

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Three

PSALM 16

The Holy One Who Would Not See Decay

It is nine in the morning in Jerusalem, fifty days after a Passover the city has not been able to forget. A crowd has gathered around a group of Galileans, and a fisherman stands up to preach. He has one thing to prove: the man you crucified is alive. To prove it he does not start with the empty tomb, and he does not start with the women who found it. He starts with a song David wrote a thousand years before.

Psalm 16 is a quiet psalm. There is no army in it, no coronation, no thunder from heaven. It is one man telling God that he has nowhere else to go and does not want anywhere else to go. Yet Peter builds the first gospel sermon ever preached on its last four verses, and years later Paul preaches the same psalm the same way in a synagogue hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. This is the resurrection lesson of our series.

Read Psalm 16 several times this week, slowly, before you read anything else. Then read Acts 2:22 to 32 and Acts 13:32 to 37. Watch one word in particular, "corruption," and watch how carefully Peter argues from a grave that anyone in that crowd could have walked over and visited before supper.

First impressions

The superscription calls Psalm 16 "A Miktam of David." No one is certain what *miktam* means. It stands over only six psalms, this one and Psalms 56 to 60, and most of those are tied to seasons when David was running for his life. Some have suggested it means an inscription, something carved to last; others suggest a golden psalm. What is not in doubt is the situation behind the words. David is in danger, he is surrounded by people who pour out offerings to other gods, and he has settled it in his own mind that the LORD Himself, and not the LORD's gifts, is his portion.

1.
 - a. Read Psalm 16 through three times, once quickly, once slowly, and once out loud. How much of this psalm is actually a request? Where does the asking stop and the confidence begin?
 - b. What surprises you most about the psalm?

A cup, a portion, and pleasant lines (16:1–6)

Verse 5 borrows the vocabulary of real estate. When Israel came into Canaan, every tribe received an inheritance measured out with a surveyor's line, every tribe but one. The Levites were given no territory, because, as God told Aaron, "I am your portion and your inheritance among the people of Israel" (Numbers 18:20; compare Deuteronomy 10:9 and Joshua 13:33). David was not a Levite and he owned a kingdom. Yet he takes the Levites' words onto his own lips. Whatever else he has been handed, God Himself is the inheritance he is counting.

2. Read 16:1 to 4. What does David say about any good he might have apart from the LORD (verse 2)? Who are the people he delights in (verse 3), and what does he refuse to do (verse 4)?
3. Read 16:5 to 6. Underline every word in these two verses that comes from the dividing up of land. What is David claiming he has actually inherited?

For Thought and Discussion: Verse 2 says, "I have no good apart from you." Most of us would say something a little different, that we have no good except what God gives us. That is true, but it is not the same claim. What would change about an ordinary week if you really believed that God Himself, and not His gifts, is the good you are after?

Counsel in the night (16:7–8)

Verse 8 gives us a picture worth carrying around: "I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken." In the Old Testament the right hand is where a defender stands (Psalm 109:31; Psalm 121:5). Notice also that David has *set* the LORD there. It is something he does, a deliberate habit, not a mood that comes over him. Hold on to this verse. Peter will quote it word for word at Pentecost, and then at the end of that same sermon he will announce that Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God (Acts 2:33). The picture turns around. The One who trusted God at His right hand now sits there.

4. Read 16:7 to 8. What does David say the LORD gives him in verse 7, and what happens to him in the night? In verse 8, what has David done, and what is the result?

Optional Application: David says the LORD counsels him and that his own heart instructs him in the night. Pick one night this week when you wake and cannot sleep. Instead of reaching for your phone, put one psalm or one paragraph of Scripture in front of your mind and let God counsel you there. Write down afterward what you thought about.

Not abandoned to Sheol (16:9–11)

Sheol is the ordinary Old Testament word for the realm of the dead. It is not first of all a word about punishment; righteous people go there as well as wicked ones. Jacob expects to go down to Sheol mourning for Joseph (Genesis 37:35). Job asks God to hide him there until His anger passes (Job 14:13). The psalms picture it as a land of darkness and silence where the daily praise of God in the assembly has stopped (Psalm 6:5; Psalm 88:10 to 12), and where no man can deliver himself (Psalm 89:48). The Old Testament tells us far less about it than we would like to know, and this is a good place to be content with what Scripture actually says. Life and immortality were not yet brought to light; that waited for the gospel and for the One who came back (2 Timothy 1:10).

So what did David mean? On the plainest reading he means what any believer in danger would mean: God is not going to hand me over to death. My life will not end in this cave or on this hillside. But the second line of verse 10 adds something. "Or let your holy one see corruption." The Hebrew word behind "holy one" is *chasid*, a man marked by covenant loyalty, one of God's faithful. The word behind "corruption," *shachath*, can mean either the pit, which is simply another name for the grave, or the decay that happens down in it. The Greek Old Testament that Peter's hearers read settled on the second sense: the rotting of a body. Hold both truths together and you will not go wrong. David was praying for his own life. He was also singing better than he knew.

5.
 - a. Read 16:9 to 11. What is David confident of in verse 9? What does he expect to find in God's presence and at God's right hand?
 - b. Read Psalm 6:5, Psalm 88:10 to 12, and Psalm 89:48. What did an Old Testament believer know about the realm of the dead, and what did he not know?
6. In your own words, what would verse 10 have meant to David in his own lifetime, long before anyone had heard the name Jesus of Nazareth?

For Further Study: The word Sheol appears more than sixty times in the Old Testament. Look up a dozen of them with a concordance and notice how few of them say anything about the condition of the dead. Then read Luke 16:19 to 31 and 2 Timothy 1:10. Be careful here. Scripture tells us enough to trust God with our dead and with ourselves, and it declines to satisfy our curiosity. A good Bible student learns to stop where the text stops.

