



# **PRAYER:**

**Nourishing a Life of Faith**

## Suggestions for Using This Bible Study

This study on prayer using the Psalms is nearly self-leading, and does not need an expert or teacher in the group. In fact it works best when all come to the study all recognizing that they are learners. Together, then, all can grow into a greater understanding of prayer, grow in the practice of prayer, and grow in Christian community together. Here are some suggestions that will enable such results:

1. When you gather together, ask one of your group to act as your facilitator and timekeeper, to help the group stay on track and on time.
2. Create an informal and relaxed atmosphere. Make sure all persons in the group know one another. If possible, have coffee or other light refreshments available.
3. As a reminder of the purpose, read the short Introduction as you begin of each session.
4. Read aloud the Bible passages. Your group can decide whether or not to read aloud the other material offered for reflection.
5. Use the questions as a guide for your discussion. Do not get derailed by seeking the “right” answer. Offer questions of your own.
6. If you have time, use the “Going Further” section.
7. Each session includes a “Group Prayer Exercise.” Try to save time to do this together in the session.
8. A key component of Bible study is the experience of Christian community. Encourage persons to be open to one another, to listen to each other respectfully, and to speak the truth in love.
9. Engaging in Bible study is an opportunity to hear God’s voice speaking afresh to us. Pray at the start of every session, asking God’s Spirit to guide and enlighten the group.
10. Encourage each person to bring a Bible. Having different translations is a bonus

Session 1: Introduction: Prayers for the Journey

Session 2: Out of the Depths: Prayers of Lament

Session 3: Confessing our Faith: Salvation History Prayers

Session 4: Singing a New Song: Prayers of Thanksgiving

Session 5: The Wonder of God’s Creation: Prayers of Praise

Growing in Prayer Together

May this Bible study refresh your hearts, renew your minds, and stimulate your imaginations as you grow in the understanding of and the practice of prayer as instructed by the Psalms.

*Pastor Dale Ziemer*

# Session One: Introduction

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## Prayers for the Journey

As Christians we believe prayer to be an essential part of our lives. But in our technological, materialistic, and functional world, the discipline of praying can be difficult. Prayer can seem irrelevant to our daily lives which are so full of work, family, and other important activities. So even as we believe it is crucial to be a prayerful people, we may not know what that means or how to go about it.

**This congregational study will invite us to consider again the important and even transformational practice of prayer, to grow in appreciation and deepen our habit of prayer both personally and as a congregation.**

The primary resource for this study on the practice of prayer is the Book of Psalms. From the very first, Christians highly treasured the Book of Psalms. With more chapters than any book in the Bible—including the longest and shortest chapters in—Psalms is the greatest book of poetry and prayers ever assembled:

- Each psalm was carefully crafted in elegant poetry seeking form and style to be worthy of addressing God.
- Written by a variety of authors, the psalms provide a striking cross-section of believers wrestling with various aspects of faith.

The Psalms invite the believer into the midst of a conversation. They enlighten the path for the journey of faith and life, whether hearts are filled with thanksgiving and praise or emptied by sorrow and suffering. For both ancient Israelites and modern Christians, these ancient Hebrew poems nourish the life of faith.

## The first Psalms

There is a growing appreciation for the Book of Psalms as a *collection* of songs, hymns and prayers. For this wide collection, Psalms 1 and Psalm 2 form an introduction. This introduction suggests that the believer will find in the Psalms:

- a true path of faith to show the way to go for those who love the Lord, and
- the way of God's rule over the whole human community.

These two psalms pave the way. They get us ready to pray. "Psalm 1 is quiet, gathering our distracted lives into an act of supreme attention. Psalm 2 is vigorous, countering the bullying world that intimidates us into hiding. By means of Psalm 1 we become a tree, putting down

roots into the soil and streams of God's Word. By means of Psalm 2 we observe God personally involved in the world, often incognito, but nonetheless ruling in the here and now. In these two Psalms, as though to start us off on our own journey of prayer during this season of study, we are invited to Attention and to Adoration. We are made ready to pray!

### **Psalm 1**

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Have a member of the group read Psalm 1 aloud from his or her Bible. As the psalm is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that caught your attention as you listened.

Have a member of the group read the psalm again, following along with your own Bible. Use the following questions as a guide for your group discussion.

