

52 WEEKS
THROUGH THE
PSALMS

J A M E S M E R R I T T



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The Music of Heaven

It was the most nervous and scared I have ever been in my ministerial life. I was about to walk into a packed worship center of close to a thousand people, many of whom wanted my scalp. I was thirty-two years old, pastoring a church larger than I ever imagined pastoring, and my first six months were the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good was the church had exploded in growth unlike it had ever seen in its one hundred plus years of existence. The church had never baptized so many people in a six-month period nor seen as many people join the church. Money was flowing like a river in a flood zone.

The bad was many people were unhappy because (a) they didn't like all the new growth; (b) the staff was undermining me behind my back because they didn't share my conservative evangelical theology nor my emphasis on evangelism; and (c) many resented my strong preaching and decisive leadership.

The ugly was there was a movement to have me fired, and a petition with some three hundred signatures to effect just that was reportedly circulating in the community and was to be presented that night. My strongest supporters were as worried as I was and told me they didn't know how the meeting would go.

I had developed a blood pressure problem over the stress and my sleep account was completely empty and overdrawn. I was spiritually drained, emotionally exhausted, and physically depleted. I was convinced that I was going to be fired that night not for doing wrong but doing right.¹ As I placed my hand on the door to enter the arena (it didn't feel like a worship center to me), I was sweating profusely, my heart was pounding, I felt sure my blood pressure was up, and I was almost hyperventilating. Just as I was about to open the door, everything changed for me because of one part of a lyric of a song that was written over three

thousand years ago. It was written by a king named David and the lyric was this: “This I know...God is for me” (Psalm 56:9 ESV).

That verse came to me because the Thursday prior to that Sunday night I spent an entire day “listening” to every single one of those 150 songs in the book of Psalms, choosing the lyrics that meant the most to me in one of the most difficult times of my life. Those songs changed my life that day, and to this day the sound of these spiritual songs are music to my ear.

There is something about music that appeals to everyone. Not everyone likes sports. Not everyone likes politics. Not everyone likes movies.² But I have never met anyone who doesn't like music. Whether it be rock or jazz, southern gospel or high church, pop or hip-hop, country or classical, heavy metal or disco, you would be hard pressed to find someone who doesn't like some sort of music.

God evidently likes music too. The longest of all the sixty-six books in the Bible, authored by God, is dedicated to the hymns of the Hebrews, known as the Psalms. In fact, music is referred to in 1150 verses throughout Scripture.³

Both Judaism and Christianity are unique in that they are singing faiths. The Psalms have been described as “Israel's Hymnbook,” and the word *psalm* actually means “song.” These songs originally were sung to the accompaniment of an ancient stringed instrument known as a psaltery, hence the word *psalm*.⁴ From the birth of Christianity, psalms were one of the main forms, if not *the* main form, of musical expression in the early church.⁵ Paul said using psalms to communicate truth is an outflow of the filling of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18-19).

Paul's observation also clues us in to the fact that psalms are more than songs to be sung or music to be played but truth to be heard and learned. One of the ways the earliest Christians communicated doctrinal truth within the church was through hymns.⁶

This practice has continued throughout the history of the church: “the hymns of the early church throughout history were intended primarily for that purpose—to teach and reinforce sound doctrine in a memorable form...if you'll go back and look at the hymnbooks [churches used to use] you will see how each song often communicated a complete

doctrinal statement, usually a complete retelling of the gospel in capsule. These songs weren't to dance to. They were to learn from. This was the understood meaning of hymns for centuries and was particularly true at the dawn of the church."⁷

Which brings us full circle to the Psalms. Even in his death, we know just how important the Psalms were to Jesus. All four Gospel writers tell us that on the cross Jesus quoted from the Psalms.⁸ The Psalms have been historically a foundation for both Jewish and Christian prayer. Not only is this book the most popular in the Bible⁹ but it is the oldest songbook still in use in the world.

