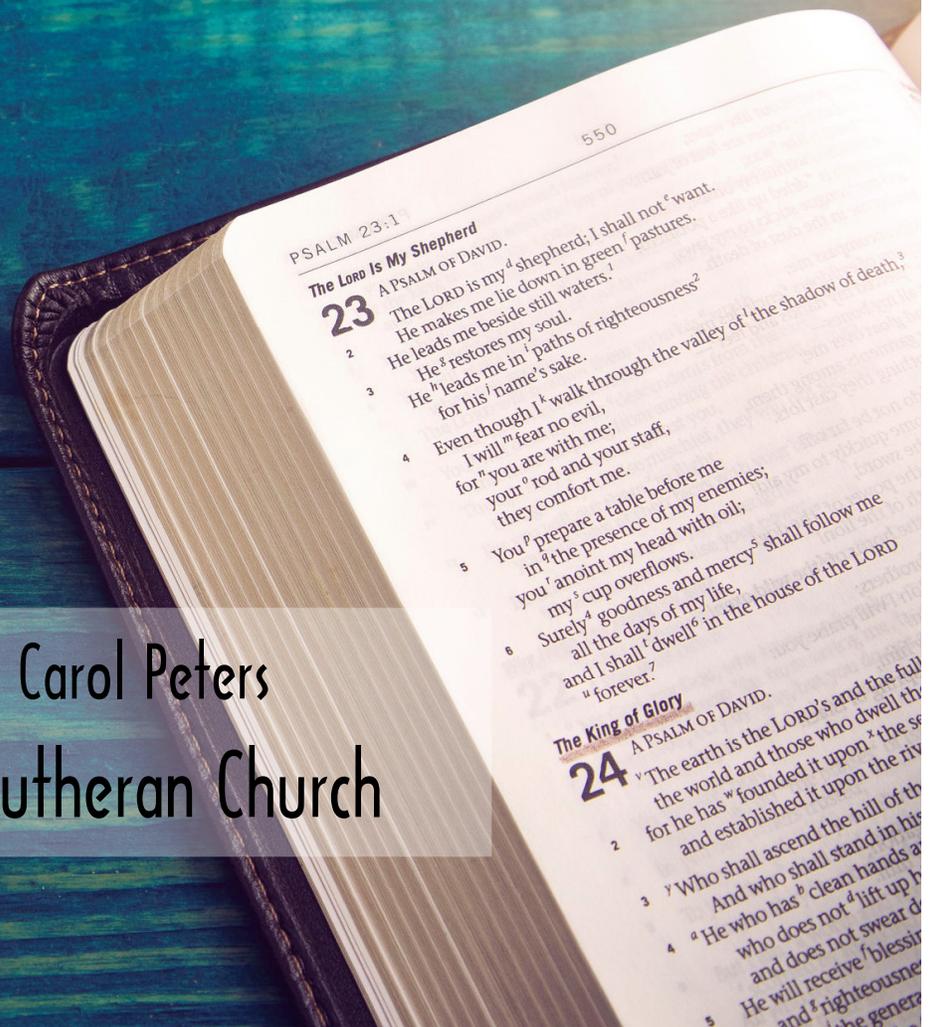


# LENT 2019

## *Encountering God through the Psalms*

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Lenten Book written by Pastor Carol Peters

## ENCOUNTERING GOD THROUGH THE PSALMS

## INTRODUCTION

If you have never read the Bible cover to cover – and even if you have – open to the Book of Psalms and over the next few weeks, read the 150 songs printed there. According to Martin Luther, in the Book of Psalms “is comprehended most beautifully and briefly *everything that is in the entire Bible.*”<sup>i</sup> He called the Psalms “a little Bible.”

Indeed, the Psalms look back to the very beginning of time, describing the Creation of the world in elegant poetry. They retell the stories of the Exodus and the mighty acts of God in Israel’s history. They give us insight into the emotions of Jesus in conversation with His Father. They look far ahead to the reign of the anointed King whose rule will continue forever and ever.

The Psalms encompass both human anguish and celebration, both fearful confusion over God’s apparent absence and simple trust in His unfailing love, cries for judgment on the wicked as well as pleas for forgiveness for oneself. They are songs of worship, supplications for deliverance, and testimonies of God’s mighty interventions.

**At the same time, the Book of Psalms is Scripture, the Word of God.** By the time of Jesus, Psalms was recognized as authoritative, as God’s Word. There are over 100 quotes from the Book of Psalms in the New Testament and many more allusions to passages from the Psalms.

Jesus said the Holy Spirit inspired David as he wrote the Psalms (Mark 12:35-36), a claim also made by the apostles (Acts 4:25). In fact, Peter called David a prophet (Acts 2:30), and David himself realized that God spoke through him (II Samuel 23:1, 2). Jesus explained, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44), pointing to the Book of Psalms’ divinely inspired prophetic nature.

How can the prayers offered by people *to God* also be God’s Word *to us*? The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that Psalms teaches us what God wants to hear from us. God, in His grace, inspired the Psalms so that we might in turn use them in speaking to Him.<sup>ii</sup>

Most simply, the Psalms teach us how to pray, to worship, and to praise God when life is wonderful but also when life is full of suffering. In them, God gives us the appropriate and acceptable way to respond to Him. The Psalms are timeless. All generations in very diverse cultures have made and continue to make them their own, using them to pray and to worship, individually and corporately.

This Lent we will explore that sacred hymnal, the Book of Psalms, and learn to pray its prayers. In so doing, by God’s grace, we can grow in our experience of communion with the Lord and in our appreciation for all that He is and for all that He has done and continues to do for us today.

Your sister in Jesus,

Pastor Carol Peters

## A LITTLE BACKGROUND INFORMATION...

### THE AUTHORS AND DATES

Tradition says that the second king of Israel, David, wrote most of the Psalms. Seventy-three Psalms are ascribed to him, and in fact, David called himself “Israel’s singer of songs” (II Samuel 23:1). Asaph, another one of the author/composers, was the chief musician under David (I Chronicles 16:4, 5). The sons of Korah composed some of the Psalms. They too were musicians from the priestly tribe of Levi. Many of the Psalms do not give an author’s name.

Psalms written during David’s reign (1000 B.C.) were probably used in worship in the Temple which Solomon, David’s son, built, while some of the Psalms were not composed until centuries later during the exile in Babylon which began in 597 B.C. and continued through the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 587 B.C. [See II Kings 24, 25.] Psalm 137, for example, reflects the despair of people living in captivity far from home. The post-exilic Psalms (e.g. Psalm 126) were composed in the time following the decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C., which allowed the people to return to Israel. [See Ezra and Nehemiah.] It may have been at that time that the Psalms were collected and put together in one volume.

The Book of Psalms was the hymnal and prayer book of Jesus, His disciples, the Apostle Paul, and the other Jews of that time. They would have heard the Psalms from childhood, committing many of them to memory.

### ORGANIZATION AND THEMES

The Book of Psalms is divided into five books, evidently to parallel the five books of Moses (the Torah or Pentateuch: Genesis through Deuteronomy).

Book I: Psalms 1 – 41      Book II: Psalms 42 – 72      Book III: Psalms 73 – 89  
Book IV: Psalms 90 – 106      Book V: Psalms 107 - 150

The Jewish Study Bible sets forth three general categories of Psalms:

1) hymns of praise      2) laments (protests)      3) thanksgiving

On the other hand, there are no “neat” categories as many Psalms combine elements of two or all three. There are also many subcategories of Psalms, including the following (with an example of each):

<u>Type of Psalm:</u>	<u>Example:</u>
Creation Psalms	Psalm 8
Historical Psalms	Psalm 78
Penitential Psalms	Psalm 51
Imprecatory Psalms	Psalm 109
Messianic/Royal Psalms	Psalm 2
Enthronement Psalms	Psalm 93
Liturgical Psalms including	
Songs of Ascent	Psalms 120 – 134
Hallel Psalms	Psalms 146 – 150

## BIBLICAL POETRY

Unlike much of our poetry, Hebrew poetry did not rhyme. Imagery, the use of metaphors, and parallelism characterize Hebrew poetry. Parallelism pairs two lines or parts of lines in different ways.

In **synonymous parallelism**, the second line echoes, expands, or intensifies the thought of the first line.

“Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and mind” (Psalm 26:2).

“The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic” (Psalm 29:4).

In **antithetical parallelism**, the second line provides a contrast to the first.

“For His anger lasts only a moment, but His favor lasts a lifetime.  
Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

In **synthetic parallelism**, the second line explains or completes the thought of the first.

“I will lie down and sleep in peace, for You alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety” (Ps. 4:8).

“The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.  
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7).

In addition to parallelism, the psalmists freely used **anthropomorphism** – giving human physical characteristics to God who is Spirit (John 4:24). Psalm 18:6-9, for example, speaks of God’s ears, nostrils, and feet. Psalm 34:15-16 mentions God’s eyes, ears, and face.

The words we find as superscriptions (e.g. *maskil*, *sheminith*, *miktam*, *shiggaion*) were not in the original writings but were added later. Translations vary as to what they mean. They may have been musical instructions or perhaps instruments. *Maskil* might mean poem. *Selah* is a signal to pause.

The Christian author C. S. Lewis has reminded us, “The Psalms must be read as poems, as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry.”<sup>iii</sup> Keeping Lewis’ words in mind will make the Psalms more readable and easier to understand.

We also look to the Holy Spirit to guide us in our reading and to shed light on God’s Word. The same Spirit who inspired the words of the Psalms can surely enlighten us as to their meaning and their application to our lives today.

(Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this study are from the *New International Version* [NIV], copyright 1973, 1978, and 1984 by the International Bible Society and are used by their permission. NASB Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible*, copyright 1995 by the Lockman Foundation, published by Zondervan, 1999. Used by permission. NKJV refers to the *New King James Bible*, published by Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982.)

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## WEEK ONE: KNOWING GOD'S NATURE

*“One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard: that You, O God, are strong, and that You, O Lord, are loving.”*  
Psalm 62:11

The Book of Psalms is “a hymnbook and a HIMbook – it is all about Him.”<sup>iv</sup> And so it is! There are more statements about God within the Book of Psalms than in any other book of the Old Testament.

Those statements, however, are not in the form of an academic, dry treatise authored by a theological professor. The psalmists spoke from the midst of their experiences with God.

The greatness of God often overwhelmed the psalmists, resulting in an outpouring of exuberant praise. They marveled at the acts of God in history and in their own lives, and their feelings gave way to hymns of thanksgiving in which they described God’s character and the deeds God had done. Even in the midst of trial and suffering, as they cried out to God, they clung to God’s faithfulness and put their hope in His promises. Because they knew the Lord, they knew they could trust Him.

Here are some of the descriptive titles for God from the Book of Psalms:

A Shield around me - 3:3	Righteous Judge – 7:11
A Refuge and Stronghold - 9:9	A Sun and Shield – 84:11
My King - 5:2	The Mighty One – 50:1
God Most High – 7:10	My Loving God – 59:17
The Rock – 18:31	Sovereign LORD – 109:21
Our Savior – 65:5	My Father – 89:26
My Strength – 22:19	Judge of the Earth – 94:2
My Redeemer – 19:14	Our Maker – 95:6
The Holy One – 22:3	The Maker of Heaven and Earth – 115:15
God of Jacob – 24:6	The Israelites’ Glory – 106:20
The LORD Almighty – 46:7	God of gods, Lord of lords – 136:2, 3
My Fortress – 18:2	Shepherd of Israel – 80:1
My Deliverer – 18:2	A Strong Tower – 61:3
My Shepherd – 23:1	My Hiding Place – 32:7
The God of Truth – 31:5	My Light and my Salvation – 27:1
The God of Israel – 41:13	My Joy and my Delight – 43:4
King of Glory – 24:10	The LORD my Rock – 144:1

In Week One, we will look with the psalmists at some of God’s attributes.

### Suggested readings from the Psalms reflecting each day’s theme for Week One

Day 1	Psalm 104
Day 2	Psalm 103
Day 3	Psalm 89
Day 4	Psalm 99
Day 5	Psalm 47

## DAY ONE: GOD IS AWESOME

***“How awesome is the LORD Most High, the great King over all the earth!”***

Psalm 47:2

Americans have cheapened the word “awesome.” Almost anything that is better than average can be awesome today – a car, a movie, a meal. The Psalms describe God and His deeds as awesome (66:3; 89:7; 111:9; etc.) Wherever our newer Bible translations use the word “awesome,” however, the old King James Bible used the word “terrible.” “How *terrible* is the LORD Most High...” One can understand why the newer versions opted to use awesome instead!

The word “terrible” actually means “causing terror” (although we use the word today to mean “very bad”). As such, “terrible” comes closer to the meaning of the original Hebrew root word which it translates (*yārē’* – to be afraid, to fear) than does the current way we use the word “awesome.”

If we had stood before Kilauea as it erupted last spring (2018), watching the lava spew high into the sky and feeling the ground quake under our feet, we would have experienced what the Hebrew word *yārē’* really means. A volcano is *terrifying*! Its sheer power and wild beauty can astound and mesmerize its awestruck onlookers. [Compare Israel’s experience at Sinai in Exodus 19:16-19.]

Encountering the reality of God is that kind of an experience, and the appropriate response – indeed the only response – is to be in awe. God inspires true reverence – a mixture of wonder, respect, and fear. After all, God is “Great...and mighty in power; His understanding has no limit” (Ps. 147:5). “The LORD does whatever pleases Him” (Ps. 135:6). God alone is to be feared (Psalm 76:7).

It is the universe with all its wonders great and small that reveals to the psalmists and to us its awesome Creator. “The heavens declare the glory of God” for all people everywhere to see (Ps.19:1-4). In fact, the Apostle Paul pointed to the natural world around us as the reason no person can claim ignorance of God’s existence (Romans 1:18-20). As a book presupposes an author and a skyscraper an architect, the universe points to a Creator – an omniscient, omnipotent, awesome Creator. Truly apprehending the greatness of God prompts awe and worship.

Why is it important that we comprehend the awesome nature of God? For one thing, it assures us that ***God is more than able to handle any mess we have made or crisis we face when we seek His help.*** All power and all wisdom are His! Moreover, understanding God’s greatness ought to force us to admit that we are not really in control. As has often been said, “There is only one God, and it isn’t you.” ***We are not in control nor do we need to be!*** Psalm 95 invites us to kneel before our Maker in worship and warns us against stubbornly trying to maintain control and have our own way.

**Acknowledging God’s greatness leads us to see both God and ourselves in the proper perspective:**

“When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, what is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?” (Psalm 8:3, 4)

God is truly transcendent, and we respond with reverence, worship, and humility – in awe of His greatness and amazed that such an almighty God should care about us.

***Creator God, may my thoughts of You always be full of wonder and awe and reverence.***

## DAY TWO: GOD IS ABOUNDING IN LOVINGKINDNESS

***“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.”***

Psalm 103:8 (NASB)

Centuries before the Psalms were written, Moses asked God to reveal Himself. The words God chose to describe Himself to Moses and Israel were compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6, 7). That self-description of God became like a creed. It appears in Nehemiah 9:17, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2. We can read variations of it in three Psalms: 86:15; 103:8; 145:8. The Lutheran liturgy uses it as a response during Lent: “Return to the Lord your God for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.”

One word in God’s revelation to Moses is especially significant as it is used 240 times in the Old Testament and frequently in the Psalms: the Hebrew word *hesed*. Vine’s *Dictionary* argues, “The term is one of the most important in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology.”<sup>v</sup>

It means love but *not* God’s love for the whole world, but rather His love for the people He has chosen as His own. **It is love within a relationship in which both parties have made a commitment or a covenant with each other:** Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1), David and Jonathan (I Samuel 20), God and Israel. It is like a marriage in which there is both the emotional love shared between husband and wife but also the obligations of their partnership. They cannot simply walk away from one another. Thus, *hesed* involves responsibility and loyalty as well love. Some versions of the Bible try to capture that idea by translating *hesed* as steadfast or unfailing love. Mercy (God does not give us what we deserve, i.e. judgment) and grace (God gives us what we do not deserve, i.e. His favor) are other translations.

When Myles Coverdale (1488-1569) translated the Bible into English in 1535, he struggled with the word *hesed* and finally coined the word “lovingkindness” to describe it. That is because *hesed* also encompasses deeds of kindness within the relationship. **It is love that acts on behalf of the beloved.** And God is not only characterized by lovingkindness, but His lovingkindness *abounds!*

We see God’s lovingkindness primarily in His sending His Son to die for us so that He could save us from sin and death. We experience God’s *hesed* each time He forgives us. God displays His lovingkindness when He hears and answers our prayers. The Bible itself is a gift of God’s *hesed*. Then there are the many personal blessings God pours into each of our lives over the years.

