

# GAMMA 12

## BIBLE STUDY

*Answers from Tim Keller guide*

Psalm 27: "THE FAIR BEAUTY OF THE LORD"

**1. Verse 1 announces that the psalm will address the problem of fear. Look at the whole psalm. What "fears" or threats does David face?**

First, there is *external attack* and threat. (Verses 2-3: "evil men... my enemies... an army... war... against me.") Here we see the political and military enemies that are never far from David's mind. It reminds us of the brutality of ancient cultures and how governing power was taken and maintained. David may be giving a hypothetical case when he says, "Though an army besiege me." That may be happening, but it seems more likely that he is not literally facing it. Rather, he is saying, "I have something that will secure me even if this happens."

Secondly, there is *internal disappointment* and loss. (Verses 10-11: "Though my father and mother forsake me.") This again is probably only a hypothetical case; he probably is not literally facing this. Rather, he is running the gamut here, going from the most outward attack on his body to the greatest internal pain in the heart — rejection by parents. He is saying, "I have something that will secure me even if this happens."

In our day, we are less likely to be besieged by an army and more likely to be let down profoundly by our parents. Fathers and mothers have always been limited and finite in their love because they are sinners. But in a highly individualistic culture like ours, there is much less pressure put on parents to be responsible for their children. Perhaps there has never been a society in which more children have been forsaken literally or emotionally by their busy, self-actualizing parents.

Ernest Becker writes, "I think taking life seriously means that whatever you do must be done in the lived truth of the evil and terror of life, of the rumble of panic underneath everything — otherwise it is phony." <sup>1</sup> The Bible gives us a strategy for living that does not minimize the "evil and terror" or the "rumble of panic underneath everything." It fully assumes that even fathers and mothers may not be there for us. David has an approach to life that can handle besieging armies and absent parents.

**2. Verse 4. (a) What is David asking for in the first half of verse 4 — to go into the priesthood? If not, what? (b) Look at the second half of verse 4. What two things does David want to do in God's house?**

**Note:** Please use and reflect on this older (KJV) translation of verse 4b: "To *behold* the beauty of the LORD, and *to inquire* in his temple." This is better than the NIV translation.

(a) What is David asking to do in verse 4a?

First, David seeks to *“dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life”* (v. 4). What does this mean? Priests and Levites literally lived in the temple, near the altar and Holy Place. It is unlikely that David is pondering his resignation as king in order to become a priest. Rather, he is yearning for the same kind of unbroken contact with the presence of God that is typified by a literal living in the temple courts. A very similar sentiment is expressed in Psalm 84:3: *“Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself... a place near your altar.”* The psalmist pictures himself as a bird that has flit about busily from place to place, but now at last has come home to God. What is desired is a sustained and profound sense of God’s reality and presence. The psalmists of 27 and 84 are both saying, *“I’ve had intermittent times of fellowship with God, but now I’ve set my heart and feet toward the Lord in a new way. I want to constantly enjoy his presence.”*

Notice the repetition at the beginning of verse 4. It is often translated, *“One thing only I ask of the LORD; One thing only I will seek.”* This is the language of deep and firm resolve. David is determined to find real and continual fellowship with God in prayer.

(b) What two things does David seek to do in the house of the Lord in verse 4b?

David desires to *“gaze upon the beauty of the LORD”* and to *“seek him in his temple.”* First, to *“gaze upon the beauty of the LORD”* is a striking phrase and perhaps the center of the psalm. What does it mean?

(1) To *“gaze”* (KJV, *“behold”*) means something much more than awareness. Gazing is like staring. We can’t help ourselves. We can’t get enough of the sight. We try to look and look because we want it imprinted on our mind for future replication and recall. Since David is probably not talking of a literal vision, we assume he is referring to the difference between intellectually knowing that God is great and actually finding a sense of God’s greatness and glory in the heart. Here is Jonathan Edwards’s classic account of the difference:

*There is a twofold knowledge of good of which God has made the mind of man capable. The first, that which is merely notional... and the other is that which consists in the sense of the heart; as when the heart is sensible of pleasure and delight in the presence of the idea of it. In the former is exercised merely... the understanding, in distinction from the... disposition of the soul. ... Thus there is a difference between having an opinion that God is holy and gracious, and having a sense of the loveliness and beauty of that holiness and grace. There is a difference between having a rational judgment that honey is sweet, and having a sense of its sweetness. A man may have the former that knows not how honey tastes; but a man cannot have the latter unless he has an idea of the taste of honey in his mind.”*<sup>2</sup>

When we move from intellectual knowledge to a spiritual *“sensing”* of God, we are finding him beautiful. So to *“gaze”* is essentially the same as meditation. We ponder, reflect, and meditate on God’s person, attributes, and deeds until we find them becoming spiritually real to our hearts.

(2) To gaze on his *“beauty”* speaks of another aspect of spiritual experience. While *“gazing”* refers to how God becomes spiritually real to us, *“beauty”* refers to how God becomes spiritually satisfying to us. Something is beautiful to us if we enjoy it for

what it is in itself. For example, music that is beautiful is experienced as satisfying in itself. We don't listen to it in order to acquire something through it. It is an end in itself. Thus "to gaze on the beauty of the LORD" means to find him ravishing and satisfying just for who he is in himself. That is adoration. Unlike repentance (which asks for God's forgiveness) or petition (which asks for God's action) or even thanksgiving (which focuses on something God already has done for us), adoration is asking for nothing but God himself.