All of which gives the impetus to this book. This music from the heart of God is indeed the music of heaven. Without question, these songs will make it into eternity and be sung forever and ever. But unlike other music, the lyrics alone captivate the heart, the soul, and the mind.

It was Martin Luther who said, "I place music next to theology and give it the highest praise."¹⁰ Perhaps the Psalms played a role in his sentiment for there is great theological truth found in this music that will warm the heart, challenge the mind, and strengthen the spirit.

In 1703 Andrew Fletcher said, "Let me make the songs of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws."¹¹ I pray that you will understand the truth and reasoning behind Fletcher's statement after spending a year with these songs. For the truth in these lyrics can transform a heart in a way that all the laws ever written never can. "Listen" to them and learn from them for the next fifty-two weeks, and you will be comforted, encouraged, strengthened, and blessed by songs that came from the hands of men but were composed from the heart of God.

PART ONE

Up Close and Personal

*God is a God we can approach and have
an intimate relationship with.*

Happiness in High-Def

Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 1
- Matthew 25:14-21
- Psalm 37:1-6
- Proverbs 8:32-36
- Nehemiah 8:1-12

Are You Happy?

If you have ever seen anything in high-definition, you know how clear and sharp the picture is. The details are luminous and the colors pop. Sometimes I wish life could always be so veracious and vibrant. What might the whole of life look like in high-def?

In his autobiography *Just as I Am*, Billy Graham tells a story from a visit to the Caribbean. One of the wealthiest men in the world asked Billy and his wife, Ruth, to come to his lavish home for lunch. The man was seventy-five years old and throughout the entire meal he hardly spoke. Something was troubling him and he seemed close to tears.

He finally looked up at the Grahams and said, “I have to confess something. I am the most miserable man in the world. I don’t understand it. I can go anywhere I want in my yacht, private plane, or helicopters. I have everything I want to make me happy, and yet I am miserable as hell.” Dr. Graham talked and prayed with him trying to point him to Christ, who alone could give him real happiness.

That afternoon the pastor of the local Baptist church came to call on Ruth and Billy in their cottage. He was an English widower who was also seventy-five and he spent most of his free time taking care of his two invalid sisters. Dr. Graham could not get over this man’s enthusiasm for life, his love for Christ, and his love for other people.

This pastor, who did not have a fraction of what the other man had, said something that Dr. Graham never forgot: “I don’t have two pounds to my name, but I am the happiest man on this island.” When the man left, Dr. Graham looked at Ruth and said, “Who do you think is the richer man?”

I believe there is a way to live and to die truly happy and then find out after death that real eternal, permanent happiness has only just begun!

Are you happy? Are you happy with your life? Are you happy with your singleness? Are you happy with your marriage? Are you happy with your job? Are you happy with your finances? Are you happy with your friendships? Are you happy with who you are, where you are, and what you are accomplishing with your life? If the answer isn’t crystal clear to you, then let’s let the psalmist tune up our vision.

“I Am Never Happy”

In 1835, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, “Music is the universal language of mankind—poetry their universal pastime and delight.” The ancient Hebrews had the same understanding well before Longfellow. In fact, the longest book of the Bible, the book of Psalms, is a collection of one hundred and fifty songs. Originally, psalms were not read or taught; they were sung. And the very first song in this musical collection is about happiness.

Shockingly, happiness is *not* tied to prosperity, profits, or people. It has nothing to do with means, money, or mistresses. The rich and famous can still be unhappy. You would think that someone rich and famous like Howard Stern would be a happy man. However, back in 2007 he had a personal trainer and was in the best physical shape of his life. He was in therapy and was getting his mind together. He was living with a young, beautiful model. He was earning one hundred million dollars a year to do what he loved doing, which was radio. But in an interview at the time, he said, “I am never happy. I haven’t been happy a day in my life.”¹ While I wish Howard Stern could be reading this chapter, I’m so glad that you are!

When Psalm 1:1 talks about the man who is “blessed,” the Hebrew word literally means “to be happy.” Perhaps the Hebrews’ title for this song was, “How to Be Happy.”

