

Bible Studies for Life Commentary

The Case for God's Involvement

Focal Passages:

Deuteronomy 8:2-5; Psalm 139:7-10; Philippians 2:5-11

Background Passages:

Deuteronomy 8:1-10; Psalm 139; Philippians 2:1-11

Lesson Outline:

God Is Personal and Present (Ps. 139:7-10)

God Guides and Provides (Deut. 8:2-5)

God Stepped into History (Phil. 2:5-11)

What This Lesson Is About:

This lesson helps adults understand that God not only exists, but that He desires to be intimately involved in their lives.

Why This Lesson Is Important:

Many people will readily acknowledge God's existence, yet they see Him as distant and removed from His creation. A popular view of many adults mirrors the classic description of God as a watchmaker who wound up creation and now just stands back and passively observes what happens. According to this view, prayer doesn't accomplish anything; we are really just on our own. This lesson emphasizes just the opposite: God is deeply involved in His creation and desires to be intimately involved in our lives.

How This Lesson Can Impact Your Life:

You can have hope by identifying ways God already is involved in your life and trusting Him with every aspect of your life.

Spiritual Preparation Through Personal Bible Study

His job loss and troubled marriage left Tom feeling overwhelmed. Financially, he and his wife had made commitments that were normal for a family like his, but now had created obligations that meant severe cutbacks and strain in the relationship. As the problems piled up, and solutions seemed distant, his faith began to falter. We talked several times about the crisis, and one day after I offered to lead a prayer for him he said, "To tell you the truth, I'm just not sure God is listening."

How would you respond to someone like Tom? While nearly everyone believes in God, many people are not sure that He is really all that concerned about us. They see Him as distant and uncaring. One classic expression of this sentiment is the idea that God is like a cosmic watchmaker, who assembled all the parts, wound it up, and now sits back to observe as it all winds down according to the laws He established.

As an apologist you will meet people like Tom who are Christians but who are struggling

with their faith. You will also meet a great many people who acknowledge God's existence but have never taken a step of faith to commit to Christ because they are not sure that God really cares. This lesson provides answers that underscore the ways God is involved in our lives and invite doubters to trust Him with every aspect of life.

God Is Personal and Present (Ps. 139:7-10)

7 **Where can I go to escape Your Spirit?
Where can I flee from Your presence?**
8 **If I go up to heaven, You are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.**
9 **If I live at the eastern horizon
or settle at the western limits,
10 even there Your hand will lead me;
Your right hand will hold on to me.**

This psalm praises God for His power and omnipresence. David ultimately appealed to God to protect him from his personal enemies (v. 19) and to lead him “in the everlasting way” (vv. 23-24).

David's confidence that God would act on his behalf was founded on the conviction that God is everywhere. The two questions beginning this section invite consideration of where David might **escape Your Spirit** or **flee from Your presence**. Many people today ask these very questions. It is a basic issue. If God really does care then He must be present and active in substantial ways. Unfortunately, many people have decided that God is real but not present. They would answer David's questions with examples from their own lives where they have felt lonely and isolated from God.

David's response is comprehensive. He imagined trying to **go up to heaven**, and, of course, He would find God **there**. On the other end of the spectrum is **Sheol**, the place of the dead—especially those who were not righteous. The Old Testament does not possess God's full revelation of either heaven or hell, but Sheol served to designate the place farthest from heaven where the dead go down and “live” after death. It is contrasted with heaven. Yet even in that dreaded place, God is **there**.

The same constant of God's presence applies to physical geography. David envisioned traveling to both the **eastern horizon** and **western limits**. The distance between them was incalculable. The verbs **live** and **settle** in verse 9 both connote more than a simple visit. Even if David were to live in those distant places God's presence is a constant.

These ideas refer to God's omnipresence. Everyone can know God is always present. Frankly, however, most people I speak to who are struggling with God's involvement are not struggling with the idea of whether or not He is present. Though this is a necessary and important first step to establish, a skeptic may treat God's presence with the same sentiment as a universal and undefined “force.” Their question may subtly shift from “Is God really present?” to “So what?”

