

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

PSALMS



THE CHARACTER OF GOD

JANUARY BIBLE STUDY 2022

PSALMS



THE CHARACTER OF GOD

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PSALMS: THE CHARACTER OF GOD

For more than 40 years, I have begun my morning quiet time by reading a Psalm. I don't know how this became a habit, but the Psalms seem to put me in touch with God and prepare my heart for a time of prayer and the study of other Bible passages in my morning devotions. I have tried to vary my devotional approach over the years, but kept being drawn back to the Psalms as that daily reading gives me a sense of God's presence.

To avoid it becoming routine, I read from various translations. I wrote a paraphrased version from memory, noted applications, and wrote prayers reflecting what I had read each day. The practice of reading a psalm a day deepened my prayer life beyond a few minutes of self-centered supplications. The psalmist was brutally honest in expressing his distress, pleading for mercy, complaining about his circumstances, or worshiping God in effusive praise. The issues were practical and situations with which I could identify. The Book of Psalms could well be entitled, "Conversations with God," as they are prayers of ancient poets who struggled with issues relevant to my own faith and relationship with God.

Psalms is also one of the most comprehensive systematic theology one could read. Readers have to be impressed by the power, authority, and majesty of God. One comes to an understanding of His sovereignty and providence in His acts on behalf of Israel. Our fear and reverence is enhanced by descriptions of His wrath and judgment, but His love, compassion, and mercy draw us near. The picturesque language stirs our emotions and strengthens our faith. To know He is our rock, our shield, our fortress, our strong tower, reminds us that He will guide us, protect us, and provide for every need. His tender expressions of love and compassion as our shepherd makes us feel as if we are enfolded in His arms.

Many Christians lack an awareness of the presence of God. We know our sins are forgiven because we trusted Jesus Christ for salvation and have assurance of eternal life in heaven. But we miss the consciousness of Christ within us—the Holy Spirit—guiding us and empowering us in righteous living. That may be because we fail to grasp the implications of being born again, but another factor could be a shallow understanding of the nature and character of God.

Why the Psalms?

The length of Psalms is often an impediment to most systematic Bible-reading plans as one attempts to check off chapters and books within a prescribed time frame. Composing a comprehensive study of 150 Psalms would be a formidable task as well as a challenge to sustain the interest of the student. Hence, the focus of this study will be a thematic focus on the character of God, highlighting select Psalms. The character of God is revealed in His relationship with His people; the same God who interacted with the psalmist enriches our understanding of how He relates to us. Just as we are told, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb. 13:8), God speaks through the prophet Malachi to affirm, “I, the LORD, have not changed” (3:6).

What we discover concerning the character of God in the Psalms is applicable to our lives today. The better we know the heart and character of a person, the better we know them. We know a lot about God; we know He is the creator of heaven and Earth and our Savior, but to many He seems like an ancient, celestial Spirit who we will know and worship only when we get to heaven. However, when we experience His compassion and loving-kindness in times of crisis, mercy and grace in forgiving our forays into sin, faithfulness in providing for every need, and power and justice overcoming our adversarial dilemmas, we truly come to know Him. Knowing God enhances our desire to worship Him, serve Him, and live to the praise of His glory.

As a missionary challenged to witness to people of different cultures and religions, I have gained a great deal of insight into apologetics—the discipline of defending the faith. I have found, the Bible is the strongest testimony to the existence of God, even though many do not recognize the authority of the Bible.

Philosophers have formulated other arguments for God including nature, from the orderliness of the galaxies to the minute function of human cells. While there are many arguments for the existence of God, many agree the strongest evidence there is a God, outside of the Bible, is the moral argument. This argument builds from the idea that there is universal recognition of good and evil and right and wrong. While we may have differing ideas of what is right and wrong, the fact there is a moral order testifies to God. If there is law, then there must be a law-giver. C.S. Lewis wrote in his well-known book, *Mere Christianity*, “Men find themselves under a moral law which they did not make and which they know they

ought to obey [...] Somebody or something is directing the universe and wants me to behave in a certain way, urging me to do right and making me feel uncomfortable when I do wrong.”¹

As the ultimate moral being, God’s character is manifested in His dealings with His people. Ultimately we see God’s goodness, righteousness, love, and compassion most clearly through Jesus Christ. As we work through our focal passages in the Psalms, the Scriptures will reveal the moral nature of God, His unchangeable attributes and character. As a result, we will grow in our knowledge of Him and awareness of His presence in our daily lives.

