

*Having God Always Before Us*

**Psalm 16**

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We're still praying for God to help us be all that God wants us to be. That includes what this psalm says in verses seven and eight: we want to be people who *know God's counsel* and *have the Lord always before us*. How do we keep the Lord always before us? Or, keep our eyes always on the Lord?

As usual, exploring the meaning of one phrase or verse leads us to see its place in the entire psalm and how it connects with other parts of Scripture.

Psalm 16 shows us something of what it means to trust in the Lord. The phrase "in you I take refuge" is a way of saying, "I trust my life to your care, Lord." The rest of the psalm is a prayer that demonstrates trust. We trust and follow the Lord's counsel. We have the Lord always before us because we trust him.

We know we're supposed to trust God. But trust isn't always easy. I had a professor one time who began the class telling us that when we think about the call to discipleship and other calls from God, some fundamental questions arise. Questions like, is life good or is it not? Is God good or is he not? If God is good, then I can trust. If God is capricious—arbitrary and impulsive—then I have to be manipulative (Stephen L. Martyn, *Spirituality of Leading*, January 6-10, 2003. Asbury Theological Seminary). So, if God is good, if we really believe God is good, we can trust God. If we think that God has something up his sleeve or isn't dependable, then we won't trust God. Instead, we'll try to manipulate God or think we have to pretend with God or that we can earn our way to God thinking well of us. And how we relate to God spills over into how we relate to each other.

That still resonates with me. In the paper I wrote for that class, I gave a lot of attention to trust. Around that time, I was listening to an old Keith Green CD and paid attention to a song that speaks about life with God, living in God, trust, and the struggle to practice what we already know. Here's part of it:

Sometimes it's hard to see  
Sometimes it's hard to get through to me  
But I want to do all that You ask me to  
Help me to follow through  
Make every day a devotion to You  
'Cause it's dust to dust  
Until we learn how to trust

Sometimes I wander away  
I'm lost in the dark and my faith starts to sway  
I don't what to do, so I cry out to You  
Then I reach out in the air  
And I call Your name and You're always there  
Then You send down Your light  
And You tell me, "Walk by faith not by sight"  
Then You come shining down

(Melody Green. "Dust to Dust." For the Shepherd Music,  
1984. *Keith Green, The Ministry Years—1977-1979*.  
Brentwood, TN: Sparrow Records, 1999.)

Tragedies and disappointments we experience, or even just know about, can make trusting God difficult. We may wonder if God is really good and powerful and if God really cares. Can we really take refuge in God?

When our son Eric was little, he had lots of ear infections. He has a high pain tolerance, so they would get really bad before he'd show that he hurt and start crying. Why does that always seem to happen at 2:00 in the morning? We made many trips to the doctor and the pharmacy during those years. We prayed for Eric a lot. Sometimes, especially in the middle of the night when he was crying in pain, I'd pray for and look for God to heal him right away. That never seemed to happen. I felt like God could surely do that for us just once. In one of Richard Foster's books about prayer he used the example of praying for his son who was suffering with an ear

infection. I sometimes prayed the way Foster describes praying for his son who was healed. But Eric wasn't.

I was kind of disappointed with God. Did God really care? And even though I knew better, I wondered if there was something wrong with my faith or how I was praying or something. I carried that disappointment and doubt for some time. Then, some years later, Nancy was in a Sunday School class or some group and was telling about Eric's ear infections. She gave thanks to God that they weren't worse, that Eric didn't lose his hearing, and that he was all right now. I found release in the realization that God did answer those prayers, just now in the way I thought he ought to.

That's one example from my experience. I know many people go through devastating disappointment and tragedy. There are a lot of the Psalms that ask questions, that cry out to God and ask, "Why?" or "Where are you?" But there are also psalms like this one that are declarations of trust and confidence in the Lord. Scripture shows that, whatever happens, God is good and powerful and does care. God's revelation in Jesus especially demonstrates this.

Let's work through this psalm and hear what it says about trusting God. When we get to the part about always having the Lord before us, we'll look at some practical ways to do that. The emphasis on trust and the outline I'm using come from a commentary by James Mays (*Psalms. Interpretation Commentary*).

