

Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith

Cedars Sermon Series

Psalm 92

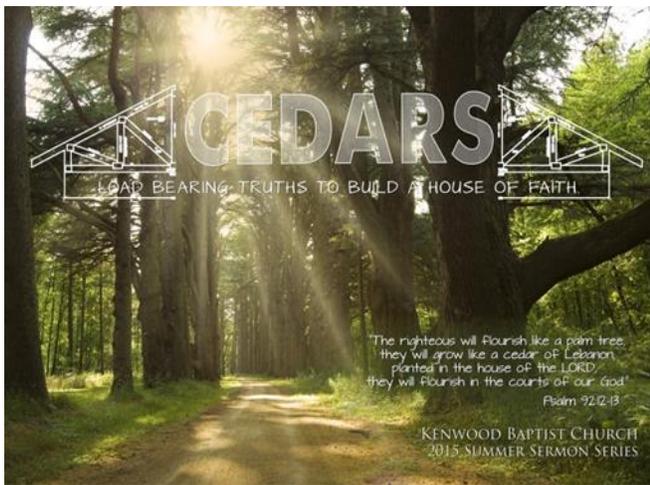
Kenwood Baptist Church

Pastor David Palmer

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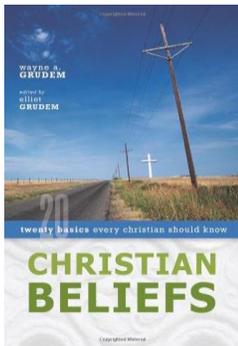
TEXT: Psalm 92

This morning we begin a new series at Kenwood Baptist. The series for the summer is called *Cedars*. Cedars of Lebanon were the prize building materials of the ancient world. These



majestic evergreen trees grew up to 130 feet high, 40 meters. Some of their trunks were eight feet in diameter. The wood of these cedars was prized for its fragrance and durability. God placed inside these cedar trees resin that protected the trees from rot and worms, and they were harvested all over the ancient Near East and used to build palaces and temples. Cedars of Lebanon are used in Scripture as an image of being rooted, planted, and flourishing in faith, and we are

going to use this image this summer for our series to explore the structure of Christian faith, the structure of Christian theology. We are going to use the questions of systematic theology, questions like: What is the Bible? What is God like? What is humanity? What is sin? Who is Jesus Christ? Each week we will take one of these questions, and we will look at each of these cedars as a load-bearing truth to build this house of faith. Christian faith has distinct answers to the questions that lie within the human heart, and when the you take the questions such as, What is election? we will see there is a question inside of that which is really a more intimate, personal question: Who is running this world? This morning, we look at the first of the cedars: What is the Bible? Implied within that is the question: Where do I find truth? Where do I go to find truth? We will look at that later this morning. My prayer for this series is that we would grow stronger together within this shared 'house' of faith. What unites us as Christians, what unites us at Kenwood Baptist Church, is not the color of our tie; it is not the color of our socks; it is not our favorite food. What unites us at Kenwood is a shared faith in Jesus Christ. As a believer in Jesus Christ, what are the truths of Christian theology? What does it mean to be a Christian? Christians are united by their shared convictions, the greatest of which is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world. We move out from there with distinct answers to



important questions. We are going to read along with this series a ‘summer sized book’ called *Christian Beliefs: Twenty Basics Every Christian Should Know* by Wayne Gruden and his son Elliott. The chapters are only four or five pages long, good poolside reading. What unites us around the shared faith in Jesus Christ is embracing the distinctive answers to these important questions, questions that are within the human heart: Where do I find the truth? Who is God? Who are we? What's wrong with us? Can anyone help us? What repairs the world's wrongs? Am I safe and secure? What is the goal of life? Where do I belong? How do I get involved? Where is this world going? and What happens in the end? These are

the questions the Christian faith and theology seek to answer. We will take one question a week and enjoy reading this book alongside of it. I know that sometimes people tremble at the thought of ‘theology.’ It sounds like a heavy word. So many people tremble at the thought of studying doctrines, and yet we must remember that Jesus’ most frequent designation for us as His followers is *disciple*, and a disciple means a *learner*. We need to learn God's ways in order to walk in them, and sometimes we set a false antithesis between devotional reading and a more theological or doctrinal reading. C.S. Lewis says this:

“We need to be instructed as well as to be exhorted. In this age our need for knowledge is particularly pressing. For my own part, I tend to find doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that ‘nothing happens’ when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pencil in their hand.”

