

PLEASURES FOREVERMORE

SERIES: SONGS OF THE SOUL



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Psalm 16
Eighth Message
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Psalm 16

Four years ago at this time, I was on sabbatical. Mostly, I spent it with my wife and my two daughters, who were twelve and nine at the time. We spent two weeks in Boston and a month in Oregon. I also spent a lot of time reading, reflecting, praying, and writing. When I returned, I attended a high school reunion. Reunions, of course, can be awkward, but at this reunion, I was encouraged by several events.

At the end of my sabbatical, I had the sense that I had been blessed by God, not just for eight weeks but also for my whole life. I thought to myself, quoting a line from a psalm, “The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” I didn’t know what psalm I was quoting, though, which prompted me to do a little research. I found out that I was quoting from Psalm 16.

Then I read the psalm and remembered, “Oh, yeah, I really like this psalm.”

We’re preaching this summer from psalms that have been particularly meaningful to us. Although Psalm 16 had been meaningful to me for quite some time, even if I was only vaguely aware of it, four summers ago it became particularly meaningful. That’s when I began reading it repeatedly and meditating on it often.

So today, I’m sharing Psalm 16. Specifically, I’m sharing the parts of the psalm that I have found especially meaningful.

Pleasant places

Psalm 16:5-6:

**The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup;
you hold my lot.
The lines have fallen for me in pleasant
places;
indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.**

The land of Palestine was considered Israel’s “portion” and “inheritance.” The land was apportioned to the tribes by sacred lot. Therefore, it could be said that

“lines”—that is, the borders—fell in certain places, based on how the lots fell. The tribe of Levi was not given any land; other tribes were directed to provide for the Levites through their offerings. Therefore, the Lord himself was considered the portion and inheritance of the Levites (Numbers 18:20, Deuteronomy 10:9).

David, the author of Psalm 16, was not a Levite. He hailed from the tribe of Judah. Where does he get off calling the Lord his portion and inheritance? David says the same thing in Psalm 142, by the way.

The original compilers of the Psalms understood that Psalm 142 related to David’s experience as he was fleeing from Saul, noting in the superscript that David “was in the cave.” When he was on the run and had no land, he wrote: “I cry to you, O LORD; I say, “You are my refuge, / my portion in the land of the living.” Having no land, David understands in a more acute way that he has the Lord, to such an extent that he sees beyond the land to the one who gives the land. The Lord not only gives the land, he also in some sense is the land.

What does David think of his portion? Specifically, what does he think of the Lord as his portion? He thinks that the lines have fallen for him in “pleasant places.” He thinks that he has a “beautiful” inheritance.

Seek God

The apostle Paul echoes David in his address to the Athenians, saying of God:

“And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are indeed his offspring.’” (Acts 17:26-28)

Like David, Paul speaks of boundaries, or lines. In this case, he observes that God has determined the boundaries of nations so that the people in those nations

might find him. We can't be everywhere. We can only be in one place at a time. There are boundaries around our lives, around our dwelling places. We are fenced in, so to speak.

God himself has fenced us in for a purpose: that we may find him where we are. Most of you reading this have probably found him. How did that happen? However it happened, it happened in a certain place, or certain places. God left certain clues in those places so that you might seek him and perhaps feel your way toward him and find him.

When I was six years old, my family moved from San Bruno to Mountain View. I lived around the corner from Ken, a close friend of mine to this day. When Ken was fifteen, some friends invited him to a church youth group, and then Ken invited me. At that point, I began seeking God in earnest, and in a few weeks, I found him. I can now see, however, that I had been feeling my way toward him for quite some time, long before I was invited to the youth group.

How about you? What have been the boundaries of your dwelling place or dwelling places? Can you see that God has left certain clues in that place or in those places so that you might seek him, feel your way toward him, and find him?

When you find him, what do you find?

Joy and pleasure

Psalm 16:11:

**You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.**

David, having discovered that the lines have fallen for him in pleasant places, that the Lord his portion, and that the Lord is beautiful, now speaks of joy. Where is joy to be found? Within the borders. In the land. In other words, joy is to be found in the presence of the Lord, and not just joy but “fullness” of joy—literally, fullness of “joys.” David presses the borders of the language to describe the explosive joy that can be found in the presence of the Lord.

David not only speaks of joy, he also speaks of “pleasures”—again, using the plural. The word translated “pleasant” in verse 6 is related to the word translated “pleasures” in verse 11. David has been able to experience

the pleasures of God because the lines have fallen for him in pleasant, or pleasurable places. These pleasures are not just temporary, or for this life only; they are “forevermore.”

