



TIME OF GRACE®

God's Biggest Goal for You

Study Notes

Summary

God's biggest goal for your year is not for you to be more patient, more generous, or more loving. The number-one thing on God's list is much, much more important than anything you could ever do. His primary goal is for you to remember who you are. At the start of a new year, have you figured out your identity in Jesus?

- **Psalm 73:1-13:** ¹ Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. ³ For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. ⁵ They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. ⁷ From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. ⁸ They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. ⁹ Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. ¹⁰ Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. ¹¹ They say, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?" ¹² This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. ¹³ Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.
- **Psalm 73:21-28:** ²¹ When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, ²² I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. ²³ Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.
- Big Idea: When life breaks down, _____ to the _____!
- Your #1 Goal: Run to _____.

Points to Ponder

1. Read Psalm 46. Find three connections between this psalm and today's message?
2. Agree/Disagree: The presence of GOD is the greatest gift that a person can receive.
3. In what area of your life (financial, physical, relational, moral) do you most often forget to run to GOD? What would it look like to run to him as your refuge instead of spending your days in worry and fear?

Homework for Next Week

Read Mark 12:1-12.

Time of Grace Ministry
God's Biggest Goal for You
Psalm 73
January 3, 2021

Pastor Mike Novotny

What are you going to do when that happens? When the next thing goes wrong with life, a relationship, a moral choice that you make, a complicated family, a tumor, a financial bill that you didn't expect. When that stuff happens, what are you going to do?

This little Lego guy with the nice hair? This is you. And this little green Lego square is your upcoming year. These are all the places where you're going to go, the people you're going to talk to, the ways you're going to spend your seconds and minutes and hours and days. And this over here - this mean looking guy with a hatchet in his hand - this is all the bad stuff you don't want to happen to you in the next year. It's the stuff you're worried about, the things you're afraid of, the thoughts that give you anxiety and keep you up at night, the hurt that none of us want to feel in our hearts.

And because there's the life that you want and all the things you want to avoid, you care about this: These walls. You might call them resolutions or goals or changes but essentially, what these things do is they come in between the life that we want and the life that we don't. For example, this gold wall is your financial situation. If you can get that wall strong enough and if the wall of your finances can be high enough, there's a whole bunch of stuff you don't have to worry about. Like if you have enough money in your bank account, in your savings, in your retirement fund, if you didn't have to freak out about paying the rent or the utility bill or something breaking on your car, if you wouldn't have to get into those squabbles and fights in your relationship about who spent what and the money that you don't have, like if you could brick by brick build that wall high enough with your finances, life, well, it'd be pretty good.

It's not just finances; there's also this. This red wall represents your health, your fitness, your diet, your exercise. Because you can have all the money in the world but if your back aches and your head aches and you're going through chemo, if your mental health is struggling and you're down and depressed or addicted, if this wall comes crumbling down, life isn't so good and this is why we resolve to eat better and sleep more, not to drink so much, to go to rehab, to make some real changes.

And then there's this wall. This blue wall represents your relationships because you can be ripped and you can have money but if that's all you got, you end up kind of lonely and so this is your friendships, this is the person you're dating, maybe the one you're married to, these are the kids that you're raising. And if this wall is strong, if you have friends who know you and who love you, if you go home to a mom, a dad, a brother, sister, a husband or wife that puts your first and serves you, like if that wall is strong enough, life is so much better, isn't it?

And then there's this wall. This wall is because I ran out of Legos. I couldn't find them all in the same color but then it hit me, it's actually kind of true because there's probably 10 or 12 other things you really care about, too. These are your moral choices, these are the job and career that you have, your possessions, the home that you go to, the experiences that you have, the college that you're going to get into, the sports, the stats, the grades, the scholarship. There's so many things and when all those things are working out, when all these walls are tall enough, you are kind of safe from the fear, the anxiety, the hopelessness and the despair. And you might be a New Year's resolutions person or maybe you're not but I guarantee you you care about all of this stuff because that's what humans do.

