mean: *Mene*: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end. 27 *Tekel*: You have been weighed on the scales and found wanting. 28 *Peres*: Your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians." 29 Then at Belshazzar's command, Daniel was clothed in purple, a gold chain was placed around his neck, and he was proclaimed the third highest ruler in the kingdom. 30 That very night Belshazzar, king of the Babylonians, was slain, 31 and Darius the Mede took over the kingdom, at the age of sixty-two.

### **Are you listening to God's lessons?**

#### **A drunken fool insults God.**

Belshazzar is the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar and a coregent with his father, who is off leading the army. Here he celebrates with a drunken orgy displaying his wealth and splendor with a thousand of his nobles. Life is grand, and they are focused on the power and wealth of the empire. Never mind that the Persians surround the city. The Babylonians feel their city is secure with 300-foot walls, food stockpiled for years, and an unending water supply. The enemy cannot touch them, or so they think. Yet the enemy will conquer them that very night.

He is a fool and shows how great a fool he is by doing something Nebuchadnezzar would never have done. He calls for the sacred vessels from the Jewish temple to be used for the feast. It is plain arrogance and is a way of celebrating that their gods are greater than the God of the Jews. Nebuchadnezzar had decreed that all were to respect the God of the Jews. Belshazzar has no respect for the true God or his greatest enemies. He is a fool who has not learned anything from the past. He will pay for it with his life this evening.

### **People ignorant of history will repeat its disasters.**

Edmund Burke once said, "Those who don't know history are destined to repeat it." We live that all the time. You fail to remove the leaves from the gutter, the gutters overflow, and you have water in the basement. What do you need to remember to do next fall? You don't balance your checkbook for a while and suddenly bounce a check. What will you do from now on so that you know the exact amount you have in the checkbook? You learn from your life lessons, and sometimes you learn from the lessons of others.

You hear about a friend who destroyed his family with an affair. You hear about a relative who ran off the road after a night of drinking. You register those experiences in your brain, and they teach you lessons even though you didn't experience the pain. Those who ignore the lessons will learn them firsthand. So it is with our faith as well. We can learn the lessons from our past or the past of others. If we can put those faith lessons into practice, we can have tremendous blessings. If we ignore lessons from the Bible and others, we will often face the punishment that comes to fools.

### **The king who forgot the lesson**

**The lesson of Nebuchadnezzar v. 20** *But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory.*

It was a lesson that everyone had heard about. You can't keep quiet the news of a king stripped of his power for seven years and living like a wild animal. Belshazzar was probably old enough to remember seeing his grandfather live that way. He was there when Nebuchadnezzar praised God for recovery. The lesson was clear. The Almighty God ruled over all and did not take people claiming to be God lightly. Only when Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged the true God did the Lord give back the king's life and throne. It was a powerful lesson for all the people of Babylon.

We see the lessons all the time. We see them in scripture when David commits adultery and thinks that he can hide it only to be punished by God. We see it in Jonah, whom God refuses to let walk away from a ministry that He has given Jonah. We see the lessons around us. We know people who have gotten drunk or committed adultery and paid the price. We see the cost of a politician's lie or even the foolishness of buying a car or TV when someone doesn't have the money. Their lives pay the price, and we can see the lesson.

**The grandson who forgot and insulted God v.22:** *"But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this.*

Somehow, Belshazzar forgot the lessons. Yes, it was probably now 20 years later, but that is no excuse for what he did. With his enemy at the city's gate, he holds a drunken party for 1000 of his nobles. He pretended to be an invincible god because of his armies and city walls. He then ordered that God's vessels from the Jerusalem temple be brought so they could use them to toast the gods of Babylon and the gods of having a good time. The Almighty God who had brought his grandfather to his knees was ridiculed as if He was nothing.

People forget lessons, too. I have had a person committing adultery tell me that her children would be fine. We have known people to get drunk and get a ticket only to get drunk and wonder why they received a ticket or crashed their car. Forget the lesson, and you pay the price. Forget the lessons of the Bible, and you will pay a price as well, just as Belshazzar will. God will not be mocked. You can't forget about God



by not coming to worship or doing something you know is wrong, and then pray that God will get you out of a jam. Forget God and pay the price.

**The penalty paid for ignorance v. 26** *This is what these words mean: Mene: God has numbered the days of your reign and brought it to an end.*

What a price it was. A hand immediately writes a message on the wall in Aramaic. The revelry stops, and the king's face turns pale. He was scared and stopped the party until someone could tell him what it all meant. Finally, the king's mother remembers how Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar his dreams. Daniel is tough on the king, for he has been a fool. The meaning is simple. God has weighed the king in the balance and found him wanting. He will lose the kingdom that very night. There is no second chance. The warning was out there, and he ignored it. He will pay the price for foolishness.

There are often no second chances when we ignore God's warnings. Someone can't be bothered with church and wonders why his prayers are never answered. Someone thinks God is foolish and then lives his life as one mistake after another. People cry that God should save them. God has given warnings and even second chances, but at some point, the time is up. Ignore God, and you can't expect God to save you from your foolishness somehow miraculously. If you don't pay attention to the lessons, you will pay the price.

### **The best way to learn how to live. God has sent you lessons galore.**

The great thing for every one of us is that God is sending us lessons galore. The Bible is filled with stories about the lives of God's people. It gives us models of success that we can follow and have lives that are blessed and that really work. It gives us the times when people were foolish so we can learn from their mistakes. We can see lessons from Abraham, who put God first, and it made his name great. We see Nehemiah faithfully taking on a challenge. We also see David commit adultery and can track the effect on his life. We can see Peter deny his Lord and see how it affected him.

We can watch the lessons of the lives of friends and relatives. We can see what happens when people get consumed by their work, stray from fidelity in marriage, or get caught in debt and financial problems. Pay attention; you will see lessons galore in the people around you. The Holy Spirit can use any of these to teach us lessons about how to live. You just have to be open to the lessons. You have to read the stories of the Bible and learn their lessons. The Bible often even spells out the lesson for you. You have to pay attention to the world. Learn painlessly from their mistakes.

### **The joy of learning without the pain**

A lot of people bring a boatload of pain to themselves because they ignore God. They will try to excuse themselves by saying that they didn't know. Sometimes, that is true, but often, all they had to do was look around them and learn from the Bible or other people. Our God wants us to succeed in life. He wants us to live lives filled with happiness and joy. Those who read the lessons from scripture and apply those in life will find that life does improve. God gives us the stories in the scripture to have better lives.

Read the Bible stories and learn their lessons. Why should you have to learn everything the hard way? See the effect of adultery on David. Watch what denial does to Peter. See how a lie almost destroys Abraham's future. Learn from them and avoid the pain. The toughest hit will be those who destroy their lives and then remember what God was trying to tell them. "If only I had listened!" will be their cry. **Life is better when you learn from other's mistakes.** You let them have the pain while you have the gain. Through it all, God smiles as His people succeed.

## 6. Living with an advantage

### Daniel 6: 1-24

**Big idea: Love God so much that you can't live without Him.**

**Daniel 6:1-24** 1 It pleased Darius to appoint 120 satraps to rule throughout the kingdom, 2 with three administrators over them, one of whom was Daniel. The satraps were made accountable to them so that the king might not suffer loss. 3 Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. 4 At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent. 5 Finally these men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God." 6 So the administrators and the satraps went as a group to the king and said: "O King Darius, live forever! 7 The royal administrators, prefects, satraps, advisers and governors have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den. 8 Now, O king, issue the decree and put it in writing so that it cannot be altered--in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." 9 So King Darius put the decree in writing. 10 Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. 11 Then these men went as a group and found Daniel praying and asking God for help. 12 So they went to the king and spoke to him about his royal decree: "Did you not publish a decree that during the next thirty days anyone who prays to any god or man except to you, O king, would be thrown into the lions' den?" The king answered, "The decree stands--in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians, which cannot be repealed." 13 Then they said to the king, "Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day." 14 When the king heard this, he was greatly distressed; he was determined to rescue Daniel and made every effort until sundown to save him. 15 Then the men went as a group to the king and said to him, "Remember, O king, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed." 16 So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. The king said to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, rescue you!" 17 A stone was brought and placed over the mouth of the den, and the king sealed it with his own signet ring and with the rings of his nobles, so that Daniel's situation might not be changed. 18 Then the king returned to his palace and spent the night without eating and without any entertainment being brought to him. And he could not sleep. 19 At the first light of dawn, the king got up and hurried to the lions' den. 20 When he came near the den, he called to Daniel in an anguished voice, "Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?" 21 Daniel answered, "O king, live forever! 22 My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king." 23 The king was overjoyed and gave orders to lift Daniel out of the den. And when Daniel was lifted from the den, no wound was found on him, because he had trusted in his God. 24 At the king's command, the men who had falsely accused Daniel were brought in and thrown into the lions' den, along with their wives and children. And before they reached the floor of the den, the lions overpowered them and crushed all their bones.

### The Christian Advantage

Christians have always had a significant advantage in life. They have a God who loves them so much that He sent His son to die on the cross for them. They have a God who builds a Christian community around us called the church so that we have friends and companions on life's journey. They have a course to follow that is mapped out in scripture. They know from the lives of the saints what will work in life and what doesn't. They have a clear and unchanging set of values that create a character others admire or are jealous of.

They have a future built on the resurrection and a belief that God will always be with them to guide them and to help them. They are not just hoping that the future will be better. They know that God has given them heaven and helps them here on earth. With all that going for us, you wonder why anyone

would leave that behind. Yet, we all know people who were Christian at one time, and the world had taken them from the Lord. Daniel is one of my Bible models. **He loved God so much that he couldn't live without Him.**

### **The world presses to take it away.**

Yet the world seems destined to try to take us from Jesus. They will keep us busy by promising us everything that is supposed to improve life. We are to fill our lives with their agenda and tasks, so we don't have time for God. All it does is leave people exhausted and confused. The world will try to make us adopt its values. It tells us that character is unimportant and that we need to put ourselves first. It leaves people broken. They are destroyed by sins like adultery and jealousy that ruin marriages and attitudes. They are destroyed by selfishness that makes us poison.