Someone once said we thank God for what He does, but we worship God for who He is. We are probably faithful to thank God for what He does, but our prayers are usually confined to petitions for what we want Him to do for us—to bless us, meet our needs, and help solve our problems. However, once we grasp the awesome nature of who God is, we inevitably move into a new dimension of worship. Our worship will not be confined to weekly gatherings with God’s people but will emanate from our hearts in constant praise as we walk in His presence each day.

Where We’re Headed

Psalms is actually composed of five books of psalms recorded throughout the history of Israel. The ending and beginning of each are usually identified in most Bible translations. Within these are smaller Psalters such as those attributed to David or Solomon, the Sons of Asaph, and others, though most have no stated author.

We will begin with Psalms 22, 23 and 24 which describe our salvation experience and how God’s character is revealed through His Son. We will see how these ancient hymns foretell our understanding of redemption revealed in the New Testament. In Psalms 32 and 51, we will examine David’s experience with sin and redemption, come to understand the grace, compassion, and forgiveness of God. In the Psalms of Deliverance (42-43), we see how God is faithful and can be trusted even when we go through times of suffering and adversity.

The Psalms of Asaph (73-83) are eleven of 62 Psalms identified as “Lament Psalms.” I call them the “woe is me” Psalms as they express distress and pessimism and a sense of having been abandoned by God. In anger or despondency they appeal for retribution, an experience with which we can all identify. But they also reveal God’s goodness and insight into how His justice and mercy is manifested without contradiction.