For the most part, the Hebrew Scriptures are somewhat opaque about what the New Testament calls eternal life. The concept of the resurrection of the dead began to emerge more clearly in the prophets, especially Daniel, and then the New Testament informs us that Christ “brought life and immortality to light” (2 Timothy 1:10). But there are breakout moments before then. Here is one of them. It looks as if David experiences the Lord in such a powerful way that he can't imagine a future apart from his presence.

In the new creation, Jonathan Edwards, considered by some to be America's greatest theologian, says, “Every perceptive faculty shall be an inlet of delight.”¹

Cosmic killjoy?

The Lord establishes the borders of our lives so that we might seek him and find him. What do we find when we find him? We find—or we can find—“fullness of joy.” We enjoy his presence—the fullness of who he is, in his power and goodness and love. We enjoy the relationship we have with him. Indeed, the lines have fallen for us in pleasant places. We have a beautiful inheritance.

Some think of God as a killjoy. On the contrary, the Lord makes fullness of joy available to us. We just have to seek it in him, in his presence.

But we might need a little help. Thankfully, the Lord gives it to us. Just as he determines the boundaries of our lives so that we might seek him, he gives us pleasures that we might see those pleasures as coming from his hand.

Those who think of God as a killjoy also tend to think of him as anti-pleasure. Here we see that God is for pleasure, not against it. The mere fact that God created humans with five senses that let in pleasure should tell us that God intended us for pleasure. In C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, a senior devil advising a junior devil speaks of God as “the Enemy”:

Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one.

All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden.²

Pleasures from God

How have you experienced pleasure? Probably in countless ways.

In the morning, I make a cup of coffee. I grind the beans and enjoy the sound. I lift up the lid of the grinder and smell the freshly ground coffee. I pour the hot water into the French press and enjoy the sight and sound. I go outside to my porch with my Bible in hand. I feel the air against my face. I sit down and take a deep breath. I notice the flowers, the birds. I take my first sip. I begin to pray. Eventually, I make way to the word, and I do my reading for the day, reflecting on what I read.

God delights to give me these pleasures. “For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer” (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

Do you have any avocations that give you pleasure? I enjoy fly-fishing and golf. God knows that fly-fishing and golf give me pleasure. I think he made me in such a way that I enjoy fly-fishing and golf.

When I was training from ministry, the Lord took me for three years to Boise, Idaho, which happened to be near world-class trout streams, including my all-time favorite stream, Silver Creek.

When I married Karen, she was a graduate student at Stanford University. Being married to a Stanford student came with certain privileges, the most important of which, from my perspective, was access to the university golf course at student rates.

For three years, until I finished my studies, I fished in Idaho. For three years, until Karen finished her studies, I golfed at Stanford.

The Lord gave me a great gift: training for ministry. He gave me a greater gift: a wonderful wife. But I have learned that the Lord has a penchant for abundance. He threw in a couple of bonus gifts. I can picture him preparing such pleasures for me and thinking to himself, “Oh, he’ll like this.” Can you picture God in such a way, delighting in giving you pleasures that he knows you’ll enjoy?

Earlier in the psalm, in verse 2, David says, “I have no good apart from you.” In other words, David is saying that all the good that he has comes from the Lord. James says the same thing: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

These days, however, we may find it more difficult to receive the pleasures of God from his right hand when our right hand, or our left hand, can’t let go of the glowing pleasures of our smart phones.

Mark Kingwell, a philosophy professor at the University of Toronto, writes:

All of us, at least in the richer parts of the planet where stimulus is rich, are aware of the problem. I am sitting in front of a screen. If it is the right time of day, there is a muted baseball game showing on the nearby TV. I have my phone on the desk, which relentlessly delivers voicemail messages about daily trivia from people I know. I answer some of them. A web-browser window is open in another tab, in case I want to fact-check something without troubling my failing memory, order a book I almost forgot on Amazon, or suddenly feel like wandering down a hot-link tunnel of scant and certainly forgettable relevance to what I still call my life. I can’t settle on any one thing, let alone walk away from the light cast by the screens and into a different reality. I am troubled, restless, overstimulated. I am consuming myself as a function of the attention I bestow. I am a zombie self, a specter, suspended in a vast framework of technology and capital allegedly meant for my comfort and entertainment. And yet, and yet . . . I cannot find myself here.³

In many cases, we have to let go of something that is giving is some kind of pleasure to receive a greater pleasure.