The world wants us to see its trinkets as the key to our future. Buy this house or this car. Have it now with five easy payments. Hope is not defined as coming from the blessings of Jesus but in having things. People end up busted and working long hours to afford the shiny life. Pushed out of the way is God as the world enslaves us with its agenda, its values, and its possessions. People become so engrossed in the things of the world that they give up the advantage that they have in God. Today's story is from one who saw what he had in God and would not give it up.

### **Daniel loves his God.**

**God builds a reputation v. 4** *At this, the administrators and the satraps tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs, but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.*

Daniel was an old man in his eighties by this point and was brought out of semi-retirement by the new government, looking for some honest men. His life was an open book, for he had ruled in Babylon and now Persia for over 60 years. Yet, no one could find anything wrong with him. God had molded and shaped Daniel for decades. His life of prayer and trust in the Lord had opened him so that he was honest, kind, and trustworthy. His character and Godly values had brought him to the top in two different kingdoms. All around him knew that his God had made him different.

He is the model for every Christian. Imagine being in your eighties, and no one can find a time you lied or were lazy in any way. Think of how nice it would be to let the Lord mold you so that you have such character and values. Your children and friends would admire you. You would impact people around you with kindness and honesty so that they trust you and want you to be part of their lives and projects. Everyone would know that your God makes you different, and you would never want that God to leave you. How could you live without His love and guidance?

**Jealous men look bad in the light of God v. 7b** *the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den.*

The light of Daniel's life was so great that the evil men around him wanted him gone. If honest Daniel was appointed their boss, how could they steal or make deals under the table? He would expect them to live with the kindness and honesty that he had. So, they came up with a plan. They appealed to the king's vanity and encouraged him to make a law that everyone would bow down to the king as a god for a month. They knew Daniel loved his God too much to do so, and they would have him.

Sometimes, I think the world is out to get honest people. When a Christian lives their faith, it makes others look bad. Occasionally, it seems that we get flack for being hardworking or kind. People will discourage us from doing the right thing so that we become just like them. The world wants to pull us down so that we have its values. The world wants to attract us with its glitter and moment of fame. It wants to pull us from God so that we become just as broken as they are. A strong Christian makes the world look bad and makes people uncomfortable.

**Godly men love God more than life v.10** *Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day, he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.*

The trap was set for Daniel, yet he didn't change anything. He wanted that time with the Lord more than anything in life. I picture him praying before the Lord and laying the edict out for the Lord, asking God to deal with this problem. He realized that people might see him pray, but that was OK. How could he give up one who had loved him so much? How could he give up a God who had raised him from a captive teen to a leader who could interpret dreams and lead men? God had made him what he was, and he loved God for it and knew that he was nothing without God.

My favorite time of the day is my time of bible study and prayer. Something is calming about giving God my concerns and celebrating my joys with Him. There is something special about spending time and letting him teach me the stories of the Bible. I have met others who have said the same thing. They keep life simple so that they have time for God. They try to live out God's character and values in life. They seem to be salmon swimming against the current, but it doesn't matter. God has made them what they are; they love him for it.

### **Pulled down or lifted up?**

**Why give up a God of love? v. 13** *"Daniel, who is one of the exiles from Judah, pays no attention to you, O king, or to the decree you put in writing. He still prays three times a day."*

For years, Daniel had prayed with God three times a day. He had watched God do miracles and humble kings. Daniel had felt the love and protection of God as kingdoms came and went around him. Why should he give up the best thing he has to worship a king who will not last? Our God has shown His love for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. He sent His son to die for our sins and our future. Daniel has given us a guide in the Bible that shows us what works in life and what will not work. He gives us time to pray and learn from Him whenever we want.

All of this is a free gift for us from our God. It is a gift that we can enjoy all our life if we are willing. It has changed people and built strong families and lives filled with blessings. God's people have real hope and lives that can be different if they live with Him. Why give God up for the things of this world? Why give God up for things that will not last? Why give God up for values that change depending on who is in charge or what the media thinks? God has loved us and always will. Why should we give Him up for things that don't care about us?

**Give God the glory so others might enjoy the blessings v. 22** *My God sent his angel, and he shut the mouths of the lions. They have not hurt me, because I was found innocent in his sight. Nor have I ever done any wrong before you, O king."*

Daniel trusted the Lord, and the Lord delivered him. God sent an angel to stay with Daniel and comfort him through the ordeal. Those who wanted Daniel dead were soon gone instead. Daniel did not depart from God, and God did not leave Daniel. He is quick to give glory to the God he loves. He wants everyone to know the love of his God. Once again, a pagan king decrees that our God is the Almighty and living God. Because Daniel did not abandon God, everyone would see that God alone is worthy of our lives.

Our devotion to the Lord can change our world. The choices we make change our children and our families. Devotions each night and worship each week, no matter what happens, are noticed by our family and friends. Character and values shape others as they desire to become Godly, too. Our world can pull us away from God, or we can pull them toward Him by our words and actions. We can make the world a better place by living out our faith and letting everyone see our God's glory and love.

## **Praying when life hurts**

Life can be difficult, but believers know where to turn. While most of the world is on its own as they face challenges, God's people can turn to the Lord for help. The five psalms are from the hearts of God's people turning to their Lord for help when life was challenging. In the most personal section of the Bible, you can feel the pain of the psalmist and his hope in the Lord. power of forgiveness. Most psalms are prayers to guide God's people, sharing their cries of distress and celebrating God's goodness and power. Let them guide your experience with God through your darkest hours as God leads you to depend on Him for help. The struggles of the psalmists have much in common with your troubles and will lead you to see what the Lord can do and how to call out to the Lord for help.

### **1. Plea for vindication**

#### **Psalm 26**

**Big idea: Rescue me from trouble and from becoming a sinful life.**

#### **Psalm 26:1-12**

Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD without wavering. 2 Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; 3 for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth. 4 I do not sit with deceitful men, nor do I consort with hypocrites; 5 I abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked. 6 I wash my hands in innocence, and go about your altar, O LORD, 7 proclaiming aloud your praise and telling of all your wonderful deeds. 8 I love the house where you live, O LORD, the place where your glory dwells. 9 Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with bloodthirsty men, 10 in whose hands are wicked schemes, whose right hands are full of bribes. 11 But I lead a blameless life; redeem me and be merciful to me. 12 My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD.

#### **Life was perfect for David, wasn't it?**

It is easy to picture David living in a day when the whole kingdom is godly, and every person is following the lead of their king in worshipping the Lord at the Tabernacle. This Psalm shows the dark side of David's kingdom. He describes deceitful men who are hypocrites. This Psalm may describe the era when his son Absalom tried to steal the throne from him, or it may have been a common occurrence in ancient Israel. A godly king doesn't always mean having godly people. People brought their offerings to God, but not their hearts. The nation was filled with wicked men.

It is easy to wish for a perfect world. It will never happen. The lure of sin is too strong for many. In our day, we must deal with greed and lust for power. People leading our nation will continue to fall as their dark secrets are exposed. Like David, we need help with a world that deceives us. David, however, asks for more from God. He doesn't just want evil exposed and the faithful protected. King David wants the Lord to help the faithful and not succumb to evil. He wants the people to be so strong in their faith that they can't be shaken. As we pray for vindication, pray for God to keep you from becoming evil as well.

**A. Vindicate me v.1** *Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have led a blameless life; I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.*

The first thing that David wanted in this Psalm was vindication. It would seem that people were attacking David and spreading lies about him. In the days of Absalom, rumors were spread about David that he was too old to govern and too weak a man. His faults were played up, and his accomplishments were forgotten. David cries out for the Lord to defend him. He may be king, but evil around him works in every kingdom's back alley. Only God can bring the truth to light and bring justice to those who lie for their gain. David throws himself on God's mercy and trusts a just God.

Our first thought in prayer is often for the Lord to save us. We have had our reputation destroyed, and we have someone who seems intent on making our lives difficult. We ask the Lord to rescue us from this

problem, which has begun to overwhelm us and make every moment difficult for us. We realize that we can't do anything but that God has all power. He is a God of justice and fairness and does not tolerate evil for long. When we are hurting, we appeal to the Lord for help, knowing He cares for His people and feels their hurts. Yet, that is not all we should pray for.

**B. Test and purify me v. 2** *Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind;*

David asked the Lord to purify him as you might purify metal and remove the impurities and dross. He asked the Lord to check him out and ensure he was not at fault. David knows that sometimes you think you have done everything right but have messed up. He has heard everyone else mention his flaws. He wants a just judge who will honestly look at his life and show him what is wrong. He wants God to come and sift him so that if he has sinned, he will know it. He wants God to help him see his faults and teach him so that he lives with even greater character.

Let's face it. Often, when we have trouble with someone, we are at least partially to blame. Our adversary may have started it, but we said something or did something in retaliation. We may have said something that was poorly taken. We may have flaws or sins that they rightly point out. Like David, we should ask the Lord to use this time of pain to help us grow in faith and character. The fire is hot for us; this is the time to grow stronger and toss our sinful habits away. Let's not just ask God to make life easier. Let us ask that God use this pain to make us better and purer.

**C. I want your love ever before me v.3** *for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth.*

David knows the power of evil to take us out of God's love. The word here is lovingkindness—that same “*chesed*” lovingkindness that is the covenant love of God. David knows the joy of that love, for it is the love that made him king and has made David great. He doesn't want to live outside that love. He wants God to examine him because he knows the importance of a right mind and life. Your actions follow your heart. David wants to continue to love the Lord the way that the Lord has faithfully loved him.

