

PSALMS

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GOD'S ABIDING WORD

Psalms

Prayers and Praise

David Baker

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Our first downloadable Bible study series!

The sixteenth-century Reformers spread the blessings of the Gospel through a new invention: the printing press. Like the Reformers, we too wish to support the ministry of the Gospel through effective, cutting-edge tools such as the Internet. Therefore, we make this all-new downloadable series available for use in your congregation. May each new study strengthen you by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Please e-mail with your comments or suggestions.

Also, both seminary students and faculty are contributing to the development of the God's Abiding Word series. For most studies the students take notes on a professor's lectures and work with the editor to develop the study. Then the manuscript goes to the professor for review. This team process is making this series possible. I would like to express my personal thanks to everyone participating.

The editor

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Getting Started

Some 3,000 years ago, King David appointed 4,000 Levites—about a tenth of all the Levites—for choir and musical service at the tabernacle. David appeared to regard the role of music and song as so important to the worship of God’s people that he himself composed numerous psalms for worship. It is likely that under his leadership, the *psalm* (poetic verse accompanied by the music of a harp) became the background music for the offerings, sacrifices, and festivals of God’s people.

One thousand years later, God’s New Testament people continued to use the psalms when they gathered for worship. In fact, quotations from the psalms run throughout the entire New Testament, like a motif that adds drama and anticipation to a play or a film. The psalms prophesy the coming of Christ and support His ministry. They play on His lips as He breathes His final breath. In the resurrection, Jesus explains to His disciples, “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).

More than Poetry

As you begin this study of the psalms, recognize that you are studying more than religious poetry. The psalms express far more than personal or congregational prayers. They proclaim Jesus Christ—His mission and passion, His resurrection and return.

Each session of this study focuses on one psalm as an example of other psalm “types” (wisdom psalms, psalms of ascent, penitential psalms, praise psalms, laments, historical psalms, and royal psalms). The study starts with psalms that are easier to understand and progresses to investigate some of the most difficult passages in the Bible.

Each session is outlined as follows:

Introduction

Interpretation

Law and Gospel Application

Along the way, you will find charts and visuals to help you understand and remember God’s message for you. Consider opening each session by praying a psalm with your class.

To prepare for “Blessed in the Lord,” read Psalm 1.

1

Psalm 1: Blessed in the Lord

From the worship of the ancient children of Israel to the house gatherings of the early church, from the writings of Martin Luther to the newly published hymns and praise songs of today, the psalms have played a central role in the worship of God's people. Yet to many people the psalms seem inaccessible and foreign. The language is at times so far removed from our everyday speech that we are left wondering what exactly the writer is trying to say. Many passages inspire comfort, but others seem so harsh that one wonders why they are in the Bible at all.

This Bible study will introduce you to the language, teachings, and history of the psalms so that this treasure chest of God's riches will not remain inaccessible, but will be opened to you and enrich your worship with all the children of God.

1. What do you think has made the psalms so important to Israel and the church throughout the ages?

2. What characteristics in the psalms have seemed strange or troubling to you?

The Book of Psalms is a collection of songs written by many different believers over a long period of time. Scholars have suggested that Psalm 1 might have been written especially as an introduction for this collection.

3. Read Psalm 1 together. Why does Psalm 1 make an appropriate beginning to the Book of Psalms?

Blessed by the Word

There is some debate about the exact meaning of the word *blessed*. It does not mean merely the state of having good things or an easy life. Nor does it mean simply being happy. A person who is blessed may not always be happy, and a person who is happy may not always be blessed. There is a difference between being happy and being blessed. Being blessed is a result of the blessing of God. This psalm, at its heart, is about a person who is blessed.

4. How does this psalm describe the person who is blessed?

The style of Hebrew poetry differs from English poetry. To better understand the psalms, you need to recognize a few aspects of Hebrew poetic style. The most obvious element of Hebrew poetry is *parallelism*. Two or three lines (or sometimes entire sections) of the psalms are closely related to one another. This can be achieved through the simple repetition of an idea with other words (e.g., I like to be in the forest/I enjoy being where there are many trees). It can be achieved through the statement of the opposite (e.g., I like to be in the forest/I hate being in places where there are no trees). It can build upon the idea in the first line (e.g., I like to be in the forest/I like it because it is peaceful and quiet). Paying attention to parallelism will help to unlock much of the meaning of the psalms. The relationship of each of the lines to the others is as important to the message as the meaning of each particular line.