As believers in Jesus, we are in a special relationship with God that began at baptism. God has chosen us as His very own (Ephesians 1:4). Accordingly, all of God’s dealings with us are born out of His kindness toward us. We may not always see that any more than a child sees a vaccination as an act of his or her parents’ kindness, but in all things, God will work for our good (Romans 8:28).

In whatever way your own Bible has translated *hesed*, please know that it means that when God thinks of you – and you are always on His mind – it is not with disappointment, anger, disgust, or indifference. **When God thinks of you, it is *always* with unfailing love.** God will never abandon those who are His own. God will never abandon you. God will never walk away from you. God will never let you go. That is *hesed*, God’s steadfast love.

***My Father and my God, thank You for making me Your child and for Your lovingkindness toward me.***

## DAY THREE: GOD IS FAITHFUL

*“Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, Your faithfulness to the skies.”*

Psalm 36:5

“Covenant” is an important word in the Bible. In the ancient Mideast, a powerful king might make a covenant with a weaker nation. He offered its people protection and/or other benefits if the people, in return, agreed to certain stipulations. Covenants were also made between equals, defining their commitment to each other. We might think of a covenant today in terms of a treaty, pact, or contract.

With *hesed* as His motive, God made covenants with His people. In the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15), God promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham, the Jews. The Sinai Covenant (Exodus 20-24) affirmed the relationship between God and the people of Israel: the Lord would be their God, and they would be His people, living by His commands. In the Davidic Covenant (II Samuel 7), God established David’s kingdom and throne as everlasting.

What guarantee did the people have that God would keep His covenants? God’s faithfulness.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “faithfulness” occurs 49 times, most often in the Psalms. “Basically, the term applies to God Himself to express His total dependability. It is frequently listed among the attributes of God.”<sup>vi</sup> **Faithfulness, in other words, is God’s nature. God never breaks a promise. God always keeps His word. God never breaches a covenant.** The Apostle Paul reminds us that even if we are faithless, God remains faithful “for He cannot deny Himself” (II Timothy 2:13 NASB). All through the Psalms, there are examples given of God’s past faithfulness to His people that, in turn, encouraged them to trust God’s faithfulness for the future.

Sometimes trusting God was difficult. Psalm 89 begins as an amazing testimony to the faithfulness of God. The psalmist, Ethan the Ezrahite, using God’s own words (vv. 19-37), brought to God’s attention the promise He made to David. Then he shifted the focus to the present situation. The Babylonian Empire had deposed the Davidic king and conquered the nation. He complained to God, “You have renounced the covenant with Your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust” (v. 39).

Two sets of contradictory facts confronted Ethan. He could not deny that God appeared to have broken His covenant with David but neither would he deny God’s faithfulness. In fact, he appealed to God’s faithfulness (v. 49) in his plea for God to act. **Trusting God’s faithfulness does not mean living in a fantasy world in denial of an unpleasant reality, but it does sometimes mean living with glaring contradictions, realizing that *we do not see the whole picture yet.***

God, of course, had not abandoned His covenant. Christians know that Jesus is the One who will fulfill God’s promise to David. Moreover, the very existence of the nation of Israel is a modern day testimony to the faithfulness of God who has kept His promise to Abraham (Psalm 105:8-11). [See Jeremiah 31:35-36.]

God has made many wonderful promises to us through Jesus Christ. Although sometimes it might seem as if God has forgotten them, **God will keep every single promise He has made in His own time.** Never give up on God. God certainly does not give up on us! God is faithful!

***Lord God, thank You for Your faithfulness to Israel that assures me of Your faithfulness to me.***

## DAY FOUR: GOD IS HOLY

***“Exalt the LORD our God and worship at His holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.”***

Psalm 99:9

God is awesome not only because of His power, but even more so because of His holiness. After all, we can understand tremendous power, and we can even imagine omnipotence. Holiness, however, is beyond us. Yet the Bible speaks more of God’s holiness than of His power or His wisdom.

God’s holiness is why Moses removed his shoes when standing before the burning bush (Exodus 3:5). It is why Isaiah cried out that he was “ruined” or “undone” (meaning unraveled or coming apart at the seams) when he stood before God, and it is why the seraphs cover their faces (Isaiah 6). It is why Jacob was afraid when he woke from his dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:10-17).

**Holiness encompasses all that God is – and what we are not. The emphasis is on God’s being unique, completely different from us, set apart [the basic meaning of holy], by His purity and perfection.**

**Ineffable.** Commentator John Goldingay wrote that it is not so much that God is righteous and we are sinful (although that is also true), but that God is divine and we are human.<sup>vii</sup> Pastor and author A. W. Tozer said that we cannot begin to comprehend holiness and “we certainly cannot define it.”<sup>viii</sup>

God’s holiness means that He is perfect. There is no room for improvement! God is perfect wisdom, perfect goodness, perfect love. There is nothing lacking in Him; God needs nothing. God is complete in every way. God is pure in His nature, motives, and deeds. God is not tainted in any way. What He is, He is 100%. God is indeed “the Holy One” (Psalm 78:41). Whatever else is described in the Bible as holy – a mountain, an altar, or people – is holy only because of its relationship with the Holy One. God sets people and things apart for His own use, and they become holy.

Throughout the Psalms and the whole Old Testament, we see an indication of the people’s reverence for the holiness of God. God had revealed His name as Yahweh, but wherever His name appeared in Scripture, the Jews would not speak that name aloud. In reverence to God, they would say “Adonai” instead, meaning Lord. Wherever the name Yahweh appeared in the Hebrew Bible, in our Bibles, it reads LORD. If the original Hebrew used Adonai, it was translated “Lord” (with lower case letters).

**God’s holiness makes Him unapproachable.** “No one may see Me and live” (Exodus 33:20). “The LORD your God is a consuming fire...” (Deuteronomy 4:24). Think about looking directly at the sun. We would become blind. If we were able to travel in a spaceship close to the sun, we would burn up. We are simply too fragile! Likewise, in the holy presence of God, we would respond as Isaiah, “Woe is me!” We are simply too broken. Too contaminated by sin. Too profane to be in His presence. Theologian R. C. Sproul wrote: “Yet as fearsome as death is, it is nothing compared with meeting a holy God. When we encounter Him, the totality of our creatureliness breaks upon us...”<sup>ix</sup>

**Praise the Lord that while His holiness makes Him unapproachable, in His *hesed*, His lovingkindness, God approaches us!** Because Jesus died for us and cleanses us from all sin, God has made us saints – holy people set apart by God to be His own and to live for Him! And in His grace, God gives us an incredible invitation: “Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you” (James 4:8 NASB).

***Holy God, thank You for inviting me into Your awesome presence. May I always come in reverence.***

## DAY FIVE: GOD IS SOVEREIGN

*“The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice.”*

Psalm 97:1

Israel, in her earliest days, was a theocracy. God made a covenant with the people at Sinai in which He was to rule over and protect them, and they were to be His people, obeying His laws. His throne was “between the cherubim,” meaning the Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 25:10-22). The psalmist Asaph addressed God as “You who sit enthroned between the cherubim” (Psalm 80:1). Although God had said, “They have rejected Me as their King” (1 Samuel 8:7) when Israel demanded a king like other nations, God was still to be the *true* King of Israel, ruling through David and his descendants. We see that in the **Royal Psalms** which celebrate the king’s rule (e.g. Psalms 20, 21, 45, 110, etc.).

When Babylon conquered the nation, taking the king and much of the population into exile, their world and their theology were turned upside down. The Babylonians would have bragged that their gods were obviously greater than the God of Israel. [Cf. II Kings 18:31-35.] The Jewish Study Bible calls the Exile “the key event in the formation of Jewish identity after 586 BCE.”<sup>x</sup>

When Persia conquered Babylon and the Persian King Cyrus allowed the people to return to Israel, their understanding of God greatly expanded. They recalled that Jeremiah had prophesied the defeat of Babylon and God Himself had spoken of using Cyrus, a pagan king, for His own objectives (Isaiah 45).

The returning exiles realized that God was indeed sovereign over *all the earth*. He was not the God and King of Israel alone. God guides the affairs of *all* nations. God holds *all* the nations in His hands and determines their destiny. **God can use *any* nation or *any* ruler – even though he or she might be totally unaware of God – to accomplish His will and achieve His purpose.**

The **Enthronement Psalms** (Psalms 47, 93, 96-99), composed following the people’s return from exile, celebrate the Kingship of God over all the earth. They call for *all* nations to join in joyous worship, even though at the time, the other nations did not yet acknowledge that God is King. The psalmists knew it was only a matter of time. One day all people everywhere will rejoice at God’s rule.

God is the Sovereign LORD (Psalm 71:5; 109:21). The sovereignty of God means that God is fully in control. God has the authority and the power to do whatever pleases Him. Nothing can catch God by surprise. Nothing can frustrate His will. Nothing can derail His plans. God is in complete control.

**So, if God is reigning, why is the world in such a mess?** An old analogy might help. Picture a captain steering a cruise ship to a certain port. The captain has set forth some rules and occasionally intervenes to enforce them, but the people onboard are generally free to do as they please during the voyage for good or evil. The one thing they cannot do is change the ship’s destination. It *will* arrive at the place the captain intends. Similarly, **human history with its chaos and suffering will one day culminate as *God* intends, achieving His purpose for creation.**

That is indeed good news! As confusing as world events might be today, or as frightening as tomorrow might become, history is still moving in the right direction: every day one day closer to the return of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God!

***Lord God, how thankful I am to know that You reign and nothing will thwart Your purpose for us.***

# PSALMS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Knowing God's Nature

### Session 1

#### Opening prayer

**Get-acquainted time** Introduce yourself to one another with 1) your name, 2) where you lived when you were 10, and 3) one thing that you liked about the place where you grew up. (Be brief!)

The members of my group are...

**Group discussion** (There are probably more discussion questions than you will have time to cover. Choose the ones you wish to discuss.)

1. Of the five devotions for the week, which one caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. Describe a time in your life, if you can, when you sensed the awesome power of God and felt something like the reverential fear or awe mentioned in Day One's devotion.
3. Review the three reasons given in Day One's devotion for why we need to understand the awesome nature of God. Is there any other reason that comes to your mind?  

Does any one of the given reasons stand out to you as especially important for your life?  
Why that one?
4. See Day Two's devotion. Why do you suppose Vine's *Dictionary of Old Testament Words* calls the term for God's unfailing love (*hesed*), His lovingkindness, "one of the most important in the vocabulary of Old Testament theology"?
5. Think of some of the ways God has shown His lovingkindness to you. Share one with the group.
6. See Day Three's devotion. Have you ever experienced a time, as Ethan did (see paragraph 5), when it seemed like God had broken a promise? If so, how did you respond? What helped you to hold on to your belief in God's faithfulness?

7. What evidence of God's faithfulness do you see in history, in the world around you, or in your own life?
8. What is one of your favorite promises of God? (You do not need to quote the Bible verse word for word!)
9. See Day Four's devotion. What do you think theologian R. C. Sproul meant when he wrote, "Yet as fearsome as death is, it is nothing compared with meeting a holy God"?
10. Do you think Christians in general have lost the experience, if not the concept, of God as awesome and holy? Why or why not?
11. See Day Five's devotion. Given what is going on in our nation and around the world, would you describe your reactions as mostly optimistic, somewhat hopeful, a little discouraged, or totally pessimistic?

How does your Christian faith influence the way you see the world? Or does it?

12. What is one thing about God that was covered in this week's devotions that you want to remember and allow to affect your life? Share it with the group.

**Prayer requests** Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Make a note below of the requests they share with you.

**Close in prayer** Use **Psalm 89:1-8** as a closing prayer. The group leader can read it aloud or each group member can read a verse in turn or the leader can read the odd numbered verses while the group reads the even numbered ones.

Then conclude with a prayer for the group. You can use the one below.

*Father in heaven, as we begin our study together, we ask that Your Spirit will open our hearts and minds to You. Enlighten us so that we will gain a greater understanding of Your Word and grow deeper in our relationship with You. Bless our group, our discussions, and our worship this Lent as we seek to know You more fully. We pray in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

## WEEK TWO: UNDERSTANDING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE

*“The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.”*  
Psalm 14:2

Most people desire to understand themselves. We take psychological tests to determine our basic personality type. We can get our handwriting analyzed, our dreams interpreted, our I.Q. measured. Psychiatrists study the chemical reactions in the human brain that influence behavior. Counsellors try to figure out the influence of our parents and environment. Sociologists study the bigger picture of human beings living in communities together.

The Book of Psalms gives us a picture of what it means to be a human being.

It certainly does not paint an entirely rosy picture! The Book of Psalms expresses the anguish of those who feel forsaken and the pain of those who battle illness. It shows us how evil people can be and how cruel to the people around them. It gives us a glimpse into the meaninglessness of death.

The Book of Psalms also gives us a beautiful picture of what life can be when it is lived in a loving and obedient relationship with the Lord.

**In any case, where better to try to understand the human experience than in the presence of God our Maker?** Through the inspired words of the Psalms, we enter into His Presence and see society and ourselves a little more clearly.

In Week Two, we will look at insights from the Psalms about the human experience.

### **Suggested readings from the Psalms for Week Two**

Day 1	Psalm 10
Day 2	Psalm 146
Day 3	Psalm 112
Day 4	Psalm 88
Day 5	Psalm 90

## DAY ONE: THE WICKED

***“The Lord laughs at the wicked, for He knows their day is coming.”***

Psalm 37:13

Nearly one third of the Psalms mention the wicked. The Hebrew word translated as “wicked” or as “evil doers” or something similar is used over 260 times in the Old Testament, mostly in Psalms and Proverbs. The “wicked” were obviously a problem! Who were they?

That is not an easy question for Christians. We understand that “all have sinned” (Romans 3:23), that every human being stands guilty before God. In fact, the Apostle Paul quoted from Psalm 14 to prove that point: “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). For that reason, it is difficult for Christians to call another person “wicked” when we know we too are sinners.

**The Psalms, however, look at the wicked from a different perspective.** *Vine’s Dictionary* explains that the wicked “denotes the category of people who have done wrong, are still living in sin, and are intent on continuing with wrongdoing.”<sup>xi</sup> Theirs are not private sins. The deeds of the wicked – both violent and white collar crime – injure other people and threaten the social order.

The wicked deceive others (Psalm 5:9) and love violence (Psalm 11:5). They speak kindly, then stab you in the back (Psalm 28:3). They take advantage of the weak (Psalm 10:2) and devise evil plots with no regard to right and wrong (Psalm 36:4). They are thieves, adulterers, slanderers (Psalm 50:18-20). Their trust is in money (Psalm 49:5-6). They are arrogant and violate the rights of others (Psalm 94:2-6). Moreover, they have no fear of God (Psalm 36:1). They assume that God pays no attention to their deeds! “They say, ‘The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob pays no heed’” (Psalm 94:7).

**Especially disturbing to the psalmists was that the wicked seemed to escape any punishment** for their actions! While the righteous struggle, the wicked enjoy prosperity (Psalm 10:5) and success (Psalm 37:7). Asaph complained, “They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills” (Psalm 73:4-5). “How long will the wicked, O LORD, how long will the wicked be jubilant?” (Psalm 94:3).

In spite of the apparent unfairness of life, David counselled the people “Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong” (Psalm 37:1). For one thing, David continued to explain, walking in the ways of the Lord brings its own rewards. The Psalms also remind us that the wicked *will* get their due. “They are like chaff that the wind blows away” (Psalm 1:4). The psalmists were confident that God would repay the wicked for their sins (Psalm 94:23), and they prayed that He would do so quickly.

God is “**the Judge of the earth**” (Psalm 94:2) who has promised that judgment is coming (Psalm 75). While Christians see God’s judgment as a negative, the psalmists eagerly awaited its day. C. S. Lewis explained the difference: “The Christian pictures the case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages.”<sup>xii</sup> After all, when we have been wronged, **we want our day in court!** Meanwhile, God’s patience in delaying judgment gives the wicked more time to repent before it is too late (Romans 2:4). It gives Christians more time to share the Good News of Jesus with all those who are trapped by sin and who are far away from God.

***Lord, I leave judgment to You. Help me to proclaim Your call to repentance and Your offer of grace.***

## **DAY TWO: THE WIDOW, THE ORPHAN, THE ALIEN, THE POOR, THE WEAK, THE NEEDY**

***“I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy.”*** Psalm 140:12

In every human community, some people are more vulnerable to exploitation and/or disaster than the rest of the population through no fault of their own. The Bible repeatedly speaks of “the widow and the fatherless,” i.e. the orphan. On the death of the husband/father, the rest of the family suffered a loss of social position, security, and income. They needed someone to protect their interests. Often mentioned along with the widow and orphan was “the alien,” the foreigner who lived in the land.

