

What Is Worthy of Your

Lifelong Devotion?

the  
**one**  
true  
thing

HOWARD BAKER



NAV PRESS®

BRINGING TRUTH TO LIFE

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Deep in the heart of [every person] is the longing, fitfully glimpsed and but half realized, to gather up all [its] strivings into an intense pursuit of one all-embracing objective worthy of the toil and tears and devotion of the human heart.

— KARL RAHNER

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## Preface

My journey into the One Thing has been bracketed by the same Doctor of Ministry class, taken once for credit and once as an audit student. The first time was in 1990 and was taught by Eugene Peterson. The replay was in 2005 and was taught by Dallas Willard. Over the course of those intervening fifteen years, the spoken and written words of these two contemporary spiritual guides have so permeated my heart and mind that I can scarcely say or write anything about relationship with Jesus that was not planted in me by them. I pray what I write (and live) is as faithful to the written and Living Word as what they taught me. Where it is not, I claim full responsibility. Where it is, I owe to Dallas and Eugene an immeasurable debt of gratitude.

In an interview, author Donald Miller said that his local congregation in Portland, Oregon — called *Imago Dei* — makes him feel parented and connected. He tells the story about speaking at his church when a woman, a homosexual, was sitting in the front row with a giant sign that said (among other things) that she hoped the churchgoers' children die and the legacy of hate ends.

He finishes the story, “At the end of the service, her sign was laid down in front of the communion table, and she was being held by me, and many others, sobbing as she had never heard truth being presented in love. She had not known the difference between a parental communication of truth and a judgmental, hate-filled communication of truth.”<sup>1</sup>

My prayer is that anyone who reads this book will have an

experience of being held in the arms of a loving community— Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, along with the great cloud of witnesses who have asked for, chosen, and valued the one true thing. I pray that the words will be not only true, but true to the God who is love — making them loving words as well as true words.

During the writing of this book, I was using *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales for a seminary class I was teaching. His words express my heart in writing a book such as this:

It is true, my dear reader that I write about the devout life although I myself am not devout. Yet it is certainly not without a desire of becoming so and it is such affection that encourages me to instruct you. As a great man of letters has said, “To study is a good way to learn; to hear is a still better way; to teach is the best of all.”<sup>2</sup>

Several students from that class were also in my Spiritual Direction Practicum. Their discernment, prayer, and encouragement kept this project moving in spite of the opposition of the evil one, my own sinful procrastination, and the challenge of writing in the midst of an already-full workload. Thank you, Julie, Louise, Mark, and Shira.

Don Simpson, the skilled editor of this book, is just as much a saint as any that I quote or write about. I simply bless God for reflecting the glory of the face of Christ through Don’s patience, graciousness, humility, and faithfulness in the midst of physical and emotional affliction. Because Don experiences the one true thing in the depths of his soul, he wanted me to write about it. He was, and is, more qualified to write about it than I am. Thank you, Don, for giving me the opportunity and for not letting me give up.

Jesus said that “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34, NIV), and, I would add, the hand writes.

pre face

The one my heart loves is also the one God has most used to shape that heart. Thank you, Janis, for loving me out of the “many things” so I was free to embrace the one thing necessary.

# Introduction

## The Only True Thing

And this is the real and eternal life:  
That they know you,  
The one and only true God,  
And Jesus Christ, whom you sent.  
— JOHN 17:3 (MSG)

Our true life is not this external, material life that passes before our eyes here on earth, but the inner life of our spirit, for which the visible life serves only as a scaffolding—a necessary aid to our spiritual growth.  
— LEO TOLSTOY

The one thing God keeps us to steadily is that  
we may be one with Jesus Christ.  
— OSWALD CHAMBERS

**B**ansi lived all of his ten years in the same little village in northern India. After his father died, his mother could barely earn enough for Bansi and his siblings to eat once a day. On some days, Bansi gave his portion of rice to his younger brother. In this grim existence, the only ray of hope for Bansi was the hope of meeting the region's ruler, the Rajah. This Rajah was extraordinarily wealthy and a heroic figure. All of the boys fantasized about being like the Rajah and dreamed of meeting him.

One day, the Rajah came to Bansi's village. The young boy ran

up to the Rajah, who was seated on a huge elephant that knelt at the Rajah's command. Bansi said to the royal visitor, "Rajah, Rajah, I have waited so long to meet you! You are my hero! How can I serve you? What can I do for you?" The Rajah quietly looked Bansi over and finally said, "Give me your bag of rice." He was referring to the little pouch Bansi had tied around his waist. Bansi looked at the Rajah in anguished disbelief. How could the Rajah ask him for all he had in the world?