Peter preaches Psalm 16 (Acts 2:22–32)

Peter quotes Psalm 16:8 to 11 in full, in the Greek wording his hearers knew, and then makes an argument you can follow step by step. Watch it move. David said these words. David died. David's tomb

is a short walk from where we are standing, and it is not empty. Therefore David was not finally talking about himself. He was a prophet, and God had sworn to seat one of his descendants on his throne (2 Samuel 7:12 to 13; Psalm 132:11), so he spoke about the resurrection of the Christ. And that Christ is Jesus, whom God raised up, and we saw Him.

7.
 - a. Read Acts 2:22 to 28. How does Peter describe Jesus in verses 22 to 24? Who does he say crucified Him, and who raised Him?
 - b. Peter says in verse 24 that it was "not possible" for Jesus to be held by death. Given what God had promised, why not?
8.
 - a. Read Acts 2:29 to 31 slowly, twice. What plain fact about David does Peter's whole argument depend on?
 - b. Why does that fact matter so much? What could a doubter in that crowd have done that same afternoon to test Peter's claim?
 - c. What does Peter conclude that David was actually speaking about in Psalm 16:10?
9. Read Acts 2:32 to 36, then 2:37 to 41. What does Peter say he and the others are witnesses of? When the crowd is cut to the heart and asks what to do, what are they told to do, and what are they promised?

Study Skill, Reading a Quotation Back in Its Original Context: When a New Testament writer quotes the Old Testament, always stop and read the quotation in its own chapter before you decide what he is doing with it. Ask four questions. Who is speaking in the original? To whom? On what occasion? How much of the surrounding paragraph does the New Testament writer expect you to carry over? Peter quotes four verses of Psalm 16, not one, because he wants the whole flow of David's confidence in front of the crowd. Try this with every quotation in this study and you will be surprised how often the New Testament writer is thinking about more than the sentence he quoted.

Study Skill, Telling the Difference Between Direct Prophecy and Type: Not every Old Testament passage that the New Testament applies to Jesus works the same way. Sometimes we have direct prophecy, a statement that could only ever have found its target

in the Christ. Sometimes we have a type, a real person or event in Israel's history that God shaped as a pattern, so that Jesus fills the pattern up completely. Most of the psalms in this series work the second way, or both ways at once. Psalm 16 is unusual because Peter argues out loud for the first: David "foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ" (Acts 2:31). Get in the habit of asking of every quotation, is this a prediction, a pattern, or both, and let the New Testament writer tell you.

Paul preaches Psalm 16 (Acts 13:32–37)

Years later and hundreds of miles away, Paul stands up in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia and does the very same thing. He quotes Psalm 2:7, then Isaiah 55:3 with its promise of "the holy and sure blessings of David," then Psalm 16:10. And he lands on exactly the sentence Peter landed on. David served God's purpose, died, and saw corruption. The One God raised did not see corruption. Two apostles, preaching independently, to two different audiences, in two different decades, read the psalm the same way. That is worth noticing.

10.
 - a. Read Acts 13:32 to 37. Three Old Testament passages are quoted in verses 33, 34, and 35. What are they, and what does each one contribute?
 - b. Paul's argument in verses 36 and 37 is Peter's argument compressed into two sentences. State it in your own words.
11. Read Acts 13:38 to 39. What does Paul say follows from the resurrection? What is offered to the hearers, and what is it that the law of Moses could never do for them?

The path of life

Psalm 16 ends with a road. "You make known to me the path of life." Because Jesus went down into the dust of death and came back up that road, the psalm belongs to His people too. Paul calls Him the firstfruits (1 Corinthians 15:20 to 23), the first sheaf carried in ahead of the harvest and the guarantee that the rest of the field is coming. The empty tomb is not only evidence about who Jesus is. It is a promise about your body.

12. Read 1 Corinthians 15:20 to 23 and 15:54 to 57. What does the resurrection of Christ guarantee for those who belong to Him? What is finally swallowed up?

13. Read Romans 6:3 to 5 and Romans 8:11. Where does a person come to share in the death and resurrection of Jesus? What does God's Spirit have to do with our mortal bodies?

For Thought and Discussion: Read Hebrews 2:14 to 15. The writer says people can be held in lifelong slavery through fear of death. Where do you see that fear at work in the people around you, and how does an empty tomb in Jerusalem actually set a person free from it?

Your response

14. David's confidence did not come from comfortable circumstances. He wrote this while in danger. What in your life right now most tempts you to say that your security really lies somewhere other than in God?
15. Peter's sermon ended with a command, not a suggestion (Acts 2:38). If you have not yet been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life, what is keeping you from talking with the teacher or one of the elders this week?
16. Write one specific step you will take because of what God has shown you in this psalm, and one prayer you would like the group to pray for you.

For the group

Warm-up. Ask each person to name one thing they own or enjoy that they would find hardest to lose. Do not moralize about the answers; simply set them alongside Psalm 16:5 and let the psalm do its own work.

Discussion. The center of this lesson is question 8, Peter's argument from David's tomb. Do not let the class hurry past it. Read Acts 2:29 to 31 aloud, slowly, and let someone in the group state the logic in their own words before you move on. Questions 5 and 6 on Sheol will raise more curiosity than the Bible answers, so give them a fair hearing and then be willing to say that Scripture does not tell us. Questions 12 and 13 bring the resurrection home to the people in the room.

Wrap-up. Close by reading Psalm 16:9 to 11 aloud, and then Acts 2:32. Thank God that the tomb of David is still in Jerusalem and the tomb of Jesus is empty, and pray for anyone in the class who is grieving a death this year.