5. Discuss what the three parallel lines in verse 1 are conveying. How do the three activities listed hinder or lead one away from God? What kind of progression is shown from line to line?

The Hebrew word *torah* in Psalm 1:2 is translated as “law” in most English Bibles. This can lead to a horrible misunderstanding. Torah comes from the word that means “to instruct.” Its basic meaning is “instruction” or “teaching.” Torah can refer to the first five books of the Bible, to rules, to the entirety of God’s teachings (including what theologians call *Law*, what God requires of us; and *Gospel*, the Good News of what God has done for us), or even to the instructions that one person gives to another. Depending on how the English word *law* is used in a particular passage, you can usually tell what its meaning is in each individual circumstance.

6. What picture does 1:2 paint of the life of the believer?

Psalm 1 encourages meditation on God’s torah (instruction). *Meditate* is another word that we can easily misunderstand. When used in the Bible, the word does not refer to the style of meditation found in Eastern religions. It means to think about, to talk about, or to repeat to oneself. The picture here is of a person who has the instruction of the Lord as the focal point of his life. As will be seen in other psalms studied, this focus does not mean that the person locks himself in a room with his Bible day and night, separated from the world.

7. What does such meditation on the words of the Lord look like in real life? What is the relationship between loving the Word of the Lord and meditating upon the Word of the Lord?

8. In 1:3 the man who is blessed is compared to a tree planted by streams of water. Discuss the three lines that describe this tree. What realities in the life of a believer might these word pictures describe?

9. Note the contrasting image used in verse 4 for the wicked. Chaff! Discuss the severity of the differences between a tree and chaff. How do these differences look in the lives of people?

10. This psalm is sometimes referred to as a "wisdom psalm." The category is characterized in part by pithy or proverbial endings. How does verse 6 relate to the rest of the psalm?

Bless Us, O Lord

Question 9 contrasts the believer and the wicked person; however, the difference between a person who trusts in the Lord and a person who does not is not always clear in this life. Sometimes Christians really suffer, and some non-Christians can be pretty nice people and live very successful lives. Hence the difference between "blessed" and "happy" becomes most clear in our day-to-day experiences.

11. According to 1:5, when will the ultimate difference between the blessed and the wicked be shown?

12. Christians are often hesitant to speak of the judgment. The idea is unpopular for obvious reasons and can make us more than a bit uncomfortable. Why is it necessary to point out this harsh teaching, as is done in this psalm?

13. The verbs used in the Bible can tell us a lot about the relationship between God and man. Look again at 1:3. The blessed man is compared to a tree. How did the tree get to where it is? What does this say about the one who trusts in the Lord and meditates on His instruction? How did the man become blessed?

14. Psalm 1:6 tells us, "The LORD watches over [knows] the way of the righteous." What a comfort to know that whatever comes to pass in this life, the Lord is watching over us! What are some ways that God watches over you?

The teachings of the Lord are an inestimably wonderful gift. They can be thought of as the “streams of water” (v. 3) by which the tree—the blessed man—is planted. The role of the Word of God cannot be overstated: all aspects of the Christian life flow out from the Word.

15. Name important aspects of the Christian life and discuss how they rely on the Word.

Words to Remember

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Psalm 1:6

To prepare for “Before the Forgiving God,” read Psalm 51.

1. Psalm 1: Blessed in the Lord

Objectives

By the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, participants will (1) increase in their appreciation and love for God's Word, especially the psalms, (2) better understand key words and concepts so that these can be applied in the interpretation of the psalms, (3) be built up in their faith through the blessing that the Lord has promised to believers through His Word, and (4) be encouraged to study and meditate upon the teachings of the Lord.

Law/Gospel Focus

The way of the world leads only to destruction, but God delivers to us salvation and unlimited blessing in the Word.

1. Answers will vary. The psalms have sometimes been referred to as the hymnbook of the Old Testament. They reveal God in the words of the worshiping community. Through the emotions of the various writers, we see the interaction between God and man. As we use the psalms in our own worship, we are drawn into that interaction. As we speak, sing, and read the psalms, we participate in the life of the church throughout the centuries, which has undergone all kinds of adversities and blessings and, through it all, experienced both the wrath and the love of our almighty yet personal God.

2. Possible answers include the psalms' poetry, repetition, lack of clarity, and harsh and hateful language.

3. The answer to this question will become more clear as participants go through the remainder of the Bible study. Good introductory answers might touch on the distinction between the righteous and sinners, the encouragement to meditate on God's Law day and night, the danger of the influence of evil people, and the blessings that come from God.

