

Your Kingdom Come

Praying the Psalms

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 **Lakewood**
PRESS

Your Kingdom Come: Praying the Psalms
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FOREWORD

The Psalms are “the most frequently cited Scriptures in the New Testament.”¹ It is evident that the Psalms have been adored throughout the history of the church; they have been utilized in private and public worship in generation after generation of the Christian church, and I think Dr. Culp is right when he infers that the fundamental reason they are so used is that “the Psalms possess a unique power to capture and transform human souls.”² This recognition does not suggest that the Psalms are useful merely because they are relatable to the human condition, though they are. Rather, as the reader of the present book will find, the Psalms are so useful because they penetrate our hearts with the deepest truths and promises of God.

In *Your Kingdom Come: Praying the Psalms*, Dr. Culp explains and demonstrates that the Psalms are to be seen not as a random assortment of songs and poems arbitrarily fit together. Rather, the Psalms are ordered together as a collection of five books—referred to as the Psalter—which tells the story of the history and hopes of God’s people who put their trust in the Lord and his promises. To journey through the Psalms in this way is to be reminded that the Lord is the King and his kingdom will come.

So, to borrow a phrase from the Prince of Preachers, Charles H. Spurgeon, let me here “at least possess the virtue of brevity.”³ As we consider the importance of the intentional ordering of the Psalter, let us carefully consider the beginning and end. The *first* word in the Psalter (Psalm 1:1) is “blessed,” which is placed there as a signpost marking the way to true and eternal peace offered from God to those “who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). The *final* words in the Psalter (Psalm 150:6) are “hallelujah; hallelujah” (translated as “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”). These last words, then, show us both the means and the end of the blessed life. This is to say, we are blessed when we praise the Lord, and the proper end of all things is the praise of the Lord.

May the Spirit-inspired Psalms inform our prayers; may our lives be blessed through Jesus Christ our Lord; may God be praised, and may his kingdom come!

I'm grateful for the labor of Dr. AJ Culp in producing this wonderful study of the Psalms. His ability to distill the material at hand has come from decades of careful study in the Scriptures. I also would like to recognize Darlene Brown for her review of the manuscript and helpful editing feedback; Joy Willis who, once again, has produced a beautifully designed book; and our Discipleship Team for their contribution to the reflection and discussion questions.

Blessings & Hallelujah!
Dr. Tyler H. Smiley
Gainesville, GA
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¹ Craig A. Blaising, "Introduction to Psalms 1–50," in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Psalms 1–50*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Carmen S. Hardin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), xvii.

² Cited from p. 4 of the present book.

³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3 Volumes (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), i.

WEEK 1

INTRODUCTION

In his study of the Psalms, Gordon Wenham begins by asking this question: “What are we doing singing the Psalms?”¹

The question seems simple enough. After all, the Psalms hold a unique honor in Church history: they have often been sung, rather than merely read aloud, in worship.

It might seem therefore that Wenham is asking why this is the case. But there is more to his question. It’s not just that the Psalms have been sung in corporate worship, but, more broadly, that they have been *spoken aloud* by the gathered community: in singing, in responsive reading, in corporate prayer, etc. So the question is why—why have the Psalms been used in this way more than any other portion of Scripture?

Perhaps the most natural answer is that the Psalms possess a unique power to capture and transform human souls. For this reason, the book of Psalms—known as the “Psalter”—has been woven into the very fabric of Christian worship so that it might transform the people of God. While this is undoubtedly true, there is another side to consider. It is not just a question of what the *Psalms* do to us, but what *we do* when we speak them aloud in the company of other Christians. When we sing, recite, or pray the Psalms, what are we doing?