Give thanks

What do you do when you understand that God has given you a pleasure from his right hand? You give thanks.

Few people have written as insightfully on thankfulness as G.K. Chesterton. He says, “The worst moment for an atheist is when he is really thankful and has no one to thank.” But he also writes concerning believers: “You say grace before meals. All right. But I say grace before the concert and the opera, and grace

before the play and pantomime, and grace before I open a book, and grace before sketching, painting, swimming, fencing, boxing, walking, playing, dancing and grace before I dip the pen in the ink.”

Doesn't a gift tell you something about the one who gives it? Isn't the giver more important to you than the gift? Doesn't the gift enhance your relationship with the giver? If the gift comes from the right hand of God, don't you want to enter the presence of God? And what do you find in the presence of God? Fullness of joy

Enter his presence

Michael K. Meyerhoff describes the day, as a twelve-year-old boy, he received a Christmas present from his parents, which came in a box. He was hoping for baseball shoes. Listen to his story:

I was 12 years old, and my life revolved around baseball. Since my idol was Yogi Berra of the New York Yankees, I was determined to be a catcher. Unfortunately, I was left-handed, and standard baseball wisdom dictated southpaws should not be positioned behind the plate—because most batters are right-handed, a left-handed catcher might have a slightly obstructed view when throwing to second or third base to nab a potential base-stealer. In fact, there was no such thing as a left-handed catcher's mitt.

However, the coaches were impressed with my powerful and accurate arm; and besides, no one else on the team wanted to play that dirty and dangerous position. So equipped with improvised extra padding in my regular glove, I took the field and squatted in back of the batter's box. My immense pride helped me overcome the sharp pain I felt every time a pitcher's fastball plopped into my palm.

There was only one problem. My shoes. Everyone else on the team wore cleats just like the pros. I had to wear sneakers. A pair of cleats cost over \$20—a princely sum in those days. Neither I nor any of my teammates could afford to purchase a pair on our own, even if we supplemented our allowances with the profits from our paper routes. But after ardent begging, pleading, and promising to clean out the garage, everyone had convinced his parents to buy him the special shoes. Except me.

It wasn't like my mother and father didn't have the \$20 to spare. They spent that amount every week for my violin lessons—which I hated. For cryin' out loud, they had spent ten times that much all at once to buy the stupid violin in the first place. But twenty dollars for a

pair of shoes—that I probably would grow out of in less than six months—to play a game? Not a chance. As far as they were concerned, that was not merely improper, it was ridiculous. Large sums of money were for food, clothing, shelter, education, and cultural enrichment—not for dressing up a boyhood pastime. My \$5 sneakers would just have to do.

I had anticipated their reluctance. When I first whined that I would be the only kid on the team without cleats, I didn't expect them to surrender right away. After all, they never understood or appreciated anything that was really important to me. They paid a lot of attention to my academic abilities and musical skills, but they barely acknowledged and did virtually nothing to encourage my athletic prowess. They were incredibly old-fashioned and totally out of it.

But I badly underestimated their resistance. I assumed the usual begging, pleading, and promising wouldn't be enough, and I was right. I then tried several weeks of general surliness and prolonged sulking. When that didn't work, I got desperate. I did additional household chores voluntarily, raised my grades in school, and even forced myself to practice my violin with as much false enthusiasm as I could muster. All to no avail.

Then the holidays rolled around, and my hopes soared. Surely they wouldn't be able to resist the generous spirit of the season. My drawers were well stocked with socks and underwear, there were plenty of warm sweaters in my closet, my shelves contained a sufficient supply of books, and I hadn't even hinted I might want anything other than those cleats. They had no choice. They had to buy me the shoes.

As soon as the religious observances were completed and we retired to the family room for the gift-giving ceremonies, I began to rummage feverishly through the pile of neatly wrapped presents to find the box with my name on it. When I found it, I was taken aback for a moment. It was bigger than a shoebox. Then I remembered my mother's penchant for practicality. She indubitably had obtained a larger container so she could place a bottle of polish and a spare set of laces alongside the cleats. The smile returned to my face as I eagerly ripped at the paper and ribbon.

Much to my surprise, there were no shoes in the box. My body went numb from disbelief; and despite my determination to remain stoic, my eyes filled with tears. But I wasn't disappointed. I was delighted. There, cradled in my trembling hands, was a left-handed catcher's mitt.