4. Answers will vary. He does not succumb to the influences of wicked people. He delights in the Law of the Lord. There is a consistency to his life (like that of a tree planted by streams of water). The Lord watches over his ways.

5. The person is described by what he does *not* do. Each line builds upon the next. Note the three verbs: walk, stand, sit.

The progression of the nouns is less clear in English. In Hebrew the words for "wicked" and "sinner" carry roughly the same meaning, though some scholars draw a slight distinction, arguing that "sinner" is used in describing more heinous evildoers. "Mockers" or "scoffers," however, go a step further. These are not people who simply do wrong, but those who despise and mock the Lord and His Word. These actions may seem less serious, but grossly offend God because they express a complete lack of faith. They endanger the spiritual well-being of believers.

6. His whole life is tied up with the instruction of the Lord. The Lord's Word is not merely a hobby, a comfort in time of distress, or a civil duty. It is the focus of his being.

7. Such meditation would express itself in many ways. Obviously the person knows Scripture well and lives by all that it says. The message of the Word would affect all the day-to-day decisions of the person. Words of Scripture would likely become a natural part of the person's conversation (we usually speak about the things that we think about most). The

relationship between loving God's Word and meditating on it seems to be cyclical. If you love the teachings of the Lord, you will desire to meditate on them. If you meditate on the teachings of the Lord, you will know them better and grow in your love for them.

8. Line 1—The believer produces good works (fruit) appropriate to the time and place. Line 2—The life given by the Lord is always in you; just as a plant by a stream does not have to worry about drying up and withering, we do not have to worry about the struggles of this life. Not that the “dry times” won't come, but Christ is always there with us, nourishing us through these times. Line 3—In New Testament language we might express this as “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” You may feel inadequate for the tasks that the Lord has placed before you, but the One who lives in you and nourishes you by His Word is able to do more than you could ask or imagine.

9. Chaff is waste left over when grain is taken from a plant. It is light and flaky and has little substance. To separate the grain from the chaff, the broken-up heads of grain were thrown up into the air and the wind carried away the light chaff. Wicked people have no permanence. They are blown around by the winds of false teaching and their own desires.

Trees are productive. They help to renew the air. They produce fruit. They hold the soil together in the area surrounding them. They are generally pleasant and add something to the place where they are planted. God works through the people He calls by the Gospel to accomplish many good tasks. They spread the Good News of what He has done. They tend to be a blessing to the society in which they live (both physically and spiritually). They are often pleasant to be around, exuding the love of the Lord.

10. It does not just sum up the previous verses; it adds to them. The word “for” shows that the truth of this verse underlies the realities expressed in the other verses. Because the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, they are blessed. Their blessedness is irrevocable because it is the result of the action of Yahweh, the all-powerful Lord. Likewise, the way of the wicked is hopeless. Try as they may to overcome God's will, they will fail. Their entire way of existence is bound to pass away.

11. The ultimate difference will be shown on the Last Day, when the Lord will bring to light the condition of every person's heart. There will be nothing hidden then, and the incongruities of this sinful world will come to an end. The realities expressed in this psalm, which we can only observe in part now, will be proved right. The wicked who thought they were getting away with something will not be able to stand on that day.

12. We need to speak of it because it is the truth. When Christians are afraid to speak of God's wrath at the judgment, they rob others of the warning they need to hear. Without the harsh reality of the Law, the sweet message of what Jesus has done for us is meaningless. If there is no judgment, there is no reason why Jesus had to die for our sins.

13. The tree was “planted” there—it is impossible for a tree to plant itself. The passive nature of this verb tells us that the blessedness of the man comes from God. It is not something deserved *because* we are in the Word. Through His Word, God creates faith and pours out His continued blessings on those He has chosen (planted).

14. Answers will vary. The list of ways that the Lord watches over us could go on forever. There are the many blessings already discussed in this psalm: the Word that He has given to us, the fruit that He causes us to bear. There is the new life that He has given to us in Jesus Christ. There are the food and clothing that are supplied to us for our daily physical existence. There is the government that keeps peace. All good things come from the Lord and are freely supplied by Him who watches over us.

15. In Baptism and the Lord's Supper, God's Word of promise comes to us physically to sustain us and re-create us. We grow in knowledge through the Word taught to us. We resist Satan and the temptations of the flesh with the Word of the Lord. We speak God's Word to those

around us and reflect it in our actions toward those who do not know Jesus. We encourage and rebuke our fellow Christians (and are encouraged and rebuked by them) according to the teachings of the Lord.

Close with prayer.