Our prayers should also ask not just for evil to be gone but for God's love to guide our thoughts and actions. We want to live in that love, not just put it on the shelf. We want to become people of love as the Lord lives in us and guides what we think and do. Prayer should be based on God's ongoing love for His people. We want God to be more than a problem solver in our lives; instead, we want God to be a constant friend and mentor who lets us live and thrive in His love as we walk with Him day by day.

**D. Keep me from joining them v.9** *Do not take away my soul along with sinners, my life with bloodthirsty men,*

Now, we come to David's real fear. He is afraid that with evil all around him, he might become like one of them. He knew that the wicked would eventually perish. They had put themselves outside of God's love and mercy. He also knew how easy it was to succumb to revenge and retaliation. For this reason, he did not associate with them and spent so much time in the Tabernacle with God. He wanted the Lord's godliness to rub off on him, not the wickedness of those persecuting him. Lord, help me keep my faith and character, was his plea.

When we find people persecuting us, this should also be our ultimate prayer. It is so easy to want to hurt those who hurt you. It is easy to want to see them suffer, and so you plot, sue, or use any influence that you have to stop them in their tracks. Suddenly, you have become just like them. We pray for God to deal with those who persecute us because it is dangerous for us to do so ourselves. We pray that God brings justice and keeps us close to Him so that we are not evil like the world and deserving of their punishment.

**What should we really want?**

**Prayer is more than making life easy v. 12** *My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD.*

Prayer is about being Godly in an ungodly world. It is not just about having an easy life. Lord, deal with the ungodly is a great prayer. Helping me to be a godly influence in my corner of the world is even better. We want the Lord to bring a little heaven on earth. We want to have confidence in the Lord, believing He will deal with the evil we bring Him in our prayers as He makes us firmer in our character and values. We stand on the level ground of integrity, living in His covenant love for all our days.

We will shout out to the world the greatness of our God so that others will see what He does for His people and that more and more people in our world trust God and let him deal with evil instead of making things worse by heaping evil on evil. David tells us all, "Laugh at me if you want and try to bring me down if you wish, but I will stand my ground and believe in the Lord. I will not forsake His ways, but will continue to believe that God will defend me and make me stronger each day."

**Let me be more like you v. 11,** *But I lead a blameless life; redeem me and be merciful to me.*

Evil can't win in the long term. They seem to win battles, but they lose the war. The way to be victorious in life is not to be like them. David knows that character and Godly integrity are the way to overcome the evil in the world. We want them to become like us instead of giving in to evil. We pray that the Lord might take care of us in the short term, tempering the harm that evil can do. More than that, we want God to help us be strong so that we lure others from the dark side and make more of the people around us to be good and loving like God.

Shout from the rooftops like David did how great your God is. Let people fear His justice when they do evil and seek His mercy and the opportunity to be his people. When His good overcomes evil, it is a beautiful world with strong families and nations where people care for one another. Ultimately, our prayer is not just to help me when I feel in pain. The prayer is to let me be more like you so that when you punish evil, you don't punish me. Let me be more like you so that I am strong and stand in the level place of your mercy and your character. Amen.

## 2. Plea for Strength

### Psalm 39

**Big idea: Praying in pain can be a life-changer.**

#### Psalm 39:1-13

I said, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence." 2 But when I was silent and still, not even saying anything good, my anguish increased. 3 My heart grew hot within me, and as I meditated, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue: 4 "Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life. 5 You have made my days a mere handbreadth; the span of my years is as nothing before you. Each man's life is but a breath. Selah 6 Man is a mere phantom as he goes to and fro: He bustles about, but only in vain; he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it. 7 "But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you. 8 Save me from all my transgressions; do not make me the scorn of fools. 9 I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for you are the one who has done this. 10 Remove your scourge from me; I am overcome by the blow of your hand. 11 You rebuke and discipline men for their sin; you consume their wealth like a moth-- each man is but a breath. Selah 12 "Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were. 13 Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more."

#### **Demands and anger often follow illness.**

We often get angry with God, with ourselves, and with others when we get severely sick. We make demands of God and the people around us because this shouldn't happen to us. We ask people around us to pray for our relief and our cure. We want to be better now and for the illness to go away. I experienced all of those things when the doctor told me that I had diabetes. I have seen others experience those things and even abandon God or push God off to the side of life as if He is the reason that we are sick. While I know it is right to pray, I sometimes wonder about our attitude toward prayer.

Ever since the fall of Adam and Eve, all men and women get sick, and everyone will someday die. Sometimes, we get angry with God for something that has become commonplace in life. We act as if our illness is not normal, but how long is life, and what can we expect in this life? David's prayer in this psalm is better, and if we follow his prayer, we can have joy even in our suffering and learn from our pain. We will learn a right attitude toward the Lord that will help us instead of just causing us more grief and worry.

**A. Complaining doesn't help v. 1.** *I said, "I will watch my ways and keep my tongue from sin; I will put a muzzle on my mouth as long as the wicked are in my presence."*

The first thing we learn from David is that complaining doesn't help. David resolved to keep his tongue silent. He was the king of Israel and didn't want the people to think God had failed just because David was sick. He didn't want others cursing God or making demands to the Lord. His silence was a time of meditation, a time to think and find answers. From the text, I have a feeling that all he got was more questions. He didn't want to curse the Lord, and he knew that others didn't have answers, but it made him hot and bothered inside.

Complaining doesn't seem to help me either. It gives me more things to be angry about, and the conversation starts to be all about me. It doesn't help that many are worse off than I am. It doesn't help to rile up others who become just as mad about my illness as I am. Complaining makes things worse. It makes people angry at God because they consider it unfair that they got ill, and soon, they are telling God what to do so that their life is better. Holding it in and keeping silent about our illness only makes it worse. There has to be something better.

**B. Praying brings answers v. 4** *"Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life."*



David's answer is prayer. He will not complain about his illness before others but pour out his fears and doubts before God in prayer. He knows that the world around him doesn't have answers but that God can teach him how to use the rest of his life for the Lord's and others' benefit. David died at the age of 70, so this psalm probably finds David in his sixties. Instead of lamenting that life is short, David asks the Lord to help him do what really matters. He complains that man is often a phantom, amassing wealth but accomplishing nothing. He wants to be different.

Praying changes our focus. It is not just about the number of our days; it is about their substance. If you knew you had only one year to live, what would you want to ensure you did? Prayer gives us wisdom even as we ask the Lord for help. Praying when you are struck with a disease that could end your life or when you are just laid up for two days with the flu can be instructive. Ask for a cure, but ask even more for fulfillment in your life. Use the time flat on your back to let the Lord teach you and help you see how to fill your days with things that will make a difference.

### **C. Surrender brings healing v.7.** *"But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you.*

Here is the central verse in the psalm and the core of our prayers. If life is so short—just 70 or 80 years—how should I live, Lord, so that I and others get the most benefit from my days? David surrenders his life to the Lord. At this point, David has more wealth and power than all of us will ever see. His prayer turns to asking for healing so that he can serve as the Lord's servant. He wants to accomplish heavenly things that will make a difference in this world. His hope for healing and for a positive future is in Christ. His last days would be spent getting materials so Solomon could build the temple.

Lying flat on your back with the flu or from a heart attack gives you time to think. Will you chaff at the illness with a desire to get back to your life, or will you look at life from God's perspective and find what He wants to do with the rest of your life? Illness can bring rebirth and renewal. It can make you look at your life differently and see that each day and year you have is a gift from God that is not to be wasted. The concern for all of us is not how long we live but how we live and impact others for the Lord.

**D. God will lead us through our illness v.12** *"Hear my prayer, O LORD, listen to my cry for help; be not deaf to my weeping. For I dwell with you as an alien, a stranger, as all my fathers were.*

David's greatest desire was to dwell with the Lord. He saw himself as an alien in this world, just as men like Abraham and Isaac did. He traveled through life with its joys and sorrows. If the Lord was at his side, the joys would be greater, and the sorrows would have less impact. David knew that God had overcome the world. If that were to be David's path, he could overcome the illness. God could make the days and years David had left productive and filled with joy for him and others. Healing was good, but God's direction and purpose would be even better.

In times of illness, our request should not be a demand for healing so we can return to our ways and our lives. It should be a request for healing so that we can continue or find God's purpose and use the rest of our days to the best of our ability. Those who walk with the Lord will find that they will never be alone. They will find that the simple things that they do in God's name will have a powerful effect on the people they love and the people they meet in life. Lord, lead me through this illness so that I can serve you better should be our plea.

### **Praying beyond our illness**

#### **The lessons of pain**

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis wrote that "**God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.**" Pain is often His megaphone to arouse a deaf world and busy people. Flat on our backs, we often have no choice but to listen. We resent such times of illness, but these can be times when we begin to see life as God sees it. We begin to see things from his perspective rather than seeing life all wrapped up in me. Such times open our minds and hearts to new possibilities and can be a touchstone in life.

I will go back to that earlier question. What would you do if you knew you had only one year to live? Pain and illness can help us find focus and goals. It can help us push aside all the things that fill our lives with busyness and focus on the things that will bring value to us and each other. We want things to go well for us and ask God to make things easy. God wants us to have a life of purpose and value. He wants us to accomplish the things that will make us feel good about life and bring people closer to Him so they can have His salvation and help.

**Find joy in each day for time is short v. 13** *Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more."*

David wants healing so that He can rejoice in the days he has left, for he knows that time is short. His closing prayer is that God would give him joy and purpose in whatever time he still has. David has experienced what God can do when you surrender your life to Him. He wants even more of that. I relate to David, for we all live with a biological clock. It may be that you are getting older like me, or it may be that a car crash will take your life early. The way to have a fulfilled life is not just to get over illness but to surrender whatever life you have to the Lord.

