

JULY

July 1

Psalms 36-39

Much of Psalm 36 seems familiar. The author speaks of the wicked prospering, yet never knowing all the kinds of delights a faithful person finds. The last verse stands out, though. How are we supposed to react to it? "See how the evildoers lie fallen---thrown down, not able to rise!"

Are we to be glad when someone, *anyone*, lies fallen and not able to get up? Are we to only help the righteous that fall? Of course not. In several of the psalms already we have seen that the righteous care about everyone. They pray for and are concerned for those that, on the other hand, are glad when the good person falls. If we only help those that are good to us, we're no better than those that don't choose to follow God.

Verse 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." Because we delight in the Lord, or maybe *as* we learn to delight in the Lord, we will find that our desires begin to line up with God's will. James 4:3 says that we don't get our prayers answered because we ask "amiss", or out of what God's will for us would be.

Much of Psalm 37 urges us to patiently wait on God's timing. Boy, that's hard to learn! With experience, though (trial and error), we find that God's plan often involves a lot of other people and circumstances. God works out the best for *everyone*, if we'll wait. Impatience is often caused by just considering our own circumstances.

July 2

Psalms 40-45

Verse 40:6 says, "sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced." This has little to do with jewelry and a lot with relationship. See Exodus 21:5-6: If a person who has been your servant for six years (because he was paying off a debt he owed you) decides at the end of his servitude that he wants to still remain as your servant, you signify this by piercing his ear. This is at the servant's request, and says that you now own him. This is what the psalmist says God really wants, instead of just gifts and offerings. God wants you to voluntarily become his servant for life!

Psalms 42-44 are reciting what is now a familiar theme, an outpouring of anguish to God. "You've been my help in ages past, but where are you now? My enemies are laughing at me. When are you going to save me? I've been righteous! Still....I will trust You." Really, there is nothing wrong with this. God's not afraid of your honesty. We should consider that God has proven his friendship to us and his love for us time and time again. Aren't you very straightforward with your other friends? When you are completely honest (as you only can be with your very best friends), you tell them when they've hurt you, and ask for explanation.

Without turning away from God when you go through times of trial, tell God what only a true friend can say. Bare your soul. Let him know each and every care. Knit your soul together with God's, clinging earnestly to Him even when you don't understand why life isn't going as well as you think it should. There really is no need to hide anything from God, who loves you more than you love yourself.

July 3 Psalms 46-51

Psalm 46:6 says, " Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts." We need to be reminded that God does the impossible. Sure, we still expect God to help us in small matters, and to give us peace and encouragement. Remember, though, that God is much more than that. We need to live in the expectation that God will do miracles. Even the most "normal" of us find ourselves in situations that only a miracle from God can change. Expect that God can do that!

"No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him," it says in 49:7. This is one of the most basic concepts of our relationship to God. We owe God more than we can pay. God created all that is and, through ignorance or even willful disobedience, we choose to make changes in the Creator's perfect plan for our world and our lives. This world could be a perfect place if we would all stick to the plan, God's ways. We don't follow God's plan, and deserve punishment, even removal from the system altogether (death) so that the plan isn't further destroyed. If we would give *anything* to pay the price for our sin (disobedience), we find that our lives are not enough; after all, we are prone to sin and are imperfect 'currency'. As payment for our sin, Jesus gave his life, the only perfect life ever, in his death on the cross. God considers our debt paid, if we accept Jesus' death as payment for *us personally*.

July 4 Psalms 52-59

A successful person that has left God behind teeters on the edge of destruction. Where is their help to come from when their life gets out of control? Verses 52:6-7 says the righteous will laugh at that person's foolishness.

We have to come to grips with the truth that it is better to be successful in the eyes of God ("righteous") than in the view of our culture. Our culture counts success as having a lot of money! That seems kind of foolish. Money doesn't insure happiness, or even a sense of being right. We rarely look up to poor people, though success in God's eyes has nothing to do with accumulated wealth---nothing. God counts those successful who are "righteous", in 'right standing' with God, lined up with his will and pursuing assimilation to God's standards. We remember from John 3:16 that righteousness starts with Jesus, claiming his death on the cross as payment for our sins.

