

A study in
PSALMS



HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This 9-week study in the Psalms is designed to be used by groups of any size, in any setting - anything from two friends reading the Bible together in their lunch break, to an entire Connect group meeting after dinner on a weeknight. All you need is a Bible and this booklet.

Before you begin, it might also be helpful to watch through the Bible Project's introductory video on the Psalms to get an idea of the book's structure and major themes. It's about 9 minutes long: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/psalms/>

You may also want to have a study bible or entry-level psalms commentary handy, in case you come across questions or issues you want to investigate further. The Bible Speaks Today commentary series (BST) is available to use at church.

Each study in this booklet has **three** components:

- 1) looking at the passage using the questions provided,
- 2) discussing the application questions that go with it, and
- 3) finishing with personal reflections.

For a 60-minute bible study we recommend you structure your time in the following way:

1. Reading the passage (5 mins)
2. Explaining what the passage is about (10 mins)
3. Discussing what the passage means (10 mins)
4. Discussing the application questions (25 mins)
5. Sharing your response to the passage (10 mins)

Week ONE

Reading the Psalms

Take turns sharing as a group: what's your experience of the psalms?

When we come to the Psalms, we're all going to experience them a little differently. Some of us will love the poetry and art we find. Some of us will struggle with how 'fluffy' the language is. Some of us will feel lost in the world of the Old Testament.

The psalms are unlike anything else we find in the Bible. They're a collection of 150 songs, carefully stitched together and arranged by the people of Israel over hundreds of years. They're also more than just songs - they're prayers and poems filled with strong emotion and deep theology.

The psalms are not only the Word of God given to us, they're also God's words given to us so we can speak them back to Him. However we experience the psalms, God has given them to us to deepen our lives of worship and prayer. It's important we keep developing our skills in reading and praying the psalms so we can use them across all seasons of life.

We're going to look at a few of those skills now.

SITUATIONAL AND UNIVERSAL

It's important to understand that every psalm was written in response to a specific historical event in the life of one of God's people. That's why many psalms include a superscription describing what this event was. See for example the superscription at the start of psalm 51:

For the director of music. A psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

However, although psalm 51 names a specific historical incident which caused David to write it, it doesn't completely embed that event in its contents. Notice how verse 2 reads:

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

Not

*Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin **of adultery**.*

Even though this prayer was born out of a particular historical moment, psalm 51 was intentionally written so that it can be used by anyone who later finds themselves in a similar, though not necessarily identical situation. Therefore we describe the psalms as both *situational* (written in response to a specific event), and *universal* (written for those who find themselves in a similar, though not identical situation). As we read the psalms, we might feel like some parts describe our own situation perfectly, while other parts feel like they belong to someone else's situation. And that is okay.

***When you read the psalms, do they feel like your own words?
Or someone else's?***

READING BIBLICAL POETRY

The psalms are also entirely composed of Hebrew poetry, which has its own unique style that is different to English poetry. It's helpful to be able to recognise a few common poetic techniques that appear across the psalms:

Terseness

This is when an idea is communicated using as few words as possible. Hebrew poetry is incredibly economical (just look at all the white space on the page). Words will often be left out or assumed rather than stated. This can lead to a certain level of ambiguity as we figure out how best to fill in the gaps.

Parallelism

This is when multiple poetic lines echo each other as they go along. They most commonly come in groups of twos and threes. The first line states the idea, and then the second and third lines intensify, specify, or sharpen that idea. Each line carries the idea forward. See for example, Psalm 88:3:

*I am overwhelmed with troubles
and my life draws near to death.*

The first line of Ps 88:3 speaks of general troubles, while the second line specifies that these troubles are life-threatening. Often, the second or third lines help interpret the first.

Imagery

The psalms use poetic techniques such as simile and metaphor to create rich images using very few words. To unpack these images requires slowing down to reflect and ponder. Both metaphor and simile typically compare two things; something known is compared to something relatively unknown. The purpose is to reveal something about one of the two subjects of comparison. Figurative language also evokes our imaginations and our emotions in a way straight prose cannot.

Read through Psalm 23. Can you see any examples of terseness, parallelism, or imagery?

What might we need to be mindful of as we read and interpret the poetry of the psalms?

THE PSALMS AND JESUS

Like all of scripture, the psalms must be read in light of who Jesus is and what He has done for us. Though the psalms were composed by the people of God in an Old Testament context, they both anticipate Christ's coming and find their fulfillment in him. Jesus himself said,

*"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)*

Jesus is saying that all the psalms, not just the ones quoted in the New Testament, anticipate his coming. It's therefore important we read the psalms using two different lenses: first we ask what the psalm meant for the Old Testament people of God, and then we ask how this psalm finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. Some psalms will be very straightforward in how they point to Jesus, especially if they are quoted in the New Testament. Others will take a bit more work.