Contrary to what some people think, God is not some cosmic killjoy

who loves it when we are miserable. God wants you to be happy, but he wants you to be happy his way. He wants you to be happy internally, externally, *and* eternally. The psalmist shows us that the key to a happy life is living a God-centered life.

Happiness Is Found in Favoring the Right People

The psalmist begins with what sounds like a negative, but it is undoubtedly a positive. I love the way The Message translates verse 1: “How well God must like you—you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon, you don’t slink along Dead-End Road, you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College” (Psalm 1:1 MSG).

This is a descriptive way of talking about the three different kinds of people who make up what we would call *the wrong crowd*:

- the ungodly
- the unholy
- the unbelieving

The ungodly have no room for God in their life. The unholy live as if there is no God. And the unbelieving mock God and the whole concept of sin. In short, these are people who will lead you further away from God, truth, and even happiness.

If you want to be happy, you cannot act on the advice and the counsel of people who push away, ignore, or mock God. Getting spiritual counsel from unspiritual people would be like getting advice on brain surgery from an automobile mechanic.

There is a progression in verse 1 that we are wise to pay attention to. First, you *walk* among the wrong crowd, then you *stand* around the wrong crowd, and then you join in or *sit* with the wrong crowd. This is the way it always works. First you start listening to what they say, and then you start hanging out with them, and then you start living like them.

We don’t need to be listening to the ungodly and the anti-godly. We do need to be talking to them and to be a friend of sinners as Jesus was. Yet, we can’t give in to their influence and become like them. The simple strategy is to favor the right people in your foremost relationships.

Happiness Is Following the Right Principles

The psalmist goes on to say the mark of a truly happy person is someone who wants to study the word of God so he can discover the will of God and do what God wants him to do. When God says, “Do this,” he is simply saying, “Help yourself to happiness.”

The more you learn how God wants you to live and the more you live what you learn, the happier you will be. When I first started playing golf, it was far more frustrating than exhilarating. There was a lot more hurt than happiness. Then, I started taking lessons and reading about golf. I began to learn what to do and what not to do. Suddenly, I could get out of a sand trap. I could hit the ball farther. I began to lower my score. Guess what I discovered? The better you are at practicing golf, the more you enjoy it.

It is not enough just to read your Bible and put it down with forgetfulness, or to read it to check it off your to-do list. Go further. Think through what you read. Apply it to how you live. Find the enjoyment in the practice of his word.

To improve my golf game, I did a lot of reading. And then I began to practice what I'd read. Everything I read told me that most bad shots can be attributed to one of three things: a poor grip, poor posture, or improper alignment. So, I have a little golfing system that I call GPA: grip, posture, and alignment. When I practice this, my game improves.

God's word helps you to get a grip on life. It will inform you of those things that are good and bad, right and wrong. It will also posture you for success, putting you in the best position to be happy. Then, when you are aligned with God's principles, facing the direction he wants you to go, he will see to it that you are happy and full of joy.

Happiness Is Fulfilling God's Purpose

When you live such a God-centered life that you are favoring the right people and following the right principles, you will be like “a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers” (Psalm 1:3 NASB).

Why do you think the psalmist compares happy people to trees? First, when you take root in God's word, you will be unshakable in what you

believe. You will be unwavering in how you behave. You won't get into the ditch of sin on either side of your life. You will stay right in the middle of God's highway of happiness.

The people who have truly moved this world have been people the world could not move. People like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were like a good tree, which took root in believing the right thing. I shudder to think where America would now be in our racial relations if it were not for Dr. King. The reason he could move this nation is because this nation could not move him. He took root in what was right—the belief that all men are created equal and should be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

Second, if you bear the fruit of living God's word, you will not wither away in the wind. In one sense, every life bears fruit, but some is ripe and some is worthless. That is why we go on to read, "The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away" (Psalm 1:4 NASB). When the grain was thrashed in the breeze, the worthless parts would fly off in the wind. The wheat, the fruit, is what settled down for use.