1. The first word in the psalm is *blessed* (some translate it *happy*). What kind of expectations should this bring to the life of prayer?
2. Using your imagination, how are law-delighting people like trees?
3. In what ways are the wicked like chaff?
4. How does this Psalm 1 meditation prepare us for prayer?

### **Going Further...**

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#### **Psalm 2**

Have a member of the group read Psalm 2 aloud from his or her Bible. As the psalm is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that caught your attention as you listened.

Have a member of the group read the psalm again, following along with your own Bible. Use the following questions as a guide for your group discussion.

1. Compare the opening nouns and verbs in Psalm 1:1-3 with those in Psalm 2:1-3. What differences in orientation do they suggest between these two psalms?
2. What kind of issues does the psalmist deal with in Psalm 2? How do these things tend to keep the author—and us—from real prayer?
3. How does the Lord view the vaunted power of nations (vs. 4-6)? Do you maintain this perspective of light humor when you watch the news on television? Explain?

4. “Anointed One” in verse 2 is *Messiah* in Hebrew, *Christ* in Greek. What in this psalm reminds you of Jesus?
  
5. It is always easier to pray for personal needs than political situations. But Psalm 2 is entirely political. What responsibility do we have as American citizens with primary citizenship in Christ’s kingdom?

### **Group Prayer Exercise**

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Distribute index cards and pens to each one in the group at the close of this session. Ask each person to consider what today’s session causes me to want to pray for. Take a few moments for quiet. Each person writes a prayer – one sentence – on the index card. Swap cards and read them aloud as your prayers to conclude this session.

Collect the cards for inclusion in your congregation’s worship.

## **SESSION TWO: Out of the Depths**

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### **Prayers of Lament**

The Book of Psalms contains more prayers of lament than any other kind of psalm. About 70 psalms fit into this category. Some of these cries of anguish and rage would seem to violate all the rules of Christian prayer. The psalmists focus so much on themselves, they are not polite and may even accuse God of abandonment, of murder, or of falling asleep on the job. They may try to bribe God or sometimes just tell God to go away. Most offensively, the psalmists take an un-Christian attitude toward their enemies: they pray devoutly that terrible things will happen to them, even to little children. Nonetheless, the sheer number of these laments forces us to take them seriously as a biblical model for prayer.

The Psalms, like the Old Testament as a whole, is very earthy—all the moods and passions of human life find expression here. They do not point to a abstract world of pure ideals—the good, the true, and the beautiful—rather they are concerned with the historical scene of change, struggle, and suffering, where God meets the people and lays a claim upon them. It seems that ancient Israel believed that the kind of prayer in which we most need fluency is the loud groan, and they have bequeathed us a lot of material on which to practice. The language may be described as “dynamic” and “realistic,” for it simultaneously expressed tension between cosmos and chaos, order and disorder. Contemporary worship may be deformed by our failure to bring the language of suffering into the sanctuary as an integral part of our

weekly liturgy. Seldom in our prayers to God, especially our corporate, public prayers, do we articulate our complaints. This is not true of the psalmists who often expressed displeasure and despair in the face of evil persons, grief, rejection and death.

### **Psalm 13: Prayer Lamenting Personal Distress**

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If we believe God to be Creator, Lord, Redeemer, and Protector, then it follows that when all is not well and feelings of defeat and despair are dominant in our present experience, we would complain (or lament) to God expressing those feelings of abandonment.

1. Working in small groups of 2 or 3, read first Psalm 13.
  - a. How is God addressed forthrightly and honestly?
  - b. Identify affirmations of belief in God.
  - c. What does the psalmist request of God?
2. What are your reactions to the personal psalm of lament.

### **Psalm 85: Prayer Lamenting Community Distress**

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As with personal laments, it is because of the psalmist's absolute dependence upon and commitment to God that they are able to express their deepest feelings of distress to God without hesitation. Given the realities of wars and rumors of war, of injustice at home and abroad, of misuse of the environment and the economy, and of violence and natural disasters all over the earth, it would be quite appropriate to express our laments to God. Yet, this seldom happens within the context of Sunday worship.

1. Read Psalm 85, moving around the group for readers.
  - a. Describe the complaints address to God.
  - b. How are God's past actions remembered?
  - c. What does the psalmist request of God?
2. What are your reactions to the communal psalm of lament?

### **Going Further...**

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Read Psalm 44, using the questions above to reflect on this psalm of communal lament.

