

# BIBLE CHALLENGE

## A one week study of the book of Psalms

### Psalms: Songs at the Heart of Life

The story so far: We're taking a break from the narrative thread we've been following through the Old Testament. This week we look at the book of Psalms. In the next couple of weeks we will work through Proverbs and Song of Solomon as well. All three of these books are traditionally associated with David and Solomon, whose stories we have just completed, so it makes sense that we should examine them at this time. Then we will return to the story.

The book of Psalms can be thought of as the prayer book of the Bible. It is a collection of poems which were often used in the course of Israel's worship. They were intended to be sung and are not primarily doctrinal statements to be studied. They are prayers to be prayed, and they were often set to music.

There are 150 Psalms, about everything that life represents – sickness, loneliness, joy, discouragement, fear, wonder. If you can feel it, there is Psalm that gives voice to it. There's something for when you find yourself wanting to celebrate, and for when you are filled with disturbing questions about why things happen as they do and where is God when you need him. Some Psalms are so reality driven that they express some of our most negative, destructive emotions in words so hard-edged they make us squirm. But in all things, they reflect the heart of one who desires to be near God in the midst of whatever life serves up.

#### Monday:

Read Psalm 1

What to look for:

- The central theme of this Psalm has to do with zeroing in on the word of God as the pathway to a happy and blessed life.
- Note how the first three verses describe a life that is lived in harmony with God. The next three verses describe a life lived apart from God and filled with compromise.
- How do we reach the point in which we experience the promised blessedness of God? Verse 2 spells it out: by meditating on the law of the Lord day and night. The person who is abundantly happy is the person who, like a deeply rooted tree, is rooted and growing in God's word, reading, hearing, reflecting, and living it out daily.
- Have you noticed any change in your sense of well-being for having spent 19 weeks daily foraging through God's word? How would you describe that change to others?
- What would it look like for you today if you were to carry this particular Psalm with you into the various parts of your day?

#### Tuesday:

Read Psalm 13

### What to look for:

- This psalm is quite different from yesterday's offering. This psalm is a particular kind, known as *laments*, many of which share the same characteristics. Laments are the most common form of psalm and they often ask the toughest questions of our faith, and verbalize our most difficult emotions.
- Note the title at the beginning of the psalm: "For the director of music". This was one of the many psalms that were originally sung in worship.
- Note the repetition of the phrase, "how long". How long are you going to stand back and do nothing? How long am I going to have to endure this pain? How long are you going to act as if you are on vacation when I am in such need, God? Do any of these questions sound familiar?
- Note the structure of this psalm which is common to most lament psalms: vs. 1-2 register a complaint; vs. 3-4 bring forward a request; vs. 5-6 offer an affirmation of trust and praise. Nothing in his circumstances seems to have changed between verses 4 and 5, but the author himself has changed – because of the unfailing love mentioned in verse 5.
- The value of lament Psalms is that they allow us to voice our most negative feelings, our deepest doubts, while remaining in relationship with God. The mark of deepest relationship is that we can be fully authentic about our needs and our fears and our feelings without having to worry that the other person will give up on us in horror or shock. We can come to God even in our worst times, even in our darkest emotions. Even Jesus prayed laments (see Psalm 22 which Jesus quotes from the cross).

### Wednesday:

#### Read Psalm 27

- This psalm's theme is stated immediately in verse 1 – fear.
- Recall that David spent years as an outlaw, hiding from King Saul. In those years David's hideouts included rocks (vs. 5) and strongholds (vs.1) in the mountains. David is writing from his own experience. In this psalm God has replaced the rocks and mountain fortresses as David's stronghold.
- Vs. 2-3 list a series of dangerous possibilities, yet David declares himself to be confident. The word he uses which we translate as "confidence" has less to do with self-reliance or bravery and more to do with trust and assurance. The thing that takes care of his fear is not his own strength, but God's.
- Vs. 4-6 revolve around David's desire to maintain constant contact and fellowship with God. The repeated references to God's house describe that constant contact.
- Vs. 7-12 expresses David's needs. Note the boldness with which he asks: Hear! Be gracious! Do not hide your face! Teach me! David does not pray with hesitancy (see Hebrews 4:16). But note also the main focus of his requests: His prayer is not "get me out

of this” or “keep me from pain”, it is “be my God in such a way that I don’t need to be afraid.”

- Vs. 13-14 are an exhortation to wait. The word translated “wait” has, in its verb form, the sense of stretching and twisting. In its noun form it refers to a cord or thread. So the picture painted by this word “wait” is one of making a powerful cord by twisting or weaving ourselves so tightly around the Lord that our weakness is exchanged for his strength.

Thursday:

Read Psalm 133

What to look for:

- Note the title of the psalm, “A song of ascents”. This is one of a number of psalms that were likely used by those making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. Since Jerusalem is situated high in the mountains, one must “go up” or “ascend” to reach it.
- This psalm celebrates the importance of community, which is compared to oil and dew. Oil carries with it the idea of holiness, of the presence and blessing of God. The oil in this psalm is depicted as running down the beard...the benefits of the community of believers overflows. Dew brings a sense of freshness and life in a hot, dry climate very similar to our own. The community of God’s people is refreshing, full of life and hope.
- How do the pressures and stresses of modern living cause us to pull apart, instead of drawing us together? This psalm suggests that the gathering of the community of believers for worship provides a center and relief that is as valuable as expensive perfume or the sight of morning dew. What does that suggest to you about the need for believers to be connected versus the oft held belief that “I can worship God on my own; I don’t need to go to church”?

Friday:

Read Psalm 150

What to look for:

- This final psalm is part of a collection of praise psalms at the end of the book. In fact the word *Psalm* means “praise”.
- This psalm begins and ends in the same way, “Praise the Lord”, or more literally, “Hallelujah”. Hallelujah is a composite Hebrew word: “hah-lale” meaning “to boast” and Yahweh, the Hebrew name for God. So, to praise God is literally to boast in him.
- Note the “why”, “how”, and “who” of praising God. Vs. 2 – why praise? For his mighty deeds. We’ve seen them so far as we’ve worked our way through scripture. Where have you seen God’s mighty deeds in your personal life?
- Vs. 3-5 – How is God to be praised? Notice the descriptive words: let loose! Don’t hold back! Self-conscious about that? Then

perhaps you've lost your focus again, thinking about yourself and how you appear to others rather than God and how he deserves your full-throated praise.

- Vs. 6 – who is to praise? Everything that has breath.
- Can you think of any hymns or praise choruses that are familiar to you that parallel the psalms you read this week? When we sing them in worship we are doing what these ancient Israelites did with the psalms – singing our prayers to the Lord.