The truly happy person is a person who is living a rooted life, a life of purpose, a life that makes an impact on others. Real happiness is found in favoring the right people, following the right principles, and fulfilling God's purpose.

Do you want to be miserable? Live a you-centered life. Do you want to be happy? Live a God-centered life. This is how you live a high-def life.

Prayer for This Week: *Father, give me a desire for your life-giving word, place me among your invigorating people, and name a vivid purpose for my days.*

Question for This Week: How can you improve your grip, posture, and alignment to the happy life God has for you?

A Song for Today

Scriptures for This Week

- Psalm 3
- Psalm 119:153-160
- Daniel 11:32
- Psalm 34:4-7
- 2 Samuel 22:47-49

You Have a Fan Who Will Never Fail You

I am a huge baseball fan and my favorite team has always been the New York Yankees. Great players have come through the Yankees and one of the greatest was Lou Gehrig. At the height of his career, Lou Gehrig contracted a fatal disease and had to retire from baseball. On July 4, 1939, he stood before sixty thousand fans and gave one of the greatest speeches in the history of sports. Listen to it:

Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of this earth. I have been in ballparks for seventeen years and have never received anything but kindness and encouragement from you fans. Look at these grand men. Which of you wouldn't consider it the highlight of his career just to associate with them for even one day? Sure, I'm lucky... When everybody down to the groundskeepers and those boys in the white coats remember you with trophies—that's something! When you have a wonderful mother-in-law who takes sides with you in squabbles with her own daughter—that's something. When you have a father and a mother who work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body—it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength

and shown more courage than you dreamed existed—that’s the finest I know. So I close in saying that I might have been given a bad break, but I’ve got an awful lot to live for!²

Less than two years later, Lou Gehrig died. Even when he faced a disease that would eventually kill him, he understood the great blessings of life and drew strength from his fans.

Have you ever lived through a season when bad news was good news because the next news was always worse news? King David experiences dark days like this. Not only does his son Absalom rebel against him, but Absalom deceives the whole kingdom and takes it away from his own father (2 Samuel 15–18). Now he is pursuing David, trying to kill him. The walls of David’s life are crumbling all around him, but God is a fan who endures with him through hardship. Just when the armies of Absalom are closing in on David, when his own people call him a coward and it appears that all is lost, the Lord gives David Psalm 3.

You Have Foes Who Will Fight You

The Psalms are songs for the soul. They speak to the heart. They come out of authentic scenes and express intense emotions. Psalm 3 speaks to the way many of us live—whether we realize it or not—in a daily fight with our enemies.

We are light living in darkness and darkness hates light. So don’t expect the world to like you. A Christian does not have to go looking for trouble; if you are a child of God, trouble will come looking for you! Listen to Psalm 3:1, “O LORD, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me” (NASB). What is true for David is also true for me.

I have three enemies that work 24/7 to get me away from God. I know every day when I get up they are just waiting for me: an enemy around me, an enemy within me, and an enemy beneath me.

The world is my external foe. It says, “I am just a product of chance and my life has no meaning.” The Bible fights against this foe by declaring, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth”—and me too!

The flesh is my internal foe. My flesh will say, “Eat, drink, and be

merry for tomorrow I may die.” But the Bible says, “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

The devil is my eternal foe. The devil will whisper in my ear, “You can get away with it!” But the Bible says, “be sure that your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23).

David’s enemies don’t just mock him, they also mock God. In Psalm 3:2 they say, “There is no deliverance for him in God” (NASB). They laugh at David’s faith and make fun of David’s Father. They do not see David living a victorious life and so they do not see God either.

Even when the people of this world can’t see God, they can see our faith. Be assured, they will measure the size of our God by the size of our faith. Through the way we live our lives every day, we must show the world, by our great faith, that we serve a great God. No matter the foe, there is no god like our God.

You Have a Father Who Befriends You

Have you ever been so focused on what you’re afraid of that you lost sight of God’s love? When we focus on our foes and fears, we forget our Father. Focusing on our foes and fears will only fill our days with doubt, discouragement, depression, and defeat.