Christian faith is rooted in truth, truths about God, truths about us, and this summer we will explore them together.

This morning, I want to do two things. I want first to look briefly at Psalm 92 where we pick up this image of the cedars of Lebanon. I want you to leave here this morning in part thinking of yourself as a tree planted in God's house. Secondly, we will look at the first load-bearing truth. The first load-bearing cedar of the summer is “Where do I go to find truth? What is the Bible, the Word of God?” Let's look at Psalm 92 together. As we move quickly through this Psalm, I want you to notice that it is filled with praise to God, and there is content to this. It is not merely an emotion. There is a structured belief inside this Psalm. It is not just “God, I praise You,” but there is a basis for this praise as the psalmist continues. Psalm 92:1 begins the Psalm by saying:

“It is good to praise the LORD and make music to Your name, O Most High.”

Isn't it a gift that we get to respond to God and offer to Him music in return and to proclaim, as

we read in Psalm 92:2:

“ . . . Your love in the morning and Your faithfulness at night,”

God's love, His steadfast love, we proclaim morning by morning. The Hebrew word for His faithfulness is really the word for His truth, God's truth. The God of the Bible is a God who is knowable by His commitment to us, His steadfast, unchanging love, but He is also a God of truth. God delights in truth, and He is the one who displays and makes truth known. We thank God that not only can we know Him and sing to Him, but He also allows us to use instruments. Psalm 92:3 says:

“ . . . to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp.”

We get to use our instruments and respond to God in praise. This is the God who has revealed Himself in the pages of Scripture, revealed Himself in history and in our experience, and we respond to Him in praise.

The Psalm 92:4 continues:

“For You make me glad by Your deeds, LORD; I sing for joy at what Your hands have done.”

The activity of God, the observable actions of God, produce joy in us. The Psalmist says: *“I sing for joy at what Your hands have done.”* We see that the God of Scripture is a God of action: He is a Creator; His deeds can be perceived; His works are not hidden in secret. As the Psalm continues in this burst of praise, Psalm 92:5 says:

“How great are Your works, LORD, how profound Your thoughts!”

Isn't it remarkable that you and I are given access to the thoughts of God, the thoughts of Almighty God which we have in the pages of Scripture? The psalmist says that these thoughts are deep; they are profound thoughts. Have you ever had a time when you moved beyond the surface with someone and they share with you their deepest thoughts? Your relationship deepens with them, and so it is with the Lord our God. Our God's thoughts are profound, and yet they can be known. Our God delights to share His thoughts and ways with us. The psalmist continues in Psalm 92:6 and says:

“Senseless people do not know, fools do not understand.”

They do not know God's ways. He lists this set of reversals that are unknown to the people of the world.

The first unknown is the contrast in Psalm 92:7-8:

“Though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be destroyed forever. But you, LORD, are forever exalted.”

The psalmist knows the ending of the story. The wickedness may seem to flourish and occupy the field, but the psalmist knows from the will of God and the purposes of God that God alone is exalted forever in the end. The second contrast in Psalm 92:9-10 says:

“For surely Your enemies, LORD, surely Your enemies will perish; all evildoers will be scattered. You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox; fine oils have been poured on me.”

God's enemies will perish, evildoers and are scattered in the end, and yet God's people experience salvation. When the psalmist says: *“You have exalted my horn,”* this is a great image of salvation. *“You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox.”* Have you ever thought of yourself like that? How does that work? The wild ox has a horn that rises up, and the psalmist says: *“You have exalted me and poured oil on upon me.”* This is the anointing oil of the Messiah, like a hidden clue of receiving salvation. It is an image of being protected and preserved. The psalmist goes on and says in Psalm 92:11:

“My eyes have seen the defeat of my adversaries; my ears have heard the rout of my wicked foes.”

My eyes see the ending: wickedness ends; it is destroyed.