Some of our Bibles still include the introductory remarks for each psalm. If you have these, you've noticed by now that various musical types are mentioned. For instance, Psalms 52-55 are "maskils", and Psalms 56-59 are "miktams". We don't know what these forms are, but to the musicians of the time, they would indicate something about the mood or pace to be aimed for. Notice also that Psalms 58 and 59 are to the tune "Do Not Destroy," evidently a tune readily recognized by the people of that day.

July 5 Psalms 60-66

At times, it seems like troubles come at us from all directions. King David writes about this in Psalm 60. Faith can get weak when that additional problem gets piled on top of what you already have. Though David cried out, " You have rejected us, O God," he still cried out for help *to God*. That's where his help had come from in the past. It was God that would help this time, also.

We need to get to the point of Psalm 62:2, "He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress. I will never be shaken." Mostly relying on God is not as secure as totally relying on God. So often we act as though God is only our last resort, most of the time just relying on our own guidance and strength (just like non-religious folks do). Trusting God does not mean just laying back and waiting for a bolt of lightning from heaven, but acting in the light of everything we know God wants us to do and be.

Psalms 65 and 66 are obviously ones that could be used in worship, and have been for 3,000 years. Songs are still being written today with their phrases. Worship should not be afraid to include the psalms that cry out in anguish and passion, like Psalms 64 or 60. That's life, and God wants to be in every part of your life. "Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to

you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I." (Psalm 61:1-2)

July 6

Psalms 67-71

God's will is that all the world be saved and everyone follow His ways. That is a vision for us, God's people, something beyond our reach that draws us upward and onward. Verse 67:6 reminds us that even the ground and environment will be blessed by this perfect situation.

Psalm 68 continues the idea of blessings for the land when God's people are aligned with God's will: "When you went out before your people, O God, when you marched through the wasteland, the earth shook, the heavens poured down rain, before God, the One of Sinai, before God, the God of Israel." (68:7-8) Can you imagine a time when all creation is in harmony?

Through good and bad times, we persist in seeking God. His ways are always the best, and are certainly the best in the long view, even if temporary relief can be found in lesser pursuits.

In 71:5-10, the psalm writer speaks of the incumbent hardships of old age---will God still be there? Our own strength diminishes, but God's never does.

July 7

Psalms 72-77

Psalm 72 is by Solomon, and at his best, he did fit this description of a good king. As with any leader of a country, if God is their leader, everyone is better off, even neighboring countries. Later in Solomon's reign, he strayed from this ideal, and the country became divided.

Psalm 73 points out the biggest difference between the ungodly and God's followers: Heaven. They may do unlimited evil and still prosper, but their judgment is coming. "As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies." (73:20)

It's hard to take chastisement; those times when God is making adjustments in our lives to improve us. Psalm 74 says it pretty well -- "Lord, how long will this take? I'm ready for you to save me!" This psalm responds to the Exile to Babylon in 589 BC and the destruction of the temple. God's people had turned their back on him and had to be disciplined. God is merciful, but God is just.

“When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm.” (75:3)
There is one standard that will always hold – God’s. His standards will not change with the times.

Psalm 77 is full of faith. God has brought justice on his people, long overdue, and it’s a bitter pill to swallow. Still, they remember former miracles and know that they can trust God for a better future.

July 8
Psalms 78-80

“Can God spread a table in the desert?” is the question in 78:19. Of course He can! That’s not near as big a miracle as some of the things I’ve seen. The rescue at the Red Sea should have been enough proof. I’ve seen folks diagnosed with cancer have the tumor disappear. I’ve seen a man legally blind that could only see two inches in from of him build a playground set for a church out of wood, from scratch. I’ve seen an elderly lady superintend the building of a church fellowship hall, 2400 square feet for \$83,000.00. All these things were by the power of God. Bigger yet was the life of a drug addict, changed to a loving mother when she invited Jesus into her life. How about the young father, whose wife ran off with her boss and left him with a young son? He gave his life to Christ, and God brought him a new wife and mother for his son (she’s a doctor). Yes, God can spread a table in the desert, and a whole lot more!