But there's a problem. There are three problems, actually. The first problem - no offense - is you. Because if you are anything like me, there's some really good choices that you're all in on January 1st that kind of fall off the map by January 10th. Sometimes I make these really amazing budgets that would make me wealthy within years; I just don't keep them. I say I'm only going to go out to eat this many times and then I really don't want to cook and we go out and we splurge. We haven't saved up for years for some great vacation but we just need a break and so we go. And when you're on vacation, no one wants to keep to the budget so you splurge and you sweat the credit card and this wall that could have been so strong, it sometimes falls down.

I think about health and fitness. I love the idea of eating better but sometimes the only vegetables I eat are the ones that come on top of the supreme pizza and then that little golden cup of buttery garlic sauce. You know what I'm talking about? Like angels make it in heaven and Papa John's gets a hold of that and you dip the crust and it's like 2,000 calories after 9:00 p.m. You know, we're going to get to the gym or we're going to wake up early but you snooze, snooze, snooze; sometimes it's us. That's the first problem.

The second problem is that sometimes it's them. You know, sometimes you're making the right choice in a relationship and you're trying to be selfless and you're trying to serve but the people in our lives aren't perfect either. And sometimes they find it hard to forgive and sometimes they make vows that they don't keep and sometimes you meet a friend in school that you think you can trust and that friend wants to tell an interesting story and they break your trust. Sometimes you're making good choices but if they're not making good choices, these walls can come down, too.

And the third and final problem is just life. Sometimes stuff happens that makes us super down and depressed and it's not our fault and it's not their fault, it's not anyone's fault; it's just life. You're sticking to the budget, you're saving money, and then the engine drops in your car, it breaks, and now you're broke. You're taking care of your body, you're getting up in the morning, you're running, you're saying no to that late-night pizza and then the doctor finds something and you're back at the hospital. See, whether your willpower gives out or someone sins against you and fails you or life just happens, it is so rare, those seasons in life are so short when everything is great and there's nothing to worry about.

Which is why I have a huge question for you: What are you going to do when that happens? When the next thing goes wrong with life - a relationship, a moral choice that you make, a

complicated family, a tumor, a financial bill that you didn't expect - when that stuff happens, what are you going to do? You've got to do something, Christian or not, whoever you are, first time in church, thousandth time in church, you're going to do something so my question is what are you going to do? Because those moments are some of the most important moments in our life. Spiritually, those moments are the ones that test us unlike anything else. In these moments, you can either get better when it comes to God or you can get bitter. You can shake your fist and be mad at why God would allow this, why there's so much pain in the world, you can actually stop believing in God altogether, or those moments can lead you to God's greatest goal.

I know some of you in this room right now, some of you watching on TV, you're in a spot like this right now and if you're not, it's coming. You know that your life will not be perfect. So today we're going to open up the Bible and we are going to go to, I think, my favorite chapter in the entire book. It's a story about a guy who was really, really religious and he was really, really close to God and then things went really, really wrong and he almost lost it. He admitted he turned like into this animal who was so bitter and beastly toward God; he almost slipped away but actually, thanks be to God, he stumbled on a truth that changed his life. He was a guy who lived about 3,000 years ago whose name was Asaph and today, we're going to hear his story. And he's going to prepare us for life in the real world; a life where we don't have to lose our hope or our joy or our peace if we just know what to do.

So if you have a Bible with you or if you want to follow along with me on the screen, we're going to jump in to Psalm 73; an ancient song that Asaph wrote. He writes this: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envy the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they're not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, speak with malice, with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say," these people who don't care about God, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?" This is what the wicked are like - always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence."

He says, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet," here it is, "Yet God, I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterward, you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who are unfaithful to you but as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge and I will tell of all of your deeds."

I can't tell you how much I love these words. These were the words I was reading in a hospital room when my father-in-law died. "My heart and my flesh may fail," I literally was reading, and he passed. "But God is the strength of my heart." These are the words I turned to when someone I know was battling cancer; when we sat on the floor of a hospital wondering about the future,

about her health, about her life, we turned to these words because Asaph realized even if the money was gone, even if the friendships fail, even if the body fails, there's one thing that will never fail: God. "Yet, I'm with you, God." My neighbor has the money, the better marriage, but I have God. And unless, somehow, you've convinced your heart that God is this small and a perfect marriage is this big, that is the most beautiful thing in the world. That my heart can give out, I can be broke, I can be on gift cards and food stamps, my children can fail, my own moral choices can fail, but if I have God, the one thing my heart was created to crave, I have absolutely everything that I need.