Then we are given the image of the cedar at the last section of the Psalm. I want you to consider this image carefully. The Bible ends with God triumphant, exalted, His people receiving salvation and enduring in the end. Wickedness is banished, and the righteous flourish. He says in Psalm 92:12:

“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;”

It is so fitting that we have a group from our church in Lebanon this morning, worshipping the Lord. The Psalm says they grow like a cedar of Lebanon, planted in the house of God, flourishing in the courts of God. Notice what happens with these cedars of Lebanon in Psalm 92:13:

“. . . planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God.”

They do not perish. They are still fruitful all the way through. It is the image of the people of God, planted, flourishing, nourished by the water of God, and they are fruit-bearing all the way through. Our culture says that when your physical strength starts to taper off, your fruitfulness dries up. But the Bible's image of God's people, the cedars, is that they were planted, rooted in the things of God. We rise up, and we are fruit-bearing all the way through, even in old age. These fruits are to be harvested for the blessing of those around us. They stay fresh and green, life-giving, and fruit-bearing. Psalm 92:14 says:

“They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green.”

Then the Psalm ends with these personified cedars proclaiming in Psalm 92:15:

"The LORD is upright; He is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in Him."

Cedars of Lebanon, strong, load-bearing truths which we will explore, one a week.

We turn now to consider the first load-bearing truth for us. Systematic theology begins with the question: How do I know truth? Where do I go to find truth? Embedded within this, we see the question: What is the Word of God? The Word of God is the revelation of God's person. It is the manifestation of His will and His character and His identity. It is the place where He makes known His person and His purposes. We need God's instruction. If we go our own way, we go the wrong way. Psalm 25:4-5 says:

"Make me to know Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me."

Psalm 43:3 says:

"Send out Your light and Your truth; let them lead me."

We read in Psalm 86:11:

"Teach me Your way, O LORD, that I may walk in Your truth."

Where do we go to find the truth of God? Psalm 119:160 says simply and profoundly:

"The sum of Your Word is truth."

I want you to pause and consider the extraordinary gift and blessing that is given to us, that we have a Book that reveals the mind, will, thoughts, intentions, and ways of God. The Bible reveals God's will, His word to us. It is written for our instruction, and we need it. Paul says in Romans 15:4:

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

I love to look up as I leave the Classics Library at the University of Cincinnati and see this verse that is inscribed on bronze tablets over the door. You could miss it since it is written in Greek, in all capitals, and there is no reference. Even if you know Greek, you can miss it, but there it is: *"Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction that through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."* I want us as a church community to embrace this load-bearing truth: Where do I go to find truth? Where do I go? Where do you go to find truth? It may seem obvious; you may have been a Christian for many years and of course, you say, you go to the Bible. But, we live in a society where we are taught regularly to go for truth in other places. Some say: "Truth? We're not even asking that anymore." Many feel nothing is true until I say it is true. We tend to place ourselves as the locus of authority, but that is not the case. God's truth is true whether we believe it or not. You can't come to the final

judgment and say, "I don't believe in a final judgment." You can't appear before Christ in His glory and say, "I don't believe this is true." If you know Jesus Christ, you can't walk in your own way and say: "This is my vision of discipleship." Our first step is to place ourselves underneath the authority of God's Word and to say, "I need instruction."

We need instruction in God's ways, and we are dependent on God's revelation for it. Perhaps the most important passage in the Bible about the Bible is 2 Timothy 3:16-17. In 2 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy towards the end of his life and is admonishing Timothy. He says in 2 Timothy 3:14-15:

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

Then he describes the Bible in this way: each word is important. He says in 2 Timothy 3:16a:

"All Scripture is God-breathed . . ."

We often say that the Scripture is inspired by God, but actually the word that he uses here is better translated as all Scripture is *expired* by God. It is breathed out by God. God is speaking, and He uses 40 different human authors, over thousands of years, in three different native languages. They didn't know each other, but He breathed out these words. These are the words that He knew we needed, and all of them are breathed out by God. That means that even the lists of conquered cities in Joshua is important. Origen said that even the list of conquered cities in Joshua will do more for your soul than three volumes of Plato. All of it, all Scripture, is breathed out by God, and then Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16b:

". . . and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness . . ."