Israelites have always tried to pass on their history from one generation to the next. They don’t want their children to forget past mistakes, lest they repeat them. When the nation has forgotten God, their destruction eventually came. “In spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.” (78:32)

In Psalm 80, “God’s chosen people” have suffered destruction at the hand of their enemies, God’s judgment delivered by other hands. Yet the people understand their sin, and promise to serve God if He’ll save them.

July 9
Psalms 81-87

The first three verses of Psalm 81 are loud and noisy. It’s a celebration! The temple was at the middle of the three great annual feasts of Israel- Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. There was a time for this kind of celebration, like you would cheer at a sporting event or political rally. Make room in your church for that kind of exuberance.

But these worship experiences were not all joyous. They also were a time for confession. We have sinned; remembrance of it is sad, but also guidance for more appropriate response to God in the future.

Psalm 83 calls on God to make a tremendous show of strength, that everyone might follow Him. God does that, of course. God's greatest show of power is your life radically changed.

Base your Sabbath on Psalm 84:10, "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere." Worship on "The Lord's Day" is tremendous rejuvenation after of a week's worth of "elsewhere".

"Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name." (86:11) We are reminded that God has to give us the strength and desire to consistently seek Him. On our own, we lack the strength to keep seeking what we know is best for us: God alone.

July 10 Psalms 88-91

It's kind of ironic that a person near death considers themselves as "remembered by God no more". (88:3-5) Often God shows great mercy in allowing someone to die. When their body can no longer continue with any quality of life, their greatest healing may occur in transferring their citizenship to Heaven.

Rahab, in 89:10, is a reference to a great beast of the sea, not the Rahab we know from the second chapter of Joshua. It was a mythical creature, a representation of the chaos of the great seas and oceans.

God promised that a son of David would always rule in Israel. This had a deeper meaning than they could understand! David's descendants often turned away from God, and God did allow a time when Israel was in exile from its land. The promise to David is fulfilled forever, though, in one from his family tree- Jesus!

Verse 90:14 is the key to a happy life: "Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days."

I sure like the image in 91:1, of resting "in the shadow of the Most High." It speaks of a peace in knowing God will protect us in all we go through.

July 11 Psalms 92-100

It's a different kind of music we find in Psalm 92. Instead of cymbals, tambourines, and horns, we hear a lyre and a harp, stringed instruments with a sweet melody. Music of all kinds have been part of worshiping God from the very beginning. Songs speak for us when we can't find the words. They express emotions, not just thoughts. They remind us of our history and God's greatness. Songs often build structure to our faith.

"Blessed is the man you discipline, O Lord, the man you teach from your law." (94:12) God will give us guidance, if we will hear it, from the Bible and by speaking to us in our prayer time. Too often our wisdom comes from learning from our mistakes! Can we trust God enough to learn from Him without having to try our own ways first? That is our goal.

The first part of 96:1 says, "Sing to the Lord a new song." I'm beginning to lean heavily on that phrase, for my relationship to God is new every day. We should find that God continually makes changes in us, if we permit, that make each day something new. The Christian life is an adventure! If we are to be more like Jesus each day, what habit or attitude will God next find in me that needs to be gotten rid of?

Just as we have contemporary songs of praise that we carry with us, Psalm 100 is a short burst of praise you can memorize to be available at all times. Many of us had to learn this psalm in Sunday School, as did our parents. In fact, our grandparents probably memorized it for public school.

July 12 Psalms 102-105

The writer in Psalm 101 makes a commitment to walk uprightly, choosing to follow God's ways. It speaks to us, loudly and clearly: "How about you?"