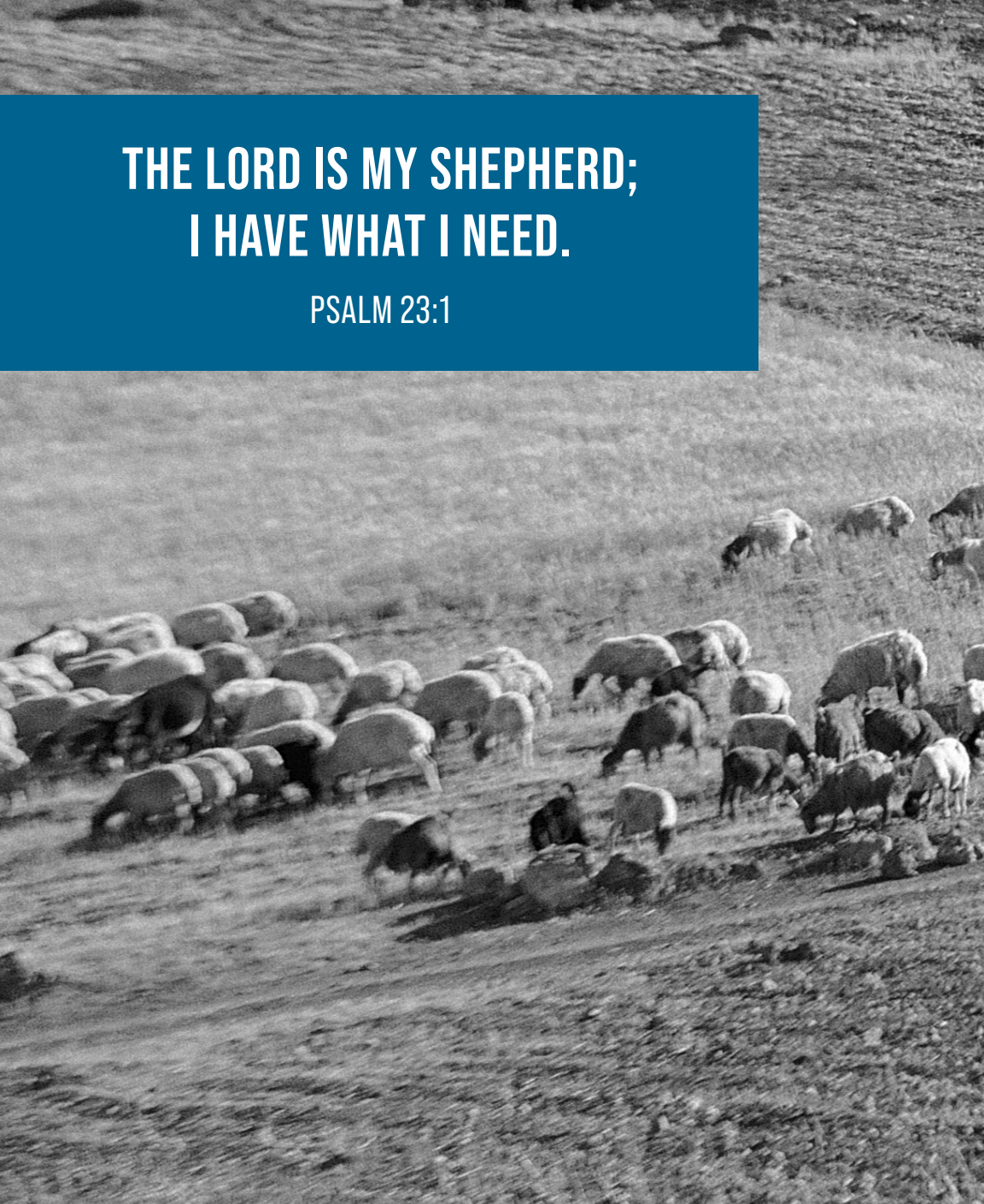
PSALMS: THE CHARACTER OF GOD

Songs of the Sons of Korah (84-88), follow with an upbeat passion for God's presence. He is revealed as a relational God who is available to us at all time. We will learn how to have consistent, intimate fellowship with Him. The Hallel, or praise Psalms (113-118) guide us in responding to God's character and salvation with praise. Finally, the climax of our study takes us through the Psalms of Ascent (120-134) which enhance our act of worship, understanding the hope we have in this life and the one to come because of who God is.

1 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (HarperOne, New York, 1952), 25.

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD; I HAVE WHAT I NEED.

PSALM 23:1



PSALMS: THE CHARACTER OF GOD



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (18/21/10-13)



GOD REVEALS HIS CHARACTER THROUGH HIS SON

PSALM 22–24

As I sat in the worship service listening to the welcome, call to worship, and singing of familiar hymns, my mind was wandering. My conversation with Robert, a Sunday School class member, dominated my thoughts. He was discouraged and frustrated with the lack of vitality and relevance in his life as a Christian. Faithful Bible study and church attendance seemed to make him feel that victorious living was elusive. He wondered why he did not experience the joy of the Lord during problems and trials. He was bothered by the absence of motivation to witness to others, and He was plagued by guilt because he thought more about worldly interests than he thought of God.

I was bothered by the fact that this seemed typical of many church members. Many seem to be dissatisfied with their Christian life. The desire to grow, to experience the fullness of God in their life or just consistency in living what the Bible teaches as a righteous life is genuine, but the failure to resist temptation or to avoid self-centered decisions and actions that often produce conflict with friends and family was a daily reality.

Suddenly my distracted thoughts were startled back to the worship service by the special music. The powerful anthem the choir was singing concluded with an excerpt from Handel's Messiah. As the "hallelujahs" and "glory to the Lamb" reverberated back and forth I was moved with an awesome sense of God's presence and reminded of His glory, power, and majesty. Immediately I realized the problem with Robert, and many others, was a shallow understanding of salvation that failed to account the character and nature of the God with whom they had entered into a personal relationship.

PSALMS: THE CHARACTER OF GOD

In previous conversations I had questioned Robert about his salvation experience. He related how he had become convicted that he was sinner, separated from God. Having been raised in church, he fully understood that Jesus Christ had died on the cross to bear the penalty for his sins and the sins of the world. He affirmed his belief in Christ, and recalled his prayer expressing repentance for his sins and accepting Jesus as his Savior. He had no doubts about his salvation and had assurance of eternal life in heaven. However, that experience did not translate into living the kind of consistent Christian life he expected from reading the Bible.

Too many Christians fail to understand that **the salvation experience is to restore us to a relationship with God**. Since the fall of man in the garden of Eden, we have all fallen short of the glory of God due to an innate inclination to sin. But **before the foundation of the world, a sovereign God planned redemption through Jesus Christ**—a way that the penalty for our sins could be paid and we could be restored to a relationship with Him. This is quite clear in a verse that is seldom used in connection with our salvation, Romans 8:29-30: “For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, [...] And those he predestined, he also called; and those he called, he also justified.” God, who created us in His own image—an image that was disfigured by sin—has saved us in order for us to be restored into the image of His Son. **Justification means we are given a right-standing with God and made righteous**. His predestined purpose in saving us was to make us like Christ, which refers to the life that we live. Paul expresses this in a familiar verse, 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!”

Salvation makes us into a new creature, like Christ, living out His nature, characterized by joy and peace and power and victory over sin. Let us put each aspect of the salvation experience in perspective. Why did Christ die on the cross for our sins? Because it was necessary for the guilt and penalty of our sins to be removed, in order for us to be restored to the image of Christ. Are we saved just so we could escape hell and be assured of eternal life? No, heaven is just the bonus—the consequences—of being restored to the image of Christ.