Scripture also frequently mentions “the poor and needy”. The Hebrew word translated “poor” (*dal*) does not mean destitute. Today we might translate it as “the working poor.” Making ends meet was a struggle for them. The Hebrew word “needy” (*‘ebyôn*) is used over thirty times in Psalms. The needy were not only poor in a material sense; they lacked the means to obtain justice. The Bible speaks of “the weak” (*‘ānî*) along with the poor and needy, meaning those with some sort of affliction or distress, people who lacked the resources to gain a better life, e.g. a slave.

**When God set forth the laws by which His people were to live, He made it clear that they must protect the most vulnerable people among them.** “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt. Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan” (Exodus 22:21, 22). “Be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:11). The prophets condemned the nation centuries later for oppressing the poor and needy. In Malachi 3:5 God warns of His judgment against “those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice...”

The Psalms reiterate that same theme. Psalm 82:3-4 calls on the people who do have power: “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy.” In our democratic society, especially for Christian citizens, that command is for us all. In Psalm 82, “God has given us a responsibility to rescue people who are taken advantage of and oppressed by evil people. We have a moral obligation to help the poor and helpless.”<sup>xiii</sup>

**God is the ultimate Defender:** “A Father to the fatherless, a Defender of widows” (Psalm 68:5). “The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow” (Psalm 146:9). **God is the One who can help when no one else can or will,** and so the widow and orphan, the poor and needy cry out to God in their distress, and God hears, encourages, listens, and defends (Psalm 10:12-18). Indeed, God had promised when He gave the Law that if the helpless “cry out to Me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused...” (Exodus 22:23-24). In Psalm 12:5, the Lord says, “Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise.”

**Martin Luther warned that if we are the ones about whom the poor and powerless cry out to God because we did not help them, we are in trouble!** “Beware of this as of the devil himself. Such a man’s sighs and cries will be no joking matter...they will reach God who watches over poor, sorrowful hearts, and He will not leave them unavenged.”<sup>xiv</sup> Better that we come to their aid and work on their behalf! Certainly we ought to join our prayers with the prayers of the vulnerable, crying out to God that their needs be met, that they receive justice, and that their rights are honored.

***Lord, open my eyes and ears to the vulnerable people in our nation; show me what I can do to help.***

## DAY THREE: THE GOOD LIFE

*“Blessed are all who fear the LORD, who walk in His ways.”*

Psalm 128:1

The Book of Psalms could be subtitled “A Guide to the Good Life.” Or maybe “How to be Blessed.” While there are several pictures in the Psalms of the kind of person who can be blessed, Psalm 15 gives us a quick overview of the necessary qualities. It describes one who is blameless and righteous.

In the Psalms, to be blameless and righteous does not mean moral perfection because in that sense, no one is righteous. It does mean conforming to ethical standards, endeavoring to keep God’s Law, fearing and seeking God. **This righteousness is practical and relational, involving how one speaks and treats other people as well as how one carries out one’s obligations to God.** (Martin Luther called this “outer righteousness” versus the “inward righteousness” that only Christ can bestow on us.)

It is, therefore, the person who walks “according to the law of the LORD” (Psalm 119:1) who is blessed. The person is righteous and blessed who meditates on God’s law (Psalm 1) and who fears God and “finds great delight” in His commands (Psalm 112:1). Because God’s commands are the pathway to blessing, they are more precious than gold and sweeter than honey (Psalm 19:7-10).

What does it mean to be “blessed”? The literal meaning of the Hebrew word translated “blessed” is happy, and the Psalms show us what constitutes such happiness. To be forgiven (Psalm 32:1). To lack nothing (Psalm 34:9-10). To receive healing (Psalm 41:1-3). To prosper in all one does (Psalm 1:1-3). To enjoy peace (Psalm 37:11). Psalm 112 mentions children, wealth, no fear of bad news, and triumph over one’s enemies. In other words, **in the Psalms, to be blessed is to live a good, happy, full life.**

God designed the Ten Commandments to give us the good life. They are instructions telling us how life works best. When we follow them, life’s pieces are more likely to come together. We avoid a lot of unnecessary pain and trouble. When we disregard them, our lives eventually begin to fall apart. Both Psalm 15:5 and Psalm 112:6 assure us that the righteous “will never be shaken.” God gives us stability, keeps us steady, and holds us together. [Compare Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:24-27.]

Vine’s *Dictionary* notes, however, that because “blessed” does not *always* look like what people today call happiness (although that is the literal meaning), Bible translations prefer to use the word “blessed” instead of happy.<sup>xv</sup> Psalm 94:12, for example, calls the person disciplined by the Lord “blessed.” The word “blessed” also reminds us that living a moral life does not “earn” the good things that come to us. **God is not obligated to give us a reward. Blessings are still and always will be His gifts to us.**

**We must be careful as we read the Psalms to keep two things in mind. First, the righteous do not always enjoy prosperity, peace, and good health.** Psalms 22 and 88 prove that point! But God *will* give the righteous light when we are in a dark place (Psalm 112:4) and bless us with His presence and help (Psalm 37:39-40). **Secondly, the Psalms show that many of God’s blessings are quite tangible.** God *is* concerned about our physical and financial condition. God has promised to meet all of our needs (Philippians 4:19). It is not wrong to ask God for material blessings. In fact, when we pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we are doing that very thing, i.e. asking God for food, shelter, clothes, a job, etc. Ask the Lord for what you need and expect Him to answer!

***Father God, in poverty or wealth, in sickness or health, I am blessed, happy to be Your beloved child.***

## DAY FOUR: THE REALITY OF SUFFERING

*“My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning...”*

Psalm 31:10

“At *Christianity Today*, we publish more pieces about God and suffering than perhaps any other topic. It’s arguably the biggest question that humans ask of faith.”<sup>xvi</sup> So writes Andy Olsen, the editor.

Through the centuries, people have questioned how a loving, all-powerful God could allow so much suffering. Theodicy is the word given to the attempts to solve that puzzle, but it is more than a philosophical enigma. According to a poll by the Barna Group, “more than 1 in 5 non-Christians say they can’t reconcile the presence of evil with the idea of a loving God.” Among youth, that number is closer to 1 in 3.<sup>xvii</sup> Unwilling to deny God’s goodness, Christians sometimes deny God’s omnipotence, concluding that God must be unable to stop all the bad things from happening or to end all suffering.

**Suffering is a major theme in the Psalms.** Centuries before Good Friday (Mark 15:34), David cried out in his misery, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me? Why are You so far from saving me...? (Psalm 22:1). He prayed in Psalm 25:17, “The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish.” In Psalm 7, David complained that he was suffering in spite of his innocence, i.e. his integrity.

Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, “There is in the Psalms no quick and easy resignation to suffering.”<sup>xviii</sup> The psalmists feared, complained, struggled, and questioned God. Sometimes suffering was a result of one’s own sins or the sins of the nation (Psalm 51; Psalm 79), but usually the reason for suffering was unknown. In the Psalms, the “Why?” question often went unanswered.

Psalm 88 is the desperate cry of Heman the Ezrahite, a tortured man. It is the darkest of all the Psalms in that it contains no uplifting word, no exclamation of praise in the end, and no expectation that God will answer his prayer. After all, he had been suffering his entire life (88:15), and now he was close to death. Moreover, he saw *God as the One who had caused his suffering* (88:7). Whether or not God caused it, He did clearly *allow* it, but Heman had no clue as to why. That Heman continued to cry out to God is an amazing demonstration of his faith. **That his prayer was included in the Bible teaches us that we can come to God openly, expressing our confusion and pain. We can be blunt about our desire for God to intervene when we are suffering and honest about our turmoil when He does not.**

Sometimes we feel like David: “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove! I would fly away and be at rest – I would flee far away and stay in the desert; I would hurry to my place of shelter, far from the tempest and the storm” (Psalm 55:6-8). David composed Psalm 55 perhaps during his son Absalom’s rebellion. [See II Samuel 15-19.] There is something strangely comforting in knowing that David who stood against Goliath and was a man after God’s own heart (I Samuel 13:14) wished he could run away!

In the New Testament we learn that God can work through suffering for His glory (John 9:3; 11:4) or to accomplish some good (Romans 8:28) and that it can produce desirable qualities (Romans 5:3). The Psalms do not give such clear reassurances. **What is clear is that, in spite of any suffering we witness or experience, we must maintain our trust in the faithfulness and lovingkindness of the Lord.** God is not cruel. God is good, all the time. Nor can we question His sovereign power. Nothing is beyond His control. As it has been said, “Never doubt in the darkness what you learned in the light.”

***Lord, there is so much I do not understand, but I will always trust Your love, goodness, and power.***

## DAY FIVE: THE BREVITY OF LIFE

***“...the span of my years is as nothing before You. Each man’s life is but a breath.”*** Psalm 39:5

*“Microbes so small I can’t see can get in my nose and start down my neck and the next thing you know it’s in my lungs and I have pneumonia, and then I’m gone. That’s us poor little creatures. Immortality and eternity you’ll only find in God.”*<sup>xix</sup> With those words, Bible teacher/author A. W. Tozer bluntly described the brevity and the uncertainty of human life. The Psalms give us that same message.

The psalmists compared human life to grass. It comes up quickly but in the heat of the day, it withers and is dead by evening (Psalm 90:5-6; 102:11). Our days “vanish like smoke” (Psalm 102:3). Our years are “fleeting” (Psalm 89:47), our lives like shadows (Psalm 102:11).

Psalms contrasts the transitory nature of human life with the eternal nature of God who is from “everlasting to everlasting.” To God, 1000 years “are like a day that has just gone by” (Psalm 90:2, 4). Although it seems as if the earth and the universe are permanent, the psalmist acknowledged that they too will one day perish. God will discard them as we discard worn out clothing, but God will remain the same and His years will never end (Psalm 102:25-27).

**One of the mysteries of the Psalms is the vague picture they give us of what happens *after* this life ends.** It is far from comforting! David prayed, “No one remembers You when he is dead. Who praises You from the grave?” (Psalm 6:5). To die is to go down to the pit (Psalm 30:9; 88:4; 143:7) or to the grave (Psalm 6:5; 88:3, 11), cut off from God’s remembrance and care (Psalm 88:5).

The word translated “grave” is the Hebrew word Sheol. The Jewish Study Bible states that Sheol is *only* and *literally* the grave: “There is no thought of an afterlife in Psalms.”<sup>xx</sup> Yet the Psalms do seem to indicate that a shadowy existence continues in Sheol, which is neither heaven nor hell. David declared that even in Sheol, God’s presence would be with him (Psalm 139:8).

There are hints at life after death in the Psalms, e.g. Psalm 16:9-11 – which Christians see as a prophecy of Jesus’ resurrection. Also Psalm 49:15; 73:24-26. For the most part, however, the Psalms give us a different picture of the afterlife than we find in the New Testament. God obviously had His reasons for revealing the truth to His people progressively because “Old Testament believers did not have the full light of revelation concerning death and the afterlife.”<sup>xxi</sup> God’s revelation evidently became increasingly clear over the centuries. [See Daniel 12:2.] By Jesus’ day, many Jews *did* believe in the resurrection of the dead. Perhaps the psalmists’ depiction of Sheol shows us the afterlife before Jesus conquered death for us and set free its captives.

Moses prayed, “Teach us to number our days aright” (Psalm 90:12). David prayed, “Let me know how fleeting is my life” (Psalm 39:4). **When we truly grasp with Moses and David that there are no guarantees of a tomorrow here on earth, we will make the most of every day that God gives us.** David recognized that **we are only sojourners here on earth, transients** who are just passing through (Psalm 39:4, 12 NASB). Pastor Mark Martin reminds us: When you are travelling, you don’t expect to get *too* comfortable or to understand *everything*, and you don’t expect to *never* get lost, so you’d better have a map (a Bible) and a ticket home (the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ)!<sup>xxii</sup>

***Lord, thank You for the promise of eternal life. For now “teach me to number my days aright.”***

# PSALMS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Understanding the Human Experience

## Session 2

### Opening prayer

**Get-acquainted time** Re-introduce yourselves to each other if yours is a new group this Lent. Briefly describe someone you know or have known, without giving his/her name, who impressed you with the way he/she handled great personal suffering.

**Group discussion** (There are probably more discussion questions than you will have time to cover. Choose the ones you wish to discuss.)

1. Of the five devotions for the week, which one caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. The “wicked” (Day One’s devotion) are still a problem. Have you ever been the victim of a crime? If you are willing, share your feelings as a victim with the group. What helped you to get through the experience? What happened to the perpetrator?
3. The June 2018 issue of *Christianity Today* printed the testimony of Pamela Perillo who, with two companions, murdered two men. While on death row in Texas, she gave her life to Jesus. [Pam is still in prison, but her sentence was reduced to life in prison.]

Do you know anyone whom we might have labeled a not-very-nice-person or even “wicked,” but whose life was turned around by the power of God? Tell the group about him or her.

4. See Day Two’s devotion. As you think about Arizona today, in your opinion, who are the most vulnerable people among us? Choose one or two of these groups of people and discuss what we might realistically do as a congregation to help them.

If you think your ideas should be heard and you are willing to help implement them, choose someone in the group to write them out and give them to one of the pastors.

5. Given we live in a rich and powerful nation, we could indeed be the ones about whom the poor and oppressed around the world complain to God. If so, Luther said we are in trouble! Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. We have seen how the Psalms describe “the good life.” (Day Three’s devotion.) How would you describe what it means to “be blessed”?
7. Pastor Rick Warren (author of *The Purpose Driven Life*) often says that God is more interested in your holiness than in your happiness and is more concerned with your character than your comfort. What do you think that means?

8. See Day Four's devotion. Some people give up on faith and on God after going through a tragedy. If you have ever experienced a major illness or some sort of tragedy in your life, what helped you to hang onto the Lord and to keep believing in His goodness?
9. In the face of so much suffering in the world, why is it important to insist God is *both* "good all the time" *and* all-powerful instead of compromising on one or the other of those two attributes?
10. See Day Five's devotion. C. S. Lewis suggested that perhaps God did not reveal the promise of eternal life to the people of Israel in the early days of their history because He wanted to teach the people to love and obey Him for who He is and not for the reward of eternal life.

What do you think of that idea?

How easy or difficult do you think it would be to love and obey God if death was the end?

[Read what Paul said about that in I Corinthians 15:16-19.]

11. How close are you, do you think, to making the most of every single day that God gives you?
12. What is one thing that was covered in this week's devotions that you want to be sure to remember? Share it with the group.

**Prayer requests** Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Make a note below of the requests they share with you. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which to thank the Lord.

**Close in prayer** Use **Psalm 25:1-10** as a closing prayer.

## WEEK THREE: DISCOVERING GOD'S GOODNESS

***"Taste and see that the LORD is good"***

Psalm 34:8

The psalmists frequently spoke of the Lord's goodness. "You are forgiving and good, O Lord" (Psalm 86:5). "The LORD is good" (Psalm 100:5; 135:3). "The LORD is good to all" (Psalm 145:9).

**Good is God's nature, one of His attributes. Good is who God is. That is why the slogan is true: "God is good, all the time. And all the time, God is good." He is perfect goodness and always will be.**

God manifests His goodness in His deeds. "You are good, *and what You do is good*" (Psalm 119:68). In the Book of Psalms, we can read many testimonies to the goodness of the Lord as shown in what He did for His people. In Psalm 18, David praised the Lord for delivering him from his enemies. Psalm 103 praises God's goodness and recites many of the "benefits" (verse 2) the Lord gives, like forgiveness and healing. Psalm 147 speaks of God's goodness in bringing the exiles back to Jerusalem.

God's goodness, however, was not always apparent. In distress, Asaph asked, "Will the Lord reject forever? Will He never show His favor again? Has His unfailing love vanished forever? Has His promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful?" (Psalm 77:7-9). Yet whatever God does *must* be good because God is good. It is who He is. God never acts out of character.

Generally, people look at their current circumstances and judge whether life – and God – is good or not.\* We tend to look at the immediate situation, what we are going through right now. A doctor says you need a new hip. That is bad! After surgery, when you can walk without pain for the first time in years, it is all good. We know that sometimes it takes a retrospective posture to see clearly. Indeed, it will not be until we stand in heaven that we will see the extent of the goodness of God in our lives.

Meanwhile, whether we see it or not at present, we hold firmly to the biblical truth: "The LORD is good." David, surrounded by enemies, could say, "I am *still confident* of this: I *will* see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living." He went on to tell his hearers, "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD" (Psalm 27:13-14).

**David issued the invitation: "Taste and see that the LORD is good!" It is an invitation to know the Lord better. It is a call to a deeper walk with Him, one in which we experience all God has for us. Then we too will conclude beyond any doubt that the Lord is good, very good!** [See I Peter 2:2, 3.]

