

Teaching Plan
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Date: August 20, 2017
Lesson Title: "The Protector"
Lesson Passage: Psalm 141:1-10

ABOUT THIS LESSON

This psalm begins with a familiar plea, a prayer for God's protection against the psalmist's enemies. But this is more than a prayer for deliverance from persecution, sickness and physical harm; the psalmist is also pleading for protection against temptations that might lure him away from his devotion to the will of the Lord. In a sense, he is praying that God will protect him from himself. He is asking the Lord to deliver him from the moral and spiritual weaknesses that dominate his godless neighbors. But though he confesses his moral and spiritual vulnerability, the psalmist still looks to God as his Protector and spiritual guardian in a time of trouble.

TEACHING/LEARNING GOALS

(1) Explain what the psalmist's prayer has in common with the "Lord's Prayer" (the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples). (2) Explain how worship can heighten one's consciousness of temptation.

BEGINNING THE LESSON

Recall the story of Gert Behannah's response to her conversion experience (at the beginning of last week's lesson), "I felt like I had just had a spiritual shower bath!" Then point out that a meaningful worship experience sometimes has a quite different effect, deepening one's sense of unworthiness in the presence of God's holiness. For example, refer to the experience of Isaiah when he saw the Lord "high and lifted up" in the Temple (Isa. 6:1) when he was prompted to cry, "Woe is me! for I am lost...for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isa. 6:5). Then relate this to Psalm 141: This psalm describes a worship experience that is an act of reverent devotion, but that also reminds the psalmist of his vulnerability to sin.

TEACHING PROCEDURES

1. Observe that the psalmist's references to "my prayer" and an "evening sacrifice" in verse 2 suggest that this psalm was uttered as a prayer at the time of the evening cereal offering (Numbers 28:4-5). As the priest led the sacrificial rite, the psalmist was offering this personal prayer.

2. As the Temple service proceeds, the psalmist's contemplation of the holiness and purity of God brings to mind his own unclean lips; and this prompts him to pray, "Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord, keep watch

over the door of my lips!" (v. 3). APPLICATION: James 3:5 reminds us that the tongue is "a little member," but what we say can have serious consequences. Even if we avoid the more obvious "sins of the mouth," such as cursing and blatant lying, it is easy to slip into more subtle sins of speech, such as gossip, personal criticism and angry retorts. Perhaps "keep watch over the door of my lips" should be frequently included in a Christian's prayers.

3. *Read Psalm 141:4, and share these thoughts:* (1) *The wording of the TEV translation of verse 4, "Keep me...from joining evil men in their wickedness" reminds us of the opening thought in Psalm 1:1 ("Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scoffers").* (2) *The last line in Psalm 141:4, "let me not eat of their dainties" (RSV) is not dietary advice. Rather, the psalmist is praying, "May I never take part in their idolatrous feasts."* EXPLANATION: It was a common practice for pagan worshipers to participate in religious meals in conjunction with sacrifices offered to idols.

4. *Explain that Bible translators differ widely on the meanings of Psalm 141:5-7, because there are many textual problems in these verses.* (Robert Bratcher and William Reyburn, respected Bible translators, have commented: "It seems imperative [to] indicate that verses 5-7 in Hebrew are extremely obscure, not to say unintelligible."): (1) *But verse 5 might be translated, "A good man may rebuke me in kindness, and with a good heart show me my faults; but I will never let evil men honor me by anointing me even with the finest oil, for I am always praying against their evil deeds." (Paraphrase: "I would rather be criticized by men devoted to God, than approved by those who disregard God.)* (2) *Note that the general sense of verses 6-7 is something like this: "When justice finally catches up with the evil men (referred to in v. 4 as "men who work iniquity") and they are handed over to those who will condemn them and have them thrown down from rocky cliffs, they will realize that the word of the Lord is true. Like wood that is chopped into bits, their bones will be scattered at the edge of the grave."*

5. *Summarize the meaning of Ps. 141:8-10 as follows:* (1) "But I will keep trusting you and seeking your protection, my Lord. Don't leave me unprotected" (v. 8). (2) "Protect me from the snares evildoers have set for me" (v. 9), let them fall into their own traps, while I escape all in one piece" (v. 10).

CLOSING THE LESSON

FOR DISCUSSION: Even though the psalmist is a devoted worshiper of God, he has the humility to admit that he experiences temptation (v. 4). This is why Jesus taught us to pray, "lead us not into temptation" (Matt. 7:13), which means "help us not to be tempted beyond our ability to resist." (*A folksy saying: "We can't keep temptation from coming up on our front porch; but it's a sin to let it in."*)