Psalm 102 cries out in loneliness. The author is afflicted in some way or ways and feels that all his friends have deserted him. He cried out to God - when no friend is near, God is always around, and will hear you. "He does not treat us as our sins deserve!" (103:10) Glory Hallelujah! That's reason enough to praise God every day!

Verse 103:12 says God removes our sins from us "as far as the east is from the west". Don't take this to mean God completely forgets our sins! The important part is that, when our sins are forgiven, God doesn't hold them against us at all. God still knows us completely, all our strengths and our weaknesses.

July 13 Psalms 106-107

We have both an individual faith and a collective faith. That is, we can speak of our relationship to God personally and as a nation or church. We are responsible for our actions, but we also must accept responsibility for the actions of the group, since we have influence within our group.

As we look back, we can see that we could have done better, and should have. We see great national sins of slavery, prejudice, pride, and lack of mercy for the needy of other nations. We see sins within our denomination that has caused division and strife.

We repent. We ask God's forgiveness, and pledge to do better individually to influence others for good. Psalm 106 talks about Israel, but by example calls every nation and denomination and group to repentance. God lays before us good and evil, life and death--- choose life!

God has been our anchor throughout history. When we repent, he forgives. When we suffer and cry out to God, He answers our prayers. God will never forsake us; his presence is with us to lead us and guide us and heal us and save us. Glory be to God!

July 14
Psalms 108-118

Much of Psalm 109 sounds like our natural reaction to evil: Dear God, destroy them! Throw them down! Ruin them like they've ruined everybody else!

Yet God calls us to an un-natural response. Do good to your enemies. Turn the other cheek. Speak kindly to those who curse you.

We serve as ambassadors for God, and God has saved us through incredible mercy. We serve as living proof that God can forgive even outrageous sin.

Psalm 110 is very messianic; Jesus is referred to, and David (the writer of this psalm) probably had no idea how prophetic he was. From the reference to Melchizedek (who seemed to appear out of nowhere in Genesis 14) to being at God's right hand (110:15) to judging the nations, Jesus the Messiah fits right into this psalm. I wonder if David knew he was writing about himself?

Verse 110:10 says that the fear (awe or reverence) of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. In other words, the smartest thing you can do is put God first-place in your life.

"Surely he will never be shaken; a righteous man will be remembered forever." (112:6) When you read the obituaries in the local paper, it's easy to think the person for whom the most is written will be the person remembered longest. Actually, that's not a good indicator. A person is remembered by the lives they've changed. Taking that one step further, a person will have the most effect in this world by connecting people to the world to come.

Verse 116:1-2 says the author will love God for as long as he lives because he came to him in his hour of need. Well... I guess we ought to be ashamed when, once we're save, we question whether God will hear our prayers.

July 15
Psalm 119

I guess you've recognized that this psalm is the longest chapter in the Bible. It is arranged in sections, with each beginning with a Hebrew Letter one further into the alphabet than the last, an "acrostic poem". It would be like writing a poem in English in which the first stanza starts with "a", the second stanza starts with "b", and so on until you had gone through the whole alphabet. It makes for a long poem! This psalm is about God's law.

Psalm 119:7 is not an instant event. "I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances. "We praise as we go along, for it takes our whole life to learn God's guidelines.

Plant God's Word in your heart, and treasure it, as insurance against sin. (119:11)

Verse 119:72 says God's Word is more precious than gold and silver. Right! By following God's guidance, we gain habits and blessings that money can't buy.

Does 119:74 apply to you? Do people rejoice because of the good example you set?

"The Lord exists forever; your word is firmly fixed in heaven." (119:89) It's good to have standards that don't change with each generation.

**July 16
Psalm 120-131**

So much of Psalms has cried out to the Lord because of oppression by other people. Now, in 120:2, the writer asks God to deliver him from "lying lips and deceitful tongues." He certainly includes his own! He puts some of the blame on being around an alien people. As James said in James 3:2-12, the tongue is hard to control.

You'll notice many of the psalms in this section are "songs of ascent": They were used at festival times while approaching the temple with a crowd, kind of a parade atmosphere. You can sense, by the rhythm of the language, that much of this reading (singing) was done responsively, one group calling out the next line or two in response to the previous lines.

