

WHAT'S THE ADVANTAGE IN KNOWING GOD?

PSALM 16

There's a story about a wealthy woman in New York City who died and left her entire estate, simply and straightforwardly, to God. This created legal problems since it's a bit difficult to just give God someone's estate. The issue was placed in the hands of the courts to resolve. A lawsuit was started in which "God" was named as a party. A summons was issued and the official process servers went through the motions of trying to serve God with official papers. The final report sent to the court read as follows: "After a due and diligent search, made in accordance with established procedures, God cannot be found in New York City." Some of you already knew that!

For all too many people in our world today, God doesn't exist. I'm not talking about just the folk who claim to be atheists. I'm referring to the much larger group who live as if God doesn't exist. They might believe in the existence of a God, but they have no living, personal relationship with God. They might know there is a God, but they don't know God. Let me ask you a question today. What's the advantage in knowing God personally? If someone sincerely asked you that question – "What's the advantage in knowing God personally?" – how would you answer? It's a simple enough question, but it's kind of hard to know how to provide an adequate answer, isn't it?

David, Israel's greatest king and the author of many of the psalms in the Old Testament, answers that question in Psalm 16. There David touches on some of the advantages in knowing God personally. This is one of my favorite psalms because it's pervaded by this wonderful sense of calm, joy and confidence. Because David has God in his life, he already possesses everything that matters. David knew the advantages in knowing God.

How are you doing today? Maybe there's a lot of joy and gladness in your life today. Wonderful! This psalm reminds you of the real source of all joy and gladness. On the other hand, maybe your life is a kind of mixed review this morning. Some areas of your life are doing well, but there are other areas that are filled with heartache and pain of some kind. This psalm reminds you that part and parcel of knowing God means receiving His presence, His guidance and His power. Or, it could be that you're in the pits today. By the way, thank you for coming to church this morning. I admire anyone who gets up and comes to church when life gets hard for some reason, because it's so easy not to come. This psalm speaks to you more than anyone else here today. One consistent message blazes through this psalm: when you have God, you have what matters. When you know God, you possess what matters. Yes, life can get you down, true enough. But when you know God, you can never be down and out! The advantages in knowing God are just too great and too wonderful to allow that outcome. So, what's the advantage in knowing God? How would you answer that question? I see in Psalm 16 at least two wonderful answers.

GOD IS YOUR GREATEST POSSESSION.

That's the essence of the first six verses of this psalm. Granted, it seems odd to think of God as Something or Someone you possess, but that's how David describes his relationship with God here. "I said to the LORD, 'You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.'" (Psalm 16:2 NIV) There are many worthwhile things to have in this life. Good health is a marvelous possession. So, also, is a happy marriage and good relationships between parents and children. A stimulating, rewarding job is a wonderful thing to have. Even enjoying material things is a good thing. Sometimes at church we can get so concerned about the dangers of materialism – possessing houses, cars, clothes or money – that we end up thinking material things are bad in and of themselves. Not at all. I believe it was C.S. Lewis who made this wonderfully obvious observation: "God likes matter. After all, He created it." No, it's only when material things take the place of God that they become a great enemy. There are many wholesome, wonderful and good things to possess in this life that God's given you to enjoy.

But notice, again, what David says here: " '...apart from you I have no good thing.'" God is the ultimate possession above everything else. He's the One who matters most and to possess God makes every other possession somehow more meaningful. By the same token, to possess everything but not to have God is to end up with nothing of real value at the end. When you possess God, you have contentment because you have what really matters. Have you noticed that contentment and the number of possessions don't always equate to one another? Sometimes the most discontented people in the world possess the most stuff. You can have a great number of possessions but still lack the greatest possession: God Himself. You can fill up your life with all sorts of possessions, attainments, successes, achievements, rewards and recognitions but still have a gnawing emptiness inside. How can that be? Because "apart from you I have no good thing." Here's something that's equally true. You can lack many things in life and only achieve a small fraction of your dreams and ambitions but still possess a deep, inner contentment. Now, how can that be? Because you have the greatest possession. At the end of the day, you have what matters. And just because you can't see it, taste it, touch it or hear it doesn't mean it's a fantasy. It's real, true and lasting, nevertheless.

Look with me again at v. 5 and 6 in the psalm: "LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance." (Psalm 16:5-6 NIV) David compares the Lord to a piece of land here – to a slice of real estate. In the Old Testament, owning land was the ultimate economic security. It was thought to be the greatest earthly possession you could have. If you owned land, you were able to grow crops or raise livestock to feed you family. To be without land was to invite poverty. But here David is talking about land metaphorically. He's saying that God Himself is David's "delightful inheritance."