He says it is useful or beneficial. It has an effect on us, as we will see, and his choice of words here plants the flag of Christian faith on one side of an ancient debate that raged between Plato and Aristotle. Plato said: "The purpose of literature is to instruct us." Aristotle said: "No, no. The purpose of literature is to entertain you. It's to make you feel something. It doesn't matter if it's true." Aristotle said: "Go to the theater, watch a great play, watch someone kill their father and be moved by this." He developed the notion of *catharsis*. You know much of our society is modeled on this Aristotelian model. We go to the movies to feel something; we don't go to movies to learn. Plato banished the poets from his ideal society "Because," he said, "they're a bunch of liars. They don't tell the truth."

Paul says the Scripture is not here to entertain you. Don't pick up the Bible and think: "I'm ready for an adrenaline surge; give it to me." Pick up the Bible and say: "Oh, Lord, teach me Your ways. Instruct me, teach me what I need to know. I'm a senseless man if You don't teach

me.” When we are in that position, we are ready to grow in faith. He says: All Scripture is breathed out and is useful, it's beneficial,” and that he explains that. He tells us four things that it's beneficial or useful for, and we need each of these. He says it is beneficial for teaching us because we are ignorant unless God instructs us. He says it is beneficial for rebuking us, for stopping us on our way when we need to be stopped. It is beneficial for correcting us, for straightening us up when we are walking in a crooked way. Lastly, it is beneficial for training us, getting us in the habit of righteousness.

All of these images converge for me as I remember how my father taught me to ride a bicycle. He bought a cheap bicycle with a banana seat, one that didn't matter if it was destroyed. My father then took me, set me on top of this bicycle in the driveway, and he said, “I'm going to teach you how to ride a bike.” With no forewarning, he grabbed the handle bar and the back of the banana seat, and he started running down the driveway. Then he just released me into the backyard. It was a bumpy ride, and he just said, “Keep peddling as fast as you can.” I made it for 20 or 25 feet, and then I fell over. After my first run, I thought, “Why do people like to do this?” Then, my father said, “Okay, we're going to do that again.” So, back to the driveway, he grabbed the handlebars and the back of the banana seat, and he released me again into the backyard for another bumpy ride. This time I made it a little farther. My father then said, “Okay, we're going to try this again. You seem to be getting the hang of it. We've had two runs.” This time he went the other direction on the driveway, which didn't release into the backyard, but released me into the street in front of our house. I found it exponentially easier to ride the bicycle on a paved road than over the bumpy back yard. Off I went down the street toward a major street that was about five houses down. As I rode, I was thinking, “Boy, there are a lot of cars coming across that street.” I heard my father's voice behind me yelling, “Brakes! Brakes!” and I had no idea what he was talking about. As I got toward that busy street, I thought, “I don't know what to do with all those cars going past.” So, I thought the way that you stop a bike is the way you stop it in back yard, which is just leaning it over. So I just leaned it over on the pavement. When I've thought back to that moment, I've thought I really needed instruction. I also needed rebuke. I also needed a straightening out, and I also needed practice. The Word of God gives us all of these things: it teaches us; it tells us when to stop; it straightens out our lives when we are going the wrong way or doing things in the wrong manner; and then it gives us a habit, training in righteousness.

The first habit of righteousness for you this morning is to embrace the habit of daily reading God's Word. In 2 Timothy 3:17, Paul says that when we receive these things from God's Word that is breathed out for us, the result is:

“ . . . so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

His Word is beneficial for our lives and has the result that God's people are thoroughly equipped for every good work. We need the Scripture; we need God's truth; doctrine matters; and the structure of belief leads to unity as a church and unity in our mission. We need God's Word to learn of God from God, and I want us this morning to embrace this habit of the heart, to embrace this load-bearing truth, that we go to the Scripture to learn of God. That means that when God's Word confronts our cherished opinions, we let our cherished opinions go and embrace God's instructions.