Look at Psalm 23 again. How does this psalm anticipate and find its ultimate fulfillment in Christ? What links to Jesus or the New Testament writings can you see?

PRAYING THE PSALMS

As we use the psalms in our prayer and worship, we need to be aware that we pray alongside a community of faith, as well as alongside Christ our Messianic King. As we've already seen, the psalms were written in response to a specific situation but they're also meant to be universally accessible. They were composed in an Old Testament context but ultimately they find their fulfillment in Jesus.

Therefore, when we pray the psalms we never pray them alone. Our voice is not the only one we hear. Listen to how German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it:

"Who prays the Psalms? David (Solomon, Asaph etc.) prays, Christ prays, we pray. We - that is, first of all, the entire community in which alone the vast richness of the Psalter can be prayed, but also finally every individual insofar as that person participates in Christ and his community and prays their prayer. David, Christ, the church, I myself, and wherever we consider all of this together we recognise the wonderful way in which God teaches us to pray."

As you pray the psalms, listen out for:

- The voice of the original author praying this psalm.
- The voice of Jesus praying this psalm.
- The voice of the church community (locally and globally) praying this psalm.
- Your own voice praying this psalm.

What are you most looking forward to in studying the psalms together?

What would you like to see change in your prayer and worship by the end of this study?

Week TWO

Psalm 1 | Wisdom

Wisdom psalms belong in the same category of biblical writings as Job, Ecclesiastes, and Proverbs. Their aim is to instruct us in life; they want to help us ‘do life well’. Often Wisdom writings do this by contrasting the lives of the wicked (those who don’t acknowledge God as King), and the lives of the righteous (those who look to God for salvation and instruction).

These psalms urge us to stick with God’s ways which lead to true life, because “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
*Who is speaking? What is the tone of this psalm?
What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
The word translated “meditate” in verse 2 can also mean “mutter” or “mumble”. How can we bring more “mumbling” of God’s word into the rhythms and patterns of our lives? What would delighting in God’s law look like for you?

What is your reaction to the fate of the 'wicked' in verses 4-5? Is this a reality you find hard to accept? If so, why? (It may also be helpful to read John the Baptist's words about Jesus in Matthew 3:11-12)

Psalm 1 says that those who choose the way of the righteous will be blessed. What does it mean to be blessed in our day and age, through Jesus? What blessings can you see in your life?

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?

Week THREE

Psalm 51 | Penitence

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
*Who is speaking? What is the tone of this psalm?
What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or
confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
When David prays he makes his appeal on the basis of God's character. What aspects of God's character do you see in this psalm?

What are some of the ways that we deny, minimise or distract from our sin? What is David's approach to dealing with his sin?

David makes two requests in this psalm. He pleads for cleansing from sin (verses 1-2, 7, 9) and for a transformed heart/spirit (verses 10-12). Why are both important?

This psalm teaches us to confess our sin, and ask for cleansing and transformation. Is there any sin you would like to bring to the group in confession and prayer? If you don't feel comfortable sharing with the whole group, is there someone in the group you could share with later? *Spend some time in confession and prayer.*

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?

Week FOUR

Psalm 8 | Hymn

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
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What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or
confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
How do you assess who and what is impressive? Looking at Psalm 8, how does David compare what might seem ‘big and impressive’ with what seems ‘small and unimpressive’?

Look together at how David incorporates the creation narrative of Genesis 1 (especially verses 26-31) into Psalm 8. What does this tell us about how God sees us?

Do you find Psalm 8’s description of humanity satisfying and a point of praise? Why, or why not?

Psalm 8 is quoted in Hebrews 2:5-18. What does this mean for how we read Psalm 8 and its implications for us?

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?

Week FIVE

Psalm 22 | Lament

Psalm 22 is one of the lament psalms. These are psalms that cry out to God in pain, suffering or trouble. Most of the psalms of lament end in confidence or in praise (like psalm 22), but there are others that don't 'resolve nicely.'

About one third of the psalms are laments, which should encourage us that it is important to cry out to God in our pain and suffering. Psalm 22 meant something to David and its original audience three thousand years ago, but it is also powerfully picked up by the writers of the gospels to help us understand and reflect on Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection.

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
*Who is speaking? What is the tone of this psalm?
What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
Have you ever had a moment of feeling like God has forsaken you? Did you feel able to cry out to God in that moment?

When we are suffering, it can be hard to trust God. What does the psalmist do in the psalm to strengthen his trust in God?

This psalm ends in praising God for delivering the psalmist, and encouraging others to join in. Do you have any examples of seeing God's protection or deliverance of you?