Find joy each day as you do the things that are important to you and pleasing to the Lord. Find ways to impact the lives of those you love and of the people God brings into your life. Let the Lord lead you as you yield your life to his will. Illness is not a time of complaining but a time of praying and getting a new attitude. There will be times on our back, but that helps us look up to heaven and find out what God's will is for our life and future. Being sick can be the first step to joy when you turn it all over to the Lord.

### 3. Plea for forgiveness

#### Psalm 51

**Big idea: Repentance is more than saying you are sorry**

#### Psalm 51:1-19

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. 4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. 5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. 6 Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. 7 Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. 10 Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. 13 Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. 14 Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. 15 O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. 18 In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. 19 Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

#### **Why "sorry" isn't enough.**

The senator said he was sorry at the podium. He was sorry for the pain he had caused his wife and the trouble he had caused his fellow senators and the public. As he stepped from the podium and returned to his office, he hoped it had been enough. He wanted this whole business to be over. Feeling sorry for your sins is just the beginning. Even if the sorrow is genuine and not half-hearted or just words said to make others feel good, there is more to forgiveness than a few words. There is the promise that it will never happen again and the lasting guilt we may feel for our sins.

All that and more hit David. God had chosen him to lead the people of Israel. God had given him every advantage as he had replaced Saul as the king. Now, David had misused his power and authority. He had given into the sin of lust and had committed adultery and murder. David knew how far he had fallen. This psalm is a classic plea for forgiveness. David not only asks for his sin to be forgiven but also asks for his life to be changed. As we study this psalm, notice what David asks for. He wants God to clean up this mess in a way no human can ever do.

#### **A. Blot out my sin v.2** *Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

His secret was out. David had tried to keep his adultery and the murder of Uriah a secret, but it was apparent that many people knew what he had done. More important, God knew what he had done. David could ignore his sin no longer. No payment could be made to forgive the murder. The punishment was death, and so David threw himself on the mercy of God. There were no excuses, just a plea for mercy from God. David feared how the sin would affect his life and his kingdom. Only God could forgive and take the sin away.

When we sin, God always knows. We may think that we have kept it quiet, that it really isn't that bad, that we can fix it and make things better. The truth is that only the cross of Christ can take away our sins. Sin had to be paid for, and Jesus did so on the cross. When we find ourselves in sin, we first need to throw ourselves on God's mercy with no excuses and no blame on others. Confess your sin so that the Lord can

forgive you and help you with whatever consequences will come because of your sin. Wash me and cleanse me should be your plea.

**B. Create a clean heart v. 10** *Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*

David knew that it could happen again. He was king with several wives and even more concubines, just like every other Near Eastern king of his era. David needed a pure heart so this sin wouldn't happen again. He needed the Lord to strengthen his faith so that he would obey the Lord. Only God could keep him steadfast and stable so that he wouldn't falter in the future. Only God could give him a sense of right and wrong that was so much a part of his fiber that he wouldn't cross that line again. Thus, David pleads for a new him who would obey the Lord and follow God all his days.

It is what is often missing in people's prayers. They want forgiveness but don't ask for help so they don't fall into this sin again. They end up telling lies after lies or finding themselves drunk week after week. We ask the Lord to take care of the past but don't ask for help for the future. Like David, we need to ask that the Lord remake us and help us have a stronger character and the strength to resist temptation the next time it comes into our lives. We can't do it, but the Lord will gladly help us with Bible study and a new heart.

**C. Keep me close v. 11** *Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.*

The Lord gave David the gift of the Holy Spirit at his anointing and could take it away, as He had done with Saul. David enjoyed God's presence and the help that the Lord gave him on a daily basis. David knew that his sin had driven a wedge between him and God. He did not want to lose their closeness. He had grown to need that closeness and felt distant for the year between his sin and the rebuke of God's prophet. In your mercy, Lord, do not cast me away. Let me continue to serve you.

When we have sinned, we often feel distant from God. Our mind knows from scripture that the Lord will forgive and restore us. Our heart is so wracked with guilt that we wonder if that is true. We wonder if God can ever love a sinner like us. The good news is that He can and does. Having asked for forgiveness for the past and help to be more like God in the future, we need to ask that the Lord might hold us close so that restoration can happen. Ask the Lord that you might feel His loving presence again. Ask the Lord that the guilts and the doubts might disappear. Hold me close, Lord.

**D. Restore the joy v.12** *Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.*

The man who had marched into the valley against Goliath and danced in the streets felt empty. This terrible sin had robbed his faith and joy. Gone was the spark that had driven him. Gone was the joy that was his every morning as he thought of the Lord and worshipped in the temple. His sin weighed heavy on him and kept him from the joy of intimacy with God. His sin had affected his eyes, mind, bones, and spirit. It was as if someone had taken all the life from him, and he was just going through the motions.

Sometimes, it is our sins that have just made life blah. We are pushing ourselves further and further from God by our actions. Sadly, people often just live with that feeling or get upset with God. That emotion is to help us see that something is wrong as much as a pain our side does. Like David, we ask the Lord to fill the emptiness. He is the source of joy in our lives; when He is gone or distant, we will feel a hole in our lives. Invite God into a greater share of your life and let the vacuum be filled with his joy instead of sadness. Let Him put that bounce back into your steps with His love.

**Repentance is more than "I am sorry."**

**I will acknowledge that God is right v. 4** *Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.*

Two things that David did well will help us with our prayers. The first is that he admitted that God was right. He did not justify what he had done, saying that kings were allowed to have any woman. He did not make excuses or blame Bathsheba for bathing on her roof. He fessed up when the prophet showed him his sin. He knew that God was right in His law. He knew that he had transgressed and deserved punishment. He accepted the consequences and threw himself on God's mercy. God alone is always right, and David wanted to follow his perfect God.

When we violate God's law, we must admit that we did wrong. We can't rewrite the Bible or excuse ourselves because this era is different. We need to read the scriptures and accept that whatever God says in His word is correct. It is an admission of what it means that He is God. It is an admission of God's righteousness and standards. God is just. His ways are not arbitrary or up for interpretation. We must follow Him and believe that whatever He says is right and best for us.

**I come with a broken spirit v. 17.** *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

The second thing David did right was to trust in God's mercy. Sin makes us broken men and women, and we can not fix ourselves. It is only God who can forgive and restore. Realizing that sin has broken us and trusting in God's love is our only hope. We need to come to the Lord, having cast aside all our pride. We must yield ourselves to God. If things are not right between you and the Lord, the problem is you, not God. We must look to the Lord to make it right.

Forgiving the sin is just the first part. Just as important is to rebuild us for the future. That will happen as we draw close to the Lord and submit ourselves to Him. We come broken by sin before the Lord and walk away healed and stronger than before. Such brokenness is our source of hope. God will always receive the broken, and he will always forgive those who are genuinely repentant. When we sin, come to the Lord for the forgiveness of the cross and the restoration of your broken hearts.

#### 4. Plea for protection

##### Psalm 57

**Big idea: In danger, it is about God and not about us**

##### **Psalm 57:1-11**

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed. 2 I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills [his purpose] for me. 3 He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me; Selah God sends his love and his faithfulness. 4 I am in the midst of lions; I lie among ravenous beasts-- men whose teeth are spears and arrows, whose tongues are sharp swords. 5 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth. 6 They spread a net for my feet-- I was bowed down in distress. They dug a pit in my path-- but they have fallen into it themselves. Selah 7 My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music. 8 Awake, my soul! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn. 9 I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples. 10 For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. 11 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.

##### **Looking up to heaven from a dark cave**

He killed Goliath and was promoted to general in the Israeli army. Now, he was stuck in this desert cave, hiding from Saul for dear life. Like a patient in the hospital flat on their back, David had nowhere to look but up. Only months before, he had said to Jonathan, "What have I done? What is my crime?" (1 Sam. 20:1). Suddenly, Samuel's promises from God to David at his anointing seemed empty. His friends must have thought God had abandoned him, but David turned to heaven with trust.

If anything distinguishes David's prayers from mine when I desire God's protection and deliverance, it is in the area of trust and purpose. I hope that God will save me. David believed that God would prevail. I think of myself with fear, while David thinks of God with great trust. Psalm 57 is another psalm that teaches us much about Godly prayer. David is in a cave near the Dead Sea, with Saul pursuing him and ready to destroy him. David knows things look bad, but God will triumph, and he will triumph with God. We, too, need to ask for help with such faith.

##### **Deliverance is all about God**

**A. I long for your mercy v. 1** *Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.*

David did not plead for help based on his own worth. He pleaded for help based on God's character and mercy. David knew that he was not worthy of the help he asked for. Who was he but a former shepherd facing the king of Israel and his army? Yet, his needs were great, and he knew that God could be depended on. He thus throws himself on the mercy of God and asks for God in His favor to spare his life and to defend him and his parents, who were with him. The basis of protection was the character of God and not that of David.

So often, people pray as if God owes them. They pray as if they are important, and God must answer them. David directs us to pray based on God's mercy and character. We have a God who helps the poor and oppressed. Our God is the God who helps those who need justice. I know that often, when I need protection, I am not guiltless in the matter. I have caused some of my own problems. I would rather ask for mercy based on the fact that God is perfect because I know that I am not. I would rather ask for mercy because God will always help His children whom He loves.

##### **B. I trust your purpose v. 2** *I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills [his purpose] for me.*

God had a plan for David. God had anointed David and promised that David would be the king of Israel someday. That promise had no conditions, and there was no escape clause in that covenant. If David

died in the cave, God's word would be in vain. David thus appeals to God's purpose. He knows that the Lord has great plans and asks that in this dark time, the Lord do what is necessary for the plan to continue. David will not hunt Saul down or kill him when he comes to the cave. He will not take the future into his own hands but depends on God to save him.