David does this too, but when problems and troubles come into his life, rather than use them as microscopes to focus on himself, he uses them as telescopes to focus on God. He says, “But You, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the One who lifts my head” (Psalm 3:3 NASB). David understands, in the middle of trouble and trials, that God is a shield *around* him, a glory *for* him, and supporter *under* him. But more important than being around, for, and under David, God is *with* him.

If you are facing difficulties and mountains you don’t think you can climb, God is right there with you. In the book of Daniel, when three godly men were thrown into the fiery furnace, the Son of God was standing right there with them. When the disciples were in that boat being tossed about on that stormy sea, Jesus came walking to them. When Paul was sitting in that Roman dungeon waiting to die, Jesus was living in him.

In verse 3, David refers to God as the “lifter of his head.” David is discouraged and defeated. His spirits are sagging and his head is hanging. But he knows he needs to lift his head. Even Jesus told his disciples that when the great tribulation was upon them, they were to “straighten up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near” (Luke 21:28 NASB).

You might be tempted to say, “Who could blame David under the circumstances?” Well, that was the point. David was not under circumstances; he was over them. He was over his foes and over his fears and he was focused on his Father.

You Have a Freedom that Is Forever

The first time the word *psalm* occurs is here in the superscript to Psalm 3. In Hebrew, a psalm is a poem to be sung to musical accompaniment, so this is the first recorded song that David writes. What would you choose to write a song about? David chooses to write about freedom.

When David finds God, David finds peace, for he says, “I lay down and slept; I awoke, for the LORD sustains me” (Psalm 3:5 NASB). Even though David is no longer surrounded by the luxury of his palace, the love of his people, or the loyalty of his soldiers, he still says, “I had the best night’s sleep I’ve had in years.” He finally discovers that true security and true serenity are found only in God.

Do you sleep well at night because you’ve got savings in the bank? Your good job is secure? Your health has never been better? The reality is that a hacker can steal your savings, a market crash can deplete your investments, the economy can cut back your job, and disease can ruin your health. But nobody can take Jesus Christ away from you. How soundly do you sleep because you have Jesus?

If the headlines declared today that God was dead, a lot of people would still sleep like a baby. But if those people were fired from their job today, they would lose their mind. If you are putting your trust, happiness, peace of mind, security, faith, and hope in anything or anybody other than Jesus Christ, you are headed for disappointment, doubt, and defeat. A lot of songs are written about these downers, but when we trust that God will never leave us or forsake us, we can sing a song of freedom.

You Have a Future that Is Firm

David realizes that with God there was no way he could lose, and thus he grows stronger in three ways.

First, his courage comes back. What David says in verse 6 is kind of weird: “I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about” (NASB). Anyone with common sense would be afraid of ten thousand people all wanting his scalp. But David said, “Bring them on!” How can David say that? Because David understands that God plus one is a majority in any situation.

Not only does David’s courage come back, but David’s confidence comes back. He says in verse 8, “Salvation belongs to the LORD” (NASB). The word he uses for salvation here is the same word used for deliverance in verse 2. It means “victory.” David finally figures it out. In any situation, victory belongs to the Lord. Now if victory belongs to the Lord and if, as a child of God, I belong to the Lord, that means victory belongs to me!

Finally, David’s contentment returned to him. He says, “Your blessing be upon Your people!” (Psalm 3:8 NASB). David finally understands that even in the middle of his deepest, darkest trials, God’s blessing is always upon him. No matter how dark the thunderclouds are hanging over your life, they will contain showers of blessing.

The next time you are in one of those difficult times, one of those Lou Gehrig moments, just remember you have a song for today where you can know that even when the foes are surrounding you, you have a Father who is always for you and a future that is bright and certain.

Prayer for This Week: *Father, give me the courage, confidence, and contentment to trust you through my darkest times.*

Question for This Week: In whatever you’re facing, what would it take to focus on God instead of on your fears and foes?