To possess God – to have a personal knowledge of and relationship with God – was like having the choicest piece of property in all of Israel.

Over in the New Testament we read about followers of Jesus being given an inheritance. For instance, “...He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light.... and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay.” (Colossians 1:12, 1 Peter 1:4 NLT) When you become a follower of Jesus, you become an heir to the King of the Universe. As a child of God, you get priceless stuff like the forgiveness of all of your sins, a peace that passes understanding, strength to face and overcome life’s inevitable struggles, a clear understanding of why you’re alive and what God wants you to do here and, then, after you die an eternal future in God’s actual presence.

Notice with me in verse 1 that David comes as a refugee to God. “Keep me safe, O God, for I have come to you for refuge.” (Psalm 16:1 NLT) To be a refugee is to seek refuge in someone else. That’s a pretty good description of your life and mine before God became our greatest possession. There you were lost in your own sin, dominated and beaten down by life’s pressures and just kind of wandering through life aimlessly. But you came to God for refuge. “Help, Lord, I need a place to be safe!” And God does give you safety. He does provide refuge. But God does far more than just that. He takes spiritual refugees like you and me and makes us His heirs. God would have been unbelievable gracious just to provide refuge, but instead He invites you into relationship with Him and gives you an inheritance beyond your imagination.

Those of you who frequent grocery stores a lot know all about the generic section. A little boy was asking his mom to buy him one of those pricey breakfast cereals he’d seen advertised on TV. He was told that a similar cereal could be found in the generic section of the store. In the generic section, Mom also picked up noodles, tissue and peanut butter at much reduced prices. On the way home, the little boy asked, “Mom, I hope they make a generic God, too. Is there a generic God, Mom?” Mom thought about how to answer that question for a while and responded, “Well, I do know that everyone can afford God.”

Indeed. Everyone can afford God. Do you possess God? Do you have God? To have the greatest possession, you must give yourself to God lock, stock and barrel. To have everything, you must give everything. And when you give everything, you receive the greatest possession imaginable: an eternal relationship with the living God. You come to Him as a refugee and He ends up making you His heir. So, what’s the advantage in knowing God? David says that God is your greatest possession. But he also provides another answer embedded in v. 7-11.

GOD IS YOUR GREATEST PLEASURE.

God isn't against possessions. He's just against making any possession greater than Him. Likewise, God isn't against pleasure. In fact, He invented pleasure just like He invented possessions. There are many legitimate and lovely pleasures that God wants you to enjoy in life. It's only when people seek pleasure for its own sake rather than God that a serious problem emerges. We could spend a long time describing all the different kinds of legitimate pleasures that God wants you to enjoy in this life. When you know God personally, every other pleasure in life is enhanced and made even more special. Ironically, when you don't have God in your life, even the most exotic pleasures in life don't satisfy you somehow. I think about a verse of an old hymn that goes like this: "Heaven above is softer blue, earth beneath is sweeter green; something lives in every hue Christless eyes have never seen. Song of birds in sweetness grow, flowers with deeper beauties shine, since I know, as now I know, I am His and He is mine." Somehow the pleasure of knowing God deepens and enriches every other pleasure. God Himself enhances the enjoyment of all things because He Himself is the source of pleasure.

No earthly pleasure lasts forever. Cheryl and I are looking forward to our vacation that starts on Friday. Part of it will mean several days tucked into a little cottage right at the very edge of a gorgeous lake in upstate New York. But all vacations come to an end. Every fantastic meal gets eaten. Ballgames end. Good books get read. A challenging, rewarding project concludes. A wonderful visit with a dear friend draws to a close. A blessed marriage ceases because a spouse dies. Kids grow up and sometimes move away. A glorious sunset fades with the approaching night. Large or small, all of earth's pleasures are temporary and come to an end. That doesn't make them bad. It's just a fact of life we all concede. But at this very point, God is different. Knowing Him is an eternal pleasure. A relationship with Him never ends. In fact, the pleasure of knowing Him will grow and get sweeter as eternity stretches on and on. Notice what David says in the last verse of this psalm: "You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever." (Psalm 16:11 NLT)

Why is knowing God a pleasure? One reason is provided in v. 7: "I will bless the LORD who guides me; even at night my heart instructs me." (Psalm 16:7 NLT) Knowing God provides guidance. You can forget that God is far more interested in you finding the right way through confusing times than you are in finding it yourself. Life does have its uncertain moments when you wonder what you should do. This psalm underlines the fact that when you have a relationship with God, He is guiding you even when you're unconscious of His directing hand.