God has a plan for each of us. When we find ourselves in danger, we need to surrender to God's plan. Our temptation is to try to fix it ourselves, to come up with our own plan, and ask God to make the plan work. God does not follow us; we need to follow Him. When in danger, we need to surrender to the Lord. We need to ask what He wants us to do, and we need not give in and seek to save ourselves in some sinful way. His plan may move slower than we desire (David would run from Saul for ten years), but it will always be the best for us.

**C. I will not be moved from you v.7** *My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and make music.*

He has asked for mercy; now he pledges confidence. He is alone, and things seem stacked against him, but he throws his fate to God. He will not waver between doubt and faith. He will not wonder if things are going to go well or not. He believes in God, and that will be enough. As you read the stories of David in the caves in 1 Samuel, you see the effect his belief has on the others. They believe because he believes. They trust God because David doesn't go back and forth but believes with all his heart that God will bring him through.

Oh, to have a faith like that. One could be confident and lead others to confidence in hard times. You would not be second-guessing yourself. You would not be doing things that make things worse for yourself and others. You trust God, and everything you do is based on that trust. Your heart and actions praise God because everyone sees that nothing can shake your confidence. Like David, you can take on great tasks and defeat great armies because you know that God is walking beside you. Such trust is built over years and cannot be shaken.

**D. Save me so I may share your deliverance v. 9** *I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations; I will sing of you among the peoples.*

David believed in God so much that he also wanted others to trust in the Lord. He wanted God to get him through this crisis and let David be king so that all nations might learn to depend on and trust in the Lord as their God. Deliver me, Lord, so that the nations take notice. For David, this was ultimately about God and not about him. This situation allowed God to show His power and love so the world would abandon its worthless gods and follow the one true God. David was spared at the cave in En Gedi, and all of Saul's army knew it was God's doing.

We want God to save us to lessen our pain. A better outcome is that it shows God's glory. Pray that the Lord would help you in such a way that the people around you know that it was God who did the miracle. Pray that this might be when someone comes to faith because of your crisis. That is a whole different prayer. It acknowledges that we can wait for healing until it will do the most good. We will wait until our healing changes a family member or a friend. Save me, Lord, so that I can sing to the nations and let them see what you have done. I want more than help.

### **Going from fear to faith**

**It is not about me; it is about God v. 11** *Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.*

First, protection in danger is not about what I can do but what God can do. My enemies may seem like beasts ready to devour me, but you are the big game hunter. I can't defend myself, but you, Lord, can overcome them all. As I hide in your shelter, I will be safe. Second, the future is not about my plan but your plan. I don't know where to go, but you do. I must trust your direction and follow you all my life.

Yes, there will be ups and downs. There will be times when I feel like I am making no progress. You have a plan and will do what it takes to get me there.

Third, this is about your glory and not my pain. People will oppose me all my life. You can swat them down, or you can bring them to faith. The army of Saul came to faith and became David's army, praising God for leading the nation. We will also want our enemy to come to faith and be part of our family. Powerful prayer turns the request for deliverance into a prayer for God's glory. The enemy who has been defeated can rise up and attack again. The enemy that has bowed before the Lord becomes a saint in the family like St. Paul. Turn my crisis into a time for witness so all may know you, Lord.

**Belief sheds burdens v. 3** *He sends from heaven and saves me, rebuking those who hotly pursue me; Selah God sends his love and his faithfulness.*

David could sleep at night. He was not caught in sleepless nights worrying about things he could not change. David prayed to the Lord, asking for God's mercy and trusting God's control of the situation. He then lived each day as if the end was certain because God's love was certain. It would have caused the tension among his family and the 400 men who gathered around him at the cave to melt away. He believed, and so they learned to believe. They learned to trust God as the Lord overcame problem after problem for David and his people.

Pray about your needs, for you will be surrounded with worries and doubts. Pray about God's glory and plan, and you will find that you can be calmer in the storm because you know that God will do something so that people will see that He is great and takes care of His people. You can almost feel the weight coming off your shoulders. You can live each day in confidence that the Lord is working whether you see Him or not. You remember how He has helped you, and you know that the future will be bright because God is in control.



## 5. Plea for the nation

### Psalm 80

**Big idea: Make us turn to your face so we might be great again.**

Psalm 80:1-19

Hear us, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock; you who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth <sup>2</sup> before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. <sup>3</sup> Restore us, O God; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved. <sup>4</sup> O LORD God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? <sup>5</sup> You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. <sup>6</sup> You have made us a source of contention to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. <sup>7</sup> Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved. <sup>8</sup> You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. <sup>9</sup> You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. <sup>10</sup> The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. <sup>11</sup> It sent out its boughs to the Sea, its shoots as far as the River. <sup>12</sup> Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes? <sup>13</sup> Boars from the forest ravage it and the creatures of the field feed on it. <sup>14</sup> Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, <sup>15</sup> the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself. <sup>16</sup> Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish. <sup>17</sup> Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself. <sup>18</sup> Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name. <sup>19</sup> Restore us, O LORD God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

#### God Bless our Native Land

Israel was in trouble. The people needed God to lead them, as He had done for them through the desert. His ark led the people through battles and a long journey, with each of the twelve tribes following in their God-given order. Now, the people were in disarray. Our nation is more divided than it has been since the Civil War. Angry voices shout that their way be done! Government servants are treated with loathing and are not allowed to dine in certain restaurants or speak in specific venues. Hate has become the temper of the nation.

We sing God bless our native land as we celebrate July 4. We remember troops who died for our freedoms. We will have fireworks and picnics to observe the way of life we share as Americans. Most importantly, we will pray for our nation. Pray that the Lord helps us to be strong. What does that mean? We can pray that things magically get better, but this psalm from a troubled time in Israel's history gives depth to our prayers. This year, let us pray for four things for our nation that only God can provide. Let us pray for the causes of our problems and not just the consequences. Let us ask God to bring the changes that we need.

**A prayer for our nation - A. Save us from ourselves v. 2. before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.**

Israel had strayed from its God. In the desert, they had followed the Lord. In the days of David, they had followed the Lord. Solomon had watered down the faith with multiple wives, and all their false temples and gods became part of the nation. The call here was for God to lead them as a shepherd. Like sheep having gone astray, they had forgotten their Lord. To save them, God would have to protect them from themselves. He would have to change their hearts, so they were again willing to follow their God as they had in the desert. They were on a path that was leading to destruction. Only God could save them.

Awaken your might, Lord, and save your people. You who dwell between the cherubim in heaven send down your spirit and create revival among your people. Let us see our ways' errors so that we might follow you again. We have forgotten your scriptures and developed our selfish ways. Like the Israelites, the people of our nation have strayed from God. Prosperity and safety will not be ours as long as the

country continues to trash the Bible and its values. We begin our prayer, asking that God get people into the word so that they can follow Him. He alone can lead us and save us.

**B. Break our hard hearts v.4** *O LORD God Almighty, how long will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?*

There are consequences when a nation does not follow God. Israel felt that God had turned against them. That may be true, but much of what they faced was merely the consequences of living outside God. God will not be mocked as we expect Him to answer selfish prayers when we don't love Him. God will bless alternate paths but will allow them to cause their pain and make the nation of Israel the laughingstock of the region. God must let the pain break His people's hearts as He did in the time of the Judges so that they would return to Him.

People's tears and pain will show that it is foolish to think that all gods or man's wisdom are equal to God. Sometimes, it is only when a nation is attacked by its enemies or when a financial or natural disaster is imminent that people look to heaven for help. The hearts of this nation have become stubborn and told God that they don't need Him. The second thing we pray for is that the Lord might break our hearts so that we see His wisdom and power, are open to His leadership, and follow Him instead of trying to get Him to support us.

**C. Revive our dying nation v.8** *You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.*

It was God who had taken the ragtag slaves of Egypt and built a great nation. He had taken them and transplanted them like vines in the ground of Palestine, where He fertilized them and let them grow to be secure in the days of David. As the people obeyed the Lord and honored Him, they were strong. Now, Israel's vine had become sickly. The nation that stretched from Egypt to Lebanon and from the Mediterranean to the border of the Euphrates had shrunk and became weak. Only God could restore the grandeur of His people, give them prosperity, and make them healthy again.

We think social programs, education, and scientific discovery will make the nation strong again. How will that change our drug problems and broken families in a country where every man does what he thinks is right for himself? We spend as if there is no end. We allow people to live for themselves. A revival of our nation will come only when we follow the Lord. He is the one who planted pilgrims and immigrants from around the world. He is the one who molded the democracy that we have and who can rebuild the nation. The third thing we pray for is for God to take control and teach us to depend on Him.

**D. We are molested by our enemies v. 13.** *Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?*

The nation is falling, and the enemies of Israel are pushing for more. Having decided to live outside God's protection and mercy, the city's walls have broken down. Perhaps this is the start of the Assyrians coming from the north or the loss of Moab and Edom on the east. When a nation lives without God, it lives without His wisdom and protection. Those who throw themselves on God's mercy will find that the Lord will return to them and will rescue them from their enemies just as He did in the days of the Judges. The enemy makes us turn to the Lord.

I thought that America would return to the Lord on September 11. We did for a short time, but we now believe we can protect ourselves and don't need God. As we live outside God's protection as a nation, what will be the next thing that comes our way? Like the people of the Old Testament, the bad things come to the good and the bad. The difference is that the righteous continue to seek and have God's protection so that He gets them through the challenges. The fourth thing we must pray for is God's protection during a crisis.

**The real solution**

**Dealing with the cause and not the symptoms v. 19 (KJV)** *Turn us again, O LORD God of hosts, cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved.*

Across the nation, there will be prayers today for the Lord to bless this nation and help us with the troubles that have come upon us. We will ask that God magically take away terrorism, the drug overdose problem, and a host of local concerns. What we need is prayers about the faith of the nation. The Psalmist calls on God to "turn us again (to yourself)" The real problem is not out there. It is that we have forgotten our God and do not put Him first. We must live in the light of His face and let His truth shine in our hearts as we turn from sin and self and follow God all the days of our lives.