In Week Three, we will look at five ways in which the psalmists experienced the goodness of God.

### **Suggested readings from the Psalms for Week Three**

Day 1	Psalm 23
Day 2	Psalm 105
Day 3	Psalm 91
Day 4	Psalm 34
Day 5	Psalm 18

\*Actually we cannot judge by some presumed standard of goodness whether God's actions can be called good or not because there can be no standard higher than God to which He must measure up. But that is a subject better left for philosophers and theologians!

## DAY ONE: GOD'S NEARNESS TO US

*“The LORD is near to all who call on Him...The LORD watches over all who love Him.”*

Psalm 145:18, 20

We see one of the most beloved pictures of God in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm: “The LORD is my shepherd.” The metaphor of God as shepherd, however, goes all the way back to Jacob who referenced “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day” (Genesis 48:15). Centuries later, God declared, “I Myself will search for My sheep and look after them” (Ezekiel 34:11). It is a recurring theme in Scripture. After a few more centuries, Jesus announced, “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11).

**There are many assurances in the Psalms of God's nearness to His people, but revealing Himself as the Shepherd gave the people an image they would not forget.** They would have been familiar with the close relationship between shepherds – who kept the sheep for wool, not meat – and their sheep.

Sheep are not self-sufficient; they depend on their shepherd for all their needs. The shepherd found water for them, led them to fresh pastures, and defended them against predators with his rod. Each night the shepherd closely examined each member of the flock to check for injuries and parasites and took care of the sick. The shepherd knew the names of all his/her sheep. They recognized their shepherd's voice and responded to it (John 10:3-4). Because sheep are prone to wander off without being able to find their way back to the fold, a shepherd kept close watch on all the sheep.

In the Psalms, there are many references to the shepherd-like care God gives His people whether the shepherd metaphor is used or not. The Lord “daily bears our burdens” (Psalm 68:19). David asked God on behalf of the people to “be their shepherd and carry them forever” (Psalm 28:9). As a shepherd tending the sick and injured, “The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). What a beautiful assurance! **When we are at our lowest, the Lord promises to be especially near! Even if we do not happen to sense His presence, God is near. Maybe God is even carrying you right now!**

Psalm 121 speaks of God's close attention to His own. “In many contemporary Jewish communities, it is recited at times of trouble as a way of offering comfort and assurance.”<sup>xxiii</sup> In this short psalm, the psalmist used the Hebrew word meaning “to guard” *six times*! It is translated “watch over,” “keep,” in the NIV. God is our Guardian. **Where we are concerned, God never lets down His guard;** He will neither slumber nor sleep (v. 4). Verse 8 promises that “the LORD will watch over your coming and going.” Psalm 139:2 is similar: “You know when I sit and when I rise.” In other words, the Lord is concerned with *all* of our activities, even with all the minor mundane details of our lives. We are *never* outside His care. One pastor expressed the meaning of Psalm 121 in this way:

**“God loves you so much, He can't keep His eyes off you!”<sup>xxiv</sup>**

Psalm 121:7 says, “The Lord will keep you from all harm.” We know, of course, that we *do* get hurt, that tragedy does strike the lives of believers, but **absolutely nothing can do us ultimate harm** because nothing can steal us away from the Lord. When we place our faith in Jesus and become His sheep, He gives us eternal life and assures us that we will *never* perish. Jesus promises us that nothing can ever snatch us from His hand (John 10:28). We belong to the Good Shepherd forever!

***Father God, how thankful I am to be one of Your sheep, to have such a wonderful Shepherd as You!***

## DAY TWO: GOD'S PAST DEEDS

***“Remember the wonders He has done, His miracles, and the judgments He pronounced.”*** Psalm 105:5

The history of the people of Israel was “*His Story*,” God’s story. Their history – retold in the Historical Psalms (e.g. Psalms 78, 105, 106) – revealed God’s goodness, manifested in mighty deeds of deliverance as well as in compassionate acts of mercy and forgiveness. The people were *always* to remember those events and to make certain to “tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, His power, and the wonders He has done” (Psalm 78:4). Remembering their history was not optional because **God’s past actions were proof of His goodness and of His love for Israel.**

Remembering, therefore, was more than a mental recollection of historical data. To remember was to hear the testimony of one’s ancestors, pointing to the goodness and faithfulness of God. To remember was to recite God’s past wondrous deeds as liturgy in praising and worshipping the Lord (e.g. Psalm 136). To remember was to respond in service and obedience to the Lord who had acted throughout the centuries so graciously on Israel’s behalf. To remember was also to heed the warnings of the dire consequences that came when their ancestors *forgot* the Lord and strayed from Him.

Scripture frequently juxtaposes the verbs “to remember” and “to forget.” Psalm 105:5 calls for the people to remember God’s wondrous deeds, but in its partner poem, Psalm 106, we discover that the people did *not* remember God’s kindness (v. 7), but rebelled by the Red Sea. God, nevertheless, saved them. “But they soon forgot what He had done” (v. 13). “They forgot the God who saved them” (v. 21). In His mercy, God continued to lead them and brought them into the land of Canaan, where they rebelled yet again (vv.34-39).

The people forgot the Lord – not once but on many occasions throughout their history – and the Lord disciplined them to bring them back to Himself (Psalm 106:15, 29, 40-43). Although *they* forgot the covenant, *God* “remembers His covenant forever” (Psalm 105:8). When the people cried out to the Lord in their distress, God “remembered His covenant” (Psalm 106:45) and delivered them.

There is another important reason to remember God’s past deeds. The psalmists “look back to the great moments of the *past* in order to frame the pain and puzzlement of the *present* within the hope that God will one day do it again, in the *future*...”<sup>xxv</sup> **Based on His displays of goodness in the past, the people of Israel could ask and expect the Lord to act on their behalf again.**

We can too. Christians not only have the deeds of God in the Old Testament on which to reflect, but we also have the life of Jesus to show us the extreme goodness of the Lord. We see His compassion. We see Him healing the sick and forgiving the penitent. We know we can come to the Lord and ask Him to do for us what He did for the people in Galilee long ago.

**We also need to remember and recite all that God has done for us personally in the *recent* past, in our own lifetimes.** We too quickly forget the times the Lord has brought us through some trying circumstances. We forget the ways in which He helped us to survive intact. Then when another crisis arises, we again surrender to fear, worry, and thinking we must handle the problem with only our own resources. No! God has helped you in the past. He will see you through any current troubles as well.

***Lord God, Your goodness to me in the past gives me hope and courage to face the future with You.***

## DAY THREE: GOD'S ROLE AS OUR REFUGE AND OUR ROCK

***“But the LORD has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.”*** Psalm 94:22

Refuge. Rock. Shelter. Shadow. Hiding place. Shield. Fortress. Strong tower. Stronghold. Rampart. In reading through the Psalms, one cannot help but be surprised at how often the psalmists chose those words – all very similar in meaning – to describe God. They far outnumber the descriptive titles for God with which we are more familiar, e.g. Creator, Father. They evoke images of danger and war.

Psalm 91 includes many of the above words as well as a gentler metaphor: “He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge” (v.4). Other Psalms also speak of finding refuge “in the shadow of Your wings” (17:8; 36:7; 57:1). Although some think this refers to the Ark of the Covenant with the cherubim and their outstretched wings (Exodus 25:17-22), the context suggests a hen protecting her baby chicks, an illustration used by Jesus (Matthew 23:37).

Often God is addressed as “my Rock” (Psalms 18:46; 19:14; 42:9; 144:1, etc.). The word translated “rock” usually meant a rocky wall, a cliff, or rocky hills or mountains. It was a high defensive place where one could find refuge in that it was largely inaccessible to one’s enemies.

**Many descriptive titles but one basic meaning: we can find true refuge in God and in God alone.**

While we may not live with the immediate dangers the psalmists experienced, we know the threat of potential danger: E. coli-tainted produce, a mass shooting by a deranged gunman, a distracted driver, a toxic chemical spill, an act of terrorism. We also live with countless insecurities. There are financial worries and anxiety over one’s health. There are concerns about the strength of one’s relationships and fears regarding the direction of our nation. No one knows what tomorrow will bring.

“God is our refuge and strength...Therefore we will not fear...” (Psalm 46:1-2). God is able to free us from our fears (Psalm 34:4). **Whatever our trouble, taking refuge in God leads to conquering fear. God is our “hiding place” (Psalm 32:7), a place of confidence, courage, and peace to which we can retreat without disengaging from our responsibilities.** It is the peace in the midst of trouble that Jesus promised His followers (John 16:33), peace “which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7).

**What does it mean to take refuge in God? How does one do that?** When David said, “In the LORD I take refuge” (Psalm 11:1), he meant he *relied* on God. In the *New King James Bible*, that verse reads “In the LORD I put my trust.” It means to “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). To “be still” is not to be quiet but to stop straining or striving. Warren Wiersbe said it literally means, “Take your hands off! Relax!”<sup>xxvi</sup> Indeed, to rely on God is to place our troubles, insecurities, and fears in the Lord’s hands and *to leave them there*. It is to wait for His instructions and to count on His help.

Pastor Vernon McGee noted that Psalm 91:1 speaks of one who *dwells* in God’s shelter finding peace and safety. Then he confessed, “*My problem is that I am there sometimes, but my stay is like it is in motels – only for a night or two at a time.*”<sup>xxvii</sup> When we *live* in that shelter, when we daily rely on God, we find rest. In the words of A. W. Tozer: “God will hold you up. He’ll keep you if you turn yourself over to Him! He’ll hold you when nothing else can; nothing will be able to destroy you.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

***My Rock, I need to find my shelter in You! Forgive my striving, calm my fears, and grant me peace.***

## DAY FOUR: GOD'S ACTS OF DELIVERANCE

***“A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all.”*** Psalm 34:19

The Hebrew verb translated “to save” or “to deliver” is “a one word description of God’s response to the needs of humanity.”<sup>xxix</sup> The word translated “salvation” or “deliverance” is also the Hebrew name of Jesus: Yeshua. When the angel told Joseph that Mary would give birth to a son, he added, “You are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Save and deliver, salvation and deliverance are used frequently and interchangeably throughout the Psalms. However, unlike in the New Testament, **these words do not refer to forgiveness, salvation from sin, and deliverance from the power of the devil. Rather they speak of rescue from any form of trouble: war, illness, enemies, distress, etc.** Certainly the people of that time realized their need for forgiveness (e.g. Psalm 51), but God’s saving acts were understood to encompass even more.

Psalm 46, on which Martin Luther based his hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, is thought to celebrate God’s delivering Jerusalem from the Assyrian army [II Kings 18-19]. Indeed, many of the saving acts of God were military in nature. In Psalm 18:7-15, David pictured God as a mighty warrior doing battle on his behalf. David excelled as a soldier (II Samuel 17:8), yet he did not lead his troops into battle without first consulting the Lord (I Samuel 23:2, 4; 30:8; II Samuel 5:19; etc.). David knew the size of one’s army was not the deciding factor in a battle because victory – deliverance – came from the Lord (Psalm 33:16-20). Psalm 124:2, 3 acknowledges the same reality: “If the LORD had not been on our side when men attacked us...they would have swallowed us alive.” *God is the Savior* (Psalm 89:26).

**Psalm 46 clearly calls us to remember that the Lord is always with us, and He will help us even when everything around us is falling apart** (vv. 2-3, 7). God is our “ever-present help in trouble” (v.1). The Hebrew word translated “trouble” literally meant a tight, confining place. Backed into a corner with no room to move and no options left. No option except to run to the Lord who promises, “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor Me” (Psalm 50:15).

God allows trouble to enter our lives, and there is always a purpose behind what God allows. It could be a call to repentance or a means of drawing us into a closer walk with Him. Perhaps God desires to put our faith on display to unbelievers and to show them the peace that is ours while we rely on Him during hard times. Perhaps the Lord wants to show us that His grace is sufficient for us no matter what (II Corinthians 12:7-9). Or perhaps we will never discern His purpose.

**We look to the Lord to deliver us, but we cannot dictate the means or the timing of our rescue.** “God chooses the time to act; man must wait in hope. God expects His people to endure difficult circumstances in faith as He chooses the most opportune time to bring salvation.”<sup>xxx</sup> Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are examples of the right attitude. About to be thrown into the fire, they *trusted* God to rescue them, “but even if He does not...,” they would still always obey Him (Daniel 3).

So we wait, hope, and endure, knowing the Lord Himself is with us and will never leave us. The psalmist testified, “The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” (Psalm 118:6). The New Testament echoes that confidence: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

***Savior, for the many times You have come to my rescue and delivered me, I thank and praise You.***

## DAY FIVE: GOD'S GIFT OF EMPOWERMENT

*"It is God who arms me with strength..."*

Psalm 18:32

"He is so full of himself!" "She is such a narcissist!" These are not the worst insults we can make about a person, but they rank in the top ten. God called David "a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22) because David was the very opposite. David's focus was not on himself but on God. He recognized that *God* brought him his victories in battle, that *God* enabled him to achieve all he did, and that *God* was the source of his strength. We see that clearly in Psalm 18, repeated in II Samuel 22.

Life was not easy for David. King Saul, jealous of David, wanted to kill him, forcing David and his men into hiding. [See I Samuel 18-28.] David thought "One of these days I will be destroyed by the hand of Saul" (I Samuel 27:1). In Psalm 18, written after David finally became the king over a united Israel, David praised God for saving his life and giving him victory over his enemies. [See II Samuel 2-5.] His opening words of praise give us the longest list of descriptive titles for God in the entire Bible.

When God acts to save His people, to rescue them from some danger or enemy, He does not always intervene in the same way. Sometimes deliverance comes by a clearly miraculous event, and God's people do nothing but watch God act. Such was the case in the Exodus, retold in Psalm 78:42-52. Psalm 46 also describes events that could only be the work of the Lord.

At other times, when we are up against tremendous odds and cannot be optimistic about our chances, everything works out in our favor. Then we realize that God *must* have intervened on our behalf. God *must* have been at work to save us, but it is simply not as obvious. Some people might attribute those unexpected but favorable outcomes simply to luck. God's people know better!

**God can also intervene in the lives of His people by giving us divine insight into problems and their solution. God grants us the ability to do whatever is needed and the strength to endure.**

David's skill as a warrior was well-known (II Samuel 17:8). He was an exceptional leader. His courage was obvious. Under David, Israel expanded its territory to its greatest range. He knew God would fulfill His purpose for him (Psalm 138:8). Yet David never claimed the credit for his extraordinary abilities. He knew they came from the Lord:

**"With Your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall.  
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer; He enables me to stand on the heights.  
He trains my hands for battle; my arms can bend a bow of bronze."** Psalm 18:29, 33, 34

**As believers in Jesus, we each have an amazing Gift from the Lord to empower us.** Jesus promised, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you" (Acts 1:8). The Spirit gives us the abilities and gifts we need to fulfill God's purpose for our lives as He did for David. The Spirit can give us an energy beyond our own natural strength (Colossians 1:29). In difficult situations, the Spirit can also instruct us as to when we need to "Be still" (Psalm 46:10) and when we need to act. And the Spirit dwells *within* us (John 14:17)! How foolish we are if we try to "get by" merely on our own resources instead of depending on the Holy Spirit!

***Holy Spirit, teach me to recognize Your voice and to obey and to draw on Your strength and power.***

# PSALMS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

## Discovering God's Goodness

### Session 3

#### Opening prayer

**Get-acquainted time** Re-introduce yourselves by name if yours is a new group this Lent. Share with the group one small (or huge) sign of God's goodness that you noticed during the past week.

**Group discussion** (There are probably more discussion questions than you will have time to cover. Choose the ones you wish to discuss.)

1. Of the five devotions for the week, which one caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. To refer to people as sheep is not exactly a compliment as sheep are not especially bright and are very dependent. (See Day One's devotion.) One church consultant advised pastors not to preach on Jesus as the Good Shepherd because that metaphor appeals to women, but it has a negative emotional impact on men. Do you agree? Why or why not?

What significance do you find in the picture of the Lord as our Shepherd?

3. What difference does it make to you that God is interested even in the mundane details of your life?
4. See Day Two's devotion. Why do you think it is important to study and remember our national history?

Why do we need to remember what God has done in the past?

5. What steps can we take to make sure future generations do *not* forget history?
6. Many of us act like Pastor McGee. (See Day Three's devotion, the last paragraph.) We spend a couple of days or maybe a few weeks taking refuge in the Lord, but we do not *live* in His shelter. Why do so many of us find it hard to remain there?
7. The Bible gives us many metaphors for God – Shepherd, Fortress, Rock, Light, etc. Do you have a favorite? Share it with the group.

As a group, try to come up with a couple newer metaphors for God.

