

Are You Welcome in His Presence?

"It is not a question of salvation — it is a question of how a believer should live life in order to worship God." *MARK S. WHEELER*

"Welcome!" "Come on in!" "Make yourself at home!" These words are spoken and heard anytime friends gather, whether during the holidays or at other times of the year. As people open their homes to family and friends for gatherings and celebrations, guests normally enjoy the benefits that belong to all guests – namely food, friendship, and fellowship.

During the Christmas holidays, an analogy often is made in reference to Jesus' being born in a stable. Because there was "no room in the inn," the question often is asked, "Do you have room for Jesus? Is He welcome in your life?" But this is Christmas, I'd like to turn that question around. Instead of asking if God is welcome in your life, I'd like to ask, "Are you welcome in His presence?" What kind of man, what kind of woman does God welcome into His presence? And, most important, has the past year seen you develop in that direction? This is not a new question. It's one that King David asked thousands of years before the birth of Christ. David too was concerned with the kind of person God would welcome, and in Psalm 15, he asked,

"O LORD, who may abide in Thy tent? Who may dwell on Thy holy hill?"

"Thy tent" and "Thy holy hill" speak of Israel's special place of worship in Jerusalem. From the phrases David uses, we can see that he is asking, "What kind of person will God welcome into His presence to worship Him?" Today we might answer by replying simply, "A Christian. A man of God. A woman of God." Certainly, any person who has accepted Christ by faith is entirely welcome in God's presence.

But in reference to vibrant, ongoing fellowship with God, we need to go further. We need to ask, "What is that person like? How does that person live?" Why is this so important? It's important for two reasons. First, it deals with practical living. Interestingly, the qualities David discovers in this psalm closely correspond to the qualifications for elders and deacons as found in the New Testament books of 1 Timothy and Titus. They offer a practical description of the believer and how he should relate to the people around him. It is not a question of salvation – it is a question of how a believer should live life in order to be able to worship God.

Second, it is an important question because of the benefits of being welcome in God's presence. In Old Testament culture, to be welcome in someone's house meant enjoying the benefits of Oriental hospitality – namely protection and sustenance.

A few years ago, a movie told the story of a young boy who went to Arabia in search of a horse that had been stolen from him. While he was there, he learned that if he told someone, "I want to be your guest," that person was obligated to take him in, feed him, and protect him. The host was responsible to sustain and protect his guests. In Psalm 15, David asks, "Who is welcome in God's presence? Whom will God protect and sustain?" In verses 2-5, he gives a threefold answer to this question. He writes:

2 He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, And speaks truth in his heart. 3 He does not slander with his tongue, Nor does evil to his neighbor, Nor takes up a reproach against his friend; 4 In whose eyes a reprobate is despised. But who honors those who fear the LORD; He swears to his own hurt, and does not change; 5 He does not put out his money at interest, Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken.

David's answer has a very interesting structure to it. In verse 2, three broad characteristics describe this person. The one who is welcome in God's presence is one who has integrity, one who does righteousness, and one who speaks truth. Looking farther along in verses 3-5, these three characteristics are explained in more detail. Verse 3 corresponds to the third quality, speaking truth; the first portion of verse 4 corresponds to the second quality, working righteousness; and the last part of verse 4 along with most of verse 5 corresponds to the first quality, walking with integrity.

David states that the person who is welcome in God's presence is one who speaks truth in his heart. He doesn't just speak it outwardly. His whole character is truthful. Proverbs 23:7 tells us that as a man speaks in his heart, so is he. What he says inwardly is a characteristic of his entire lifestyle. Instead of merely speaking truth, this psalm is pointing out, the righteous person lives truth.

This kind of truthful living shows itself in several ways. First, the upright person does not "slander with his tongue." When asked for his opinion of a person or an event, he tells the truth without adding to it. He doesn't run others down verbally, whether in their presence or behind their back. He doesn't participate in racial slurs or ethnic jokes. He simply does not slander with his tongue.

In addition, this kind of person does not do "evil to his neighbor." This kind of truthful living shows itself in small ways as well as large. It means that he doesn't take his neighbor's paper when his own wasn't delivered. It means that he doesn't deliberately water his lawn when his neighbor's car is parked in front of his house. He doesn't borrow something and not return it.

Also, speaking truth means that one does not "take up a reproach against his friend." This kind of person doesn't keep a running score of every wrong done against him. He doesn't hold grudges. He doesn't keep reminding others of their past sins. He forgives and he forgets.