## Group Prayer Exercise

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### Writing Our Communal Prayer of Lament

- a. Working in groups of 2 or 3, identify concerns in church, community, nation, or world that really distress you.
- b. After brief sharing, select one contemporary concern to be the focus of your lament.
- c. Write a communal prayer of lament, using the psalms as a model:
  - Address to God
  - Statement of complaint or concern
  - Affirmation of belief in God
  - Cry for help
  - Expression of praiseBe direct, honest, and brief as you can be.
- d. Pray these laments together. Then share as a part of your congregation's worship.

(See "Some hints for writing prayers together" at the end of this resource)

## SESSION THREE: CONFESSING OUR FAITH

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### Salvation History Prayers

Storytelling is a human art, as old and as universal as language itself. Whether a story is told for entertainment, to celebrate a victory, to explain the origin of a common experience, or for some other reason, the narrative creates a world and invites the audience into it. A story of "history" is appealing when it stirs our curiosity about something that happened "once upon a time" and touches upon, even illuminates our human experience in the present.

From early times Israel confessed its faith characteristically by telling the story of its life. There are four psalms that can be clearly identified as salvation history psalms (Ps. 78, Ps. 105, Ps. 106, Ps. 136). These psalms portray God's saving action in the history or story of Israel. The story/history is not related with detachment but is told as a drama that is true "for me" and "for us." They recite events fundamental to Israel's self-understanding as a people and essential to Israel's knowledge of God's character.

The four salvation history psalms have several characteristics in common. Even though written in poetic form, they essentially present a narrative or story that has a beginning and an end. The events of the narrative are presented in chronological order. They have strong

didactic overtones and appear to have been used to instruct the people about their heritage and to help them remember that heritage. The basic content of each psalm is the great deeds or mighty acts of God. These great deeds reveal God's love for, judgment of, and deliverance of the people with whom God has established the covenant of faith.

### **Psalm 105**

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Read Psalm 105 in a slow and meditative manner, moving around the group, then review the psalm and consider the following questions.

- a. What are the beginning and ending points (events or persons) of the story?
- b. In what other books of the Bible is this period of history recorded?
- c. What are some of the connecting links that hold the whole story together as one story?
- d. What do you think is the essential meaning or significance of this history?

### **Going Further...**

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#### **Psalm 78**

Have a member of the group read Psalm 78:1-7 aloud from his or her Bible. As the psalm is read, close your eyes and listen carefully. Share with the group the words or images that caught your attention as you listened.

Have a member of the group read the psalm again, following along with your own Bible. Use the following questions as a guide for your table group discussion.

1. One author suggests that an entire educational theory could be based upon these seven verses. Working as a group identify:
  - a. The purpose of the teaching.
  - b. The content of the teaching.
  - c. The expectations included in the text.

## Group Prayer Exercise

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- a. Working as a group, write a prayer confessing your faith about God's work through your church over time. Choose a period of time, say, the last 20 years. This will include those who have longer history with your church along with those who have shorter history. Recount briefly the high points and low points. Try to follow a pattern similar to the Psalm, especially noting how the prayer begins and ends.
- b. Pray this confession of faith together. Be prepared to share this prayer as part of your congregation's worship.

## Session Four: Singing a New Song

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### Prayers of Thanksgiving

The most exuberant, extensive, and expansive indicators of who and what God is, and what God is about, are found and elaborated in the hymns and songs of thanksgiving that the people of Israel and individuals in the community uttered again and again in the course of Israel's history. There the sovereignty of God is given language and structure. There the power and majesty of the Lord are uncovered and made visible. In the songs of Israel the most elemental structure of the Old Testament faith is set forth. So in the praises of this people the foundation stones of both theology and piety of the Judeo-Christian tradition are laid down. In what is said we learn of the one we call Lord. In the way it is said—both shape and tone—we are given a model for our own response to God.

### Psalm 103

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Psalm 103 is a priceless treasure, a beautiful song of praise, which has four main parts: (1) personal blessings received from God (v.1-5), (2) national blessings received from God (v.6-14) (3) a reminder of our human frailty and utter dependence upon God (v.15-18), (4) a declaration that all creation praises God (v.19-22).

1. Identify among your group 3 different translations of this psalm. Read one portion at a time for all translations and then repeat the process for the next portion: (1) verses 1-5, (2) verses 6-10, (3) verses 11-14, (4) verses 15-18, (5) verses 19-22.
2. As you listen to the several translations, listen carefully for significant as well as subtle differences in the translations. You may want to jot these down.