Psalm 126 reflects the great joy the Jews felt in returning to their native land after the captivity in Babylon during the sixth century B.C. Not all captives chose to return (only a small percentage).

**July 17
Psalms 132-138**

Are these psalms empty ritual? Are they just repeated without thought, words not connected to the heads and hearts of the people? They obviously are songs that became the ordinary part of ceremony in worship.

But they aren't ordinary! In the same way, we repeat the Lord's Prayer, "Amazing Grace", "The Old Rugged Cross", and other songs and creeds time and again, until we have them memorized. Does that mean they've lost their meaning? Rarely! The parts of the ritual of worship we've memorized have shaped and formed us. They've become internalized, part of our basic beliefs. It's not as much rote memorization as it is spiritual formation.

Psalm 136 cried out to be read responsively in the church. The theme is obvious; don't ever forget it, because you may need it one day: "His love endures forever."

Need a summary of what it's like to live in captivity? Read Psalm 137. It really tears at your heart.

**July 18
Psalms 139-143**

Psalm 139 points out the two sides to God's nearness. God will always be there when you need Him..... But there is also no hiding from God. How do we find peace in this balance? The only reason we want to ever hide from God is that we're afraid something we're doing doesn't exactly fit God's will. We've got to understand that God wants to uncover our faults to improve us, to give us greater life.

This series of psalms follows David's struggle to trust only in God for his help. It's a struggle we all go through. We know the catchy phrase, "God and me make a majority", but when you are the only one of your team that you can actually see, it's easy to struggle. Like David, we rely on the known fact of God's past assistance to give us clear vision of God's faithfulness. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

**July 19
Psalms 144-150**

See the evangelistic thread in Psalm 145? Verses 4-7 urges one generation to tell the next of God's ways, and speak freely of God's majesty.

What a contrast between God and all others, even kings. There is always a good reason to praise the Lord! This is a tremendous group of psalms that ends the book. How could anyone read them and not feel uplifted?

Many people read in the book of Psalms every day. You could read one each day (break Psalm 119 into parts), and easily read through the book twice a year. Psalms covers a wide range of emotions, from reverence to anger. You come away with the feeling, after reading this book, that God's not afraid of your honesty.

**July 20
Proverbs 1-3**

Proverbs was written by Solomon, son of David. Most of the book of Psalms was attributed to David; Solomon was just as prolific, in a different style.

Solomon prayed to God for wisdom, and God gave him what he asked for, to an incredible degree. Solomon is known as the wisest man who ever lived. Most persons have to gain wisdom the hard way, by learning from mistakes they made. Solomon also gained much wisdom this way; his biggest mistake was letting his many wives lead him away from God. We'll see many references in Proverbs to the lessons he learned from this sin.

In 1:7, Solomon pairs wisdom with discipline. It would be great if we could gain most of our wisdom by following the advice of others, especially God, rather than by learning from our own mistakes. That's where discipline comes in!

In the last part of chapter 1, Solomon reminds us that it's not popular to be cautious because of the advice of others. We'd rather rush ahead, thinking our fate will somehow be different from those who've gone before. If we could just get it in our minds that God's ways are always meant for our good, we wouldn't have to constantly paying for our errors.

**July 21
Proverbs 4-7**

Verse 4:14 says to avoid the company of the wicked, "for they cannot sleep till they do evil". I remember guys who, as teens, seemed to always be looking for

mischief as something to get away with. It was a thrill to them. It led them to all kinds of trouble, but I also remember that some of their innocent friends got into trouble just by being with them.

I wonder what Solomon will say about the advice that comes from being behind on progress. Know what I mean? Some parents will tell their children to never store anything on a computer without it also being printed out on paper. "You can't trust a computer to not crash and wipe out all your hard work," they say. That's certainly true, but printing out everything is unnecessary.

Chapter 5 seems too vivid to not be "wisdom by mistake". Surely Solomon knows the regrets of adultery first-hand. He urges his readers to have discipline enough to learn by his experience, not their own.