There's a marvelous insight about guidance embedded there in v. 8: "I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken." (Psalm 16:8 NIV) When you make the effort to keep God "in your sights", so to speak, as you walk through life, you will experience God's guidance to a far greater degree. If you try to keep something in your field of vision at all

times, you will not be able to look at anything else for very long without coming back to that object. David had made a crucial decision: at all times He looked at life through God. He always had God before Him. No matter what else He did in life, God was always in His spiritual field of vision. Doesn't that explain why you and I have at times messed up in life? We got our eyes off of God. We failed to keep God in our sights. We neglected to set the Lord always before us. Here's a great truth about experiencing God's guidance for your life. Whenever you aim at anything in life, make sure God is in the picture.

Years ago, before flashlights were invented, you had to use a lantern to see your way if you were out at night. There's a story of a man out on a cold, stormy night. The moon was giving him a little light, so he decided to put his lantern under his coat so his hands would be protected from the biting wind. Suddenly a gust of wind blew open his coat. When the light from his lantern shone out it revealed the fact that he had walked right to the edge of a cliff without knowing it. Another step and he would have fallen to his death. He learned a life-long lesson about taking walks at night: don't hide the light under your coat! There are too many people who try to go through life with the light of God's truth hidden away out of sight. All too many times they don't realize their mistake until it's too late.

Here's another marvelous truth about knowing God. Death doesn't end the relationship. In fact, death allows your relationship with God to enter a new and more wonderful phase. If I didn't know that truth, it would be very difficult for me to preside at a funeral. David says this to God in the psalm, "...you will not abandon me to the grave..." (Psalm 16:10 NIV) That great message is found everywhere in the Bible. Knowing God not only means guidance and stability in this life, it means resurrection and endless joy in the next. Isn't that just like God? Death was never a part of His original plan for human beings. But what Satan thought was his ultimate triumph over us, God has transformed into a doorway where we move from one kind of relationship with God into a better kind of relationship with Him. You'll discover that death will allow you to experience the pleasure of God's presence in a way that you just can't here on this earth.

Knowing God is a pleasure – the greatest pleasure. The more you discover His "paths of life" – as David refers to it - , the more pleasure and enjoyment you'll experience. God gives an inner joy that never runs out, never deteriorates and never grows dull. I love those final words of David in this psalm: "You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand." (Psalm 16:11 NIV)

Most of you have heard of Helen Keller. She lived from 1880 to 1968. She was one of the most remarkable persons who ever lived. Early in her life she lost the ability to see, hear or speak. She was less than 2 years of age when she began living in this disabled condition. Yet, through the help of another remarkable woman, Anne Sullivan, her teacher, and the Perkins Institute for the Blind – where she lived and studied for a time – she became one of the most sensitive,

alert and aware persons who ever lived. Because of her limitations, Helen developed an incredibly keen sense of the reality of life around her. On one occasion, she was walking in the woods with a friend. It was springtime and Helen was using her fingers constantly to read the signs of new life bursting out in the forest. She felt a slender birch tree and even the vibrations of a bird singing in its branches. She felt flowers and leaves beginning to sprout. She felt stones in the cold brook. When she returned home, she had the memory of many things that she'd seen on her walk even though she was blind. She asked her friend (who had perfectly good eyesight) what she had seen. The friend said, "Nothing in particular." Helen Keller was astounded! How could her friend walk through the woods in the springtime and see nothing in particular? But as she spoke with other people, she learned that there were many people all around her who had eyes to see but were more blind than she was with her sightless eyes.

Have you ever driven along a particular highway such as the Blue Ridge Parkway and come across those signs that say "Scenic Area" or "Scenic View Ahead"? When you think about it, isn't that kind of strange? Here's this breathtaking vista of obvious beauty, but I guess we need someone in some highway department somewhere informing us in writing that we're surrounded by beauty. My friend, God is continually giving you signs of His presence. He is constantly showing you and reminding you that He is present, that He loves you, that He is your greatest possession and that He is your greatest pleasure. Read the signs! What's the advantage in knowing God? He is your greatest possession. He is your greatest pleasure.