I love Asaph's words. He says, "I don't know about you but as for me, it is so good to be near God." I love that idea! Just to be near God is - I don't think the word "good" has ever been so flattered as it is in this verse. To Asaph, it's great to be near God. It's amazing when you mess something up and God is still there. When everyone else turns their backs and gets too busy but you still have God. That is the greatest thing in the world, this place where we can run to and find happiness and hope and peace if we have God.

And that's why I brought one more Lego with me today. My kids helped me build this one. This is the refuge. I love how he said it: "I have made God my refuge." You know, in the ancient world of Israel, life was pretty brutal. There wasn't just wars; there was incredible brutality. If a foreign army marched into your city and busted down your walls, terrible things would happen to you and those you love. So what people back in the day used to do is they would build one of these; a refuge. It was like this rock-solid, impenetrable tower that you could run to, lock the door, and even the fiercest, strongest enemy couldn't get it; it's a place where you can be safe. And that's what Asaph learned about life. That as much as we wish things were different - believing in God doesn't guarantee you'll be rich or healthy, have great friendships, perfect relationships, that life is going to be easier - but by believing in Jesus, you get the best thing of all; you get God. A place that you can always run to, a love that will never fail, an inheritance that can't be taken away. God's biggest goal for you this year is not that you lose the weight, not that you get a better job, not that you'd experience the beauty of the world. God's biggest goal is for you to realize that this is what you were made for. That deep in your heart is this God-shaped hole that only he can fill. That you're going to run around for the rest of your life searching for the next experience, the next restaurant in town, the next drink, the next job, the next vacation and they will never be good enough to give you the kind of peace that God wants. The only thing that will work is for you to get to the point where Asaph got to and say, "But I have God." This is complicated, this is messed up, I wish I could pray and just change this. I can't. But right now in this moment, I have God. So if you're taking notes in your program, write this down: When life breaks down, God's number one goal is to run to the refuge.

So I was blessed in this past year to write a book; the book is essentially about that. And I studied every passage about the presence of God, God is our refuge, our tower, our fortress, our hiding place. I've been thinking about it, searching every Bible passage, finding every connection to songs and I've been like marinating my heart in this idea. But I never realized how beautiful it actually was until two weeks ago. Sitting in my office was a guy whose life was really complicated. I can't tell you the details for confidentiality reasons but he was a father who had lost his relationship with his kids. And as he was telling me this story, there was this growing distance that years had turned into weeks and then months and now had been like

forever since he had spoken with his own children as a father. His story made me so sad and I was just empathizing and feeling for him and I was waiting for him to end the story so I could say, "Man, I'm so sorry about that." But the guy never gave me the chance. In the middle of his story, before I could react to it, he kind of looked up at the corner of my office and he said, "But Pastor, sometimes I think about God and I picture these mountains and this beautiful sky and I turn and right there is God." And he opens his eyes and this guy's grinning at me. And I went from pitying him to envying him. Cause anyone who can go through life with walls like that and still have a sense of peace, this rock-solid place they can come back to, is spiritually a step beyond where I am. That man, like Asaph, is a great example for all of us.

So here's my challenge for you in the year to come; it's our last fill in the blank. I want you for the next 12 months to run to G-O-D, A-S-A-P. If I've got God, I can walk through the valley of the shadow of death because you are with me. The apostle Paul said it this way while he was sitting in a jail cell: "I've learned the secret of being content; I have a peace that goes beyond understanding. I can rejoice always because God is near." Asaph said it so beautifully: "Earth has nothing I desire because nothing lasts like God." So whatever happens in the days to come, I want you to start training your heart and tell your spiritual muscle memory to go after God. Seek his face, close your eyes like that man did, picture the God who delights in you because friends, that's what Jesus died to give you.