We often want the nation saved in our image. The Psalmist knew that Israel and all the nations would only have prosperity and safety when her people humbled themselves and turned to the Lord for His forgiveness and the direction of their lives. We pray about the symptoms of sin, asking God to take away sin's consequences while we continue to live as we please. The Psalmist calls on us to ask God to cleanse us and renew a right spirit in us so that the natural consequences of faith prevail and we live in God's blessings.

### **Recall the days of King David.**

Asaph was a court musician during David's reign. He knew what blessings the nation had when it lived with the Lord at its center. David's reign was a time of great conquest, as countries surrounding it bowed before the Lord's king and nation. It was a time of wealth and ease, as God provided. Perhaps Asaph or a descendant of his who wrote this psalm was thinking of what the nation could be if people bowed down to God again. When the Lord was in charge, it was a golden era for the people of Israel. Now, he saw nothing but problems as the nation forgot its God.

Let us recall David's days as well. If we returned to the Lord, many of the world's problems would be smaller or wholly gone. His character and values lead people away from sinful habits into Godly ones that make us a blessing to ourselves and each other. Lord, we ask for a reformation across the country so that America might flourish again. It is something that only you can do. We can't restore ourselves, but we can throw ourselves into your mercy. Turn us to you so that we may see your face, love, and be saved. Amen.

## **Colossians: Christ is all you need**

The Colossian church was blending Jewish and Greek ideas about the deity of Christ in a way that dumbed down the truth about Jesus. Paul rejects any teaching that diminishes the uniqueness and power of Jesus. He calls on the church to reflect on the impact of Christ's character on their lives. This requires submission to the Lord because he is God and is the head of the church. Our lives must be centered on Jesus and not allow any substitutes or additions. Our lives must follow the Lord and be united with Jesus so that we may have His forgiveness and plan for our lives. Toss out the man-made religions that seek to blend into the faith. Keep your focus on Jesus so that you might live by His word alone.

### **1 Thanks, Jesus, but I want more!**

#### **Colossians 1:1-20**

#### **Big idea: Christ has given us much but offers us more.**

**Colossians 1:1-20** 1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, 2 To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse: Grace and peace to you from God our Father. 3 We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, 4 because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints-- 5 the faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you in heaven and that you have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth. 7 You learned it from Epaphras, our dear fellow servant, who is a faithful minister of Christ on our behalf, 8 and who also told us of your love in the Spirit. 9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. 10 And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, 11 being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. 15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

#### **Our spiritual life is where we should never settle for second best.**

There are many places in life where we settle for second best. We may want a new Mercedes, but settle for a Ford. We may want to have a big five-bedroom home but settle for a three-bedroom that is more in our price range. We settle for what we can afford. We often settle with people. We deal with the boss who is not so kind. We keep a friend that may have hurt us more than once. We even settle with ourselves when we don't like how we have put on weight or picked up a bad habit. People aren't perfect, are they?

Yet, should we settle when it comes to our faith? Should we settle for a faith that is not working well but isn't too much of a burden? Should we settle for a relationship with God in which we know we are going to heaven, but our faith doesn't help us much here on earth? Paul would say no. God would say no. As we saw with Abraham not long ago, the sky is the limit regarding our relationship with God. God wants our faith to be dynamic so that it impacts every aspect of our lives and makes them better. The truth is that *Christ has given us much but offers us more.*

#### **Thank you, Lord, for what I have**

**I thank you, Lord, for my faith v.4.** *we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints.*

Paul begins the book of Colossians with a prayer of thanks for the faith that the Lord has given the Colossian people. Philemon, whom Paul wrote the book of that name, was an elder and leader in this

church. From prison in Rome, Paul had heard of the faith of these people. Paul knew how precious such a faith was. Paul had been outside that faith before the Lord came to him on the Damascus Road. That God would give such a faith freely and the blessings that come because of faith was still a miracle to Paul. It was indeed something miraculous.

I thank the Lord for all of your faith. This church has a good reputation in the District as a church close to its Lord. People marvel at our literature program, our one-on-one involvement with kids at the elementary school, and our work at the local college. Like Paul, I know that it is all a gift from God. It is an easy gift to take for granted, especially if you have been a Christian all your life like I have. Yet, the very thought that the God of the universe would reach down to have a relationship with me and help me daily is more than I can grasp.

**Thank you, Lord, for the change in me so I can love others v.6** *All over the world, this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you.*

Paul also thanks the Lord for the great love he sees growing among the people in this church. Faith never exists in a vacuum. It shows itself in the way that we live and treat others. The Colossians was a congregation without the divisions of Corinth or the problems of Galatia. This was a church where God's love drew the people to their Lord and to each other. This church was where Paul could ask the unthinkable in the book of Philemon and expect that they would love a slave enough to take him back as a brother.

This church is also a place of love. You have a remarkable ability to shower visitors with love and make them feel at home. You, too, show the change that comes when Christ is in you. You love your Lord and are willing to show that to people in our community and our church. This ability, too, is a gift from God. People don't just love unselfishly by themselves. God is love, and those who know the Lord catch that love from him. They feel so loved by God that they can love others as he has loved them.

**O Lord, give me more.**

**Let me be controlled by the knowledge of your will for me v.9,** *asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*

Champions live wiser. They not only know what the Lord is saying, but it makes sense to them. Paul wanted the knowledge of God to come on the Colossians in such a way that such wisdom controlled how they lived. He wanted the wisdom of God to be at their disposal so that they would instinctively know how to live and act. As you know, when you are driving to put on the brake when a car runs a red light, Paul wants the wisdom of God to help you instinctively make the right decisions.

What a blessing that God is willing to give to his people. He will saturate them when they study his word so that the wisdom is not academic but can be used every day in their lives. They will have stronger marriages and be better workers because they instinctively do the right thing. They will be people who avoid many of the problems that others just don't see until it is too late, and they will take advantage of opportunities that the Lord gives that others will miss. God's wisdom will be written on their hearts so that they don't need a book to know what the right thing to do is.

**Let me walk in life so I can bear fruit v.10.** *order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work,*

Paul says that it will change the outcome of the Colossians' lives. They will live a life worthy of the Lord so that everyone around them will know that we walk with God and so that we do not bring any shame on him or ourselves. It will also give the Colossians a chance to bear fruit. They will be servants who will bless others as they serve them. They will be a blessing and change their world as they bring others into faith in the Lord, spreading the faith through a community like leaven.

When God puts his knowledge in our hearts, people can see the difference it makes in our lives and the lives of those around us. They can see the fruit of the spirit showing forth in how we relate to others and

are willing to serve them. They can see the very image of God in us as we reflect God's values in the things we do. Paul says that we are not just to talk about our love for God, but we show that love in the way that we live as we honor God every day and serve others because of the love of God in us.

**Let me have your strength of character v.11** *being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,*

Yet Paul wants even more for the Colossians. He wants them to have the character of God. He wants them to be changed not only on the outside, where people can sometimes fake it, but all the way into the core of their being—their character and their values. That is a big request. It was easier for David to slay Goliath by the power of God than to resist Bathsheba when lust took over his inside. It was easier for Elijah to call down fire from heaven on Mt. Carmel than to fight the depression that came afterward when Jezebel wanted to kill him.

The greatest miracles are not when God does something spectacular for the church or his people. The greatest miracles are when God changes people so that they have his character and can fight Satan's temptations as he tries to destroy us. The fight against the devil is hard. Only those who are strong can endure. Only those who will continue on the battlefield patiently serving while they have doubts and fears will be victorious. Paul wants God to change us so that we are strong as champions and that Satan can not bring us down from within.

**I can trust that Christ can do this in my life.**

**He is the image of God and creation's firstborn v. 15** *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

Paul writes all of this at the time that a group of false teachers was trying to replace the Colossians' devotion to Christ with a mild approval of Christ and a host of other ways to improve their lives. The false teachers didn't get rid of Jesus. They just made him one of several helpers. It sounds like today, doesn't it? Most don't toss Jesus out fully; they just say that you need other things as well. The government will help you. Our product will help you. This book or television show has the answers that you need. In the end, Christ gets lost in a maze of information.

Three things stand out about the firstborn: Jesus Christ, the creator and redeemer of the world. He is competent, dependable, and trustworthy. None of the other sources of help and information can say that. He is all that you need. New research constantly changes what is the best diet or the best way of raising your child. Not one part of God's message and wisdom has changed since the beginning of time. What was true for Old and New Testament people is true for you. He is all that you need.

**He is glorified by my success. v.16.** *all things were created by him and for him.*

So why can I ask for more? Shouldn't I be satisfied with my faith and life? It might not be perfect, but I have salvation, and even the smallest faith helps me live better than the majority of people who have no faith at all. Jesus would say no. Every parent understands how much they would gladly do to help their children be better today than yesterday. If it was in their power, what parent would turn down a child who wants to be wiser, live better, or have a stronger character? We would do all we could to help a child succeed.

So why does it surprise us that our Savior would want any less for us? He has given us faith and wants us to be able to apply that faith. We have love; he wants us to have character. Any child of God who asks for deeper spiritual gifts from God will get whatever God thinks will help us be better and stronger. He is motivated by his love for us and desires to give us everything. He is motivated by the fact that Christians of Character touch other people and draw them to the Lord as well. We should never be satisfied with what we have. Keep asking because *Christ has given us much but offers us more.*

## 2 Doing what it takes to build the church in Christ

Col. 1:24-2:5

**Big idea: building others should be our purpose regardless of the cost**

**Colossians 1:24-2:5** 24 Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. 25 I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness-- 26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. 27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 28 We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. 29 To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. 1 I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. 2 My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, 3 in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. 4 I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments. 5 For though I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit and delight to see how orderly you are and how firm your faith in Christ is.