Here Wenham leverages an area of scholarship called “speech-act theory.” Despite its daunting name, this theory taps into common

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	ACTS 1
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	ACTS 2
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	ACTS 4
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	ACTS 13
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	HEBREWS 1

sense. What it means, in short, is this: words do not merely *mean* things; they also *do* things. Think, for example, of the words “I do.” In some situations, you might use these words to answer a question about your habits. Someone might ask, for example, whether you ever go to a certain restaurant or park. And, in response, you might say, “I do.” Here you are using “I do” simply to provide information. Yet in other situations, these words carry much more weight. If, for instance, you say “I do” within a marriage ceremony, you bind yourself to another person in solemn pledge. Or if you say “I do” during a witness oath in a court of law, you commit to giving truthful testimony. In these final two examples, the use of “I do” constitutes a solemn and binding oath, and the failure to keep the oath can have severe consequences for yourself and others.

For Wenham, the act of singing or reciting the Psalms in worship falls into the same category as a marriage ceremony or oath-making in the court of law. They are acts of *participation* rather than observation, and they are inherently “self-involving.”² When we utter the Psalms in worship, we are not merely stating facts *about* God; we are *addressing God himself* and *declaring our commitment* to him. Standing before God and in the fellowship of the saints, therefore, we are “actively committing...to following the God-approved life.”³ But that raises a question: What is the “God-approved life” that the Psalter envisions?

To discern this, we must understand the situation—the crisis—that the Psalter sought to address. Foundational to the faith of ancient Israel were two things: the *king* and the *temple*. We learn why this was the case in 2 Samuel 7:11–16, the Davidic Covenant:

“The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he

will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

Throughout time, God had made a series of covenants with his people, by which he bound himself to Israel in solemn oath: e.g., covenants with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. The Davidic Covenant, then, was the latest one, continuing the pledge of God’s presence and blessing to the people.

Yet the Davidic Covenant was also unique. Unlike the other covenants, God promised a *king* to rule over his people *forever*—a king from the line of David. God would continue to rule from heaven, but the king would serve as his steward sitting on the throne in Jerusalem and the temple would serve as God’s “house” on earth. The king and the temple, in other words, were physical signs of God’s promised presence: his *kingdom* and *kingship* on earth. Practically, then, from here onward the Davidic king was viewed as the channel of God’s blessing to his people.

When Babylon conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC, therefore, it created in Israel a crisis of faith. The temple, God’s dwelling on earth, was looted and burned to the ground; and the king, God’s representative on earth, was captured and brought before Nebuchadnezzar. As King Zedekiah stood before Nebuchadnezzar, his sons were brought before him and slaughtered one by one; and then Zedekiah’s eyes were gouged out, so that the slaughter of his sons would be the lasting image in his mind (2 Kings 25:7). After that, King Zedekiah was led away in chains and placed in a Babylonian prison. This final chapter in the book of Kings became a symbol for Israel’s own situation: with the king’s descendants dead and him now blind, the question of kingship was shrouded in darkness.

When the exile ended seventy years later and the people began to

return to the land, the hope of God’s kingdom was rekindled. Some of David’s descendants still lived, and a second temple was built in the land. But it soon became clear that this hope was misplaced. The new temple was not like the old temple (Ezra 3), especially since God’s presence never again filled it. And no descendant of David would sit upon the throne as king, for Israel was still ruled by a foreign power, Persia, who handpicked puppet leaders.

All of this created a crisis in Israel. The people were suddenly cast into a whirlwind of questioning. If God’s promises were everlasting and the Davidic king was their conduit, what did it mean that there was no king? Did it mean the promises were null and void—that God, aggrieved by his people, had finally decided to hand them over to their own ways? Did it mean, rather, that God had abandoned the possibility of a human king—that after a multitude of failed kings, God himself would serve as Israel’s sole king? Did it mean something else, something beyond the sight of the people? The book of Psalms was composed to address this very crisis.

But what do we mean when we say the book of Psalms was *composed*? We know, on the one hand, that book of Psalms was only part of a much larger tradition of psalmody in ancient Israel.⁴ The Old Testament references a series of other songs, such as the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–18) and the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10)⁵, and at least two other Israelite song books: the *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Numbers 21:14) and the *Book of Jashar* (2 Samuel 1:18). And we know, on the other hand, that the book of Psalms was composed from a variety of song collections, which are frequently

THE PSALTER		referenced: e.g., the Psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73–83), the Psalms of the Sons of Korah (Psalms 42–49, 84–88), the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 113–118). All of this suggests the Psalter was neither a random collection of Israel’s worship songs nor their sum total, but rather a collection that was carefully chosen and crafted for a purpose.
Book 1	1–41	
Book 2	42–72	
Book 3	73–89	
Book 4	90–106	
Book 5	107–150	

That purpose was to address the question of kingship.