8. If you have a favorite Bible story about the Lord delivering or helping Israel or an individual in either the Old or New Testament, share it with the group.
9. In Psalm 124:2-3, the psalmist described what would have happened "if the LORD had not been on our side..." How would your life be different today if the Lord had not been on your side at some crucial time in your life? If you can, share it with the group.

10. See Day Five's devotion, the last paragraph. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being "I really do not know the Holy Spirit at all" and 10 being "I never act without consciously depending on the Holy Spirit," choose a number that shows how actively you depend on the Holy Spirit when facing life's challenges. Tell the group why you chose that number.
  
11. Why do Christians sometimes say, "There are no coincidences" and "There is no such thing as luck"? Do you agree? Why or why not?
  
12. What is one thing that was covered in this week's devotions that you want to be sure to remember? Share it with the group.

**Prayer requests**      Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Make a note below of the requests they share with you. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which to thank the Lord.

**Close in prayer**      Use **Psalm 91** as a closing prayer.  
Or if you have time, ask one of the group members with a smart phone to search on "**Always**" by Kristian Stanfill and listen to it as a closing prayer. It is a worship song similar to Psalm 121. Note the mantra-like repetition at the end: "I lift my eyes up; my help is from the Lord." It's a good line to remember and to keep singing through the week!

## WEEK FOUR: CALLING OUT TO GOD

***“I call on You, O God, for You will answer me; give ear to me and hear my prayer.”*** Psalm 17:6

The Book of Psalms is a book of hymns and prayers. Even the psalms that do not address God but are instructive or give a testimony are prayers “for they serve to submerge in God’s will and purpose the one who prays them.”<sup>xxxix</sup>

The psalmists were firm in their confidence that God hears us when we pray. “Know that the LORD has set apart the godly for Himself; the LORD will hear when I call to Him” (Psalm 4:3). And not only will the Lord hear, He will answer. “In the day of my trouble I will call to You, for You will answer me” (Psalm 86:7). Personal experience of God’s answers to prayer in the past motivated the psalmists to keep on praying: “Because He turned His ear to me, I will call on Him as long as I live” (Psalm 116:2). The Jewish Study Bible makes the point: **“If there is one primary underlying assumption of the book of Psalms, it is the potential efficacy of prayer.”**<sup>xxxix</sup>

That there is a relationship between God and the person/community praying is quite apparent in the Psalms. “God is called upon to hear prayers and to respond; this is one of His attributes,” and so, it is confusing and frightening when He seems to “hide His face” and not pay attention to the psalmist.<sup>xxxix</sup>

In spite of our sometimes feeling as if God is hiding His face from us, Psalm 34:15 describes the Lord as “attentive” to the righteous. How incredible that the God of the universe, the Creator of all things, should be attentive to *any* human being! We sometimes listen to other people without really paying attention, and then we remember little of the conversation. God, however, always gives us His attention when we call on Him.

It is, of course, because of His lovingkindness that God hears us. His faithfulness gives us the assurance that He will answer our prayers in the best possible way.

It is important to remember that prayer is more than hoping, rejoicing, weeping, speaking one’s mind, or pouring out one’s heart. Prayer can include all of these, but **the significant act of prayer is that we come into God’s presence and address those wishes, sorrows, and joys to the Lord.** Indeed, Psalm 62:8 encourages us to “Pour out your hearts”—not simply as an emotional release but—**“to Him,** for God is our refuge.”

In Week Four, we will look at some of the key ways in which the psalmists cried out to God.

### Suggested readings from the Psalms for Week Four

Day 1	Psalm 44
Day 2	Psalm 109
Day 3	Psalm 51
Day 4	Psalm 86
Day 5	Psalm 25

## DAY ONE: PSALMS OF LAMENT

***“How long, O LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?”***

Psalm 13:1

Disappointments, accidents, illness, tragedies—suffering touches everyone in some way. When we feel like God has abandoned us, our pain grows even more intense. Joseph had God-given dreams of prominence yet he ended up in prison in Egypt, wrongly accused. [See Genesis 37, 39.] Samuel had anointed David to be king, but he became a hunted man, hiding out in caves. [See I Samuel 16, 19-26]. How do we pray when it feels like God has forgotten all about us?

**The Psalms of Lament are the prayers of people in great distress who felt forsaken by God and could not understand why God had allowed certain events to happen.** They are perplexed, confused, hurt. The writer of Psalm 44 reminds God that the people had *not* sinned but had been faithful to the Lord (vv.17-21), so God *should* have blessed them. That was His promise! [See Deuteronomy 28.] The psalmist really was asking, “Why are You treating us this way?” (Psalm 44:23, 24).

Sometimes the psalmist recognized the present suffering as punishment, but he still protested that the punishment was lasting too long. Jerusalem was in ruins because the people had forsaken the Lord. [See Jeremiah 6.] Psalm 74 and its companion Psalm 77 lament the destruction of the Temple and the nation’s defeat. The psalmist cried out, “Will the Lord reject forever? ...Has His unfailing love vanished forever? Has His promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful?” (Psalm 77:7-9).

These are not the words of people *complaining about* God. The Israelites in the desert had murmured against God. They had not learned to trust the Lord, and so they were ready to rebel against God and return to Egypt. God disciplined them. [See Numbers 11, 14.]

The psalmists, on the other hand, never stop trusting God. In their distress, they remind God of His promises, His character, and His past deeds of deliverance. They confront God with the evidence that seems to show He is now acting out of character and not keeping His promises. **Yet they knew God had committed Himself to them and that He would be faithful to His covenant**, so it was only a matter of time before God would act again on their behalf. Hence the cry, “How long...?” (Psalm 13:1; 74:10; 89:46). “They firmly believe, *in total disregard of present evidence*, that God is still rich in steadfast love and compassion, that His promise and covenant are still valid and unchangeable...”<sup>xxxiv</sup> The psalmists thus move from despair to hope, from fear to faith, and end their laments with praise.

The Psalms of Lament are disturbing to us because of how freely and unguardedly the psalmists address God, but they teach us that *this is how we should pray too*. **Own up to the depth of your pain! Be frank about your frustration with God’s failure to help you in the way you think He should.** It is no sin to ask God, “Why have You forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1). David and Jesus both asked that (Mark 15:34)! Don’t be afraid to ask your tough questions, but ask them *of the Lord*. That is the key: spending time in God’s presence and placing our laments, our confusion, our frustrations at His feet.

**The truth is God never abandons His children, not even for one millisecond!** We are assured—despite our feelings to the contrary and despite our not getting answers to the “why question”—that no trouble, hardship, or danger can ever separate us from God’s love (Romans 8:35-39).

***Lord, how gracious You are to listen patiently to my protests and to hear my questions.***

## DAY TWO: IMPRECATORY PSALMS

***“Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the reproach they have hurled at You, O Lord.”***

Psalm 79:12

Hardest to understand are the Psalms that cry for vengeance. The psalmists again speak candidly. “The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked” (Psalm 58:10). The image is that of victorious soldiers moving across the battlefield, walking through the shed blood as they plunder the dead bodies of the enemy. With regard to a wicked man, David prayed, “May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow” (Psalm 109:9).

**Jesus commanded us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors (Matthew 5:44). Given that the Psalms are Scripture, we might ask, “Are we encouraged to *pray* these Psalms?”**

The idea of vengeance is *not absent* from the New Testament. The martyrs in heaven ask how long before they are avenged (Revelation 6:9-11). To those suffering persecution, Paul promised, “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you” (II Thessalonians 1:6). Jesus Himself promised that God will bring about swift justice for His chosen ones against their adversaries (Luke 18:7, 8).

Paul warns believers, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Romans 12:19 NASB). The psalmists, in fact, were *not* taking their own revenge but called out *to God* to repay. Moreover, the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out that the enemies of whom the psalmists spoke were “enemies of the cause of God,” and the prayer for vengeance was not personal but rather “the prayer for the execution of His righteousness in the judgment of sin.”<sup>xxxv</sup> The concern is for *God’s* honor. Scripture makes clear that Judgment Day is coming, and the perpetrators of evil *will* receive retribution (Revelation 20).

While the Bible forbids personal and petty vindictiveness, C. S. Lewis observed that **in the face of atrocities, indignation can be a good thing showing that we take right and wrong seriously, that we are not callous or indifferent to the suffering of others.**<sup>xxxvi</sup> Bible commentator John Goldingay noted that the Imprecatory Psalms express fear and rage, but “instead Christians are rather inclined to ask God to remove fear and rage from their hearts.” He wrote that these Psalms show us that asking God to remove the rage is *not always appropriate*: **“The fear and rage can be deep and proper responses to ways other people are behaving” – and we ought to pray that God will put down the violent and abusive.**<sup>xxxvii</sup> That is what these Psalms ask. [RE: *Forgiving* one’s enemies, see APPENDIX A.]

Consider the evil in the world. In 2014, the terrorist group Boko Haram abducted 276 girls in Nigeria. In 2017, a gunman killed 58 people attending a concert in Las Vegas. Over the years, ISIS has beheaded its enemies. Christians all over the world are subject to horrid persecution. Think of all the school shootings. Because our *real* enemies are the demonic powers energizing the wicked (Ephesians 6:12), we should pray that wicked people will repent and be saved. Nevertheless, asking God to bring down the terrorist, thwart the plans of the wicked, and bring justice to their victims is surely a fitting prayer!

The Imprecatory Psalms are cries for divine justice. The Jewish Study Bible explains, **“This is not to be taken as simple revenge, but as a way of expressing the hope for the return of the right world order, where evil has no place and all acknowledge God.”**<sup>xxxviii</sup> To that hope, Christians can say “Amen.”

***Sovereign God, frustrate all of the plans of evil doers and bring the perpetrators of evil to justice.***

## DAY THREE: PENITENTIAL PSALMS

***“Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”***

Psalm 51:2

When a person has done wrong, perhaps the first thought is to cover it up. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and she became pregnant, that was the plan. His cover-up involved her husband’s death. [See II Samuel 11.] He married Bathsheba and during her pregnancy, David kept quiet, but the guilt took its toll. “When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long” (Psalm 32:3). Psalm 38 gives us a more complete picture of the misery a child of God living with unconfessed sin suffers: physical deterioration, social isolation, emotional turmoil, etc. When the prophet Nathan confronted David, he admitted, “I have sinned against the LORD” (II Samuel 12:13). Psalm 51 is one of seven Penitential Psalms. It is David’s prayer of confession

**The word “confession” in Hebrew (*yādā*) can mean to confess one’s sin or to praise God.** It means acknowledging our sin, and it means making a public declaration of God’s attributes, thus praising Him.<sup>xxxix</sup> David acknowledged his sin, using various words to describe his deed. The Hebrew word translated *iniquity* refers to something twisted or perverted. *Transgression* is a rebellion against a ruler or his laws, in this case, against God. *Sin* means to fail to live by the standards God has set for us.

In his confession, David also declared God’s attributes. He began his confession by appealing to God’s grace and mercy and to His *hesed*, i.e. His lovingkindness (v.1 NASB). David cited God’s compassion, which in Hebrew is from the word “womb.” Thus, compassion is like the deep love of a mother for the child nursing at her breast (Isaiah 49:15) or the strong love of a father for his children (Psalm 103:13).

David begged God to *blot out* his sin as a creditor might erase a debt that he had formerly entered into his books (v.1, 9). **He asked God to wash and to cleanse him so that he could be “whiter than snow” (v. 7) – a rather bold request from one who had arranged for the death of an innocent man!** But David knew God, and on the basis of *God’s character*, David prayed that he could be clean, that he could know joy again (v.12), and that God would not take His Spirit from him (v.11) as God had removed His Spirit from King Saul, his predecessor (I Samuel 16:14).

Psalm 32 is David’s testimony—how he tried to hide his sin and his later confession. “Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered” (v.1). The Hebrew word for forgiveness means to bear sins and carry them away, reminiscent of the scapegoat, carrying the people’s sins outside the camp (Leviticus 16). David displayed that concept of forgiveness in Psalm 103:12: “as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

Centuries later Isaiah would write of the Suffering Servant who would “take up” our infirmities and “carry” our sorrows (53:4). David had pointed out that animal sacrifices alone did not please God, but repentance (“a broken and contrite heart”) was necessary (Psalm 51:16, 17). **We know, however, that God could forgive David as He also forgives us, not only because we repent, but because Jesus gave His life as a sacrifice on the cross, and His blood covers all our sin and cleanses us (I John 1:7; 2:2). There is no sin so large or so heinous that Jesus’ blood cannot cover it.**

As Martin Luther observed, once we stop trying to cover up our sin, then God Himself can cover it!<sup>xl</sup>

***Loving God, how thankful I am to know my sin is covered and that I am forgiven and cleansed!***

## DAY FOUR: CRIES FOR HELP

***“Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me.”***

Psalm 70:1

“I pray only when I am in trouble; but I am in trouble all the time so I pray all the time.” These words attributed to author Isaac Bashevis Singer explain a very basic motive for prayer.<sup>xli</sup>

**“Lord, help me!” is one of the earliest forms of prayer and a popular one for all time.** A couple generations after Adam and Eve, people “began to call on the name of the LORD” (Genesis 4:26). The Hebrew for “to call on God’s name” meant to summon God to help with a specific need. Numerous Psalms are cries to God for help or grateful words of thanksgiving for the help God gave.

“Poor and needy” is how the petitioner often described himself (Psalm 40:17; 70:5; 86:1; 109:22). That was not *literally* true, but it did convey the desperation felt. People who are poor and needy do not have the resources to help themselves and often have no one to protect them. They need the help of one who is wise and powerful. Thus, the psalmist was expressing his inability to help himself and his need for God to intervene. [Cf. Jesus’ words: “Blessed are *the poor in spirit...*” Matthew 5:3.]

The psalmists plead with God to answer: “Answer me when I call to You...” (Psalm 4:1). “Look on me and answer, O LORD my God” (Psalm 13:3). By “answer,” they meant to do as they had requested. Bible commentator John Goldingay observed: “It is sometimes said that God answers prayers with ‘Yes,’ or ‘No,’ or ‘Wait.’...the Psalms would not take ‘No’ for an answer.”<sup>xlii</sup> In Psalm 86, David cried to God for help and gave God many reasons *why* He should answer, often prefaced by the word “for.”

Goldingay went on to say, “Nor are they very keen on ‘Wait.’ They assume we can press God about timing as well as about the matter itself. Admittedly this is because their prayers generally look more urgent than ours; when the ax is about to fall, there is no time for ‘Wait.’”<sup>xliii</sup> Indeed, many of the Psalms ask God to hasten (70:1), to act quickly (38:22; 71:12), or to not delay (70:5).

Martin Luther advised memorizing the above verse, Psalm 70:1, which calls on God for speedy help. He said, “This prayer is the shield, spear, thunderbolt, and defense against every attack...”<sup>xliiv</sup> It is useful in all circumstances! The monk John Cassian (360-435 A.D.) wrote that this verse “can be...adapted to every condition...it contains an invocation of God against every danger....it contains the thought of one’s own weakness, confidence in the answer, and the assurance of a present and ever ready help.”<sup>xliv</sup>

**In those crisis moments, when there is only a moment to pray, Psalm 70:1 says it all!**

**How blest we are that we can cry out to God for help and know in that instant God hears us. God does not change!** We can pray with David, “You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to You” (Psalm 86:5). 3,000 years later, God still answers those who call to Him *whatever their trouble* (Psalm 86:7). God is still “near to all who call on Him” (Psalm 145:18). As many have testified, **“The more we depend on God for help, the more dependable we find that He is.”**

As followers of Jesus, we have even more promises assuring us that the Lord hears and answers prayer (e.g. Luke 11:9-10; John 16:23-24; Philippians 4:6-7). There is absolutely no reason not to stop right now and seek the Lord’s help with whatever it is you are facing. You do not need to face it alone!

***Loving God, that I can turn to You for help at any time, in any place, about anything, is astounding!***

## DAY FIVE: PRAYERS FOR GUIDANCE

***“Show me Your ways, O LORD, teach me Your paths; guide me in Your truth and teach me...”***

Psalm 25:4, 5

There are only two paths open to us, and we choose the one we will take. One is the path of obedience to the Lord, and the other is the path of our own will. To walk in God’s way is to take the pathway of life. The other way “seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death” (Prov. 14:12).

Sometimes it is difficult to discern God’s path, His will, from the other options available. It is not always a choice between what is clearly right and clearly wrong morally. Sometimes the choice is between what is good and what is best, but God’s way is ultimately always best. **Because of our own sinful nature, we can easily deceive ourselves into thinking what we want is what God wills too. We can persuade ourselves that the path we have chosen is the will of God for us when, in fact, it is not.**

The psalmists realized this and prayed for guidance. “Show me the way I should go...Teach me to do Your will” (Psalm 143:8, 10). They recognized God as their Teacher who “instructs sinners in His ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them His way” (Psalm 25:8-9).