### **A leader without a successor is a failure.**

A cause or organization without a successor will fail. Look how Al Qaeda struggled when Bin Laden was killed. The organization floundered. North Korea's leader has named his son to succeed him so that there is no power vacuum. In business, see how a very sick Steve Jobs has to get up before the people and promote this new product. When Walt Disney died, that company went into a tailspin that took years to turn around. Companies built around one man struggle when there is no successor.

We see it in the church, too. Watch what happens to a congregation trying to call a pastor when the head pastor retires after 30 years in one place. More and more large churches call the successor a couple of years before the head pastor retires to provide succession. Paul was always thinking of a successor. He left behind men like Timothy, Titus, and Luke. In this text, he talks about building people in Christ so that this church he has never met will have a successor. The theme today is **building others should be our purpose regardless of the cost**.

### **What Paul was willing to endure?**

**Paul would face suffering** 1:24 *Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you,*

Building others was Paul's purpose. In Second Corinthians 11, Paul lists a few things that have happened to him for the gospel. "**Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea.**" All of that was about halfway through his ministry. There would be more as he traveled, bringing the gospel to others. Who knows what he faced in the prison from which he wrote this gospel? Paul was in the prison he was going to at the end of Acts when he wrote this book.

Such afflictions will often slow us down from being willing to serve in the church or greater ways in the kingdom. Yet, we should expect no less. We are fighting a mighty enemy in Satan. He will attack you for your faith, or he will attack non-Christians and use them if he wishes. Those of us who have allied ourselves with Jesus Christ will find Satan causing us troubles just so that we can not make a difference in the lives of others. Most of us will not face prison or death, but we will face disappointments, struggles, and a busyness that will get in the way of serving. To serve the Lord, we will need to endure.

**Paul was willing to be a servant** 1:25. *I have become its servant by the commission God gave me.*

For all that suffering and sacrifice, Paul would have a place of honor and prestige. That is what we expect in business or politics. People say, "I have worked hard to get where I am in this company; give me a little respect." I am your congressman; don't I deserve a few perks now and then? Paul had just the opposite. In several letters, Paul talks about how he had to provide for his own food and living. Paul will speak of members of the church who show him no respect. He will make more considerable sacrifices for the people than they do for themselves.

Paul's love was not selective. He loved these people even though they didn't know him. His life should be an example for us. Servants in the church don't do it for prestige. Many times, a servant serves a person or family only to find that the family abandons them or even hurts them deeply. Paul endured it all because of his love for the Lord and his vision of building up people in Christ. He knew that the church would not succeed without the next set of leaders in each place. His purpose was to build them up in Christ, for nothing else would give them strength for their struggles in service.

**It was all for his purpose and people's progress.**

**It begins with salvation in Christ** 1:27. *To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

Paul's goal was to connect them with Christ. It wasn't about saving them from hell. It was about connecting people to Christ in this life and the next. There is a difference. Salvation is about bringing people close for God's glory and not for our comfort. Paul was not about comfort, so people would have just enough faith to avoid hell. He was about overcoming every obstacle so that people would want to be with God now and later. Salvation must be in Christ. The gospel must lead people to know and enjoy God more fully.

Our purpose in this church is not to save people from hell or make them comfortable. It is to help people understand the mysteries of God. We want them to know God so well that they can't picture their lives without him. Only life with God can make this world better. Only love for God will make heaven a joy. Can you imagine hating God and being forced to spend an eternity with him? Now, that would be hell. The Christian life is about our relationship with God, not getting to a place where life is easy in heaven.

**It continues with spiritual maturity** 1:28. *so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.*

Once people came to know God, Paul wanted them to mature so that they lived out their lives with God. He wanted them to grow by contact with God and live lives increasingly in tune with his values and plan for them. Faith was not to just be put on the shelf. The Stradivari Society of Chicago entrusts violins into the hands of talented musicians. The great violins are owned by patrons who realize that the instruments will lose their tone if not played regularly and so they know the instruments have more value if used.

The relationship God creates with us must also be played, or it will go flat. God wants to keep giving us gifts so that this salvation in him touches our lives, but he knows that we must use it, or it will go flat. We must live out our faith, letting it grow and the music of our lives soar for others to hear. We must learn how to play this relationship by studying the word. We must practice this relationship as we grow in our values and character. We must perform the music of our lives in service to others by caring for people and helping them as God has planned for us. Only then will the gift be mature.

**It results in intimate knowledge and love** 2:2 *My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love,*

Only when Christ was in them, and they were actively living out their faith, could the Colossians genuinely have an intimate knowledge and love for the Lord and each other. They would be vessels that contained the treasure of God in their very core. The Christ in them would be a precious possession that would guide their lives and help them so that they could not be deceived by the false prophets of their



day. They would love one another and be a force that could change their world and the future with Christ's power.

When a group of Christians has learned and practiced Christ's teachings, they can become a force of his power. Like Olympic champions, their lives will reflect Jesus for all to see. They will be a people who are filled with Christ, and his power and grace help them succeed. They will now be ready to train those who will succeed them so that the Christian church multiplies exponentially and can make the world different. They will mentor others just as Paul had mentored them. They will be ready to be people **building others regardless of the cost.**

### **God has a thin bench.**

Why was this so important to Paul? He knew firsthand that God has a thin bench. Most churches know that regardless of whether they are large or small, there are never enough people to do the ministry. It isn't like God has a dozen people who could do this job. Missionaries I have talked to have been willing to leave family, friends, and all the comforts of America simply because they feel that if they don't go, no one will reach this part of Africa or Asia. People reach into the slums of the inner city knowing few others will go.

The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few, said Jesus. Paul knew that the purpose was to build workers in a relationship with Jesus who was willing to serve regardless of the cost. It isn't about making people comfortable and getting them all a pass out of hell. It is about building others so that they can do whatever the Lord has in mind for their lives. Christ wants people to have the full riches of Christ and the strength to pass it on. We have been connected to Christ so that we can also connect others to his love. **Building others should be our purpose regardless of the cost. Amen.**

### 3 Captive to false "truth"

Colossians 2:8 – 23

**Big idea: Don't let anyone enslave you by taking you from the truth of Jesus.**

**Colossians 2:8-23** 8 See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. 9 For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, 10 and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. 11 In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. 13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. 16 Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. 17 These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. 18 Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. 19 He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow. 20 Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: 21 "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? 22 These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. 23 Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

#### **What is truth?**

##### **The "human" truth**

What is the meaning and purpose of life? That has been a fundamental question that has plagued man for years. One philosopher has declared that he has the answer, only to be proven wrong and replaced by another. Nietzsche, Darwin, Marx, Freud, and others have all tried to explain it. Now, we don't even try. We have opinion polls to determine what Americans think is the truth. We allow that truth to be one thing for you and another for me, as if I can shape what is up and down or change the consequences of my actions.

Christians have an absolute truth in the Bible that has not changed for 4000 years. What was true with God in Abraham's day is still valid for him. Yet, most Christians follow the changing truth of the world more than God's truth. We will spend hours in front of the television and minutes in the Bible. Paul warns the Colossians not to be enslaved by the truth of the times. The culture wants them to give in even though the culture doesn't have answers, either. The results will be deadly and destructive for any Christian who gives in. **Don't let anyone enslave you by taking you from the truth of Jesus.**

##### **Such "human" truth destroys**

How can I say that the truth of the world is deadly? Look around in American society and see the carnage. What happens in your life depends on the path of truth you take. If you accept specific ideas, there is no way that you can escape the destination of destruction that they cause. Look at the results for those who believed in easy credit and buy now, pay later. They have homes underwater and credit card debt that is killing them. They believed in the instant gratification the world said was truth. Some of them will never be able to retire or are one paycheck from disaster.

Look at relationships and marriage. We have been told that marriage is about our happiness. No wonder divorce and affairs seem to be all around us. Living together is supposed to be the solution, but did you know that couples who live together before marriage are twice as likely to divorce than those who do not? Human truth has left us searching for quick fixes because we have been led down the wrong path. It has led us to an era where the opinion poll tells us what truth is today and leads us to disaster tomorrow. As Christians, we have to hold on to God's truth. It is the only one that we can trust.

### **How do we lose the real truth?**

**We are told that Christ is not the answer v.8.** *deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*

Yet, in Colossae and America, we are constantly told that God's truth is insufficient. Paul's people lived amid mystery religions, a mixture of religions like the Mormons and Masons, with secret knowledge that was supposed to give you an edge in life. Christ was seen as inferior. If you want to be a Christian, go ahead. Yet, to get ahead, you had to have the special knowledge these fraternal religions had to offer with their mixed deities. Jesus just wasn't enough.

In our world, Christ has been relegated to saving us from hell. Jesus is not really supposed to know anything about relationships or managing money. Churches have nothing to offer regarding raising kids or realistic values. Ever wonder why our world is a mess? Christ has been left at the curb. He is no longer the answer. Sadly, the average Christian has bought it. They will scour the newspaper for ideas about managing money and forget the Book of Proverbs. They will look to Oprah about how to live instead of Jesus.

**We change our truth because of other's judgments v.16** *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink,*

The people in Colossae were starting to change the truth of God as they gave in to the pressure of others. No one wants to look or live differently. No one wants to buck the system and make people think you are strange. Paul challenges them not to let people who don't know the truth judge them. Yet the same thing is happening today. Our culture is outraged when kids don't want to play soccer on Sundays. People think you are weird if you struggle with the way sex education is taught or when a lewd book is part of literature class.

Loosen up and get with the times. The president and Congress have told us that we should spend more to save the economy. Buy into the whole green Mother Earth movement because the spirits of the earth are revolting at the pollution we are creating. Never mind that God made us caretakers of the planet. As a group, Christians have given into the culture. Our divorce rate is the same as the nation's. indebtedness and mismanagement of money afflict Christians as much as others. We have lost the edge God gives us in his word because we have changed our truth to match the nation's truth.