Second, to "inquire in his temple" means not so much a preoccupation with God's person as with his will.<sup>3</sup> The word "inquire" means to seek an oracle. In the temple, the Urim and the Thummim were two stones on the priest's breastplate which could give yes or no answers from God. A person could inquire for a word from God through the Urim and Thummim or simply seek a prophecy. Today, of course, we have a source of God's will that is far better than a "one-off" prophecy or revelation. We have the Bible, the Word of God. This is where we can fruitfully "inquire."

The NIV translation of verse 5b is "to seek him in his temple." This is a poor translation, because it sounds like a repetition of what has come before. If we understand the meaning of the word "inquire" rightly, however, we get a wonderfully balanced picture of how to "go deeper" into God. We are not to do so simply with our intellect or simply through mystical experience. Derek Kidner says, "*To behold and to inquire*; a preoccupation with God's Person and His will. It is the essence... of discipleship." <sup>4</sup>

### **3. Verses 5-6. What does David say will result from this kind of whole-hearted contemplation? Why?**

In verse 6 he says, "*Then* my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his tabernacle I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the LORD." When he says "then," he is setting up a cause- effect relationship between the dwelling and gazing of verse 4 and the security, fearlessness, and confidence of verses 5-6. What is the nature of that confidence?

Does he mean in verse 6 that his enemies will literally be unable to touch him or attack him because he will be worshiping in the tabernacle? That is unlikely. If enemies wanted to attack him, they could either walk into the tabernacle or wait for him to come out. This must mean that the contemplation of God itself dissolves his fears. His mind, in a sense, is taken off himself. This is very mysterious when it happens.

Christian experience follows suit here. When sensations of God's beauty fill you with joy, the confidence that flows out does not consist of some certainty that somehow God will not let anything bad occur. Rather, you become so full of joy in God, and so aware that neither death nor life, neither defeat nor victory will break your relationship with him (see Psalm 23:6 and Romans 8:38), that the circumstances of this life cease to bother you. The wisdom of God is so real that you rest somewhat in his purposes. His glory is so real that your own reputation and prospects don't seem quite as important. This does not make you passive; rather, it "lifts your head" above your enemies (v. 6).

### **4. Verses 7-14. The exuberant prospect of verses 4-6 is not a current reality. David does not yet have this triumphant experience of God. How, then, does he pray and prepare his life for the presence of God?**

Just as Elijah built an altar, laid out a sacrifice, and prayed for God's fire to come down (1 Kings 18), so we have to prepare our own lives and hearts for visitation by God, a deeper experience of him. This image of preparing an altar is helpful because it shows that we are not to be passive. It also shows us that we are not in control. There is no formula that automatically connects us to God. We ultimately rely on God to come to us.

First, we see that David is repentant and asking for mercy despite his sins. Both verse 7 ("be merciful to me") and verse 9 ("Do not hide your face... in anger") show that he recognizes that he does not deserve the presence of God. He is confessing his sin and repenting.

Second, we see David express his willingness to rearrange his life to be more obedient (v. 11). Kidner observes, "David is not only a worshiper seeking God's face (v. 8); he is a pilgrim committed to his way (v. 11). He is very much in the world, and a prayer for a 'level path' is not for comfort but for sure progress (as a moral term it implies what is right, or straight) when the merest slip would be exploited." <sup>5</sup>

Third, he reminds himself of God's promises and his nature, in order to build his own confidence that God will let him into his presence. He reminds himself that God has been "my helper" in the past (v. 9b), that God is more to be trusted than even parents (v. 10), that God wants to show us goodness in this life (v. 13).

Lastly, David "seeks his face" (v. 8). This is almost certainly the same thing as "gazing on the beauty of the LORD" (v. 4) — meditating on and adoring God. However, he mentions that "my heart says of you, 'Seek his face!'" (v. 8a). This seems to mean that he believes that God himself has put it in his heart to seek him. (Some translations say, "You have said to my heart, 'seek my face.'") The psalmist encourages himself that his longing and even his sense of God's absence are signs that God is with him. He only longs for God because God put it in his heart to do so. "He will not ask for our love (v. 8a) and then withhold his own (v. 9a)," says Kidner. <sup>6</sup>

**Summary:** In verses 4-6, David foresees three stages to going deeper into God. First, *dwelling* (v. 4a). He is going to make sustained prayer and fellowship with God a new priority. This is his new resolve and discipline. No longer will he simply seek God in fits and starts, or only when there is a crisis. He is going to dwell with God. Second, *gazing* and *inquiring* (v. 4b). He is going to meditate on the truth and contemplate the Lord till he breaks through and senses his beauty. Third, *sacrificing with shouts of joy* (v. 6). He knows that eventually, there will be such a deep joy in worship that his head will be lifted up and he will fear no enemy.

However, in verses 7-14, David hunkers down for the long road to the joy of verses 4-6. He knows it will take much time and effort to bring his heart into routine communion with God. In verses 7-14, he begins to "lay the altar": he repents, obeys, remembers, prays, and rests in the assurance that God must want him, or else he would not want God.

Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," Sermon, 1734, in *The Works of Jonathan*

*Edwards, Vol. 2* (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. 114.

See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 121. Derek Kidner, p. 121.

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**5. Is the experience David describes something new to you? Have you ever gazed at the beauty of the Lord? Share your experience of this with the group. How can you actually move forward in your spiritual life and experience more and more of this?**

**6. Are there hinderances to a deeper contemplative life and do you struggle with the desire to even come into contact with God. Share your difficulties and pray for each other**