The way in which the Psalter does this is by recounting Israel's story as a people, a story told over the course of 150 psalms and across five 'books':

A key reason the Psalter has been divided into five 'books,' therefore, is to give structure to this story. The structure especially trains a spotlight on one key element of Israel's story: kingship.

In the course of this study, we will develop how this works and what it means. But, for now, it is helpful to give a quick overview.

Book 1 (Psalms 1–41): focuses on King David and his reign as king. This book, by far, has the highest concentration of psalms labelled "of David."

Book 2 (Psalms 42–72): continues to focus on Davidic kingship, but it moves beyond the man David onto the monarchy after David's time. That is why the collection begins with psalms from the Sons of Korah, who continued the tradition of psalms singing that had begun under David, and why the collection closes with a psalm of Solomon (Psalm 72), David's son and successor on the throne.

Book 3 (Psalms 73–89): continues the storyline, moving into the final age of the Davidic dynasty. Mirroring the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians, this book ends on an ominous note, saying of the Davidic "his crown [lies] in the dust" (89:39).

Book 4 (Psalms 90–106) addresses the crisis of the fallen monarchy, reminding the people their true hope was never a mortal king, but a divine king: the Lord himself.

Book 5 (Psalms 107–150): takes a defiant and exhalatory mood, which is grounded in a recurring proclamation: "The Lord reigns!"

Book 5 reminds Israel that, despite present appearances, the Lord still reigns over all creation, and they are to proclaim this reality until he brings his kingdom to earth again. Yet the people not called to trust blindly and indefinitely; they are called to wait upon a future figure: the final and true Davidic King. Book 5 directs attention not just to the invisible God in heaven, but to his coming king, the Messiah.

In this way, the book of Psalms addresses the question of Israel's king. It reminds the people, on the one hand, that God alone has always been their true king. And it assures them, on the other, that God's promise of a king will be fulfilled in the future, though in a different way than many expected. The coming son of David will be human, but not *merely* human; he will be an exalted king, Israel's Messiah.

Returning to our original question, "What are we doing when we sing, pray, or recite the Psalms?" We are, in essence, praying for God's kingdom and his king to come. It is no accident that Jesus echoes this sentiment in his own instructions on prayer: This, then, is how you should pray...

Your kingdom come,
Your will be done,
on earth,
as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9–10)

Jesus was not creating a new prayer; he was summarizing Israel's ancient prayer book—the Psalter. In praying for God's kingdom and king to come, then, we are committing to two things: 1) to wait upon someone and 2) to wait in a certain way. As we move to study particular psalms, therefore, we will be asking two questions: 1) Who is it that we wait for? and 2) How do we wait for him?

QUESTIONS

1. Before reading this, had you ever noticed the five “books” within the Psalter? Had you ever considered that the Psalter itself was a carefully crafted book that tells a story and expresses the Christian hope for the future?
2. How, then, might this affect how we interpret individual psalms? As a test case, read your favorite psalm and reflect on this question.
3. Furthermore, had you ever considered that when you sing, pray, or recite the Psalms you are, in fact, pledging to live in a certain way?
4. Consider again your favorite psalm: What in particular are you pledging to do when you recite this psalm?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

1. If you have a favorite Psalm, what is it and why is it your favorite?
2. When Dr. Tyler uses the Psalms as a guide to prayer in our corporate worship each Sunday, what is he doing?
3. Why is it helpful to use the Psalms as a basis for our prayer life both individually and corporately?
4. Is there a particular Psalm you have found helpful to use as a backdrop for prayer? If so, what is it? How have you found it helpful? What do you hope to take away from our study of the Psalms?