Anyone notice the color of the door handle on my refuge? That wasn't because I ran out of Legos, by the way. I wanted you to know that a place this good, not anyone can get into. Like, untouchable happiness 24-7, peace, the presence of God - actually, Asaph said this, too. Verse 1, he said, "Surely God is good to those who are pure in heart." Psalm 15 says, "Who can ascend the hill of the Lord? Only those that have pure hearts and clean hands." Which means if you're anything like me, you can't go barging into the presence of God, which is why we love Jesus. Two thousand years ago, Jesus came into this world, he sought God with all his heart, and then he shed his blood on a cross so that anyone who would take hold of Jesus would find the door to God's presence unlocked. Anyone who every day would say, "I'm a sinner but Jesus still forgave me," could stand in the safest place on planet earth. They could go to the place where no matter how many walls fall, they would always have God.

I'll be real with you as the new year starts, Jesus will cost you. He loves unconditionally but following him and letting him get the last word in everything in your life will be the hardest thing you will ever do. And the kicker is he won't make you rich or healthy; he won't guarantee you perfect marriages or friendships or children because he died and rose to give you something better - God.

And that's why I asked one of my friends to draw me a picture. In this past year, I got to know this really amazing Christian artist; his name is Christopher Powers. Some of you have seen his art online or here in church. And our family became huge fans of him. His depiction of the way a husband and wife should love each other is printed and framed above the fireplace in my living room. His depiction of how we deal with anxiety and worry is printed and framed in the bedroom of one of my daughters. He has been a blessing to me, my marriage, my family, and my faith. And as I thought about today, you know, the fact that life is complicated but God is this safe place to be, I asked him just two weeks ago if he'd be willing to make a picture. If I

would donate to his art and his ministry, if he'd be willing to make a personalized picture. And he responded to that email and he said he would for free, which was amazing of him so then I thanked him and I sent him kind of a pesky email and said, "Hey, I'm preaching on Sunday. Do you think we could have it done by then?" And because he's that kind of guy, he did. And no one yet has seen this picture that he'll officially release next week but I want to show it to you.

I said, make me a picture that shows that the walls of life don't always stand but there's this bright, beautiful place that we can go to that those who trust in Christ can get to and this is what he sent. He told me there are 10 stairs that lead up into that refuge because 10 in the Bible is the number of completeness and Jesus completed every bit of forgiveness that you need. He turned from this dark, dingy kind of life on earth to this glimpse of heaven where God is beautiful and there are rivers that satisfied the deepest happiness and cravings of our soul. And he reminded me that it's only because Jesus was selfless, because he accomplished his goal of dying for every one of your sins, that we can get there.

So friends, I pray you have a great year. I pray you set goals and you have the willpower to keep them. That no matter what happens, remember what Jesus came to do. The greatest goal of all: To give you the opportunity every second of every day to get your heart to the safest place on the planet, the presence of God.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, with hundreds of people in this room right now and hundreds of thousands going to watch this on TV, I can only imagine the kind of situations and complications and stories. I'm sure there would be a long line if we all shared what kind of walls were falling right now in our lives. But I'm so grateful, God, the answer for all of us is the same: To seek your face, to know that you are the perfect friend, you are the groom that is always faithful and loves his church. You are the one who was willing to forgive and his mercy is new every single morning. You are the perfect Father. You bring us in to the perfect family. You have promised us perfect bodies and a future that is free from pain and suffering because, one day, we will be with you.

I pray, God, that you would help us not to be afraid. Throughout the Bible, you say don't fear for I am with you. And for everyone who trusts in Christ, that's true right now. Help us to run to set a PR, a personal record, for our peace as we get to you faster than ever before because God, if we can, if we can spend more moments seeing your face, this life would be better than any we've ever had.

I thank you, God, for hearing this prayer. I thank you for opening the door to your presence by the blood of Jesus. We look to him, we trust in him, we cling to him so we can see your face. I ask this all in Jesus' wonderful name and all of God's people said Amen.