Bansi slowly handed his little bag of rice over to the Rajah, who took it and began to examine it carefully. Finally, when the tension was more than he could take, Bansi grabbed his pouch from the Rajah and ran back to his hut. He threw his bag against the wall of the hut and began to sob. Through his tears, he noticed that interspersed with his rice were small, shiny nuggets; the Rajah had been replacing the rice grain by grain with gold.

Gathering up the rice and the gold, Bansi ran back to the Rajah and said, "Rajah, Rajah, if I had only known what you were going to do with my rice, I would have given it all to you."

We have a Rajah, a King, who asks for all that we have and all that we are so that he can replace the common grains of rice that comprise our life now with the gold of lasting treasure. Jesus comes to us just as Gandalf came to Bilbo Baggins in *The Fellowship of the Ring*—not to rob him, but to help him by convincing him to give up his most cherished and most dangerous possession, the ring. Gandalf, the Rajah, and our Lord Jesus all unquestionably act out of love and goodness, but their desire to help must overcome our hearts of fear, possessiveness, greed, and pride.

Has the desire to "have it all" or the desire to protect the little we do have depleted our ability to pursue any single desire with deep passion? Does our striving for a "balanced life" actually prevent our achievement of it? Do the myriad calls to serve God prevent our hearing the clarion call to know God? Could it even be that

our dedication to fulfill the Great Task<sup>1</sup> has left little energy to obey the Great Love<sup>2</sup>? Have our disappointments, failures, and losses clouded our vision of the One who alone brings hope, joy, and comfort?

This book is an offer to focus and integrate scattered and fragmented lives. It is an invitation to simplicity in this age of complexity; a *compass* for the whole-life direction of those who realize that formulas for blessedness, recipes for success, and paths to holiness in five easy steps are at best deceptive and at worst fraudulent.

This book is for those who pursue the ascent when the trail steepens and the air thins, as well as for those hardy souls who have long hungered for the high mountain while yet wandering in the “misty lowlands.”<sup>3</sup> It is for the busy who sense a deep yearning for the “one thing necessary,” even as they are, like Martha, “worried and bothered about so many things” (Luke 10:41).

Even in the current Western culture of muchness and manyness, there are multitudes who struggle not with over-full lives but with empty ones. They have long since given up hope for ultimacy and intimacy, for meaning and relationship. For them it is unthinkable that there could be “one true thing” to fulfill all their dreams. But what if there is? This book is for them as well.

## **The One and the Many**

The philosophical quest to find the one thing that lies behind all things in the universe is called the problem of “the one and the many.” Basically stated, the problem of the one and the many begins from the assumption that, though it contains millions of components, ultimately the universe is one thing—a whole. Because it is itself a whole (one thing), there must be one unifying aspect behind the many things that exist or occur within it.

For most of us, the quest to find a unifying fabric for our lives

is practical rather than philosophical. We are overwhelmed by the many and can't see the one forest for the many trees. We doubt whether the "one" even exists, and we consider suspect anyone who claims to have found an integrating point for all of life. People who give themselves to one thing are often viewed as obsessive, narrow-minded, or, worse yet, as fanatics. This view is accurate when it involves mindless dedication to a job, to a possession, to a cause, or even to a person. None of these are worthy of the human heart. They cannot bear the weight of such devotion.

But there is an insatiable and often unconscious hunger for "one thing" to make life work for me: something that will heal past wounds and failures; something to give relief to my pain; something to assuage my loneliness; something to bring joy, peace, and meaning. So as half-starved refugees, we attach our hope to and place our faith in whatever addresses the hungriest part of our souls. And that "whatever" is our god at that moment. To paraphrase John Calvin — a hungry and empty human heart is an idol-making factory.<sup>4</sup>

Becoming masters that enslave, these false hopes indeed emerge as "idols." So, to protect us from destructive idolatries, God gives priority of place to the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). The first commandment pronounces there is only one true thing—the Living God, whom we know fully as revealed in Jesus Christ. To worship anything else is idolatry and foolishness. Not only is it sin, it is stupid. Did I say that strongly enough?

There can be any number of false "one things," but there is only one *true* thing that can deliver on the promise of unifying, integrating, and simplifying our lives.