WEEK 2

PSALMS 1–2

Psalms 1–2 are numbered as separate psalms, and undoubtedly that is how they were originally written. However, as they now sit in the book of Psalms, side-by-side at the beginning, they seem to function as a single unit. The reason for this, scholars suggest, is because together they provide a “gateway to the Psalter,”⁶ an aperture through which to view the rest of the book. In particular, Psalms 1–2 highlight the *twin themes* of the Psalter:

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 1
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 2
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 8
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 9
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 10

1. The Righteous Person (Psalm 1)
2. The Anointed One (Psalm 2)

The righteous person, in Psalm 1, is the ideal Israelite; it is a portrait of the ideal person of God. The anointed one, in Psalm 2, is the ideal Israelite king; it is a portrait of the ideal son of David. Yet, as we shall see, by setting these two figures side-by-side the Psalter blends these twin figures into one.

Unlike other ancient Near Eastern cultures, Israel did not see its king as special. He was not semi-divine. He was not imbued with unique dignity or a divine vocation. He did not own the title, “son of God.” In Israel, that title belonged to the whole people (Exodus 4:22), and the whole people, as such, were the ones imbued with a special calling. The whole people, rather than just the king, were called to live on earth as the “image of God” (Genesis 1:26–27). This

is the origins of the idea that, today, we call “the priesthood of all believers.”

Because of this, the king’s role was also different. Rather than standing in an exalted position above the people, Israel’s king stood as one among equals. He did, in a sense, have a unique role: he was called to serve as “a representative figure.”⁷ The king was called to set an example, to show the people how to truly live as the son of God and image of God. In other words, the king’s chief responsibility was to embody the ideal Israelite and be a model or exemplar for the rest of the people to imitate (Deuteronomy 17:14–20). The ideal Israelite (the “righteous one” in Psalm 1) and the ideal king (the “anointed one” in Psalm 2) are therefore two sides to the same coin: both the king and the people are aspiring to become the same kind of person. As Patrick Miller says, “The ideal ruler is thus the model Israelite” and “the anointed one is simply a true Israelite even as he is a true king.”⁸

Together, then, Psalms 1–2 weave together the figures of the ideal Israelite and ideal king, showing them to be the very same person: simply, *the person of God*. Yet this raises the question: What, according to Psalms 1–2, is the ideal Israelite? What kinds of things mark the person of God? Here we will focus on a few key elements, which tie together Psalms 1 and 2.

Firstly, Psalms 1–2 are framed by a key word, which has deep theological significance for the Psalter: ‘blessed’ (Hebrew: *ashre*):

Blessed is the one who... (Psalm 1:1)

Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:12)

The word ‘blessed’ forms an envelope around Psalms 1 and 2, spotlighting it as a central idea not just of Psalms 1–2, but of the whole Psalter. Indeed, the whole Psalter may be taken as a reflection on how to live a ‘blessed’ life before God.⁹ It is vital to note, as such, that while some translations use the word ‘happy’ instead

of ‘blessed,’ the term is somewhat misleading. In English, ‘happy’ carries connotations of smiling light-heartedness; but that is not the meaning in Hebrew. In Hebrew, the meaning is closer to the contentment of living the God-approved life. While that life journeys through sorrow and hardship, it is considered ‘blessed’ because it finds ‘refuge’ in the almighty (Psalm 2:12)

Secondly, Psalms 1–2 are framed by another keyword, which is important both in the Psalter and the rest of Scripture: ‘way’ (Hebrew: *derek*):

Blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the company of mockers (Psalm 1:1)

Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:12)

This word, which again forms an envelope around Psalms 1 and 2, draws attention to the fact that the God-approved life follows a certain path, a certain ‘way.’ Psalm 1 highlights that the way of righteous runs opposite to way of the wicked, leading to life rather than death. And Psalm 2 highlights that Israel’s ‘anointed one,’ who follows the way of the righteous, will encounter hostility from earthly rulers (the ‘wicked’). Yet in the end, all who follow the road of the wicked will end in destruction, while those who follow the anointed one will receive life.