3. What does this psalm tell us about human life?
4. What does this psalm tell us about God?
5. What does this psalm tell us about the way God relates to human beings?

### **Going Further...**

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#### **Psalm 107**

One of the longest psalms of praise and thanksgiving, Psalm 107 has a striking structure and its content is quite provocative. “This Psalm in its interaction of form and content is virtually a theological paradigm for the Psalter. It sets forth in its formal structure and repetition the movement from cry for help to divine deliverance to human response of praise” (Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*).

1. Have one member of the group read verses 1-3 and another, verses 33-43. Listen for key words and images.
2. Working with four sections of the psalm, pause and consider the following questions after each section:  
Verses 4-9 / Verses 10-16 / Verses 17-22 / Verses 23-32
  - a. Who is the subject?
  - b. What is the distress?
  - c. What is the plea to God?
  - d. What is God’s response?
  - e. What is the people’s response?
3. Read again verses 1-3 and verses 33-43. What relationship do you see between the various sections and these opening and closing verses?

#### **Group Prayer Exercise**

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- a. Using the form of Psalm 103, write a prayer of thanksgiving:
  - Identify personal blessings received from God,
  - identify shared blessings (church, community, nation, or world) received from God,
  - name elements of our human frailty and complete dependence upon God,

- declare your – and all creation’s – praise of God.

Spend 10 minutes or so working as a group, using smaller groupings of 2-3 if helpful.

The goal is to write 4-7 sentences that incorporate these key elements of prayers of thanksgiving.

- b. Pray your prayer of thanksgiving together. Then share in your congregation’s worship.

## **Session Five: The Wonder of God’s Creation**

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### **Prayers of Praise**

Psalms that express prayer to God out of concrete distress (laments) and praise to God for a particular act of deliverance (songs of thanksgiving) lead in the direction of *hymns* which praise God in general terms for God’s greatness and faithfulness as creator of the cosmos and ruler of history. Hymns of praise usually fall into three sections: an opening invitation to praise God, a central delineation of the praiseworthy character and actions of God, and a concluding affirmation of faith or re-invitation to praise and worship.

### **Psalm 104**

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1. Going around the group, have one member at a time read a section of Psalm 104 in a meditative mode. Listen for key words and images. Share what caught your attention as you listened to the psalm.
  - a. What do we learn about God the creator from this psalm?
  - b. What do we learn about the created world?
  - c. How does praising God the creator lead to an affirmation of God’s creation?
2. Invite each person in the group to share pictures or images of creation from trips they have taken, trips others have taken, or from social media or the internet at large. Consider these images of creation:
  - a. What beauty do you see in God’s creation with this image?
  - b. What power do you see in God’s creation with this image?

- c. To what extent is God's creation quite fragile?
  
- e. What responsibilities do you and others have for preserving, fulfilling, and using this aspect of God's creation?
  
- f. What words of praise would you use in a prayer responding to God for what God has created?

### **Group Prayer Exercise**

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After sharing in this session, you are invited as a group to write brief prayers of praise. Then offer this praise together in prayer, and prepare to share within your congregation's worship.

## **GROWING IN PRAYER TOGETHER:**

The goal of this study is not only to grow in our understanding of prayer from the Psalms, but also to grow in the practice of praying together.

### **A few ideas for growing in the practice of prayer together**

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1. Take time in the group to go around the circle and share one joy or concern from the past week. All listen carefully, and the person to the left of the speaker offers a one sentence prayer on the speaker's behalf. This is coming alongside each other in the presence of God.
2. For informal group prayer: When inviting all participants in the group to offer prayers out loud, think of it like a time of popcorn popping – anyone is free to 'pop' and offer a prayer out loud, in no particular order. Decide ahead of time how we will close each prayer offering, and how all will respond. For example, at the end of each prayer offering the speaker adds, "Lord in your mercy," after which all respond, "Hear our prayer." This lets the speaker know their prayer is embraced and offered by all.
3. Pair up. Have one person share a request or thanksgiving, a joy or concern. The partner offers the prayer on their behalf. Then switch.
4. Share prayer requests around the group, and have one person pray for all of the requests.

5. Use the pattern laid out in Acts 1:8 (read it), and pray as a group for your community, city, state, country, and the world.

### **Some hints for writing a prayer together**

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Working together to write a prayer in a group of 2,3 or more can be difficult at first. Working together like this brings all kinds of different ideas, thoughts, and many possible angles and tangents into the mix. It can often seem harder than working alone. But it can also be very energizing and a powerful faith building and relationship building practice.