A. W. Tozer powerfully describes the beauty and sanity of a life given to the one true thing:

We need not fear that in seeking God only we may narrow our lives or restrict the motions of our expanding hearts.

The opposite is true. We can well afford to make God our All, to concentrate, to sacrifice the many for the One. . . . The man who has God for His treasure has all things in One. Many ordinary treasures may be denied him, or if he is allowed to have them, the enjoyment of them will be so tempered that they will never be necessary to his happiness. Or if he must see them go, one after one, he will scarcely feel a sense of loss, for having the Source of all things he has in One all satisfaction, all pleasure, all delight. Whatever he may lose he has actually lost nothing, for he now has it all in One, and he has it purely, legitimately and forever.<sup>5</sup>

Four centuries earlier, Francis de Sales anticipated Tozer as he encouraged the common folk of Geneva to believe that “the devotion which is true hinders nothing, but on the contrary it perfects everything.”<sup>6</sup>

Tozer and de Sales are representative of the Christian spiritual ideology that encompasses all the traditions. It is one great river of devotion into which the Orthodox, Quaker, Wesleyan, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, and Reformed tributaries flow. But in the last hundred years, the great rushing river has been dammed to a trickling stream — from wild to mild.

Someone pulled a fast one on us! We have been taken! Scammed! Deceived! We are not meant to be passive *consumers* of religious goods and services, but to be active participants in the pursuit of the one true thing.

The entire revelation of the Bible supports Tozer and de Sales, but nowhere more clearly than in the words of Jesus, “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). Seek the one, and the many will be taken care of.

But how many of us who name the name of Christ actually

believe that passionate devotion to God alone is the best life possible? How many of us even consider it a realistic possibility? We know we *should* believe it, so we profess it without believing it. We say, “Jesus is Lord,” while we manage our lives apart from Him. We profess to be disciples of Jesus, but eagerly learn from almost anyone but Him when it comes to everyday living.

Let me tell you what I am up to. I want to change what you believe about God and about life. Why? Because you will always live out what you believe. Even the demons do as much, according to James 2:19. They believe and “shudder.” If a person’s only theology book was your life, what kind of god would they “read” about? Your life is the accurate statement of what you actually believe and, as they say, may be the only Bible some people ever read.

Feel guilty yet? Don’t. I simply want you to begin thinking honestly about your beliefs. This is just the introduction. As Douglas Steere wrote in his introduction to *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, by Søren Kierkegaard (whom we’ll get to know later), “In [Kierkegaard’s] *Journals*, he makes a comment on the function of an introduction to a book. It should serve to unclot the spectators from their diverse preoccupations and get them ready for the real bath.”<sup>7</sup> So I hope you are beginning to feel a draft!

## Where Are We Headed?

The following somewhat random yet connected statements will give you an idea of where we are going. It is only fair that you know our direction. And as the flight attendant says: If this isn’t your destination, now would be an excellent time to get off the plane.

How do these thoughts strike you?

- The writer of Hebrews simply says, “All things are open and laid bare to the eyes of *Him with whom we have to do*”

(Hebrews 4:13, emphasis added).

- According to Oswald Chambers, “Jesus taught that a disciple has to make his relationship to God the dominating concentration of his life, and to be carefully careless about everything else in comparison to that.”<sup>8</sup> We are liberated to be carefree in the care of God.
- The wellspring of life for the disciple is Jesus — all else is decoration or distraction.
- Jesus told the rich young ruler, “*One thing* you lack” (Mark 10:21, emphasis added). He was young. He was rich. He was in charge. He was religious. What could he possibly be lacking? Didn’t he have everything? He had everything but the one true thing. How many times do we have to hear those who appear to have it all say, “There’s got to be more to life than this,” before we believe what our Bibles clearly teach?<sup>9</sup>
- In *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers states, “God nowhere tells us to give up things for the sake of giving them up. He tells us to give them up for the sake of the only thing worth having — viz., life with Himself.”<sup>10</sup>
- Once a friend of mine asked what I think is the best question ever: Is Jesus enough? Right where I am, with what I have and who I am — is Jesus enough? If we ask this question when things are going well, we will be able to ask it when life is hard. And we will find, possibly to our surprise, that He is enough.
- Paul’s fear for the Corinthians is my fear for myself and for those I love: “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3).
- C. S. Lewis, in his unparalleled description of the Christian faith, *Mere Christianity*, speaks of Jesus: “You can shut Him up as a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon;

or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”<sup>11</sup>

And that is the destination: at the feet of Jesus calling Him *my* Lord, *my* God, *my* one true thing.