David goes on to tell us that the person who is welcome in God's presence is one who "works righteousness." The phrase "works righteousness" refers to personal ethics. It means that the upright person is ethically righteous, that he acts in an honorable manner. He doesn't cheat on his income tax. He returns money at the store when he is inadvertently given too much. His life is governed by personal honesty.

In verse 4, we next see a contrast about this person: "In whose eyes a reprobate is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD." This person views life and people through God's eyes. He hates what God hates, and he honors what God honors. He is not caught up in a "celebrity" mentality. He doesn't worship the rich and beautiful, the famous and powerful. He places value on people who put God first and who live for Him. He does not make his evaluations based on the world's standard of success and achievement.

Along with being truthful, acting in an ethical manner, being honorable in all his dealings, and viewing life and people through God's eyes, the true worshipper of God – the one welcome in God's presence – is one who "walks with integrity." He is a man who keeps his word. He does what he says he will do, when he says he will do it. If he promises to be somewhere at a certain time, he is there, on time. If his bills are due on the tenth, he doesn't pay them on the fifteenth. A man of integrity keeps his word.

This kind of person keeps his promises even if it costs him something: "He swears to his own hurt, and does not change." This does not mean that he deliberately tries to hurt himself. Rather, it means that once he makes a promise, if circumstances change so that he is at a disadvantage, he still keeps his word.

A general contractor I knew in Texas once signed a contract to build a water park for a large city. After signing the contract, however, he discovered that he had left something substantial out of his estimate. Instead of making a profit, he stood to lose \$200,000! But because he was a man of integrity, he resolved to fulfill the contract. Fortunately, the city later canceled the contract.

A man of integrity is one who "does not put out his money at interest." This is the idea of exploitation and abuse. In that culture, when one's fellow Israelite borrowed money, it meant that he was absolutely destitute. According to God's law, his fellow countrymen were not to take advantage of him by charging interest that he would never be able to repay. In the same way, a true worshipper of God is not going to take advantage of other's misfortune by putting out his money at interest. He is not going to be the family loan shark, taking advantage of his brothers and sisters or his parents and his children. He is not going to take a friend out to McDonald's for lunch and the next week expect his friend to take him out for a steak dinner. A man or woman of integrity also is one who is not influenced by bribes. He does not "take a bribe against the innocent." He is honest in his business deals. He doesn't accept kickbacks. He doesn't make deals based solely upon what benefits he may receive. He is not susceptible to outside influence or corruption. He makes his decision honestly, and then he stands his ground.

David wanted to know who was welcome in God's presence. He wanted to know what the true worshipper of God lived like. He discovered that this person is one who walks with integrity, who does righteous deeds, and who speaks the truth. And he also learned that this kind of person enjoys a special blessing. David writes, "He who does these things will never be shaken." The phrase "does these things" refers to an entire life based upon integrity, righteousness, and truth. The psalm goes on to say that the person with this kind of lifestyle will never be shaken. Of course, this does not mean that he or she will never have problems, never be out of a job, never experience conflict, nor ever lose a loved one.

But it does mean that life will be absolutely stable all the way. When David says that the upright will never be shaken, it refers to a fundamental stability. It means that they won't be shaken from their high position of godliness. They won't be shaken from the residence of the divine presence. And they will always be welcome in God's presence.

Just north of Los Angeles, there is an amusement park that has a high observation tower. Visitors to the park can ride an elevator to the top and enjoy a magnificent view of the entire park and surrounding area. What many visitors don't know is that the tower was designed to have a sway factor of seven feet in either direction at its highest point. That means that in the event of an earthquake or high winds, the tower has the potential to sway back and forth a total of 14 feet! The tower definitely will be shaken, but the foundation will remain secure. Because of that secure foundation, the tower will last.

David says that the true worshipper of God has that kind of fundamental stability. Those whose lifestyle is marked by integrity, righteous deeds, and truth can go through hard times knowing that their foundation will remain secure and that they will always be welcome in God's presence. In the eyes of the world, men and women are measured by their outward actions, by their activities. In God's eyes, however, men and women are measured by their character. David asked, "Who is welcome in God's presence? Whom will God protect and sustain?" The answer: Those whose lives are marked by integrity. They keep their word even if it costs them something. They are characterized by righteous deeds. They act honorably to those they contact, and they view life and people through God's eyes. Their lifestyle is marked by truth. They don't slander others, and they treat their friends and neighbors with respect. This is the kind of person who will always be welcome in God's presence.

Who is welcome in God's presence to worship Him? A Christian, the man or woman of God, to be sure. And beyond that, those whose lives are marked by integrity, righteousness, and truth. Such people will never lose their secure foundation.