This has often been explained in discipleship classes as the three tenses of salvation—past, present and future. (1) We have been saved from the penalty of sin. (2) We are being saved (present life) from the power of

sin. (3) We will be saved (heaven) from the presence of sin. Paul seeks to portray these aspects of how we are saved and how we then live out that salvation through what Christ has done in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

Salvation means that Christ, God Himself is in us, living our life for us. Our new life is a transformed life, that reflects the image and nature of Christ. We miss the essence of salvation when we see it only as an historic event in our life when our sins were forgiven, or if it is no more than a past affirmation of faith that assures us of getting to go to heaven.

Although the Psalms were written hundreds of years before Christ came and died on the cross, many of them illuminate aspects of the Christian life and help us understand the redemptive experience. It is evident that the God who planned to restore His fallen kingdom and redeem a people for His glory through the work of His Son, is the same God of the Old Testament who inspired the writing of the Psalms and all of Scripture for our benefit. The Psalms are apparently several collections of hymns which comprised the Psalter which the people of Israel sang and used in their worship. We don't know exactly how they were organized, but it is amazing that the juxtaposition of Psalms 22, 23, and 24 reflects the three aspects of our salvation as discussed above.

God's Character is Revealed Through the Death of His Son (Psalm 22)

Reading Psalm 22, one might mistake this song for an account of the crucifixion of Jesus in the Gospels and wonder how it got misplaced in the Old Testament. It begins in verse one with the cry, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?”—exactly as expressed by Jesus on the cross in Matthew 27:46. Verses 6 and 7 declare, “I am [...] scorned by mankind and despised by people. Everyone who sees me mocks me; they sneer and shake their heads” (Matt. 27:39, Mark 15:29, Luke 23:35). Verse 8: “He relies on the Lord; let him save him” (Matt. 27:43). The passage continues in verses 14-18 with a graphic description of what happened on Golgotha.

Some may recall the 2004 film, *The Passion of Christ* directed by Mel Gibson. The entire film was a graphic portrayal of the last week of the Jesus' life, primarily from the time of His arrest to His burial, highlighting the



DOES IT TRANSLATE?

Christianity is more than a set of beliefs and practices. Our faith should shape the way we live.

Check any statements below that you can truthfully say about yourself:

- I have repented of my sin, trusted in Christ's sacrifice and accepted Jesus as my Savior.
- I regularly engage in times of personal prayer and Bible study.
- I am faithful in church attendance.
- I desire to grow in my faith and experience the fullness of God.
- I give my time and money generously to God's work.
- I live by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.

Then check any of these statements below that you can truthfully say about yourself:

- I experience joy in the Lord in the midst of trials and suffering.
- I am motivated to witness to others about Jesus.
- I live what the Bible teaches in my relationships.
- I resist temptation and reject self-centered decisions and actions.
- I courageously live out my steadfast faith in God.
- I strongly desire that my salvation experience translate into victorious Christian living.

brutality of Christ being beaten and abused. I remember seeing the movie and watching the lashes tearing into the flesh of Jesus; it went on and on and on, and I wanted to shout, "Stop it! Stop it!" I cannot forget the ringing of the hammer as it drove the nails through His hands, the spiteful mocking of the crowd, and the blood dripping from His wounds and splattering on the ground.

Centuries before this occurred the psalmist clearly identified death by crucifixion in the fact that His hands and feet were pierced (22:16). He captured His mouth being so dry His tongue stuck to the roof of His mouth (22:15), and the Gospels recorded His plea for water. It predicted that the Roman guards would not break His legs as they did other victims. (22:14). The Psalm even speaks of lots being cast for his clothing (22:18).

1 / GOD REVEALS HIS CHARACTER THROUGH HIS SON

Two of the most significant, overarching characteristics of God's nature are His **sovereignty** and **providence**. We are reminded throughout Scripture that God is on His throne; all power and authority belongs to Him. He who created the earth and set the stars in the heavens has never relinquished control of the affairs of men. The word "providence" comes from two Latin words—"video" which means to see, and the prefix "pro" which means to see beforehand. God, in His providence, knows and is able to see all that is going to happen and beforehand has determined how it will be used for His purpose and glory.

When we quote Romans 8:28 in times of tragedy or adversity—"**We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose**" we are affirming the providence of God. When Job was allowed to suffer severe loss at the hand of Satan, God knew that he would prove faithful and in the end would be blessed far in excess of his previous prosperity.