### How Are We Getting There?

We will be guided by a tenth-century-BC king, a fourteenth-century mystic, a first-century peasant woman, a nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, a converted Pharisee, and a sixteenth-century soldier turned contemplative missionary. What could that diverse group possibly have in common?

They found the life that is truly life (see 1 Timothy 6:19).

And that life is Jesus. Not Jesus and \_\_\_\_\_. Just the Jesus who said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

In case you haven’t guessed, relationship/discipleship/apprenticeship to Jesus is the one true thing.

As you continue, you will discover three parts to this book. Within each part, the first chapter focuses on a biblical text, the second on a spiritual master from the past, and the third on Jesus’ invitation to us.

Since most activities in life begin with desire, part 1 is about desiring and seeking the one thing. Desire leads to decision, so part 2 discusses choosing the one thing. When we choose in the same direction repeatedly, those choices become our character, our values. Part 3 describes what it means to value the one thing.

Well, I hope you haven’t jumped off the plane and that you are ready to settle in for a leisurely yet adventurous journey toward the one true thing.

P A R T

1

**seeking**  
the  
one  
thing

A Pure and Holy Passion

One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek.

— P S A L M 27:4

You can grow in knowledge if you take pains to set your heart most upon one thing. That thing is nothing other than a spiritual desire toward God—to please him, love him, know him, here by grace in a little feeling, and in the glory of heaven with a full being.

— W A L T E R H I L T O N

## Psalm 27

### Seeking the One Thing over the Many

Whom have I in heaven but You?  
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.

— PSALM 73:25

There is only one desire and only one aspiration which fills the poet's heart and in which all his other wishes converge and find their fulfillment — that he may live in perpetual communion with God. If he can have that, then he has everything.

— ARTUR WEISER

I have asked the Lord for many things.  
How about you?

- I asked that the pretty little blonde in my kindergarten class would like me. (Didn't happen.)
- I asked to make the peewee football team. (Happened.)
- I asked to be the star of that team. (Didn't happen.)
- I asked that my dad would survive mouth and jaw cancer. (Happened.)
- I asked God to get me out of countless dilemmas in exchange for my empty promises of never sinning in that way again. (What do you think?)
- I asked to do well on exams for which I had not studied. (Didn't happen.)

- With two outs and the game tied in the bottom of the ninth inning in the state high school championship game, I asked to get on base. (Happened.)
- I asked for just the right woman to become my wife and be the love of my life. (Happened!)
- I asked for perfect kids with straight teeth who never got into trouble. (Didn't happen.)

When I have asked — when you have asked — for many things, the common context is need. Sometimes the need is as trivial as success in a ball game. At other times, it is life and death. But, regardless of the context, those of us who profess to know God ask.

This is a good thing. God is the giver of every good gift (see James 1:17). Jesus tells us to ask and to seek, because the generosity of our heavenly Father far outstrips that of any earthly father (see Matthew 7:7-11). After all, the Father gave us His Son. We can be sure that He will not withhold from us any good thing.

So as we dive into Psalm 27 to look at asking for the one thing, there is no reason to stop asking our gracious heavenly Father for whatever it is that we need. God delights for us to come to Him as dependent children. However, we will learn from this psalm that it is possible to subjugate our many requests to the one great request.

Then we will find along with A. W. Tozer that “for all God’s good will toward us He is unable to grant us our heart’s desires till all our desires have been reduced to one.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Absolute Prayer from Absolute Poverty**

Context is everything. If I say “I do” in reply to the harmless question, “Do you want mustard on that burger?” I am a little happier about my lunch. But if I say “I do” in a church in front of a minister,

and I am standing next to a woman dressed in white, it will have lifelong impact. Context matters.

In this amazing psalm, David said, “One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek” (Psalm 27:4).

What was the context for his bold statement? Was it a moment of reflection as he rested comfortably in his palace surrounded by his servants, subjects, and soldiers? Possibly it was a moment of triumph after winning another huge battle as Yahweh’s anointed king. It even could have been an ecstatic moment after he had retreated to a secret hideaway to play his harp, pray, and write a few psalms.