Watch for Solomon's two key points about money: Don't co-sign a loan with anyone. Don't buy on credit. In both these situations, you give someone else power over you.

**July 22
Proverbs 8-11**

There are two ways to gain wisdom: Make mistakes and learn from them, or listen to those who have made mistakes and avoid the same errors.

Wait, there is another way! Proverbs 8 said wisdom has been around longer than people have. If we are careful to follow God's ways, we can gain wisdom without there needing to be mistakes. God made all that is, and knows the best way for his creation to work. Why not just carefully follow God? "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." (Proverbs 9:10)

Much of the poetry of Proverbs is in couplets. In the first half of a verse, a primary idea is stated. Then, in the second half of the verse, the idea is either repeated in a slightly different way, or the opposite is stated in a negative way. This makes great responsive readings for a worship service! It has an easy rhythm, and enforces an idea.

**July 23
Proverbs 12-15**

Verse 12:16 says, "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult." The writer, Solomon, warns us not to react to every little insult we think is aimed at us. Maybe you've had experience with this kind of overly-sensitive person. You have to watch your words so carefully that you don't enjoy being around them. It's like walking on eggshells! Better to just let little slights' slide on by and look at friends in the light of your whole history with, not just the last few minutes.

In the first part of 13:10, it says, "Pride only breeds quarrels." How true! Self-centered protection of our rights and reputation cheats our neighbors and friends of our love. Get your mind off yourself! Even though it's a secular song, it's always

true that "love makes the world go 'round."

Notice the medical advice in 14:30. If you'll reach a point of satisfaction with what you have, it will help you live longer, but if you constantly are striving for more, it will "rot your bones". Stress kills, and wears down your immune system. How did Solomon know that 3,000 years ago?

July 24

Proverbs 16-19

It seems that a wise person is always ready to listen. He/she realizes that they will never know everything, but the more they know, the better off they will be. A foolish person, though considers he/she knows enough already and stops listening. A good listener can avoid foolish mistakes by hearing about the mistakes of others.

Verse 19:2 says, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge." It's best to understand a situation first before we rush off to solve it - it saves time and money.

The second half of 19:13 says that a quarrelsome wife is like a constant dripping. It's not just about wives! A person that always has a complaint is like a drippy faucet, a persistent irritation.

Solomon speaks from experience that following God's ways is always best. Listen carefully to God before you act.

July 25

Proverbs 20-22

Proverbs is just overflowing with wise advice. Look at 20:4, "A sluggard does not plow in season; so at harvest time he looks but finds nothing." This applies to a lot more than agriculture! School studies, investing, spiritual growth all reap great rewards many months and years after a timely act that may have seemed like drudgery at the time. Spending time with our children or your spouse may not seem important at a particular moment, but will yield great rewards later on.

Verse 20:29's reference to "gray hair" actually is a synonym for "wisdom". (An old man can also be wise with a bald head or white hair.)

"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." (22:6) This verse has been a comfort for parents, but I pray it won't be an excuse for not continuing to witness to grown children.

July 26

Proverbs 23-26

Verse 23:9 reminds us that there are some people you just can't reason with. Develop skill at recognizing this, to save yourself time and effort. Be sure to recognize the wise persons who are always trying to listen for ways they can

improve.

Proverbs believes in hard work. It seems that a sluggard is anyone who doesn't work during every available hour. Excuses will come back to haunt you.

Verse 26:27 reminds us that gossips, liars, and fools are destined for misfortune. "If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it." Any kind of dishonesty takes us out of God's will, so blessings will be few and far between.

Don't put a lot of trust in a foolish person. It's hard to lean very steadily on one who insists on having a false opinion of their greatness. They're a poor judge of character!

July 27

Proverbs 27-31

Did Solomon write chapters of Proverbs in one sitting, or did he have a list he added to as he thought of wise sayings?