Thirdly and finally, Psalms 1–2 contrast the dispositions of the righteous and the wicked by using a fascinating Hebrew term: *hagah*:

whose delight is in the Torah of the Lord,
and who **meditates** [*hagah*] on his Torah day and night
(Psalm 1:2)

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples **plot** [*hagah*] in vain? (Psalm 2:1)

The same Hebrew word, *hagah*, means very different things in these psalms. The shared idea between these is ‘to utter a sound,’ though the types of sound contrast each other. In Psalm 1, the sound uttered is that of meditation upon God’s word, while in Psalm 2 it is that of conspiring against the king. The use of *hagah* therefore highlights the key difference between the activities of the righteous, who ‘mediate’ upon God’s Torah, and the wicked, who ‘conspire’ against his anointed one.

But what does it mean to ‘mediate’ upon God’s word? Eugene Peterson has been helpful in explaining this. Today, when we hear of someone meditating, we think of a person kneeling in a quiet chapel beside a candle, speaking softly to himself or herself. But that is not the picture in Scripture. In Scripture, the Hebrew word for ‘meditate’ (*hagah*) depicts something closer to an animal growling over food. Peterson depicts it like this: we should imagine a dog with its favorite bone—first gambolling around the prize in pure delight before settling in to chew, lick, and savor the bone. It is like “letting a very slowly dissolving lozenge melt imperceptibly in your mouth.”¹⁰ This, according to Peterson, is how Christians ought to understand the idea of ‘mediating’ upon God’s word.¹¹

Psalms 1–2, therefore, set the stage for the rest of the Psalter, placing our two guiding questions at the center: 1) Who is it that we wait for? and 2) How do we wait for him? Psalm 2 is foundational in showing who God’s people wait for: the long-promised Davidic King, the ideal son of God who will someday rule the nations (Psalm 2:7–8). As we see in the book of Acts, the Apostles recognized Jesus as this long-awaited figure:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together

in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.’

Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. (Acts 4:23–27)

“We tell you the good news: What God promised our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm:

‘You are my son; today I have become your father.’

God raised him from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay. (Acts 13:33–34)

As Christians today, we find ourselves in a situation that is both similar and different to that of ancient Israel. Our situation is different in that we now know the identity of the promised king and Messiah: Jesus of Nazareth. But our situation is also similar in that we, too, await his coming.

And that brings us back to our other question: How do we wait for him? Psalm 1, we have seen, outlines the life of the faithful: to walk in the way of the Lord by meditating on his word. This results in a ‘blessed’ life. To pray Psalm 1, therefore, is to commit ourselves to this kind of a life. Psalm 2 helps develop the picture further: when people walk in God’s ways and listen to his voice, they will run up against the rulers of this present age, leading to strife and suffering. Just as it happened with God’s anointed one, so those who follow

him will endure suffering. As we shall see, the ‘blessed’ life of the Psalms is one that includes both joy and sorrow, and, by pointing to Jesus Christ, the final and true son of God, it offers both a *model for imitation* and *source of hope*.

QUESTIONS

1. Take some time now to reflect on the idea that Psalms 1–2 offer both a model for imitation and a source of hope. How does it do this?
2. Have you ever considered before that, in this present age, a ‘blessed’ life before God will necessarily include suffering? Yet how do we know whether we’re suffering for following God’s ways or simply because of our own faults?
3. Consider one of your favorite psalms in light of our governing questions: Who is it that we wait for? And How do we wait for him? How does your favorite psalm help answer either or both of these questions?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

Psalms 1 and 2

1. Recall a time when you chose not to “walk in the counsel of the wicked” (Psalm 1:1). What did you learn from that experience?
2. Biblical meditation has been compared to a cow “chewing the cud”. If you understand what it means to “chew the cud”, how does that relate to biblical meditation?