But it is none of these. The words of Psalm 27 accurately give the context: evildoers, devour, adversaries, enemies, war, trouble, forsaken, foes, false witnesses, violence. David is not speaking from the safety of the palace or from the sanctity of the temple or from the seat of power. As you read John Calvin’s description of the context, imagine the thoughts and feelings you would have if you were in David’s situation:

Although David was banished from his country, despoiled of his wife, bereft of his kinsfolk; and, finally, dispossessed of his substance, yet he was not so desirous for the recovery of these, as he was grieved and afflicted for his banishment from God’s sanctuary, and the loss of his sacred privileges. Under the word *one*, there is an implied antithesis, in which David, disregarding all other interests, displays his intense affection for the service of God; so that it was bitterer for him to be an exile from the sanctuary, than to be denied access to his own house.<sup>2</sup>

In summary, David has lost everything. Calvin places this psalm’s setting in the midst of Absalom’s rebellion—the son usurping the father’s throne. David has nothing left except one thing: a

desperate desire for God. *This* is what it means to be a person after God's own heart.

Having lost everything, David doesn't curse God. Instead, he *wants* God.

Having been betrayed by family and friends, he doesn't blame God. Rather, he *seeks* God.

Having been confronted by merciless human ugliness, he doesn't forsake God. He *longs* for the beauty of God.

We must pause for a moment here and accept the fact that David was a real human person — more like us than not. In the psalm, David wrote about his mother and father forsaking him. Who among us has not experienced family pain and conflict? For some, the betrayal is as subtle as love and approval withheld. For others, it is tragic neglect or abuse. Many of us have experienced the deep wound of not being loved well by those whose primary responsibility it was to do just that. Such is the wound of betrayal David experienced.

My best guess of when this happened in David's life is when he was a young shepherd boy and the prophet Samuel paid his father Jesse a visit. Samuel was looking to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king, so Jesse lined them all up in front of Samuel — except David. David was out in the fields tending the sheep, and his father did not send for him. What must that have felt like for David? When he found out, he must have been angry and hurt — the kind of hurt that stings for a lifetime and screams for revenge. But David didn't wallow in his pain, nor did he strike back in bitterness. He simply turned to the God he knew *could not* betray him.

What sort of a person had he become that he could seek God alone, “disregarding all other interests”? How did he manage in the midst of absolute poverty to pray the absolute prayer? We must also pause for each of us to ask the question, “Is this the kind of person I would like to be?”

As you reflect on those questions, consider this aspect of David's character: the undivided heart. In Psalm 86 David asks God, "Unite my heart to fear Your name" (verse 11). And just before his death he challenges his son Solomon to "wholehearted devotion" to God (1 Chronicles 28:9, NIV). David, like us, made inexcusable mistakes. David, like us, hurt and was hurt by those he loved. David, like us, knew the heights of joy and the depths of despair.

But, unlike most of us, through it all, with an undivided heart, he wanted God more than anything.

### **Another Context**

As we ask ourselves the question, "How did David come to the place of desiring the one thing?" it will help to notice an additional context of Psalm 27. Not only were sin and evil present in full force, but so was God. And this was the context that defined reality for David.

Psalm 27 begins with the acknowledgment that the Lord is our light and our salvation. It is not so startling for David, or for us, to see God as our only hope of deliverance from trouble. He is our hope here and in the hereafter; that is, for our salvation. But in what sense is the Lord to be our "light"?

Think about what light does. It allows us to see everything else. In a dark room, not only can I not see light, I cannot see anything. While visiting the incredible hewn-rock churches in Lalibela, Ethiopia, we were guided into a stone tunnel that connected two of the churches. For centuries, this tunnel has been called the "seventh degree of hell" because of its pitch darkness. I put my hand an inch from my eye and still could not see it. That is life without God.

Goodness, truth, and beauty can be right in front of us, but without God as light, we don't even notice. Only because of God

can I “see” others, myself, and reality. With a “God is my light” context, everything else comes into focus. Because this was the lens through which David looked at all of life, he saw clearly the necessity, rightness, and wisdom of asking for “one thing” and only one thing.

### **One Thing, Three Verbs**

Happily, we are not left to imagine what asking for the one thing looks like. The psalm gives us three lively verbs in verse 4 that flesh out the skeletal idea of seeking the one thing.