Psalm 22 affirms God's providence in letting those who came before take a peek at His plan to redeem them. Furthermore, it was a testimony to those who witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus that God was in charge. Everything was happening just as He had ordained it from ancient times. And it gave Jesus assurance the Father's hand was upon Him as He went to the cross and laid down His life to bear the penalty of our sins. This was revealed to the prophet Isaiah; as he described it, "But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6).

We can be saved today because of what God did through Jesus on the cross. **The crucifixion is the ultimate reflection of God's love and compassion because God sent His own Son to die on our behalf.** There is no greater expression of mercy than taking the sins of us who deserved to die, and placing them upon Jesus. The sinless Son of God became a substitute for us so that the penalty of our sins could be paid. When we believe it, and place our faith for salvation in what Jesus did for us, we have been saved! And it is all foretold in this Messianic Psalm.

A CLOSER LOOK

A Familiar Quote

Finding the words of Jesus on the cross in Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” introduces another possibility to how this familiar passage is normally interpreted. Whenever Jesus encountered temptation, He used the truth and power of God’s Word to counter the attacks of Satan. Spiritual warfare reached a pinnacle of intensity when Jesus went to the cross. Of course, in bearing the sins of the world, He was, in that moment, separated from the holiness and righteousness of the Father. However, rather than feeling abandoned, Jesus fully understood the purpose for what He was suffering and His place in God’s eternal plan of redemption.

It is possible that, while hanging on the cross, He thought back to Psalm 22 as a reminder that God was in control, and all that was happening occurred just as God said it would. Perhaps He began to quote this Psalm as a reminder of the providence of God, but due to His mouth being dry and the air being stretched out of His lungs, He could not continue speaking the verses that followed. But He was claiming verse 3, that God resided in the praises of His people.

His mind rushed forward to verses 27-28, “All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD. All the families of the nations will bow down before you, for kingship belongs to the LORD; he rules the nations.” Rather than feeling rejected, He was reminded of why He was suffering and dying—that all the peoples of the earth would know the King of kings and Lord of lords. The writer of Hebrews affirmed this perspective when he wrote, “For the joy that lay before him [Jesus], he endured the cross, despising the shame” (Heb. 12:2).

God's Character is Revealed Through His Son as our Shepherd (Psalm 23)

Having been saved from the **penalty** of sin, the nature of our salvation in the present could not be expressed more thoroughly than by this most familiar Psalm. What is it that keeps our salvation secure from the moment of conversion until our translation to that future heavenly realm? What is it that keeps the grace flowing in forgiveness because we have placed our faith in God? What is it that keeps us growing in holiness and empowering us for God-glorifying worship, witness and service? A knowledgeable Christian, familiar with the teachings of the New Testament, might reply correctly that it is the Holy Spirit. Paul would explain that it is because he had been crucified with Christ (in the past), and this current life is literally the presence of Christ living in him (Gal. 2:20).

The psalmist chooses to describe this with the metaphor of the Lord (God) being our shepherd—"The LORD is my shepherd" (present tense). In John 10, Jesus describes Himself as the **Good Shepherd**. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Earlier He used the metaphor of the door of the sheepfold. "I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture." (John 10:9). He goes on to say in John 10:14, "I know my own, and my own know me." So, as the shepherd, Jesus is the door to salvation and security; we enter only by Him because He is the only One to die and pay the penalty for our sin. He later declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Our going in and out—living life day by day—is also in His hands.

Having become His sheep—the penalty of sin having been paid—we have a new relationship with God. **He is one with Christ as a shepherd, caring for us, guiding us, providing sustenance for us as we go about life.** Realizing we are saved to be restored to a relationship with God and to live conformed to the image of Christ, we live in submission to Him, allowing Him, as our shepherd, to guide, empower, nurture, and provide for us. Since you now belong to Him, picture yourself as a lamb, lovingly embraced in the arms of your Savior, being protected from temptation and every danger. Psalm 23 highlights the benefits and provisions for our Christian life with Christ as our shepherd, and each one reveals the character of God that is revealed in His Son.

God's benevolent character and generosity is shown in providing for all our needs (23:1). The fact that "He renews my life" (23:3a), or as other

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translations say, “He restores my soul,” reflects that He is merciful and long-suffering. Often in the demands of life we let things slide spiritually, or even stray from the Lord, but He convicts us and patiently brings us back into the fold through repentance.