Mays says that trust is not just a warm feeling or a passing impulse in a time of trouble. The trust we see demonstrated in Psalm 16 "is a structure of acts and experiences" that keep us aware of the Lord as the supreme reality of life.

We see first that *trust is a relationship that defines us*. The psalmist prays, "LORD, you are my Lord and I am your servant. All the good I have and experience comes from you and apart from you I have no good." The Lord is good and wants good for us and gives good to us. As Psalm 23 says, "The LORD is my shepherd, I have everything I need."

Because we trust this good God who is the source of "all goodness and beauty, all truth and love," our commitment to God is exclusive. The psalm says, "Those who run after other gods multiply their sorrows. I won't

join them in worshipping those gods that aren't God." To worship and serve another god, to give our commitment and allegiance to something other than the Lord, cuts us off from the source of goodness.

We're so messed up, we even take good things that God gives and turn them into idols. Instead of thanking God for them and praising the One who gives them to us, we make the things our focus. We pursue things instead of seeking the Lord. Some writers talk about ancient gods that are still worshiped in various ways today: Mammon, Aphrodite, and Mars. We know them better as Money, Sex, and Power (for example: Richard Foster, *the Challenge of the Disciplined Life*; N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began* 393-400). Good gifts from God, but if we run after them for their own sake, we multiply our sorrows. But if we really trust the Lord, we seek him, we run after him, we worship and serve God only.

As we trust the true and living God, we see that *relationship with God is the greatest benefit for the Lord's servants*. Knowing God, living in God, abiding in God is the greatest gift God gives us. The psalm writer just prayed, "I will not drink the cup of other gods." Now he prays, "LORD, you alone are my portion and my cup."

There are several images here that describe the goodness of life with God: portion and cup, lot, boundary lines, heritage. In Israel, the tribe of Levi didn't inherit land; the Lord was their portion. The psalm says that's really true of all God's people. When the land was portioned out to the tribes, they cast lots to determine the boundaries. The psalm borrows that idea and says, "God you've given me a good place."

It mentions having a "goodly heritage." Mother's Day is a good time to think about our heritage. What have we learned, what's been passed on to us from our mothers, our ancestors? God has worked through those women to give us good things. Our mothers aren't perfect. We're not perfect parents, but God wants to work through us to share good things with our children and grandchildren. And, married or single, whether you have children or not, God can work through you to pass along a goodly heritage of faith and love and service.

Now we get to the verses that I started with, that stood out to me as I was reading and praying this psalm a while back. In verses 7-8 we see that

*trust concentrates our mind on the Lord.* "Through praise the psalmist keeps the LORD in the center of his attention" and he practices the presence of the LORD (Mays).

"I *will* praise the LORD." Praise is a choice. We intend and determine to worship. Worship is our response to God. But we choose to respond in this way.

This Lord we trust and praise is the one who counsels us or gives us counsel. A good counselor listens to us, knows us, and shares wisdom and insight with us. They help us see the way to go. God knows us, knows our situation. And God has the best perspective, the biggest picture. This ties in to what we've talked about before: being established in the truth, abiding in Jesus' word and being set free by the truth Jesus is. As we abide in God and walk as Jesus walked, as we continue in relationship with the Lord, he gives us wisdom, he gives us direction, he counsels us and helps us choose the right way.

"Even at night my heart instructs me," it says here. Some translate the word heart there as conscience. Literally, it says "kidneys." The ancient Hebrews thought that place in the body was the source of deep emotion (John Holbert, <http://www.patheos.com/resources/additional-resources/2011/04/god-of-joy-and-pleasure-john-holbert-04-25-2011>). The point is that God works through our emotions and our conscience to teach us. *Even at night*, we can learn from God. Some say that means that when we're awake at night we can meditate and pray. And that's true, of course. But my first thought was that God is able to work on us and help us even when we're asleep. There's a great line from Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection: "Nevertheless, we must persevere since in the spiritual life not to advance is to retreat, but those who have been breathed on by the Holy Spirit move forward even while sleeping" (*The Practice of the Presence of God*, ed. Delaney, 57). We can trust God to help us make progress even when we're asleep.

"I keep the LORD always before me." We stay focused on this good God whom we trust and worship, who provides for us and guides us. How do we stay focused on God, have him always before us, always on our minds?