On the cross, Jesus quotes verse 1 (Mark 15:34), the soldiers gambled for Jesus clothes (John 19:24), his hands and feet were pierced, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. What does it mean that Jesus lived out this psalm? Does that change how you see suffering? How can you pray this psalm with Jesus?

Spend some time in prayer, particularly expressing your pain, or the pain of those you know who are suffering. Ask for God's deliverance, protection and comfort.

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?

Week SIX

Psalm 73 | Doubt and Confidence

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
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What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or
confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
In verses 1-14 the psalmist looks around at the prosperity of the wicked in the midst of his own suffering and asks: 'is this life of faith really worth it?' Have you ever asked this question yourself?

In verse 17 things changed for the psalmist when he spent time with God in His sanctuary. Nothing in his situation changed, but he gained a new perspective. How can spending time with God in prayer and worship help us with our doubts?

In the end, the psalmist declares to God that 'earth has nothing I desire besides you' (verse 25). Also read John 6:66-69. Is Jesus your greatest treasure and prize? How might drawing near to Jesus help us with our doubts, and give us confidence?

What encouragement does Psalm 73 give us for when we or others around us experience doubt?

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

*What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?
What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?
Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?*

Week SEVEN

Psalm 116 | Thanksgiving

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
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What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or
confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
The psalmist praises God for saving him after he cried out for help (verses 4-6). Have you ever experienced God's powerful presence in response to a desperate prayer? Or have you experienced God's help in smaller, more everyday ways?

In verses 8-9 the psalmist praises God for delivering him from death. Read Ephesians 2:1-10. In what ways has God saved you from death so you can 'walk before the LORD in the land of the living'?

The psalmist asks, 'What shall I return to the LORD for all his goodness to me?' Do you think it's possible for us to repay God? Why do we give our thanks to God?

What does thanksgiving look like in your life? What could it look like? (Consider verses 13-19 in your answer).

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?

Week EIGHT

Psalm 137 | Imprecation

Psalm 137 is an imprecatory psalm. These are psalms that cry out to God in the midst of injustice and suffering, asking God to bring vengeance against those who commit such evil. These psalms do not encourage humanity to take vengeance into our own hands. Instead, they are prayers of faith asking God to act on behalf of the righteous, and trusting that one day he will. For God, the only true just judge, has said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay” (Deut 32:35).

This psalm deals with some serious themes, and could raise some difficult theological questions. It may be helpful to listen to the sermon on Psalm 137 on the DBC website:

<https://www.dicksonbaptist.com.au/podcasts/media/2025-05-11-god-is-a-just-god>

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
*Who is speaking? What is the tone of this psalm?
What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
This psalm (unlike most others) gives us a clear historical setting. What do you know about the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon that happened around 597BC? How do you think this left the psalmist feeling about his situation?

As Christians, our hope is not for the bricks and mortar of an earthly city. How does your longing for the fulfilment of God's kingdom compare to the longing that the psalmist has for Jerusalem (verse 5-6)?

Can a Christian pray this psalm? What kind of prayer is appropriate for someone who is a victim of genocide, terrorism or other extreme abuse?

Christianity offers justice in two ways: a full and final reckoning before a just judge... Or the mercy extended to sinners at the cross. How does God's commitment to justice *and* mercy confront and comfort both perpetrators and victims?

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?

Week NINE

Psalm 150 | Praise

1 Read through the psalm twice, using two different bible translations if you can (e.g. ESV, NIV, NLT, NRSV).

2 Begin by observing what the psalmist is saying.
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What are the main images you see? How does it make you feel?
Does it change from beginning to end?*

3 Discuss what you think this psalm means.
*What is it saying about God? What is it saying about people?
What does it tell us about worship? What things are unclear or
confusing? What links to Jesus can you see in this psalm?*

4 Discuss the following application questions:
Psalm 150 tells us 13 times to ‘praise the LORD’. Spend some time as a group discussing: what is praise? What goes on in our hearts when we praise something or somebody?

Is praise something that comes naturally and easily to you? Or does it sometimes feel unnatural, forced, or boring? Why might that be?

Verses 3-5 call on God’s people to praise Him with music, song and dance. Praise can be more than music, but it certainly isn’t less. Why might God want us to praise him using music? How does music help us to praise God?

Praise, perhaps more than any other form of worship, has the capacity to help us find enjoyment in God no matter how we are feeling or what is going on around us. How could you include more praise in your life? What helps you praise God?

5 Finish by taking turns sharing: what is your response to this passage?

What is God saying to me? Does this change what I think or believe? What does this mean for how I live?

What season of life would prompt me to pray this psalm?

Do I know of anyone for whom this psalm is true, and could I pray it for them?