David's answer to "So what?" is that God is not only present, but He is also personal. Notice his shift from **You are there** in verse 8 to **Your hand will lead me** and **Your right hand will hold on to me** in verse 10. (See this lesson's word study on "Lead.") Not only was God present, but He was personally involved in David's life and has continued to be involved in the life of every person to the degree that person trusts Him.

Theologians often describe God as transcendent and personal. Transcendence refers to God's being different from us. He is above and beyond us in so many important ways. To be personal means that God is also involved and concerned about us. It answers the question "Does God care?" God speaks our language; understands our struggles; and helps, guides, and blesses us in all circumstances of life. David was certain that wherever he went, God would **lead** and **hold on to** him. Believers can share that confidence.

In one of the orientation meetings for the start of seminary, all new students gathered in a large room and listened to instructions, filled out forms, and received more information than we could process. The last person to speak was Don Minton. With a kindness and gentleness that I came to understand was a constant for him, he went through a couple of final points. I do not recall any of that information. I do recall his final words, "In your years here, you have no idea what you will face. Just remember that wherever you walk, you need never walk alone." That encouragement sums up David's point in this psalm.

Those words stayed with me because they remind me of a very important theological truth. No matter what we encounter in life, God is both personal and present. In the opening illustration, Tom faced a series of circumstances that led him to doubt whether God really cared. The Bible consistently affirms that God is always present, He cares deeply, and is personally involved in our lives.

Before leaving this section we need to note one other objection people often raise in connection with God's being personal and present. They may acknowledge intellectually that God is personal and present, but they feel unworthy. Think for a moment about the author of this psalm. In addition to being a king and a man after God's own heart, he was also an adulterer and a murderer, but he was forgiven. God's promise to be personal and present is a function of *His* character, *not* ours.

God Guides and Provides (Deut. 8:2-5)

² Remember that the LORD your God led you on the entire journey these 40 years in the wilderness, so that He might humble you and test you to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commands. ³ He humbled you by letting you go hungry; then He gave you manna to eat, which you and your fathers had not known, so that you might learn that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. ⁴ Your clothing did not wear out, and your feet did not swell these 40 years. ⁵ Keep in mind that the LORD your God has been disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son.

The Book of Deuteronomy is a collection of Moses' sermons near the end of his life. This particular segment of Moses' speech is summarized by the word **remember**, a major

theme of the entire book. Faith in God requires a sharp eye to see His present blessings and a sound memory to recall how He has guided and provided in the past.

The people were at the end of a **journey of 40 years in the wilderness**. We need to recall the reason for their wandering. God had led them to the promised land and was prepared to lead them to possess it. Failure to trust in God's power, however, led the people to decline their opportunity. As a consequence, instead of experiencing the full blessing of God's purpose and plan for them, they wandered in a wilderness until the doubters had died away (see Num. 13:17–14:35).

The Israelites' mistake was a common one. They looked at the challenges before them, assessed their personal resources and abilities, and decided they were not equal to the task of taking the land. In short, they left God out of the equation.

Sometimes the barrier to seeing God's guidance and provision is fear and doubt. The challenges are too daunting, and people decide that they cannot step out on faith. Other times, the fundamental problem is pride. They may decide to trust only in what they can see and hold in their hands. This self-determined life focuses on self and neglects to remember God. Even believers often take one of these approaches, having grown accustomed to a "practical" approach to life. Either cause leads to the same expression: disobedience. Where God invites trust and faith, they respond with indifference or doubt that God really does provide.

Faithful remembering highlights God's provision in the past. No one can realistically look back over life and honestly come to the conclusion that God has not provided. God's blessings are universal to a degree. All people benefit from our good and loving God. Just as the heavens proclaim God's glory, our lives are testimonies to His guidance and provision.