3. What does it mean to “meditate day and night” on God’s law (Psalm 1:2)?

4. Do you personally meditate on biblical passages? If so, how do you do it?

5. What does Psalm 1:3 teach us about the effects of “delighting” and “meditating” on God’s word?

6. Psalm 2:12 speaks of taking refuge in God. What does the idea of taking refuge in God look like practically to you?

7. In what area of life, right now, are you taking refuge in God? How can we pray with you this week about it?

WEEK 3

PSALM 22

Across Christian history, few psalms have been as important as Psalm 22.¹² The reason for this is because Psalm 22 is widely considered both “a messianic psalm par excellence”¹³ and a model of Christian lament.¹⁴ To say it is a messianic psalm means that it was seen, by both Christ and the

Apostles, as key to the Messiah’s identity. And to say it is a model of lament means it encapsulates how the Messiah endured suffering, and, as such, how his followers should do so as well. But where did they get these ideas about Psalm 22?

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 13
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 14
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 16
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 19
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 22

Psalm 22 was seen as important from the earliest of days, indicated by its pivotal position at the heart of Book 1 (Psalms 1–41). In this position, the psalm contributes to the image of the ‘anointed one’ (Psalm 2:2) established at the opening of the Psalter. The opening of the Psalter depicted the anointed one as the ideal king, the one who would one day save Israel and rule the nations. He would be obedient God’s Torah and oppressed by the rulers of the earth. Psalm 22, therefore, develops this image further by showing *how* the anointed one would respond to suffering: he would lament.

But what *is* lament? Many well-meaning pastors will explain that: “Lament is simply complaining to God.” In saying this they are trying to make lament accessible to modern Christians, comparing it to something they already understand well: complaining. But the idea is simply not true and is ultimately misleading.

In order to understand the nature of biblical lament, it is helpful to begin by looking at the structure of Psalm 22:

Prayer for help (vv. 1–21)

Prayer of trust/praise (vv. 22–31)

The psalmist begins by crying out to God (vv. 1–21). He acknowledges, on the one hand, God's goodness and steadfastness, but also, on the other, his own terrible agony—enemies are attacking him unjustly. Then, suddenly it seems, the psalmist shifts, praising God for his help (vv. 22–31). He lavishes praise upon God for all that he has done.

What are we to make of these contrasting halves? What does this tell us about biblical lament? The first half shows us that lament is more than mere complaining. Biblical lament rests upon relationship: it recognizes that God has made promises to his people—namely, to be present in times of trouble—and so, when that is in question, his people are invited to cry out. But this is not simply a cry of complaint, which would be self-indulgent; it is a cry for *help* and *understanding*.

Ultimately, of course, the psalmist wants to be saved from his circumstances. Yet it is interesting to note that in so many psalms of lament the recurring language is about God's presence in suffering. Consider Psalm 22 in this regard:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from my cries of anguish?

My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, but I find no rest. (vv. 1–2)

Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help. (v. 11)

But you, Lord, do not be far from me.

You are my strength; come quickly to help me. (v. 19)

The cry of lament, therefore, is twofold: it asks God for *his help* and for *his fellowship* in suffering.

What does the second half of Psalm 22 show about lament? Does it show, as some suggest, that lament must move quickly from crying out to praising God? What we find is not so much a sudden shift from lament to praise, but instead a shift from lament to a *vow to praise*.

Whoever truly cries to God out of the depths, and in this cry thinks not of his need but of God...knows that the moment of making a vow, a promise, is a part of this cry. I *know* then that the matter is not finished when I have pled and God has heard, but that something else must still come...I know that with the promise that I add to my petition I have entered into a relationship with God.¹⁵

The sudden change, in other words, is not a kind of “fake it till you make it” approach, where someone who suffers must put on a brave face. Rather, it is a deeply relational act of trust, in which the sufferer acknowledges that, despite the circumstances, God is faithful and will ultimately show this; and the sufferer, in turn, vows that when God does intervene, then he will praise him. What we find here, then, is not so much a sufferer offering hollow praise but “praise in expectation.”¹⁶

Considering the importance of Psalm 22 in ancient Israel, it is no surprise to find that it was central to Christ, the Apostles, and the early Church. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark place it at the very heart of the crucifixion narrative:

It was nine in the morning when they crucified him. The written notice of the charge against him read: THE KING OF THE JEWS. They crucified two rebels with him, one on his

right and one on his left. Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” In the same way the chief priests and the teachers of the law mocked him among themselves. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! Let this Messiah, this king of Israel, come down now from the cross, that we may see and believe.” Those crucified with him also heaped insults on him.

