

Life Lessons from the Psalms

Knowing God Requires This

Do You Know God as Well as You Would Like to Know Him?

Before the turn of the century, I went to Russia to teach at a college for two weeks. While there I was able to fulfill a dream I had of visiting a Russian orphanage. The kids immediately surrounded me and wanted me to see everything and play games with them. One particular little girl took me by the hand and held it as I walked around the children's home. We tried to adopt Olya, but her grandmother wouldn't permit it and by the time her grandmother passed away, Olya was too old to be adopted. We have stayed in touch; five times I have gone to visit her, and we send messages to each other on What's App. I don't speak Russian and Olya doesn't speak English, so it is quite hard for us to know each other very well. Distance and language barriers prevent much in the way of relationship, but we certainly love each other like father and daughter. If human relationships are difficult to maintain when there is not much time or effort given to them, would it not be the case also, at least it seems logical, the same would be true of our relationship with God? Many say they love God but if they are not putting much effort into getting to know God, what really is there? Our big idea is most important to the Christian community. If you want to know God and see your prayers answered then decide to invest in your relationship with Him.

One of the most beautiful of the Psalms is not very well known but let me share a few verses found there. Psalm 84 starts this way. **How lovely your dwelling places, LORD of armies.** (Psalm 84: 1) Few Christians today speak this way of God but it is only because they do not know God like the Psalmist does. This idea of dwelling places is a very ancient way of considering God. For pagan people, God was wherever an idol was placed. He, or in many cases she, lived in a temple or a palace or in a special hillside. A rather comical example of this sort of thinking is described in the historical record of the early Jewish nation. When the northern kingdom of Israel routed the Aramean army, the advisors to the king of Aram insisted that the reason they lost was because the Israelite God was God of the hills but if the two nations fought in a valley, the Aramean army would triumph. **Meanwhile, the officials of the king of Aram advised him, "Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they.** (1 Kings 20: 23 NIV) This of course was ludicrous, and the Israelites whipped the Arameans the next time when they fought in a valley. The Lord is the LORD of the heavens and the earth and there is no location where He cannot be found or is not King and ruler. **The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.** (Acts 17:2 4 NIV) Notice the strong declaration of Paul that reverberates throughout the Old and New Testament and which the Arameans discovered tragically. The LORD is not an idol who lives in temples built by people. But He does live in temples as I mentioned in the previous message I shared.

The strange revelation the Bible makes is that God lives within those who are born again, who have put their faith in Christ as Savior. **Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.** (1 Corinthians 6: 19-20 NIV) Remember that the Psalmist declared that the dwelling places of the LORD are lovely and He is talking about you. Why can He say that? It is because the LORD makes all things new and clean and pure. The very fact that the Holy Spirit of God lives in you makes you wonderful and of great nobility. To insult you is to mock the God who lives in you and that is utter blasphemy. The very worst you can do is underestimate the wonder of God joining you and making His home in you and what sort of potential that promises. Keep in mind that the LORD is the LORD of armies. He is the God who fights for you, who controls the situation, whatever it may be. You may feel overwhelmed, but you can never be overwhelmed if the LORD of armies lives in you. The Lord stands with you and your battles are His. The LORD of armies is your God and He lives within you to protect and do battle in your fight.

Verse 2 gives us great psychological insight into the internal state of those whose God is the LORD. **My soul was pale and even became faint for the courts of the LORD, my heart and my flesh shout unto the living God.** (Psalm 84: 2) The Hebrew of this verse is a bit clumsy, but it tells you something important about what wells up within the hearts of those who develop a personal relationship with God. There is a craving that brings to exhaustion the desire for the presence of God. It can get so intense that you wonder if you will ever be happy again if you cannot meet God. The picture is of someone coming to the house of the person he loves and banging on the door until his knuckles are bloody from the effort because his desire for her is so great. Psalm 42 provides a vivid visual of the internal state

of those who begin to crave God. **As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?** (Psalm 42: 1-2 NIV) This is not Christian propaganda. It is the actual condition of those who realize just how much they need the LORD and the sort of fervor that produces. Do you really need God or are you getting along ok without Him? Only you can answer that question.

Verse 5 is the crucial point of this passage. **Happy ones are the people whose strength is in you, whose heart are highways.** (Psalm 84: 5) Again the Hebrew is clunky but the message is deep and profound. To gain the strength of the Lord is a genuine inflow of happiness. When God empowers you and you know it and you are able to overcome, to be victorious, the joy is overflowing. But how do you get this strength, this supernatural power? The one who is as some translations put it, on pilgrimage but more likely it describes someone whose heart is racing toward God, going after the LORD like a driver in a Ferrari on her way to a date or a job interview with the company of her dreams. The person who has God's supernatural strength develops a one track mind, "I want God above all!" There are plenty of people who want God to help them, who have interest in connecting with Him. But only a few are going hard after God, pursuing Him with their foot on the pedal and it is those people who have an abundance of happiness because God is empowering, is fueling their lives.

I understand this may sound like pie in the sky religion. But let me share an example of this from the Bible. The missionaries Paul and Silas cast the demon out of a slave girl in Philippi. The demon gave the girl the ability to tell fortunes and the owner, so the girl made a lot of money from her fortune telling. When Paul cast out the demon, the girl could no longer tell fortunes and so they used their influence to have Paul and Silas arrested and beaten severely with wooden rods. Locked in prison with no one to plead their cause, Paul and Silas sought the Lord. Their hearts were a highway to God. How did that impact them? The strength that came from God filled them with happiness and they joyfully sang songs of praise. Rather than crying over their terrible situation or even cursing God for what had happened, they thirsted after God, they raced to God and He made them strong and happy. Several years ago, I was at a pastor's conference and at the end of the evening, the crowd was asked if any of us had a prayer request, to come down and the group could pray for us. A godly couple went down, and they shared they had tried for years to conceive a child but were unable to do so. After the time of prayer, I approached them and told them that my wife and I had tried for eight years to have a child. But then our church one Sunday surrounded us and placed their hands on Mary Jo and I and prayed we would have a baby. The next month our first son was conceived. I asked if I could place my hands on them and pray that they would soon conceive. This beautiful couple wept as I prayed for them. Their hearts were like a highway racing toward God. Was it a mere coincidence that two months later they sent me an email telling me they were expecting? Make your heart a raceway on which you chase after God. His strength will be supernatural and the happiness He brings you will fill you to overflowing. How can you chase after God? Read the Bible with the expectation God will speak to you. Pray for every person you can, assuming God will bless each of them. Meditate on Scripture verses and memorize them. Be an active and vibrant part of a church. Obey the commands of God. It does take discipline and work if you are going to be close to God, close enough that His strength and happiness flow into you but it is surely worth the effort. Here is our big idea. If you want to know God and see your prayers answered because you are close to Him, then you must put time and effort into your relationship with Him.