Moses provided specific examples of God's provision. He provided **manna to eat...clothing that did not wear out**, and even blessed them so that their **feet did not swell**. This list is small but illustrative of a great principle. God blesses everyone, but only a relative few people take time to notice. Some people are *aware*, and others are not. One of our chief tasks as Christians is to become aware of God's presence and blessing. As apologists, one of our chief tasks is to help others to become aware.

More important than the specific expression of the provision, however, is the purpose behind the blessing. Moses pointed out that by providing manna to eat, the people should **learn that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord**. Probably close to 100% of you who are reading these words have never known serious and chronic hunger. You have never lacked bread. This abundance creates the illusion that we can rely on what we obtain. We worked for the money, went to the store, paid for the bread, brought it home, and prepared it. Where is God in that equation?

The great irony is that while most of us and our neighbors eat well, many people retain a spiritual hunger they cannot satisfy. The Israelites' physical hunger became an illustration of an important spiritual principle. Our lack of physical hunger threatens to prevent us from seeing this principle. Our spiritual hunger should lead us to turn to God who

provides “the bread of life” (John 6:35). If skeptics are honest, they usually will admit to feeling that gnawing spiritual hunger. As a sensitive apologist you can help them see how God has provided for them.

The greatest challenge we face at this point is when God did not provide (at least yet) as a person wanted. Prayer for a healing that does not come, for a financial problem that remains unresolved, for a strained relationship that remains unreconciled all become exhibits for the skeptic to claim that God is distant and prayer is useless.

Any of us may fall into this trap. The Israelites did. God provided manna, and they soon became tired of it, longing for meat (Num. 11:4-6). They often professed to prefer bondage in Egypt to freedom and trust in God. What they were doing was living by the exceptions. “God has not provided the way I want, therefore, I doubt that God provides at all.” They focused on the exceptions instead of the blessings.

The folly of this argument is akin to a teenage daughter who complains that her parents will not buy her a particular dress, and petulantly claims that they “never do anything for me.” She slams the door to the room her parents provide, flops down on the bed covered with 14 pillows, turns on the TV, or the iPod, or calls her friends on the cell phone for which the parents pay a monthly bill, and later drives to a friend’s house in the car her parents bought for her 16th birthday (by the way, I am not writing autobiographically here). She has chosen to live by the exception. She did not get the dress, so she forgets everything else.

In the same way, a man may conclude that God is distant and does not care; yet all the while he enjoys the abundant blessings of life itself. By focusing exclusively on a disappointment, he comes to a distorted conclusion and ignores the evidence of a God who really does care.

The tough times in life are a form of **disciplining** and underscore God’s ultimate purpose. He is always leading us to deeper waters of faith. God uses all of life to increase our faith, times of abundance and seasons of wandering. I recently was in the hospital room of a church member who has battled a series of health problems. As I volunteered to pray for him, he said he would like to begin the prayer. With his wife and two good friends at his bedside he thanked God for what he had learned through this wilderness. Even when he had not been healed, he *remembered* that God had provided for and guided him.

Moses used the facts of God’s provision as an invitation for the people to have greater faith. We can accept that same invitation. We can extend it to others.

God Stepped into History (Phil. 2:5-11)

- ⁵ **Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus,**
- ⁶ **who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage.**
- ⁷ **Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men.**

8 **And when He had come as a man in His external form,**
9 **He humbled Himself by becoming obedient**
10 **to the point of death—even to death on a cross.**
11 **For this reason God also highly exalted Him**
12 **and gave Him the name that is above every name,**
13 **so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow—**
14 **of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth—**
15 **and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,**
16 **to the glory of God the Father.**

The incarnation, God’s stepping into history, is a mystery that defies precise definition. In this passage for study, Paul provided an illustration of what God did to become man, though not an exact explanation of how. Paul’s affirmation of Jesus’ humanity also helps us make the case for God’s involvement in our lives. Because God stepped into history, He understands our situation perfectly and can help us in life.