I was challenged this week by a contrast, a profound contrast. I was curious how much reading Americans do, and you can imagine it's low. We are reading less and less as a society, and it is ironic that our other metrics show that our society is declining. There's a connection between reading and knowing, and we've often confused today access to information with knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom and knowledge are something you possess through habit and learning. I learned this week that 88% of American homes own multiple copies of the Bible. The average ownership is 4.1 Bibles, but only 25% of those homes say that they read the Scripture daily. We need to know God's Word. On the other hand, I learned recently that a group of Chinese pastors have committed themselves to reading God's Word over and over, and they set the goal of 1000 times reading the Scripture through. Then a missionary friend of mine said: "They reached the goal and so they set a new goal. This group of pastors said they were going to read the Bible 10,000 times!" I thought: "WOW!" but then I started thinking what would happen to me, what would happen to you, what would happen to us if we became a community that in the hidden spaces of our lives we were voracious readers of God's Word? I think we would grow in faith and faithfulness.

I want to conclude with a story about Adoniram Judson's ministry related to this point. Judson, together with his wife Ann, was the first missionary from the United States ever, and the origin of our entire denomination is with supporting the Judsons' ministry. They went to Southeast Asia, to the country of Burma, and Judson ministered for years. He said, early on, that ministry not based in Scripture will not endure, and so he set about translating the Scripture. His version of the Burmese Bible is still the only one in existence in that country. Judson began to teach, offer the Gospel, distribute tracks - portions of Scripture, and he came into contact with a man named Maung Shway-gnong. Maung Shway-gnong was a learned man, a middle-aged man. He was a Buddhist teacher with a cadre of disciples. One night, his disciples left him and he was alone with Judson, and Maung Shway-gnong let down his guard in a surprising way. Late that night, the two men talked, Maung Shway-gnong's



attitude and countenance changed. His ironic, skeptical manner dropped away, and with some show of emotion, he admitted that he had no inner knowledge of religion and asked Adoniram to be his teacher. He said that in Buddhism there is no idea of an eternal being and that at the end you just drop into nothing. Their existence is snuffed out in the end. Maung Shway-gnong said: "Eight years ago, I became exposed to the idea of an eternal being." He said that he had received confirmation of this through a tract through Judson's missions. They talked all through the night and discussed the possibility and necessity of divine revelation, and Judson sought to persuade him that the writings of Jesus contain that revelation. This man had moved ~~to~~ from "God is not personal, unknowable, no truth out there," to "God exists out there and how can I know Him?" Judson's first move was to try to convince him that we know Him through this divine revelation, the revelation of Scripture. That is how we know. These two men began a friendship that lasted for many years. Maung Shway-gnong was a leading man, a prominent man in his society, and he knew the cost of associating himself with the Christian mission. He became interested and then would step away from pressure. Finally, Maung Shway-gnong came to see Judson and asked him a number of hairsplitting objections, and he said:

"Do you think I would pay the least attention if I found you could not answer all of my questions? I do believe in God; I do believe in His Son Jesus. I am a Christian at heart."

Judson sensed that he was bluffing and so put the question to him directly. He said:

"Do you believe all that is contained in the Book of Matthew that I've given you? In particular, do you believe that the Son of God died on the cross?"

Maung Shway-gnong said:

"You have caught me now. I believe that He suffered death, but I cannot believe that He suffered such a shameful death on the cross. No king would allow his son to be treated with such indignity as you say that God allowed His Son to be treated."

Judson came right through the opening, and he said:

"Maung Shway-gnong, therefore you are not a disciple of Christ. A true disciple inquires not whether a fact is agreeable to his own reason, but whether it is in the Book. His pride has yielded to the divine testimony. Teacher, your pride is still unbroken. Break down your pride and yield to the Word of God."

Maung Shway-gnong stopped to think. Then he said:

"As you uttered these words, I see my error. I have been trusting my own reason, not the Word of God, and this day now is different from all the days on which I have visited you. I see my error in trusting myself, and I now believe in the crucifixion of Christ because it is contained in the Scripture."

Maung Shway-gnong then said to him:

"I think now that I shall not be lost even if I should die suddenly, because I truly love Jesus Christ."

Judson asked him:

“Do you love Him?”

Before he departed, Maung Shway-gnong said with feeling:

“No one that really knows Him can help loving Him.”

How do we know Him? We know Him through His Word.

Amen.