A minor miracle had been performed. After visiting every sporting goods store within a fifty-mile radius,

my mother and father realized that, indeed, there was no such thing as a left-handed catcher's mitt. Then, after numerous long-distance calls to every baseball equipment company in the country, they finally found one that would manufacture a custom-made model, rush it through production, and ship it special delivery so it would arrive in time for the holidays. Adding the price of the glove itself to all the automobile mileage, telephone bills, postal charges, and time taken off from work, that mitt must have cost them close to \$250—more than they had paid for my stupid violin.

More importantly, a major miracle had occurred as well. For the first time in my life, I recognized that my parents actually cared about me—and had cared about me all along. I thought they weren't paying attention. I learned they were just concentrating on what was truly significant. I thought they were ignoring my persistent demands. I learned they were just nurturing my ultimate dreams. I thought they would never let me have anything I wanted. I learned they were just letting me know that nothing could ever stand in the way of my getting what I needed.

My parents could have taken the cheap and easy route by purchasing a pair of shoes. That would have bought them some temporary affection and admiration. Instead, they took the difficult and costly route by getting me a left-handed catcher's mitt. That earned them my undying love and respect.

It turned out to be quite a bargain. I still felt uncomfortable being the only kid on the team in sneakers. And later, as a senior in high school, I finally scraped up enough money on my own to buy a pair of cleats. But even with my fancy footwear and my one-of-a-kind glove, I never got more than a passing glance from the pro scouts. Then again, even with another half-decade of unrelenting lessons, I never became much of a virtuoso on the violin either.

On the other hand, throughout the ordinarily tumultuous teenage years, my parents and I enjoyed a relatively calm and solid relationship. Instead of seeing them as unreasonable adversaries, I could view them as occasionally inscrutable advisors. And instead of feeling they were constantly correcting and controlling my behavior, I could sense they were dutifully guiding and goading my development. Sure, we had our irreconcilable differences and tense moments. But we never lost the special something that came with the left-handed catcher's mitt. And in the long run, I think my teammates envied me a lot more than I envied them.⁴

Can you see, not least because of the pleasures that God has given you, that he cares about you—and has cared about you all along? Would you like to give thanks? Would you like to enter his presence, where there is fullness of joy? God gives pleasures, but all the pleasures, like all the good, point to him as the ultimate pleasure, as the ultimate good. In his presence there is fullness of joy. The pleasures that he gives escort us into his presence. You have a beautiful inheritance.

Let me speak for a moment to those of you who are hurting in some way. Maybe you even feel that your life is miserable. Is there anything in life—anything—that you actually enjoy? Something you see, something you smell, something you hear, something you taste, something you touch? Give thanks! Give thanks and enter the presence of God, where there is fullness of joy.

Joyful person?

This summer marks my twenty-fifth anniversary as a pastor at PBC. Twenty-five years ago, I'm not sure people would have called me a joyful person. I didn't think of myself as a joyful person. I was more full of angst than joy. Steve Zeisler, one of our veteran pastors, suggested I do a biblical study on joy. The not-so-subtle implication was that I could benefit from a little more joy in my life.

I have to say that I don't know that people today would call me a joyful person, because I don't ask them for their opinion. In any case, my assessment of myself has changed. I now think of myself as a joyful person, because of, well, the joy I experience. So, what's changed?

Some of you who have known me for all those years would say, "Well, he married a wonderful woman and he now has two wonderful daughters." And it's true. Both my wife and my daughters have brought me great joy. But who gave them to me? God did. Psalm 127:3: "Behold, children are a gift of the LORD . . ."

For my wife and daughters, I give thanks. For them, and for everything else God has given me, for all the pleasures, from a cup of coffee in the morning, to a round of golf with friends, to a day on the stream angling for trout, I give thanks. I give thanks and I enter the presence of God, where there is fullness of joy.

I don't know that I can say I've experienced fullness of joy in the presence of the Lord. Who can say such a thing? Who actually, this side of the new creation, can say that he or she has experienced such joy? But at times I have experienced deep and profound and exhilarating

joy in his presence. I can say that I have experienced the pleasures that come from knowing him.

The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.

Endnotes

1 Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (London: Ball, Arnold, and Co.) 628.

2 C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour and Co.), 49.

3 Mark Kingwell, "Technology Keeps Us Constantly Stimulated. What do we lose when we no longer have nothing to do?" <https://thewalrus.ca/why-being-bored-is-good/>.

4 <https://rompnroll.com/blog?post=its-the-thought-that-counts>.