Paul began by affirming Jesus’ full divinity. He existed **in the form of God**, a reference to His pre-incarnation. Jesus was fully God. The word *form* refers to the essential nature of the object, and in this case means that Jesus was completely equal to and fully God. Most Christians today have no trouble affirming this. Where we fail, however, is affirming fully what Jesus did with this equal standing and what that means for us.

Paul used several phrases to describe Jesus’ **attitude** to His divinity. He did not use it **for His own advantage**, meaning He sought only to do what pleased His Father while He walked the earth.

The phrase **He emptied Himself** describes what Jesus did with His rights and power as God. The Greek word is *kenoo* and literally means to empty. It has given rise to a body of study called Kenotic Christology that seeks to define precisely what Jesus emptied Himself of. We see the obvious candidate of omnipresence, because Jesus on earth obviously was not everywhere at once. Omniscience (all knowing) and omnipotence (all powerful) are a bit more controversial, for some people believe that Jesus maintained both of these, but simply did not demonstrate them. We might add that Jesus did not give up His relationship to the Father (“as You, Father, are in Me and I am in You,” John 17:21) or His identity with the Father (“the one who has seen Me has seen the Father,” 14:9). The list can go on and become somewhat tedious.

Interestingly, however, Paul was not concerned to define precisely what Jesus emptied Himself of. Instead he focused on what Jesus gained by becoming **a man**. By taking **the form of a slave** and **taking on the likeness of men** He identified with us. By emptying Himself, Paul was not suggesting that Jesus became less than God. He never stopped being God. Instead He **had come as a man in His external form**. Literally, God stepped into history.

So scholars have somewhat missed the boat by extended discussions of what Jesus “lost” in the incarnation. The real value of this passage is focusing on what God accomplished by stepping into history. Perhaps the best biblical commentary on this passage is 2 Corinthians 8:9 which in part reads, “although He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich.” When Jesus **humbled Himself** and

succumbed to **death on a cross** He set a pattern and a precedent. The pattern was that even as **God ... highly exalted Him** when Jesus **humbled Himself** so God also will make us to “become rich” when we humble ourselves and **confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.**

The precedent is even more important for our present study. We know through the incarnation that God becomes intimately involved in our lives. This point is particularly important in making “The Case for Hope.” A person may inaccurately claim that God does not know what it is like to live as a human being, to be at the mercy of evil and temptation, and to endure suffering. God’s response was not in mere words but in sending His Son to live completely as one of us. As a caring apologist we must make the case that Jesus was fully God and fully human. In this way, we defuse the objection that God is distant and uncaring. To the contrary, He cared so much that He came to us, lived among us, and died so that we might have life. Additionally, as the writer of Hebrews put it, “For since He Himself was tested and suffered, He is able to help those who are tested” (Heb. 2:18). Truly, He is a present help in time of trouble.

Jesus, His nature, mission, and life are truly the fulcrum of Christian apologetics. Our entire case for hope rests on what God did in Christ. For that reason, the Unit theme, “The Case for Jesus” is vitally important.

For Tom, the darkness of his present distress obscured for him the light of God’s presence. We all face these dark periods, and for Tom I promised to pray for him during that time. Eventually, he emerged from that trial and went on to a very fruitful ministry. He did so because God was involved in his life. Always. That same promise should encourage you and be a vital point in making your case for hope to other people.

Biblical Truths of This Lesson in Focus

- Because God is everywhere and in every situation we face, we can know He will guide and encourage us.
- Remembering how God has guided and provided in the past creates confidence for the present and future.
- God’s involvement in our lives is not based on our worthiness but on God’s grace and character.
- God’s involvement is supremely illustrated by His coming to earth as a man and living among us.

Word Study: *Lead* (Ps. 139:10)

This Hebrew term (*nachah*) means to lead, to guide, or to help one proceed along the right path. It is used around forty times in the Old Testament. In Exodus 13:21 it is used to describe the manner in which God led the people of Israel with a cloud by day and fire by night. The word highlights God’s commitment to personally guide us and take us down the right path. Trusting God’s direction leads us to pray expectantly and follow faithfully.