**God teaches us through His Word.** Psalm 119 sets forth the practical value of God’s Word in our lives. “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (v. 105). Psalm 119 focuses on *torah*, the Hebrew word usually translated “law,” but here it is “much more than law or a set of rules. Torah is...the means whereby one can reach a goal or ideal.” It is teaching, direction, guidance, instruction.<sup>xlvi</sup> It *points to*—the meaning of its root word—the way to a satisfying, full life.

**For that reason, we can be happier receiving God’s guidance than if we had won the lottery!** “I rejoice in following Your statutes as one rejoices in great riches” (Psalm 119:14). “The law from Your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold” (v. 72). Therefore, “I lift up my hands to Your commands which I love, and I meditate on Your decrees” (v. 48).

**Why is it we are not always as enthusiastic about Scripture as the psalmists were?** If we are honest with ourselves, maybe it is because we do not really want to obey the Word; we prefer setting our own course through life, choosing our own path. Or it could be that we rush through our Bible reading without meditating on what it says, without asking, “What does this mean for me and my life today?” Perhaps we fail to ask the Holy Spirit to give us insight into the Word. Only with the Spirit’s help can we truly understand the Bible and its application to our lives.

Sometimes our difficulty comes from the fact that we seldom read the Bible in the first place! We wish God would speak to us more than He does, and yet we neglect the chief means by which the Lord has chosen to speak to us: the Bible! Ask the Lord to give you a new and deeper love for His Word!

**God has given us an encouraging promise: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you”** (Psalm 32:8 NASB). Then in the next verse, God warns us not to be like mules that must be led by bit and bridle! When we feed on His Word and keep it in our hearts (Psalm 119:11), we will daily discover and happily follow God’s will for our lives. When we are yielded to Him, God is always able to get us where He wants us to be – in the center of His will.

***Lord, please “Show me Your ways; teach me Your paths; guide me in Your truth and teach me.”***

**PSALMS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**  
**Calling Out to God**

**Session 4**

**Opening prayer**

**Get-acquainted time**            Share with the group one of your earliest memories of speaking to God in prayer.

**Group discussion**        (There are probably more discussion questions than you will have time to cover. Choose the ones you wish to discuss.)

1. Of the five devotions for the week, which one caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. See Day One’s devotion. Have you ever been upset with God or frustrated by His apparent failure to help you? Some people stop praying under those circumstances – sort of like giving God “the silent treatment.” How did you handle your own anger or disappointment?
3. Read Romans 8:38-39 aloud. As a group, make up a contemporary list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God, for example, unemployment. Then put the list into the context of that same passage and read it again in the new form:

“For I am convinced that neither unemployment nor \_\_\_\_\_ nor  
\_\_\_\_\_ nor \_\_\_\_\_ nor  
\_\_\_\_\_ nor \_\_\_\_\_  
nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is  
in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

4. See Day Two’s devotion. Asking for God’s vengeance on any person or group of people generally makes us uncomfortable. Or does it? Can you give an example of a group whom you would like to see come under God’s judgment?

Is it possible to pray *against* some people while also praying *for* them? Explain your answer.

5. C. S. Lewis in his book, *Reflections on the Psalms* (page 79), asked whether there should be a “social stigma” placed on certain people. Given that Jesus ate with “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 5:29-31), what should our attitude be toward those who do not live by our moral code?

Are there people with whom we *should* avoid a relationship, for example, cruel or dishonest people? Should we shun them? Why or why not?

6. See Day Three's devotion. Lifeway Research discovered that 67% of Americans admit they are sinners. If you were in a debate and the opposing team represented the 33% who evidently do *not* admit they are sinners, what arguments would you use to persuade them?
7. "Confession is good for the soul." In your opinion, is that true? Why or why not?
8. Read I John 1:9 together. When you have confessed your sin and repented and heard God's word of forgiveness, why is it important to *leave your burden of guilt* at the cross and move on, accepting ourselves now as clean and "whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7)?
9. See Day Four's devotion. Some people think that we should not bother God with our little problems. They think that we are insulting God when we come to Him with something that is inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. They say we should "save" our prayers for the big crisis or major issues of life. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
10. Most of us are as impatient as the psalmists were when we want (or need) God to answer a prayer quickly. What has helped you to wait patiently when the answer to your prayer seems to be delayed?
11. See Day Five's devotion. If you can, describe a time in your life when you were very conscious of the Lord's leading you. Or if you prefer, describe a time in your life when you only realized after the fact, as you looked back on that episode, that God had guided you.
12. What is one thing that was covered in this week's devotions that you want to be sure to remember? Share it with the group.

**Prayer requests**      Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Make a note below of the requests they share with you. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which to thank the Lord.

**Close in prayer**      Use **Psalm 86:1-13** as a closing prayer.

## WEEK FIVE: RESPONDING TO GOD

**“When You said, ‘Seek My face,’ my heart said to You, ‘Your face, O LORD, I shall seek.’”**

Psalm 27:8 (NASB)

Bible teacher and author A. W. Tozer in his book, *The Pursuit of God*, used the above verse to explain why some Christians “find” God in a deeply meaningful way while other believers struggle in their relationship with God. He assured his readers that God does not have favorites!

Tozer suggested that the people who have enjoyed a close walk with the Lord, in contrast to the average person, respond when they feel the inward longing for God. They “cultivate” their spiritual awareness instead of ignoring it, putting it on hold for a more convenient time, or quenching it outright.<sup>xlvii</sup>

**David, in the verse above, shows us that when he felt what we sometimes call a “nudge” from God or the “tug” of the Spirit, he did something about it. David responded immediately.**

A relationship of any type requires responsiveness. We act and we react to others. We speak, we listen, and we respond.

In our relationship with God, God is the one who initiates. God speaks through Scripture. God expresses His love for us. God calls us by His Holy Spirit to come to Him. God brings us into a relationship with Him as our Father. All these actions should elicit a response from us.

Psychologists tell us the worst thing we can do to other people is not to hate them or insult them. The worst thing we can do is to ignore them, to act as if they do not even exist. All relationships require response.

Martin Luther, in his *Small Catechism*, captured the primary way in which we are to respond to God: we are to fear and love God. The Psalms clearly say “Amen” to that. “I love You, O LORD, my strength” (Psalm 18:1).

In Week Five, we will look at some other ways in which the psalmists responded to God, ways in which we can respond as well.

### **Suggested readings from the Psalms for Week Five**

Day 1	Psalm 33
Day 2	Psalm 150
Day 3	Psalm 30
Day 4	Psalm 96
Day 5	Psalm 100

## DAY ONE: TRUST IN THE LORD

*“To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul; in You I trust, O my God.”*

Psalm 25:1

“Trust” in Hebrew “expresses that sense of well-being and security which results from having something or someone in whom to place confidence....stressing the feeling of being safe or secure.”<sup>xlviii</sup> The Psalms take for granted that each person places his or her trust in something. It might be in money (Psalm 49:6), in leaders (Psalm 146:3), or in weapons (Psalm 44:6). Too many put their trust in idols (Psalm 115:4-8). Psalms advises us to place our trust in God who is like a refuge or shield, keeping us safe and secure. To rely on anything else *but God* is foolish; it can only give a false sense of security that can vanish in a moment, leaving one vulnerable and without hope.

**Trust. Hope. Wait. These three words are virtually synonymous in Psalms.** Psalm 33 links them together: “We *wait* in *hope* for the LORD; He is our help and our shield. In Him our hearts rejoice, for we *trust* in His holy name” (vv. 20, 21). The Hebrew word for “hope” means expectation. We might use the English word “hope” to express a wish e.g., “I *hope* she gets better.” **The Hebrew “hope” is not a wish but the confident anticipation of what is certain to come. It is the expectation of the fulfillment of a promise.** Hope is *trusting* God to keep His Word and to do what He has promised. So one *waits*, waits with eagerness for God to act and, in the meantime, endures the present situation.

To hope in the Lord is to trust God and thus to wait for Him to answer our prayer, to keep His promise, to rescue us from trouble. To trust God is to have hope, and we wait for our hope to come to fruition. “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD” (Psalm 27:14).

**Our trust in God is our response to His faithfulness:** God has kept His promises in the past. Scripture and many believers today will testify to that! **Our trust responds to His lovingkindness**, love that did not spare His own Son from death in order to save us (Romans 8:32). David said that even if his own parents would forsake him [they did not], God would always care for him (Psalm 27:10).

Psalm 33 begins with praise and ends with a confident expression of trust in God. When we praise the greatness of God in creating the world (vv. 6-9), we realize God is more than able to care for us. Recalling God’s sovereignty over the nations (vv.10-19), reminds us that we can trust God’s ability to keep us secure. A. W. Tozer explained, “If you believe you’re in the hands of chance, of course there’s something to be afraid of, and you’re a fool if you’re not afraid.”<sup>xlix</sup> Believers, however, are in the hands *of the Lord!* An old hymn by Stuart Hamblen says, **“I know not what the future holds, but I know who holds the future.”<sup>i</sup> The omnipotent, loving, sovereign, faithful Lord holds your future!**

“When I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?” (Psalm 56:3, 4). David wrote these words, apparently, when he fled alone to Gath and “was very much afraid” (1 Samuel 21:10-15). **Trusting God does not mean that we will never be afraid, but it does mean we know where to turn with our fears. God will give us the strength to overcome them so that, while we still might *feel* afraid, our fears will not control us.** Pastor Vernon McGee observed, “These people who say, ‘I haven’t any fear,’ may mean that they are insensitive to the circumstances and problems that really exist. Or they may have a foolish sort of faith....David admitted he was afraid, but he trusted the Lord to take care of him.”<sup>ii</sup> We can too!

***Lord, because I know You love me and are able to do all You say, I place my hope and trust in You.***

## DAY TWO: PRAISE THE LORD

***“Praise the LORD. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise Him!***

Psalm 147:1

Imagine a boisterous, noisy celebration. A victory party for the winning candidate after the election results are in. A parade for the Super Bowl champs. Exuberance! Joy! Commendations and tributes!

That gives us a sense of what praising the Lord means in the Psalms. There are trumpets and cymbals (Psalm 150:3-5), shouting and singing (66:1-2), clapping (47:1), dancing (149:3), and arms lifted toward heaven (141:2). There are recitations of God’s mighty deeds in creating the world and in redeeming Israel. There is recognition of God’s attributes. Body and mind, emotions and will all enter into the experience of praising the Lord. Praising God with fellow believers only enhances the celebration.

Praise is a spontaneous human response to many enjoyable experiences. On a perfect-weather day, we express our delight. We give a standing ovation to honor a worthy person or performance. We jump up, raise our arms, and shout when our team scores. **Praising God should be as natural, as enthusiastic. Praise recognizes the incomparable greatness of God. Praise expresses our wonder. Confidence in God’s love overflows into song. Praise acknowledges and responds to God for who He is and shows our esteem for the Lord. God is worthy of our praise, and we know it!**

The Jewish Study Bible tells us, “According to the Psalms, the main religious function of human beings is to offer praise to God...they envision a world in which everyone and everything will praise God.”<sup>lii</sup> We need not be overly concerned with the wording of our praise as the Bible tells us to simply *shout* or, as the King James Bible reads, “make a joyful *noise*” (Psalm 81:1; 95:1; 98:4; 100:1; etc.)

“*Everything* that has breath” (Psalm 150:6) is to praise the Lord. The trees, the seas, rivers, and mountains too (Psalm 96:12; 98:7-8). All of humanity, all the animals, all of nature, and the universe have this in common: we are God’s creation, dependent on Him, and existing for His glory. We all wait in eager expectation for all things to be made new (Psalm 104:30; Romans 8:22; Revelation 21:5).

Praise “magnifies” the Lord (Psalm 34:3 NASB). We obviously cannot make God bigger and greater than He is. To magnify the Lord is to look at God, as it were, through a different lens, like looking at the moon with a telescope. We see God more clearly as we praise Him. We see aspects of His nature we had not noticed before. **When we fail to magnify the Lord, we generally magnify our own problems instead, making them appear huge to our eyes! Praise helps us to see how “huge” God is!**

God is everywhere, and the Lord promises to be with us always. We do not, however, always “sense” or experience the reality of the Lord’s presence with us. **Engaging fully in praise and thanksgiving ushers us into *the experience* of God’s presence (Psalm 100:4). God does not need our praise. We need it!** Praising God re-focuses our attention off ourselves and onto Him, and as we praise Him, God manifests His presence to us. We “enter His gates” and His courts (100:4).

No wonder the book of Psalms closes with the command to praise the Lord. Psalms 146-150 in the Jewish Bible all begin with “**Hallelujah.**” The Hebrew word *hālel* means “to praise,” and Hallelujah literally means “Let us praise Yahweh.” It is the final word to the Book of Psalms. How fitting!

***My God, how wonderful You are! You are holy and good in all You do. Nothing is too hard for You!***

## DAY THREE: GIVE THANKS TO THE LORD

**“Give thanks to the LORD, call on His name; make known among the nations what He has done.”**

Psalm 105:1

Strangely enough, there was no separate Hebrew word for “to thank” when the Psalms were written. The same word that meant to confess sin or to praise God – *yādâ* – also meant to give thanks to the Lord. [See the devotion “Penitential Psalms” in week 4.] To offer God thanks was to praise God.

**Thanksgiving, nevertheless, is a distinctive type of praise.** In part, it expresses gratitude to God for something God has given or done. **Biblical thanksgiving is also a testimony** to one’s family, friends, and the community. The grateful recipient of God’s blessing speaks to others about what God has done. Thus, the psalmist not only called on the people to give thanks to God, but he told them to also “make known among the nations” what the Lord had done for them (Psalm 105:1).

We do not know the occasion upon which David wrote Psalm 30. The title says that it was on the dedication of the Temple, but that was after David’s time. Scholars think Psalm 30 may have been read at the dedication of the Second Temple because the psalm speaks of suffering that God had healed. [See Ezra 6.] David evidently composed Psalm 30 after a devastating illness.

Psalm 30 is his hymn of thanksgiving to the Lord for healing him. In part, he addressed God, mentioning specifically what God had done for him. “You lifted me out of the depths...You did not let my enemies gloat...You healed me...You brought me up from the grave...You spared me...You turned my wailing into dancing...You clothed me with joy” (verses 1-3, 11). Psalm 30 also includes David’s testimony to his hearers. In fact, he clearly did not speak verses 4-5 to God but to his audience.

Commentator John Goldingay observed that the Thanksgiving Psalms “put more emphasis on the facts of what has happened than on the worshipper’s feelings of gratitude. Such confession takes the form ‘You have done this’ more than ‘We are so grateful.’ God even has the glory in the grammar.”<sup>liii</sup> We see that, for example, in Psalms 118 and 136 and in the various places where the psalmists stated the reasons for their thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is all about what *the Lord* has done.

**Thanksgiving is also all about telling what God has done!** “Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what He has done for me” (Psalm 66:16). “I will tell of all Your deeds” (73:28). “One generation will commend Your works to another; they will tell of Your mighty acts” (145:4). Such testimony is a call to other people to join us in trusting the Lord.

Pastor Mark Martin expressed it this way: **“A thankful heart can’t stay quiet; it has to share what the Lord has done. Don’t be afraid, speak up! The world’s dying for some good news and you’ve got the best news ever – Jesus!”**<sup>liv</sup>

It could well be that most of us are grateful people and that we do not take the Lord’s gifts for granted. Perhaps we daily thank the Lord for the specific ways He has blessed our loved ones and us. It could also well be that most of us have seldom spoken to anyone else about those blessings or about our answers to prayer. **Our thanksgiving is incomplete!** What has the Lord done in your life that you can share? What is the Lord doing right now? What is the story *you* have to tell?

***Loving God, forgive my hesitation in telling others of all You have done for me. Grant me boldness!***

## DAY FOUR: WORSHIP THE LORD

***“Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker...”*** Psalm 95:6

When we say we “are going to church,” we generally mean to a service of *worship*. Christian worship includes a variety of activities: praise, thanksgiving, singing, prayer, hearing God’s Word, giving our tithes and offerings, receiving the Sacrament. In the Temple at Jerusalem, worship featured choirs and instruments, psalms and praise, offerings and animal sacrifice. Synagogue worship, which was widespread by Jesus’ day, emphasized the reading and explaining of God’s Word.

**The Hebrew word for “worship,” however, was much more specific. It meant to prostrate oneself or to bow down.** It was the word used when David “bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground” before Saul (I Samuel 24:8). Since God was the true King of Israel, it came to mean coming before God in reverent devotion. Splendor, majesty, strength were God’s *royal* attributes (Psalm 96:6).