At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice,

“Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

... With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last. The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Mark 13: 25–38; also Matthew 27:45–46)

When Jesus quotes Psalm 22:1, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” it signals two things. Firstly, Jesus is identifying himself as the long-expected king of Israel, the final and true Son of David—the Messiah. Secondly, despite the expectations of the day, the Messiah would suffer for his faithfulness, just as David did. And this suffering was evidence not of God’s judgment but of his approval.

What, then, are we doing when we pray Psalm 22? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one upon whom we wait. While some psalms portray this king as triumphant, Psalm 22 has another emphasis: it depicts him as a suffering king. The New Testament would go on to show that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer on our behalf, and that he was none other than God in the flesh. As such, the one whom we wait upon is “the crucified God.”¹⁷ And we are, on the other hand, committing to wait for him in a certain way, namely by following his example of *lamenting*. While it is foreign

to many Christians today, here lament is put forward as the way to endure suffering. Faithfulness will bring suffering, and the way to endure suffering is to cry out to God—to lament. It is what our Lord did on the cross, and it is what we are called to do in imitation of him.

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, what is the difference between biblical lament and “complaining to God”?
2. Have you ever considered before that lament might be a way in which to imitate Christ and faithfully endure suffering?
3. How comfortable are you with this idea? Do you have any concerns or push back?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

1. On the cross, Jesus quoted Psalm 22:1 (See Matthew 27:46 & Mark 15:34). Why do you think Jesus quoted this verse?
2. What does it mean to be forsaken by God?
3. Have you ever felt as though God had forsaken you? If so, what was helpful for you in your time of despair? What did you find unhelpful?
4. Together, read Psalm 34:18, Psalm 46:1, and Hebrew 13:5. According to these texts, does God ever forsake His children? Why, then, do we at times feel as though He has?

WEEK 4

PSALM 23

Here we come to the most beloved of all psalms: Psalm 23. Certainly, no psalm has been prayed more in the midst of trials and dark times. Hospital chaplains report that at the bedside of the dying, whether they are Christian or not, Psalm 23 is often requested to be read aloud. And the words of verse 4 are found to be especially comforting:

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 23
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 24
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 31
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 32
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 34

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil,
for you are with me,
your rod and your staff, they comfort me (v. 4)

When faced with our own mortality, it seems Psalm 23 resonates deeply within us all. And the reason for this is twofold: on the one hand, it speaks *to us*, comforting us with the promise of God's presence and care, and, on the other, it speaks *for us*, giving us the words to express our enduring hope. In this way, Psalm 23 is a perfect example of a particular kind of psalm: *a psalm of trust*.

It is no accident that Psalm 23 comes immediately after Psalm 22. Psalm 22, we will recall, is a psalm of lament, the prayer of the suffering King David. Suffering comes from living faithfully before God in a fallen world, and lament, as such, is the proper response to such suffering. But lament is not the end; lament is only one part in

the journey toward God. The next stage of the journey is trust.

The psalm of trust, then, is the older brother of psalm of lament. It has not left suffering entirely behind, but it does find the psalmist at a different stage. Like the lament psalm, it concerns suffering; unlike the lament psalm, however, it focuses not on the suffering itself but on what suffering *teaches*:

Somewhere in the shadows of the psalms of trust trouble is lurking. We cannot always determine what crisis prompted the psalmist to declare his trust in the Lord, but generally speaking, some trouble had lain in ambush along the psalmist's path...With the kind of problems the psalms of trust introduce, we might expect to encounter a strong lament, but that is seldom the case. Rather, the lament seems to have faded into the background of the psalmist's life. He has moved beyond lament to confidence, even though, in contrast to the psalms of thanksgiving, the crisis may not yet have passed. But the psalmist can face it now because experience has taught him that Yahweh is good and answers when his children call. These psalms are expressions of faith, not cries of victory. They sketch out the path, to be sure, but they do not necessarily lead all the way.¹⁸

Psalm 23, therefore, shows King David at the next stage of his journey of faith, having moved beyond lament to trust.