#### *That I May Dwell in the House of the LORD All the Days of My Life*

This request is not for a perpetual church service. David’s one yearning is for the Presence of Yahweh, experienced acutely in the temple (the house of the Lord) but not limited to it. David expresses here his faith that the Presence of God provides everything he needs. It makes all other concerns, dangers, troubles, losses, and pains of this life seem secondary. As long as God was with him, he knew he could endure whatever might come his way — “whom shall I fear?” (verse 1). Such is the strength and courage of those friends of God who have long since settled the question of God’s faithful presence with them.

The elusive “with-God life” that David longed for, asked for, and sought is now freely given and guaranteed to all who put their confidence in Jesus, who is Immanuel, God with us. But do I really want this “with-God life”?<sup>3</sup>

One does not have to read far into any of the Gospels to notice that the presence of Jesus not only brought comfort to the troubled but also troubled the comfortable. Living life in the presence of

God is entering into a dimension where Jesus is Lord and I am not. It is a place where what God wants done gets done — whether that is in my heart, in my relationships, in my activities, in my possessions, or in my body.

But mainly what God wants done is freedom for the captives, healing for the brokenhearted, sight for the blind, and good news proclaimed to those who are “down and out.” In other words, His kingdom come, His will be done on earth as it is done in heaven (see Matthew 6:10).

### *To Behold the Beauty of the LORD*

David had a sense of the majestic beauty of the God who is the source of all beauty, creativity, and enjoyment. It is beauty that arouses desire and sustains devotion. When David caught a glimpse of the ark of the covenant being brought into Jerusalem, he expressed his overflowing desire and devotion by dancing. Awareness of beauty does that — even to a warrior king.

Anyone who has lost his desire for God has first lost the vision of God’s magnificence, brilliance, and radiant glory. If you find your desire for God waning, look at Jesus. Fix your eyes on Him.

Join Mary of Bethany in sitting at His feet, listening to His voice, and looking full into His wonderful face.

Join the crowds who beheld the beauty of His grace as He forgave the terrified woman who had been caught in adultery. Look on in awe with those who beheld the beauty of His power as He fed the five thousand and the beauty of His compassion as He touched lepers, gave sight to the blind, and blessed those who were thought to be “unblessable.”

Join Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and the disciples in beholding the beauty of the life of Jesus. They experienced what

C. S. Lewis described as the deep desire of the human heart: “We do not want merely to *see* beauty. We want something else which can hardly be put into words — to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.”<sup>4</sup>

We can look at Jesus only for so long without His beauty stirring our desire to know Him. As we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18), we inevitably step closer to an undistracted devotion to Him.<sup>5</sup> And this is where we become part of the beauty of who He is — Christ formed in us.<sup>6</sup>

### *To Meditate in His Temple*

Here David’s desire is to meditate upon the beauty he has seen in the presence of the Lord. The Hebrew word for meditate, *hagah*, means “chew” or “gnaw” — as a lion over its prey. Just as what the lion “meditates” on becomes part of him, so when we meditate, chew on, the beauty of the Lord, it passes into us and becomes part of us.

The location of choice for David is the physical temple that he has been exiled from. But in the Psalms, the temple of the Lord extends far beyond a building to include all of creation.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, David’s meditation is not limited by location, but can take place anywhere.

The lesson for us is obvious. We don’t need a quiet place, a sanctuary, or a retreat center in which to meditate. All we need to do is slow down right where we are and reflect on the meaning of what we are experiencing as we stand in the presence of the Lord and behold His beauty.

It is meditation that allows us to notice and respond to the fire of God’s presence, voice, and action in the midst of the ordinariness of our lives. The acts of abiding, beholding, and meditating

are the responses of those who have asked for the one thing. One scholar, commenting on Psalm 27, speaks of David's kind of total devotion this way:

Only he can speak thus who has given up all dependence on his fellow men and above all on himself in exchange for an exclusive dependence on God which is unconditional and accepted without any reservation whatsoever. That inward independence of anything which is human makes a man truly free from any kind of fear, but is only granted to him to whom God means everything and for whom God is the ultimate goal in the actual practical circumstances of his life.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes we must come to the place, as David did, where God is all we have, in order to recognize that God is all we need.

On one of the great battlefields of the Civil War, the body of a young, unidentified soldier was found. The search through his pockets yielded a scribbling that has been handed down as "The Prayer of the Unknown Confederate Soldier." It captures the essence and beauty of asking for the one thing:

*I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things;  
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy;  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;*

the one true thing

*I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for — but everything I had  
hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.  
I among all men, am most richly blessed.<sup>9</sup>*