Praise with its uplifted hands, upraised faces, and loud voices ushered one into the presence of God. Then in the awesome presence of Almighty God, one bowed the head and bent low, perhaps kneeling or even lying prostrate, in a posture of submission. Singing gave way to silence or to quiet adoration. Worship as bowing low was not only an Old Testament practice. In heaven, the twenty-four elders repeatedly “fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship” (Revelation 4:10; 5:14; 11:16; 19:4). The angels, too, fall down before the throne of God (Revelation 7:11).

**Physical posture is not the point, however, as much as what that posture signifies.** Bowing down, kneeling, or lying prostrate conveys humility and submission. Clearly, humility and submission ought to characterize our relationship with the Lord. **Humility** recognizes who I am before God and that I bring nothing of any real value to the relationship. Without God’s love and grace, I am merely a lost and condemned sinner, one of billions. **Submission** acknowledges that God’s way and will are right and best and that I want the Lord to reign over my life. Worship removes me from the throne of my life and enthrones God as my only King. By my worship, I show that I make that my choice.

The bowed head is also a sign of **devotion** and **adoration**. Pastor Vernon McGee wrote, “Worship is a love affair; it is making love to God...Worship without love is like a flame without heat; it is like a rainbow without color; it is like a flower without perfume.”<sup>iv</sup> Worship says to the Lord, “I love You.”

Then comes an amazing discovery! “Come near to God and He will come near to you” (James 4:8). Jesus Himself promises to be with us as we worship with our fellow believers (Matthew 18:20). As we worship, and especially in receiving Communion, the Lord assures us of His love for each of us.

There’s more! “The LORD takes delight in His people; He crowns the humble with salvation” (Psalm 149:4). Again, “The LORD delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love” (Psalm 147:11). Think of a parent delighting in her child, sitting on her lap. A friend finding pleasure in time spent with his companions. A husband and wife enjoying each other’s company.

### **Now dare to think of God taking delight in you!**

Envision God enjoying our worship, pleased to see *your* presence in the congregation. Picture the Lord Jesus finding pleasure in your company as you spend time with Him. Because He does, you know!

***Lord, I bow before You and offer myself to You for whatever purpose You choose. I do love You.***

## DAY FIVE: REJOICE IN THE LORD

***“Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!”*** Psalm 32:11

Asked if he were happy, Snoopy – Charlie Brown’s dog in the *Peanuts* comic strip – replied, “I’m about one cookie away from being happy.”<sup>lvi</sup> Often, like Snoopy, we feel on the verge of happiness. If only we had a better job, more money, a best friend, a better marriage, good health, one more cookie.

**Joy is a major theme in the Bible and in the Psalms. Sometimes it is an order!** The psalmists *command* us to rejoice, as in the above verse. Paul, too, made it emphatic: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Jesus spoke of His joy being within us, and our joy being complete (John 15:11; 16:22-24). In the Bible, “Belief and joy are inextricably intertwined.”<sup>lvii</sup>

In the Psalms, the joy expressed to God might have resulted from a God-given victory (Psalm 21) or because of God’s forgiveness (32:11) or healing (30:5, 11). Some of the Psalms (e.g. 97) celebrate God’s reign with joy. The reasons most frequently given for joy in the Psalms are the Lord Himself and the salvation He brings. **“Happy are the people whose God is the LORD!”** (Psalm 144:15 NKJV). When things were *not* going so well, the psalmist reminded himself not to be depressed: “Why are you downcast, O my soul?...Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him...” (Psalm 42:5).

It is often said there is a difference between happiness and joy – that happiness depends on circumstances while joy does not. “Blessed,” however, means “happy” in both Greek and Hebrew. Maybe neither happiness nor joy is that dependent on circumstances. We usually discover that the extra cookie does not bring us happiness after all. A psychologist at the University of California, Irvine, who worked with people whose *basic* needs had already been met, found that our genes determine 50% of our happiness, circumstances only 10%, and our own thoughts, actions, and attitudes 40%.<sup>lviii</sup>

**Happiness is largely up to us! Happiness is a choice. Our joy, or in some cases, our *decision* to be joyful, is a *God-pleasing response* to Who He is and all He has done for us.**

*“This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it”* (Psalm 118:24).

In looking at what it means to trust the Lord (Week 5, Day 1), we learned that trusting God does not abolish fear, but it does overcome it. Likewise, we *will* experience sorrows, and rejoicing in the Lord does not abolish all the sadness we might feel. It does enable us, however, to experience joy alongside our down feelings. Choosing to rejoice in the Lord enables us better to cope with our sadness.

Because we know Jesus, Christians can know happiness or joy to a greater degree than other people can. For one thing, the Holy Spirit can override our genetic heritage! Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit that He produces within us (Galatians 5:22). Fellowship with the Lord Jesus brings us happiness. We rejoice in the Lord’s love for us, in His grace and faithfulness. *No matter what else is going on in our lives*, we know Jesus died for us and gives us the gift of eternal life. **We are on our way to heaven!** The secret of happiness is to find it *in the Lord*. Even in the midst of tribulation, we can choose to focus on the Lord and to remember all He has done for us. We have plenty of reasons to rejoice!

What if *choosing* to rejoice seems an impossible feat for you? Then ask the Holy Spirit to help you, and remember the old Sunday School line: “Be my feelings what they will, Jesus is my Savior still.”

***Father, Nehemiah 8:10 says it well: The joy of the Lord is our strength! I will rejoice in You always!***

## PSALMS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Responding to God

## Session 5

### Opening prayer

**Get-acquainted time**      Share with the group briefly one thing for which you would like to thank the Lord this week.

**Group discussion**      (There are probably more discussion questions than you will have time to cover. Choose the ones you wish to discuss.)

1. Of the five devotions for the week, which one caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. See Day One's devotion. Our culture understands faith as belief in the face of what cannot be known for certain. Likewise, hope describes a desire for some specific outcome with no guarantee that it will happen. How does the biblical description of faith and hope differ from that accepted understanding?      [See Hebrews 11:1 for a clue.]
3. How can trusting God be an antidote to fear, worry, and anxiety?
4. See Day Two's devotion. How would you describe your "comfort level" with reference to the kind of praise the Psalms call us to give to God?
5. Why, if God does not need our praise, do *we need* to praise Him? How are we helped by praising God?
6. See Day Three's devotion. Why are so many of us hesitant to speak with other people about the Lord and what He has done for us?
7. Psalm 136 is thanksgiving psalm with each verse stating something the Lord had done for His people followed by the refrain, "His love endures forever." Using some of the things the group members named during the get-acquainted time, compose a 4 or 5 verse thanksgiving psalm of your own, using the same refrain.
8. See Day Four's devotion. Had you ever considered that submission to God is one aspect of true worship? In our society, the word "submission" has negative connotations for many people. What do you think it means to submit to God?

How do you feel about submitting to God?

9. How would knowing that the Lord delights in spending time with you change your pattern of worship attendance or the amount of time you spend in daily prayer, Bible reading, and meditation? Or would it? Why or why not?
  
10. See Day Five's devotion. A recent study on happiness found that while money does not buy happiness, having free time in which to do nothing *does* lead to feeling happier. God commanded us to keep the Sabbath, insisting there be one day each week when we have time to worship, relax, and do no work. What is one step you could take toward setting aside more "Sabbath" time? Share that idea with the group.
  
11. How realistic do you think it is for Christians to *choose* to rejoice? Explain your response.
  
12. What is one thing that was covered in this week's devotions that you want to be sure to remember? Share it with the group.

**Prayer requests**      Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Make a note below of the requests they share with you. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which to thank the Lord.

**Close in prayer**      Use **Psalm 33** as a closing prayer.

## WEEK SIX: MEETING THE MESSIAH

*Jesus “said to them, ‘This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about Me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms.’”* Luke 24:44

Bible commentaries do not always agree on which psalms to classify as Messianic. The standard criteria is that **a psalm quoted in the New Testament as referring to Jesus is a Messianic Psalm**. When Jesus chased the merchants from the Temple, for example, “His disciples remembered that it is written: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (John 2:17). The verse they remembered is Psalm 69:9, and the reference to it in John’s Gospel makes Psalm 69 one of the Messianic Psalms.

The word “Messiah” is from the Hebrew word for an “anointed” person. Kings and high priests were anointed with oil when they took office. Over the centuries, the prophets spoke of a coming king from David’s lineage, a king who would rule from Jerusalem and bring peace to the whole world. By Jesus’ day, the Jews were calling that long-awaited king “the Messiah” or “Christ” (the Greek equivalent).

When the psalmists wrote the various psalms, they may not have seen that their words pointed to the Messiah. The Holy Spirit who inspired them, of course, incorporated the prophetic element. In Psalm 41:9, for example, David lamented Ahithophel’s betrayal (II Samuel 15:30, 31). Centuries later, Jesus quoted that verse in reference to Judas (John 13:18).

**It is in retrospect, having their minds enlightened by Jesus (Luke 24:45), that the New Testament writers understood the Psalms to be speaking of Him. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they discovered a new significance to many of the Psalms.** Nearly half of the Old Testament references to Jesus the Messiah in the New Testament come from the Psalms.

Martin Luther saw Jesus all through the Psalms. For Luther, the Psalms – and not merely the ones designated “Messianic” – pointed to Jesus Christ and the Gospel message of grace. Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that Jesus was already speaking through David when David wrote the Psalms.<sup>lix</sup> Bonhoeffer further explained, “It is the incarnate Son of God, who has borne every human weakness in His own flesh who here [in the psalms] pours out the heart of all humanity before God and who stands in our place and prays for us....It is the prayer of the human nature assumed by Him which comes here before God.”<sup>lix</sup>

Pastor Vernon McGee likewise wrote:

The Gospels tell us that Jesus went to the mountain to pray, but the Psalms give us His prayer. The Gospels tell us that He was crucified, but the Psalms tell us what went on in His own heart during the Crucifixion. The Gospels tell us He went back to heaven, but the Psalms begin where the Gospels leave off and show us Christ seated in heaven.<sup>lxi</sup>

With that in mind, we really are on “sacred ground” as we read the Messianic Psalms.

### Suggested readings from the Psalms for Week Six

Day 1	Psalm 2
Day 2	Psalm 69
Day 3	Psalm 22
Day 4	Psalm 110
Day 5	Psalm 45

## DAY ONE: HIS IDENTITY

***“The LORD has said to Me, ‘You are My Son. Today I have begotten You.’”*** Psalm 2:7 (NKJV)

We cannot know what Jesus understood about His own identity and future ministry as He was growing up in Nazareth. How much of the story of His birth did Mary share with Him, and at what age? By age twelve, Jesus apparently perceived something of who He was; we see that in His answer to Mary and Joseph when they found Him in the Temple. “Why were you searching for Me?...Didn’t you know I had to be in My Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49).

At His baptism, God spoke: “You are My Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). Jesus would have recognized immediately the quote from Psalm 2, a prophecy of the coming King. For Jesus, **that word from heaven confirmed His identity as the Messiah**. Paul would later quote that same verse in preaching about Jesus (Acts 13:33), and Hebrews 1:5 uses it to prove Jesus’ divinity.

God, however, also alluded to Isaiah 42:1, “Here is My servant, whom I uphold, My chosen one in whom I delight.” Because that passage refers to the Suffering Servant [See Isaiah 53], **the voice from heaven clearly showed Jesus that the Messiah He was to be would differ vastly from expectations**. The Messiah and the Suffering Servant were one and the same! Some scholars think it was then that Jesus first realized that His life was to end on a cross and that this realization is what sent Him out into the wilderness to fast and pray and set His course. At such a vulnerable time, the devil came to tempt Him, including offering Him a path to the throne that avoided the cross (Matthew 4:8-10).

In His controversy with the Pharisees, Jesus quoted Psalm 110:1, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” Jesus knew that verse spoke of Himself and using it, He challenged His critics to admit **the divine nature of the Messiah**, but “No one could say a word in reply” (Matthew 22:41-46).

The Psalms continued to clarify who Jesus was. The disciples saw His cleansing of the Temple (John 2) as fulfillment of Psalm 69:9, “Zeal for Your house consumes Me.” Hebrews 2:9 quotes Psalm 8:5 – “You made Him a little lower than the angels” – to indicate Jesus’ humanity. On Palm Sunday, the people of Jerusalem took up the shout from Psalm 118:26, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD” (John 12:13).

Psalm 45 gives us additional insight into Jesus’ identity as God. While presumably speaking of a *human* king, it says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever” (v.6). The Jewish Study Bible says this makes Psalm 45 unique in the whole Bible because it “raises the possibility that the king here is viewed as divine.”<sup>lxii</sup> In addition, Psalm 45 praises the King for His splendor and glory, i.e. divine attributes. Again, the Jewish Study Bible says this is “remarkable” because “the king is praised in language typically reserved for God.”<sup>lxiii</sup> Hebrews 1:8-9 says Psalm 45 speaks of Jesus.

**At some point, every person must come to a decision about who Jesus is.** Islam calls Him a prophet. Hindus see Him as one manifestation of God among many. For many unbelievers and some liberal Christians, Jesus is a Teacher. None of these opinions is adequate! One day *ALL people will kneel before Him* and acknowledge, **“Jesus is Lord!”** (Philippians 2:10-11), a day anticipated by Psalm 2.

***Jesus, thank You for the gift of faith that enables me to know that You are my Lord and my God!***

## DAY TWO: HIS SUFFERING

***“Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head...”*** Psalm 69:4

The sufferings of Jesus began long before His agony in Gethsemane and on the cross. The Gospels give us a hint of what Jesus endured, but we find greater expression of His pain in the Psalms. The Messianic Psalms give us the prayers He prayed and insight into His human thoughts and emotions. Indeed, Hebrews 10:5-7 puts Psalm 40:6-8 into the mouth of Jesus: “When Christ came into the world, He said...’Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do Your will, O God.’”

Jesus’ sufferings began in His own family. As His popularity soared, His relatives “went to take charge of Him, for they said, ‘He is out of His mind’” (Mark 3:21). His half-brothers spoke sarcastically to Him, and John explained, “For even His own brothers did not believe in Him” (John 7:2-5). “I am a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my own mother’s sons” (Psalm 69:8) conveyed His feelings.

When Jesus cast out demons, people said He had done so through the power of the devil (Luke 11:15). Some insisted He was possessed by a demon (John 8:48) or possibly crazy (John 10:20). Some called Jesus a glutton and drunkard (Matthew 11:19). Paul recognized how Jesus’ enemies taunted Him, and he applied Psalm 69:9 to Jesus: “The insults of those who insult You fall on Me” (Romans 15:3).

Jesus’ neighbors in His hometown of Nazareth tried to throw Him over a cliff (Luke 4:16-30). The religious leaders attempted to trap Him in His words (Luke 20:20), and they plotted to take His life (John 11:53). Twice the Jews tried to stone Him (John 8:59; 10:31). Jesus explained, “This is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated Me without reason,’” (Psalm 69:4; John 15:25). At one point, *many* of His disciples broke off from Him, leading Jesus to ask the Twelve if they wanted to leave Him too (John 6:66-67). Jesus was “the stone the builders rejected” (Psalm 118:22; Mark 12:10).

**While Jesus was confident of the presence and protection of His Father, the constant animosity, rejection, and threats must have taken an emotional toll. Psalm 69, quoted frequently in reference to Jesus and by Jesus Himself, is an expression of His very human feelings in prayer to His Father.**

The Church calls Psalm 22 and 69 the Passion Psalms. They are psalms of Jesus’ humiliation and rejection. Martin Luther said Psalm 69 “must be read with the most devoted love for Christ.”<sup>lxiv</sup> While there are references to Holy Week – Judas’ betrayal (v. 25; see Acts 1:16-20) and receiving gall and vinegar to drink (v. 21; see Matthew 27:34; John 19:29) – Jesus perhaps prayed Psalm 69 on various occasions during His ministry before He faced the cross. [See Hebrews 5:7-8.] Some suggest that it may have been His Gethsemane prayer the night of His arrest. [See Luke 22:39-46.]

What about the imprecatory nature of Psalm 69: “Pour out Your wrath on them...” (v. 24)? **On Jesus’ lips, these words take on a sobering nuance. Jesus knew that He was to die for the sins of the world. Jesus knew that on the cross He would bear the wrath of God. When Jesus prayed Psalm 69, then, He “requests the execution of the wrath of God on His body.”**<sup>lxv</sup> The petition on His lips became “Pour your wrath on Me instead.” Luther wrote we could well be terrified at the sufferings of Jesus, expressed in the psalms (especially Psalms 22, 40, and 69), unless we understand it was *His* choice to pay the price to save us.<sup>lxvi</sup> Oh, how He loves you and me!