**We change scripture to match the view of the world v.18.** *Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize.*

The false teachers had begun to change the teaching of the scriptures to match their views. Angels were now to be worshipped because they had the secrets men wanted. No longer did you go to God for knowledge. His angels were smarter and more approachable. Today, denominations have changed their teachings to match the world. It doesn't take long to find a church where homosexuality is now OK, and even the pastor practices it. Abortion is OK. Living together is not a sin but just a choice.

The Bible doesn't say those things, but culture does. Churches have been so worried about offending people that they have thrown out the Bible and preached a social gospel. Millions of American Christians believe it and find it comfortable since they don't have to stand up for the truth. Yet, the wrong path will always lead you the wrong way. How can false truth lead you to real happiness? How could wrong

directions help you to find your way? Can you get to Cleveland by going south? How much harder would it be to go through the South and North poles to get there?

### **How do we reclaim truth?**

**We cling to Christ alone v.9** *For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,*

Paul tells them to reclaim the truth by clinging to Christ. This is the strongest statement of Jesus's deity in the Bible. Paul says that all of God's power, wisdom, and strength for your life are wrapped up in Jesus Christ. You reclaim truth by not giving up what you have. You don't let all of our culture, with its truth for the day, lead you away from Jesus. You hold on to his message and the edge that he will give you if you accept his ideas about relationships, money, and life in general.

It is about attitude. It is about believing that the world does not have the answers and that Jesus has all the answers you need. The constant hum of our culture will not slowly chip away at your beliefs and your faith in Jesus. That doesn't mean you must dress in 18th-century clothes or stay in a monastery somewhere. It does mean that you will pledge to yourself and your spouse that you will seek the answers in life from Jesus and not from the evening news or talk show host of your choice.

**We tune out the world v.14.** *having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us*

Paul tells the Colossians to avoid all the mystic religions with their false rules. Spend the time in the Bible and let the Lord teach you what works in life. Talk to Christian friends and get their advice based on scripture, not the world. Part of the problem for most Christians is that they spend so much more time listening to talk show hosts and magazines than they do Christ. I challenge you to go to the Christian bookstore or [Christianbook.com](http://Christianbook.com) to find things to read based on God's truth.

I have been recently doing more Christian reading. I read Masterworks to get Bible studies that are based on Christian books. I start my day with devotion from Man in the Mirror. I tune out the morning talk shows and have reduced my news watching. I am tired of being scared by their false predictions. They say that with computers, garbage in and garbage out. We say you are what you eat. How can we expect it to be any different in the area of truth? You will believe what you are constantly reading and listening to. If it is the garbage of the world, you will think garbage. If it is God's truth, you will build your life on truth.

**Are we captive or free v.20?** *Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules:*

Have you ever played a game where two people look up into the sky on a crowded street and talk about something that isn't there? Soon, a crowd of people gather around, straining to see what you are looking at and even commenting as if they see it, too. People talk about having the truth and will point you in a direction where there is absolutely nothing. In the process, they will hold you captive, looking into the sky as if there is something to see when there is nothing at all. Some will want the truth so bad that they will pretend that it is all real.

We are only free when we follow Christ. He has the path that will lead us closer to God. He has the path filled with truth instead of a list of dos and don'ts that get us nowhere. He is the only one who will point us in directions where there is something to see. You have a choice: You can listen to the people of the world, with their false truths that will lead you down a primrose path to destruction, or you can tune them out and spend more time listening to Jesus in his word and Christian literature. You can be enslaved by the culture or free in Jesus. Amen.

## 4 So you want paradise?

### Colossians 3:1-17

**Big idea: Paradise is what God can make of you, not a place to escape it all.**

**Colossians 3:1-17** 1 Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. 3 For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. 5 Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. 6 Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. 7 You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. 8 But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. 9 Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. 11 Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. 12 Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. 13 Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. 14 And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

### **Paradise, really?**

#### **What Gilligan could tell you about paradise**

**Paradise:** When we think of those words, we often think of some Caribbean island with a white sand beach and a hammock reserved just for us. You would get up in the morning and have nothing to do but sit on the beach day after day. By day four, you would be going a little crazy, missing other people, sports, and even things like your job. By day forty, you would soon learn why Gilligan and the people of the show "Lost" wanted to leave the island. Pretty—yes, but not what you can build a life on.

What really is paradise? Is it a place filled with beautiful sights or where you can escape the world forever? Experience tells us that vacations are fine for a time, but we usually only want to live there for a while. Most of us want a life of harmony, goals that work, feeling good about who we are, and relationships with others that bring joy and meaning to our lives. Maybe **paradise is what God can make of you, not a place to get away from it all.**

#### **A new vision - Look to Christ v2** *Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.*

How do you know what will work in life? How do you know what kind of person will bring joy to your life? In Paul's day, mystery religions told the people they had the answers. Come and join their secret societies, and they will show you how to be happy. Paul said the secret was not to look to these earthly religions but to Christ. Look up and not down. Learn from Christ what God intended life to be from the beginning. God has a plan for each person and a set of universal goals and truths for our lives. As we learn these, we find true joy.

That learning is involved shouldn't surprise us. We spend years learning how to do our occupation. We read books, watch a television program, or learn from a friend if we want to cook, lay tile, or fix the car. We even spend time learning to do hobbies like knitting or photography. Paul is saying that we have to learn from God what a life of paradise is like because we won't find the answers here on earth. Setting your mind means that we need continual effort. There is always more to learn, but the results are worth the effort. God has something extraordinary to teach us.

## **Paradise lived – personal renewal.**

**Getting rid of the things that destroy us v.5** *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature:*

If you want paradise, it begins with personal renewal. The new Christians at Colossae had a lot of baggage left over from their former life. The passions, tempers, and sharp tongues needed to go because they were nothing but trouble in their life. Just look at the list of characteristics Paul mentions: "**anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips.**" How would you like to be around a coworker who acted like that? How would you like to have a child or spouse who was like that?

Now, think if that were you. People wouldn't want to be around you, and you would be less likely to have a truly happy life or make good friendships. The good news is that we don't have to live that way. Christ conquered the sins that destroy us on the cross and can help us get rid of them. Yes, it will take time and will not always be easy. Just ask anyone who has tried to stop cussing. While you can not do it alone, as you spend time in word and prayer, letting the Lord teach you and renew you, it can and will happen. He can do for you what you can not do by yourself.

**Learning traits that will bring a better life v.12** *clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience*

Yet, life is not a vacuum. If you remove the bad things, you need to replace them with something good, or the bad will simply come back. Here, too, Paul wants the Colossians to look to Christ. He alone knows what is good, and he alone has the power to help us adopt good traits. What Paul was telling the Colossians was a little revolutionary for them. No one in their day saw kindness or humility as virtues. To them, they were signs of weakness that everyone should avoid. The way that you got ahead in the world was to be forceful and make others give you respect.

Yet, Paul wanted us to model our lives after the life of Jesus. Jesus showed all of these traits. He had a genuine sensitivity and sympathy for others. He was humble because he didn't need to force others to respect him. They respected him because of the inner strength that comes from God. Such a person is the kind we want to be around, and this is the kind of person we can become if we open our hearts to the Lord. He can make us gentle and patient. He can make us proud of ourselves and have fewer regrets about how we lived our lives.

## **Living in a changed world**

**Living with forgiveness v.13** *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have*

Paul knew that who you are creates the world you live in. Have you ever noticed how some people have a cloud of anger around them, so people shy away? Others have a cloud of self-righteousness around them, so you know that you can never please them. Putting on Christ affects how we treat others and will affect how others treat us. Paul wants us to "**Bear up**" with some of those cloudy people. They require extra grace. Only when you have clothed yourself with God's gentleness and patience can you survive around them.

You learn to forgive rather than stoke the fire of their anger and self-righteousness. You are confident about what the Lord has made of you and can brush off the insults and harsh looks. You don't spend time stewing about an insult or making things worse by being angry or self-righteous. In the end, you remember how the Lord forgave you and forgave others. This creates a little bit of paradise in an otherwise difficult office or home. Because of the strength of who the Lord has made you, you can not only survive but thrive as you continue to live by God's rules, not the rules of unruly men.

**Living with peace v.15** *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,*

You have strength because you live by a different rule book than the rest of the people around you. Paul tells the Colossians that they should let God guide them. The word rule here means umpire. He

wants the love and character of God to be the umpire of your life in times of conflict. Don't play by the rules of men who will seek revenge or angrily demand respect. Play by the rules of God, which doesn't pay back with evil but shames people when we treat them better than they treat us. That keeps the tongue from anger or cursing when people treat us badly.

We end up with peace. We feel good about ourselves and how we handle the situation rather than living for days with regret and having to apologize or even suffer the consequences for having given in to the playbook of the world. The end result is stronger friendships, happier families, and workplaces where we are a ray of sunshine. God's character in us and his rule book guiding our actions will create a life we can look back on and feel good about. Life is better no matter what happens if we live it with God at the helm.

**Paradise is doing all for Christ v.17** *And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus,*

A few years ago, wearing a bracelet with the letters **WWJD** was popular, namely, what would Jesus do? The idea was simple. If you wanted to live a life where you had no regrets and where the things you did really worked, then you just followed the example of Jesus. Paul does not want to give us a list of things to avoid and things to do. He just wants us to do everything in Jesus' name. He wants us to be in the word so that we can stop and think, "What would Jesus do?" How would he act in this situation? How would he handle himself and unruly people?

You can't change the world, but you can let the Lord change you. Let the Lord bring his love, mercy, and strength into your life so that you can have a little heaven on earth. You can have a bit of paradise when the rest of the people around you are facing the hell of the rat race. Paradise is not a place we create or a thing we buy. It is a life created for us by God as he remodels us. It is a life created when we freely seek his guidance and do everything with him in mind. **Paradise is what God can make of you and not a place to get away from it all.** Amen.