Start the day with God. That sets the tone for the whole day. Some people wake up and say, "Good morning, Lord." Others wake up and say, "Good lord, morning." What sets your attitude as you begin a new day?

What if we started each day praying Psalm 23 or even this Psalm 16? Or some other Scripture or prayer? We could start our day with the Lord's Prayer or the Wesley Covenant Prayer.

Devotions or "quiet time" or whatever you call it is a good start to a day of keeping the Lord before you. We don't want to get caught in a legalistic performance: "I have to do this at this time every day." But we do aim to be consistent and regular in spending some time giving God our attention, reading the Bible and reflecting on it, praying for ourselves and others, praying for guidance and help for the day.

And we return our attention to God throughout the day. We pray "flash prayers." You don't have to pray out loud all the time. God can hear our thoughts. Through the day we can pray things like God, bless this person; Lord, help me with this project; Father, show me your way here; Holy Spirit, speak to me. Or we can set certain times through the day to pray.

Brother Lawrence called this "the practice of the presence of God." We intentionally give God our attention again. We turn our thoughts to God. We lift up a brief silent prayer. We determine to do all things to God's glory.

Seeking to praise God in all things is one way we do this. Thinking about that I remembered one time in college when we were playing intramural flag football. Our team was on defense. Two of our guys rushed the quarterback. They both dove for him at the same time, he stepped out of the way, and these two guys crashed into each other head on. They both fell to the ground. One did what most of us would do: he was groaning and muttering. The other guy was just as hurt, but he was going, "Thank you, Jesus! Praise you, Lord!" That was who he was. Praise was a constant part of his life. What if our first impulse was to praise God?

Music is one way to keep the Lord always before us. Try tuning the car radio to a station that plays Christian music for a while. Download some songs and make a playlist you can use to help you focus on the Lord. You

can find Scripture set to music. If you're inclined toward classical music, a lot of it was written for the church. There's Gospel music, hymns, other praise and worship. In the last 40+ years, there's been all kinds of music written by Christians. You can find the Christian message and songs of praise in just about any style of music you can imagine. Maybe you like the Gaithers. I like the singer-songwriters like Rich Mullins, Michael Card, Andrew Peterson. I quoted Keith Green a while ago; he was one of the earlier Christian artists.

Whatever we listen to or watch, we can pray for God's perspective on it. If the Lord is always before us, we see everything through him. He influences how we see all the events, the news, the experiences, whatever we see in life.

The New International Version translates this phrase: "I keep my eyes always on the LORD." As we abide in God and walk with the Lord, we stay focused on him, we continually look to him.

A great picture of this in the Gospels is when the disciples are in the boat on the Sea of Galilee. They're caught in a storm and afraid they're not going to make it. Then Jesus comes walking to them on the water. Peter says, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water." Jesus says, "Come on." Peter gets out of the boat, walks on the water, and comes toward Jesus. Then it says, "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!'" (Matthew 14:22-30). As long as Peter kept his eyes on Jesus, he was good. But when he looked away, he started to sink.

In light of all this, remember these words from Hebrews: "And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus..." (12:1-2).

There's one more thought in the psalm that we need to lift up: "*Trust is confidence of life in the face of death*" (Mays). With all our heart, soul, and body, that is, all our being, including kidneys, heart, tongue, pulse, our whole bodies, we rejoice, we trust, we follow, we are claimed by God. The psalm writer expresses confidence that not even death can end our relationship with the God of goodness. In the New Testament, both Peter and Paul quote this psalm when they talk about the resurrection of Jesus

(Acts 2:24-32; 13:34). In Jesus, we know and trust the Lord God of life. In Jesus, God shows us the path of life, fills us with joy in his presence, and gives us pleasures forevermore.

There's a great prayer or hymn attributed to St. Patrick that celebrates God's presence in our lives and affirms our trust in him. The most famous section of "St. Patrick's Breastplate" says this:

Christ with me,  
Christ before me,  
Christ behind me,  
Christ in me,  
Christ beneath me,  
Christ above me,  
Christ on my right,  
Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down,  
Christ when I sit down,  
Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every [one] who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.

<https://www.ourcatholicprayers.com/st-patricks-breastplate.html>)

So we pray, God help us be all that you want us to be—people who trust you, who follow your counsel and have you always before us.