***Lord Jesus, You lived Your life for me. Give me the grace to live my whole life for You.***

## DAY THREE: HIS SACRIFICIAL DEATH

***“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from saving Me...?”*** Psalm 22:1

Two of the Messianic Psalms include prayers of confession. “You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from You” (Psalm 69:5). Psalm 40, likewise thought to express Jesus’ feelings, reads, “My sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me” (Psalm 40:12). We know, of course, that not every verse in a Messianic Psalm necessarily applies to Jesus, and we know as well that Jesus was sinless (John 8:46; Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus, however, did take our sins upon Himself. He was the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Jesus became a curse for us (Galatians 3:13). “God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us” (II Corinthians 5:21). In His complete identification with us, Jesus prayed the prayer of confession. Luther wrote that when Jesus prayed these Psalms, they were *not* “the words of an innocent one; they are the words of the suffering Christ, who undertook to bear the person of all sinners and therefore was made guilty of the sins of the entire world.”<sup>lxvii</sup> Luther said **Jesus was clothed in our sins, wrapped in them.**<sup>lxviii</sup>

Jesus said that no one takes His life from Him but that He lays it down of His own accord (John 10:18). Yet in Gethsemane, Jesus struggled in prayer over the “cup” He was to drink (Luke 22:41-44). What He dreaded above all was not the physical pain but the bearing of sins that would cut Him off from His Father. Jesus had said, “The One who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do what pleases Him” (John 8:29). **Now the Son who always did what pleased the Father was to become the worst rebel, the filthiest sinner, and the One who was always with Him would now hide His face.**

And so, on the cross, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34; Psalm 22:1). In some way that we will never comprehend, Jesus experienced God’s wrath against sin, the punishment that would have been ours for eternity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that the suffering and death of the sinless Son of God on the cross is “the end of all phony thoughts about the love of God which does not take sin seriously.”<sup>lxix</sup> The cross ends the sentimental assumption that God will merely wink at sin and grant amnesty even to all who reject His gift of forgiveness and grace.

**Psalm 22 clearly describes crucifixion and Good Friday:** the insults of the onlookers, bones out of joint, extreme thirst, pierced hands and feet, nudity, gambling for His clothes. Although Jesus only spoke the one verse aloud, undoubtedly He prayed the whole psalm on the cross. The Gospels give us historical facts, but “In Psalm 22, we have an x-ray which penetrates into His thoughts and into His inner life. In this psalm, we see the anguish of His passion; His soul is laid bare.”<sup>lxx</sup>

At the same time, God remained “My” God for Jesus, and the end of Psalm 22 anticipates His victory (vv. 22-31). Perhaps Jesus also prayed and clung to Psalm 16:7-11, as He suffered on the cross, as an expression of His confidence in God, trusting that God would raise Him from the dead.

God was not absent on Good Friday. God was at work “reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (II Corinthians 5:19). Indeed, **God the Father was suffering too, aware of the anguish of His beloved Son and yet intentionally holding back from rescuing Him in order to save us.** Jesus endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2), but so did God the Father. For you. For me.

***Lord Jesus, my Savior, beholding Your cross, I have no words to express my awe and gratitude.***

## DAY FOUR: HIS PRIESTHOOD

***“The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind: ‘You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.’”***

Psalm 110:4

There are two mentions of Melchizedek in the Old Testament: Genesis 14:17-20 and Psalm 110:4. His name in Hebrew means “king of righteousness,” and he was the king of Salem, a word that means peace (Hebrews 7:2). He was also “priest of God Most High” (Genesis 14:18) to whom Abraham (then called Abram) paid tithes after a military victory. Then centuries later, God declared that the Messiah would be a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. The Letter to the Hebrews explains this.

Melchizedek was “without father or mother, without genealogy” (Hebrews 7:3). This did not mean he had no parents – of course, he did -- but to be a priest in Israel, a man had to prove from his genealogy that he was a Levite. Thus, Melchizedek was *not* a priest because of his genealogy, like the Levites, but by God’s appointment. “Without beginning of days or end of life” means that Scripture does not record his birth or death, making his priesthood *appear* to continue forever. Most significantly, **Melchizedek was both a priest *and* a king, a dual role impossible in Israel.** Priests were Levites while kings came from the line of Judah. Hebrews then shows his similarities to Jesus, our Great High Priest.

**Jesus is in the order of Melchizedek because He is both King and High Priest, and He fulfills both roles by appointment of God the Father. Moreover, because God raised Him from the dead and gave Jesus His sworn promise, Jesus’ priesthood will indeed last forever.**

A priest is a mediator, bringing God’s word to the people while representing the people before God, so a priest should be close to God. He also needs an understanding of humanity. Jesus “had to be made *like His brothers in every way*, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (Hebrews 2:17). Hebrews tells us how He suffered when tempted (2:18; 4:15) and how He “offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears” (5:7). Jesus was made “perfect through suffering” (2:10), meaning His experiences as a man fully equipped Him for His role as our Priest.

**Right now, in heaven, Jesus is serving as our High Priest on whom we can call at any time, in any place, in any circumstance, with any need.** When temptations almost overwhelm us, we can turn to Jesus for strength. When difficulties appear insurmountable, we can call to Jesus for help. We can approach His throne with “*confidence...in our time of need*” (Hebrews 4:16) because *Jesus always sympathizes* with our weaknesses (4:15). **Jesus understands even if no one else can!** Moreover, the Lord Jesus gives us strength and grace to keep us from falling into sin, but when we do sin, Jesus is our Advocate in heaven (1 John 2:1).

Jesus is able to “deal gently” (Hebrews 5:2) with us. The Greek word for “deal gently” means that Jesus will not be irritated, lose His temper with us, or be short with us even when we do something truly stupid. He will treat us with more mercy than we deserve. He will instruct us with infinite patience.

Even now, Jesus is interceding for us before the throne of God (Hebrews 7:25). That does NOT mean Jesus must persuade God the Father to be gracious to us! It *does* mean that He represents us there, that our prayers are given constant attention, and that in Jesus’ name, we too have access to God.

***Lord Jesus, what a blessing to know You understand me even when I cannot understand myself!***

## DAY FIVE: HIS REIGN

*“Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever...”*

Psalm 45:6

Forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven in triumph. Psalm 68:18 gave a preview: “When you ascended on high, You led captives in Your train,” a passage quoted in Ephesians 4:8. The scene is that of the conquering king returning home in a victory parade in which the vanquished army follows in chains. Paul gives us that same picture, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15).

**We live in an in-between time.** The King has already triumphed (Revelation 5:9-10). God has spoken: “Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet” (Psalm 110:1). We are not yet, however, at the time when, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). But that day is coming.

Meanwhile, “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against His Anointed One” (Psalm 2:2). From earliest times and the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) to our own day of atheistic Communism and of governments that outlaw conversions to Christianity, nations have rebelled against God and Christ. In fact, there have been more Christian martyrs in the last 100 years than in all the rest of the centuries combined! The early believers recognized this hostility and quoted Psalm 2:2 in their prayers regarding the persecution they faced (Acts 4:24-30).

But the day is coming when Messiah’s enemies will indeed be made His footstool (Psalm 110:1), and the nations will be judged (Psalm 110:6). The nations will be His inheritance, and He “will rule them with an iron scepter...” (Psalm 2:8-9). Revelation 19:15-16 anticipates that day: “Out of His mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. ‘He will rule them with an iron scepter.’ He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.” [See also Revelation 2:26-27; 12:5.]

**Believers need not fear that day of judgment. We belong to the King!**

Psalm 45 is a Messianic Psalm quoted as describing Jesus in Hebrews 1:8-9. Originally, Psalm 45 celebrated a royal wedding. Christians see in it a description of the reign of Jesus Christ and His relationship with His Bride, the Church. [See Revelation 19:6-9.] Jesus Christ truly is “the most excellent of men,” and God surely has anointed His lips with grace (v.2). John wrote, “From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another” (John 1:16). Justice, humility, righteousness, splendor, majesty (vv.3-6) all describe the Lord Jesus. Jesus endured the cross anticipating a future joy (Hebrews 12:2), and here we see the joy that now is His (v.7).

In Psalm 45, the psalmist instructs the young woman to “Forget your people and your father’s house” (v.10) because she is about to enter a brand new life as the bride of the king. Similarly, Jesus tells His followers, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother...he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). **As we come to know Jesus, everyone and everything else falls into second place** (or lower!). He is the Sun around whom our lives revolve. Paul wrote that compared to knowing Jesus, all else is rubbish (Philippians 3:8). A believer’s heart belongs to Jesus! Now we eagerly await the day when we shall see Him face to face!

*“Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.”* (Revelation 22:20)

## PSALMS SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

### Meeting the Messiah

## Session 6

### Opening prayer

**Get-acquainted time**            Share with the group one insight you have gained during our study of the Book of Psalms.

**Group discussion**            (There are probably more discussion questions than you will have time to cover. Choose the ones you wish to discuss.)

1. Of the five devotions for the week, which one caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. See Day One's devotion. Do you remember when you truly realized that Jesus is God and your Savior, when that belief became your own and not merely what you had been taught? If so, tell the group about it.  
(If you are unsure whether you *do* believe that Jesus is God and your Savior, do not be afraid to let the group know.)
3. Have you ever gone through a time of doubting or questioning who Jesus is? Was there a period in your life when you took time to examine what the Bible teaches and the Church claims about Jesus? If you can answer yes to either question, share your experience with the group.
4. We generally think of the crucifixion when we think of Jesus' sufferings. Before reading Day Two's devotion, had you ever considered how much He suffered *throughout* His ministry?  
  
What makes rejection so painful?
5. Read Psalm 69. Does it surprise you that Jesus probably prayed this psalm? Why or why not?  
  
Does it upset you to think of Jesus' praying Psalm 69?
6. See Day Three's devotion. Each one of us is a sinner, yet there are some sins that our fellow sinners commit that we find totally disgusting and repulsive. Given how horrified we, even though we are sinners ourselves, would feel to take on those sins as our own and to be "clothed and wrapped in them," can you even begin to imagine what Jesus must have felt in "becoming sin"?  
  
So why did He do so?
7. Try to explain what you think Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when we wrote that the cross is "the end of all phony thought about the love of God which does not take sin seriously."
8. See Day Four's devotion. What about Jesus' role as our High Priest gives you the most comfort?

9. In I Peter 2:5, we read that we are being made into a “holy priesthood.” I Peter 2:9 describes believers in Jesus: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood...” Revelation 1:6 tells us that Jesus “has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father.”

Jesus is our High Priest, our Mediator. We in turn are to serve as priests to the world.  
What do you think your responsibilities as a priest include?

10. See Day Five’s devotion. When we watch a scary movie that we have seen before, it is not as scary as the first time we saw it because now we already know if everything turns out okay in the end. How does knowing that Jesus has triumphed and will one day return as King of kings make living in frightening times or trying circumstances any easier? Or does it? Why or why not?
11. The song “I Can Only Imagine” by MercyMe tries to capture the experience of seeing Jesus face-to-face for the first time. It asks whether I will dance before Him or fall to my knees, whether I will shout Hallelujah or “be able to speak at all.” What do you imagine you will say or do when you stand for the first time face-to-face before the Lord Jesus?
12. What was one thing that was covered in this week’s devotions that you want to be sure to remember? Share it with the group.

**Prayer requests** Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Make a note below of the requests they share with you. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which to thank the Lord.

**Since this is the last meeting of your group...**discuss whether you would like to meet for a reunion after Easter or later this spring. If so, make the appropriate decisions regarding when and where and choose who will be the contact person.

**Close in prayer** Use Psalm 45:1-8 as a closing prayer.  
Since this is your last session together, you might also include a time of thanking God for any insights you have gained and for your fellow group members.

## APPENDIX A: FORGIVING ONE'S ENEMIES

Forgiveness is clearly a Christian ideal. Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." How can we both pray the Imprecatory Psalms and extend forgiveness?

**First, forgiveness is not ours to offer to people who have committed crimes against other people but not against us.** What right do we have, for example, to forgive the 300 Roman Catholic priests whom, it was reported in August 2018, the Grand Jury found guilty of abusing 1,000 children in Pennsylvania over the last 60 years? It would be presumptuous for someone not victimized to extend forgiveness. Forgiveness must come from God and from the people they hurt.

We do need, however, to identify with the victims of evil deeds in their pain and stand with them. We pray that things will be set right. We pray that perpetrators of evil will come to justice and that they *will never hurt anyone ever again.*

That is why we pray the Imprecatory Psalms. Yes, they are a little "over the top" sometimes as in Psalm 137:8, 9. Keep in mind, however, that these psalms are also poetry, and so they paint a much more expressive picture than prose. (The tragic reality is that Israel's enemies did commit such atrocities against them as described in Isaiah 13:18 and elsewhere.)

It is important to remember, too, that in Israel in the days of the psalmists and in Jesus' day as well, exaggeration was used to strongly convey an idea. Jesus commanded, for instance, that if anyone is tempted to sin because of what he sees, then he should gouge out his own eye (Matthew 5:29). We know Jesus did not intend that literally, but He clearly made His point that God takes sin and its penalty seriously and we should too.

**Secondly, when we *are* the victims, then we do need to forgive the ones who wronged us more for our sake than theirs.** Even if they show no remorse, we need to "turn it over to God" so that we can let it go. When we do not forgive our enemies, we give them a power over us to keep on hurting us and to enslave us by our own bitterness, anger, and maybe by thoughts of revenge. As has often been said, not to forgive is like drinking poison and expecting that the poison will kill your enemy. It only kills you! We need to be set free, to get our lives back! Forgiving others does that.

When the one who has sinned against us *does* repent, then Jesus instructs us to forgive as often as necessary and to restore the relationship (Matthew 18:15-22; Luke 17:3, 4) as God does with us.

**Third, to forgive does not mean to ask God to eliminate the consequences to or the punishment of the ones who harmed us. Nor should we allow them to continue hurting us.** Every person is accountable to God. On the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them," yet He declared that the religious leaders of His day would be held responsible for the blood of the prophets (Luke 11:50, 51).

As Christians, we forgive those who harm us, but we also leave them and the consequences of their actions in the hands of God. **As opportunity allows, we respond to an enemy with deeds of charity, overcoming evil with good as the Apostle Paul advised.** "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (Romans 12:20, 21)!

## APPENDIX B: PASSAGES THAT ARE WORTH MEMORIZING

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. Psalm 19:14

Psalm 23

Show me Your ways, O LORD, teach me Your paths; guide me in Your truth and teach me, for You are God my Savior, and my hope is in You all day long. Psalm 25:4, 5

The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1

The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to Him in song. Psalm 28:7

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Psalm 32:1

I sought the LORD, and He answered me; He delivered me from all my fears. Psalm 34:4

Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him. Psalm 34:8

A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all. Psalm 34:19

Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, Your faithfulness to the skies. Psalm 36:5

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”  
Psalm 46:10

“Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honor Me.” Psalm 50:15

Cast your cares on the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall. Psalm 55:22

When I am afraid, I will trust in You. Psalm 56:3

Because Your love is better than life, my lips will glorify You. I will praise You as long as I live, and in Your name I will lift up my hands. Psalm 63:3, 4

Hasten, O God, to save me; O LORD, come quickly to help me. Psalm 70:1

In the day of my trouble I will call to You, for You will answer me. Psalm 86:7

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before Him with thanksgiving and extol Him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods. Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care. Psalm 95:1, 2, 6, 7

Psalm 100

Psalm 103

The LORD is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation. Psalm 118:14

This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118:24

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. Psalm 119:105

Psalm 121

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. Psalm 127:1

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23, 24

The LORD is near to all who call on Him, to all who call on Him in truth....The LORD watches over all who love Him... Psalm 145:18, 20

Praise the Lord. How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise Him!  
Psalm 147:1

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>iv</sup> J. Vernon McGee, *Psalms 1-41, Thru' the Bible Commentary Series* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), ix.
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- <sup>vi</sup> Jack B. Scott, "āman" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, editors R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 52.
- <sup>vii</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 90-150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms, Tremper Longman III, editor (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic Publishing, 2008), 757.
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- <sup>xv</sup> Vine, 19.
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- <sup>xvii</sup> Brittney Martin, "Pass through the Waters," *Christianity Today*, July/August 2018, 33.
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- <sup>xix</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Attributes of God Volume 2: Deeper into the Father's Heart* (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania: Wing Spread Publishers, 2007), 65.
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- xli Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 158.
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March 6 Ash Wednesday

Worship 7pm

April 18 Maundy Thursday

Prayer Vigil starts after 7pm Worship and Holy Communion

April 19 Good Friday

Prayer Vigil until 3pm, Worship at 7pm

April 21 Easter

6am Sunrise Worship

8, 9:30 and 11am Traditional Worship in the Sanctuary

9 & 10:30am Contemporary Worship in the Gathering Place



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