His gentleness and wisdom is experienced by His sensitivity to our needs, nurturing and caring for us and quieting our hearts when we get caught up in the stress of life (23:2). That wisdom also guides us in the direction of His will and to have moral discernment so that we do what is right and make decisions that conform to His righteousness (23:3b).

We benefit from a powerful God of courage who is steadfast when we all go through dark and difficult times—the loss of a loved one, a debilitating illness, disappointments, situations in which we feel there are no solutions and we can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel. He is with us, protecting us when we go through the valley and would be overcome by fear. That power and authority is symbolized by the shepherd’s rod that protects and comforts us (23:4). We can have confidence that He is taking care of any problem and danger that may threaten our well-being or walk with Him. When we feel defeated due to personal attacks, gossip, intimidation, or ridicule for our faith or moral convictions, we are secure in the One who assures us of victory. In fact, He flaunts that victory, blessing us in the presence of our enemies, not because of what we are able to do but because of our position in Him. In fact, it is blessing in such **abundance**, it is beyond our capacity to contain it (23:5).

Finally, **the psalmist reflects on God’s goodness and faithful love**. It is not only available, but God faithfully pursues us throughout life with His goodness and love, and gives us assurance of dwelling with Him forever (23:6). We belong to Him in a relationship that cannot be severed for all eternity.

All of this speaks of the nature of our salvation after the efficacy of Christ’s death has paid the penalty of our sin. Having been restored to a relationship with God, every aspect of His character is reflected in what He provides for us. His power and grace, love and compassion, His faithfulness and steadfastness, power and authority, give us the victorious life that glorifies Him. We are not on our own to live out our salvation; our life is now the life of Christ, our Good Shepherd within us. As Paul expressed it, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27) That is not just the assurance of a future glorification in heaven, but it is the hope and assurance of God being glorified in our life here and now.

God's Character is Revealed in the Eternal Reign of His Son (Psalm 24)

Psalm 24 follows with a graphic image of the return of Christ affirming the glory of God and **the future hope of our salvation**. The King of Glory, the Lord, strong and mighty, will be welcomed into His eternal kingdom. This is none other than the Creator of heaven and earth. The world and all its inhabitants belong to Him.

The question is asked, "Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place" (24:3)? The idea of ascending affirms the common idea that heaven is "up there" above the mundane of the created world as we know it. Who is it that will accompany the king into that glorious eternal realm? The answer is, "The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not appealed to what is false, and who has not sworn deceitfully" (24:4). This may bring doubt and uncertainty to many believers as to whether or not they qualify. We may not qualify for "clean hands" or actions and behavior not tainted with sin. Even if we have lived a good life, we may feel our heart has not always been pure and motives not always genuine. I have known many Christians who could testify of complete assurance of having been saved, but are not absolutely certain they will make it to heaven when faced with the judgment of God. That is because they forget we are not righteous or pure in our own deeds, but are made pure and worthy of eternal life because the blood of Christ has washed away our sins. It is in Him that we stand righteous before the Father.

The fact is the Son of God paid the penalty of our sins. It is the faithfulness of God and His **redeeming grace** that assures us of **eternal life** in heaven. It has often been said, "A settled past and an assured future should mean a triumphant present." Let us live out day by day a God-glorifying, victorious life, following the Son of God as our Good Shepherd who lives within us.



ABOVE: Sheep in the Judean hills.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (8/20/4-15)



A TRIUMPHANT TRANSLATION

Consider the following quote:

“A settled past and an assured future should mean a triumphant present.”

What does a settled past look like for a believer?

What does an assured future look like for a believer?

What does a triumphant present look like for a believer?

A CLOSER LOOK

Rise Up, Ancient Doors!

The poetic expression of a psalm is often built around a graphic image and analogy such as that in Psalm 24. Picture a medieval castle with banners flying from the ramparts. Shouting subjects are lining the walls as they welcome their king returning victoriously from battle. The drawbridge is lowered over the protective moat that surrounds the castle. The orders are given, and the heavy fortified gate begins to be raised for the king and his entourage to enter with all their glorious splendor. He will once again take his seat on the throne and rule his kingdom.

The question is whether we have opened the doors of our hearts to welcome Him and enthrone Jesus as ruler and King with authority over our lives. Like the gates of that ancient citadel, we should lift up our head to praise and exalt the King of glory. Open the door of your heart to welcome Him, dwell in His presence and enthrone Him as Lord of your life. Allow His righteousness to produce a pure heart and clean life that will enable you to enjoy the blessings of His salvation.