Here are a few ideas for writing a prayer together:

- a. Select a scribe from within your group to jot down each contribution as it is offered.
- b. Welcome each contribution without judgement or critique as it is offered.
- c. Use your own best listening skills as you listen to each one's contribution. Take time to really hear and understand what is being offered.
- d. Then build on each other's ideas, giving each other credit for them.
- e. Be prepared for there to be give and take, a back and forth movement of ideas, thoughts, words and phrases across your group.
- f. Listen for which words and phrases resonate with the other members of the group.
- g. Finally, the scribe writes down the words and phrases that express the consensus of the group.

### **Additional Reflections on the Psalms and Prayer**

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#### **The Psalms: Poetry and Prayer**

Poetry is language with personal intensity. It is not, as so many suppose, decorative speech. Poets tell us what our eyes, blurred with too much gawking, and our ears, dulled with too much chatter, miss around and within us. Poets use words to drag us into the depth of reality itself. They do it not by reporting on how life is, but by pushing-pulling us into the middle of it. Poetry grabs for the jugular. Far from being cosmic language, it is intestinal. It is root language. Poetry doesn't so much tell us something we never knew as bring into recognition what is latent, forgotten, overlooked, or suppressed. The Psalms text is almost entirely in this kind of language. Knowing this, we will not be looking here primarily for ideas about God, or for direction in moral conduct. We will expect, rather, to find the experience of being human before God exposed and sharpened.

Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*

## **Pain and Praise**

The Psalms model ways of talking to God that are honest, yet not obvious—at least, they are not obvious to modern Christians. They may guide our first steps toward deeper involvement with God, because the Psalms give us a new possibility for prayer; they invite full disclosure. They enable us to bring into our conversation with God feelings and thoughts that most of us think we need to get rid of before God will be interested in hearing from us. The point of the shocking psalms is not to sanctify what is shameful (for example, the desire for sweet revenge) or to make us feel better about parts of ourselves that stand in need of change. Rather, the Psalms teach us that profound change happens always in the presence of God. Over and over they attest to the reality that when we open our minds and hearts fully to the God who made them, then we open ourselves, whether we know it or not, to the possibility of being transformed beyond our imagining.

Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*

## **Looking into the Hearts of the Saints**

Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself. There you see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from all sorts of fair and happy thoughts toward God, because of his blessings. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God! So, too, when they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for you fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them.

And that they speak these words to God and with God, this, I repeat is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life....Hence it is that the Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation they may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit them as if they were put there just for their sake, so that they could not put it better themselves, or wish for anything better.

*Martin Luther*

## **The Wonder of God's Creation**

These psalms in various ways are *expressions of creation faith*. They affirm that the world is a well-ordered, reliable, and life-giving system, because God has ordained it that way and continues to preside effectively over the process. At the same time, there is a profound trust in the daily working of that system and profound gratitude to God for making it so. Creation here is not a

theory about how the world came to be. That is not how the Bible thinks about creation. It is rather an affirmation that God's faithfulness and goodness are experienced as generosity, continuity, and regularity.

Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*

## God's Mighty Acts

Israel's praises, were evoked in the first instance not by a general religious awareness of God's wisdom and power manifest in the broad expanse of creation or in the long sweep of human history, but rather by a particular experience of God's saving power and purpose in the life situation of a people. Divine intervention into the historical plight of a band of slaves—victims of the mightiest emperor of the time—had the wonder effect of creating a people “out of nothing” and opening a way into the future from a no-exit situation. Hence Israel's earliest songs, as in the case of the Song of Miriam (Ex. 15:20-21) or the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-18), were jubilant cries of praise in response to the God who had acted with saving power.

Gerald Anderson, *Out of the Depths*

### Psalms used in this study:

(\*) indicates the key psalm in each session, with others recommended for going further in your study.

Session One: Introduction – Prayers for the Journey

Psalm 1 \*      Psalm 2

Session Two: Out of the Depths – Prayers of Lament

Psalm 13\*      Psalm 85\*      Psalm 44

Session Three: Salvation History – Prayers Confessing our Faith

Psalm 105\*      Psalm 78

Session Four: Singing a New Song – Prayers of Thanksgiving

Psalm 103\*      Psalm 107

Session Five: The Wonder of Creation – Prayers of Praise

Psalm 104\*