I love 27:17, "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another." We can be a great encouragement to each other. In fact, that's the beauty of the church! Each of us helps the other 'sharpen' our spiritual life.

"A fool gives full vent to his anger", says 29:11. I've learned that the hard way! When we let our temper get out of control, even for a little while, it sure is hard to mend all the broken fences later.

Chapter 31 contains to be a standard for wives to live by, though it provides a distinctive point for husbands as well.: Do whatever it takes to support your mate. It's a full-time job, but brings incredible blessing."

July 28

Ecclesiastes 1-4

Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, had a lot of regrets in his later years. He realized you could have done a lot better, as king and father and God-follower. Ecclesiastes is full of cynicism. The phrase "everything is meaningless" (NIV translation) or "all is vanity" (King James) or "everything is futile" (Living Bible) is repeated over and over. Solomon looks back at his life to try and find where he missed its real meaning.

It's rewarding to discover the meaning of life a bit at a time as we read through Ecclesiastes. Solomon examines many activities that are important to humans, and judges what profit there is in each. It's a "weeding out" process. Knowledge (1:12-15) is not the key to meaning. Laughter is not the highest goal (2:1-2). Great projects is not the answer. What is the meaning of life? He starts to find a little insight in 2:24-26. It's got something to do with our relationship to God.

The familiar "time for everything under the sun" passage, Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, is meant to be cynical. "This is all going to happen, no matter what I do." Look at it

from a different angle, though: Opportunities arise each day that may never come again, so don't miss any chance to serve God by doing good.

July 29

Ecclesiastes 5-8

In Solomon's search for meaning, he shares a major discovery with us in 5:1-3: Prayer should include more listening than speaking. We are on the end of the conversation that needs to receive advice, not give it! I guess that makes a lot of sense, but it's just the opposite of how most all of us pray.

In 5:10, it says, "Whoever loves money never has money enough." He goes on to say that riches bring lots of worrying about possessions. He shares another great discovery in 5:18-20: A person needs to be satisfied with his or her labor each day as a gift from God.

"Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart." (7:3) Actually, medical research has proven this to be false. Laughter is good for your heart. But what the author is saying here is that you can gain more wisdom from misfortune than from days when everything goes your way.

July 30

Ecclesiastes 9-12

Everybody lives, everybody dies. You've got to make the most of life while you're alive! We don't know how many years we will have, or how many troubles we'll have, so just live out your days with as much wisdom as possible. (chapter 9) Think back on what you know of the writer, Solomon. He was chosen by God to succeed his father, David, on the throne of Israel. He always had everything he wanted when he was growing up. When he became king, God gave him great wisdom and uncountable riches. Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, of various nationalities and religions, who eroded Solomon's devotion to God. Solomon concludes in today's reading in Ecclesiastes that wisdom is just knowledge if it is not accompanied by respect ("fear") of God. It becomes meaningless, folly, of no lasting value. It certainly sounds like he regrets having grown old and not having discovered this earlier. Chapter 12 concludes Solomon's search for meaning, in verse 12:13: "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man."

July 31

Song of Solomon 1-8

This book operates on two levels, the most obvious being Solomon's romance with the Shulammite woman. This also serves as an allegory of God's intimate romance with us, his church.

God has always had his eyes on you. If you can imagine it, God loves each of us like we are his only heart's desire. God longs for us, wants to hear our voice in prayer, desires to wrap his love around us. Of course, God wants us to love him just as much in return.

The love between man and wife is a beautiful thing when they are completely devoted to each other. Few of us are beauty queens or breathtakingly handsome men, yet through the eyes of love our wife or husband sees us that way. It has to do with commitment and marriage: You determine that this one person that God has given you will always be the object of your affection, with God's great help. They will be all you ever need, and will fulfill the every longing of your heart.

A good marriage is, then, a reflection of God's love Just as God loved you before you were born and before you had a chance to respond to God's love, so a wife or husband commits themselves one to the other before all is known, like how they squeeze the toothpaste tube, whether or not they snore, or how they will punish the children. Love is not a feeling, but an action based on commitment.