So how does Psalm 23 develop the picture of King David's trust? The psalm is comprised of two halves:

Lord as Shepherd (vv. 1–4)

Lord as Host (vv. 5–6)

Each of these develops an aspect of the Lord's character, which David expresses his trust in.

In the ancient Near East, good kings were often characterized

as shepherds of the people. In Israel, Yahweh was king over the people and so he was seen as the chief shepherd. That is what David expresses in the first half of Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me. (vv. 1–4)

The imagery is thoroughly pastoral: it speaks of leading to pastures and waters, and of providing protection.

Yet there is more in the background. In the biblical tradition, to say that Yahweh was shepherd was to evoke one event in particular: the exodus. This was the event that defined God's shepherding: rescuing his people from trouble, protecting them from danger as he brought them out, and leading them into the Promised Land. But the exodus was also prototypical—not just a one-time event but representative of God's shepherding in general (Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34). It was the model for how God would always shepherd his people.

This helps us to understand the second half of Psalm 23, which otherwise might prove confusing:

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me

all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. (vv. 5–6)

The imagery suddenly shifts from the pasture to the table, from Yahweh as shepherd to Yahweh as meal host. But why?

Here again the table imagery comes from the exodus. Linguistically, the closest parallel to the language of Psalm 23:5, “you prepare a table,” is found in Psalm 78:19, where it recalls the Israelites doubting God after the exodus: “Can God really prepare a table in the wilderness?” The psalm goes on to characterize the Israelites’ response as the opposite of ‘trust’ (v. 22), which is put into sharp contrast with Yahweh’s miraculous provision of water from the rock and bread and meat from heaven (Psalm 78:20–29)—his “preparing a table.” Psalm 78 then goes on to summarize Yahweh’s protection and provision for Israel as that of a shepherd (v. 52). What we find in Psalm 23, then, is David’s confession of trust that Yahweh *is* in fact the Good Shepherd.

As with other psalms, the imagery here is taken up in the New Testament and applied to the Lord Jesus. This is clearest in John 10, where Jesus refers to himself as the Good Shepherd (v. 11, 14), effectively calling himself Israel’s divine king. John 10 then goes on to develop how, exactly, Jesus serves as the Good Shepherd: he lays down his life for the flock. This is why the New Testament treats Jesus’s life and death as the “second exodus”: because by laying down his life, he delivered people from sin and allowed them access to God’s presence.

What are we doing when we pray Psalm 23? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one upon whom we wait: the Good Shepherd. Israel’s God was a shepherd and his anointed one, King David, was a shepherd; it is only fitting, therefore, that the true and final heir of David, the Messiah, would also be a shepherd. The Messiah’s shepherding would follow in the tradition of Yahweh’s shepherding:

he would deliver his people from bondage. Jesus Christ, whom we wait upon, will someday finish what he began, delivering all flesh from the chains of sin and decay. And we are, on the other hand, committing to wait in a certain way: by trusting in the Good Shepherd as David did. As we walk through personal, national, and global darkness, we commit to trust in our shepherd, proclaiming

I shall fear no evil,
for you are with me

Psalm 23 provides a beautiful and powerful model for moving beyond lament to trust—to trusting in the Good Shepherd.

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, describe the difference between a psalm of lament and a psalm of trust? Can you think of an example from your own life when you were able to move from lament to trust?
2. One scholar has described Psalm 23 as a “psalm of pilgrimage,” since it moves us from a place of lament to a place of trust. How might praying Psalm 23 teach us to view our own life of faith as stages of a pilgrimage?
3. Have you ever considered that the hinge of Psalm 23 is found in these simple words: “for you are with me” (v. 4)? Over the next week, whenever you are troubled by something, speak these words aloud and see how their simple promise affects you.

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

1. Psalm 23 is one of the most popular and most quoted Psalms. Why do you think that is so?
2. How does acknowledging that the Lord is our Shepherd help keep us from wanting (Psalm 23:1)?
3. Have you ever laid down in a pasture? If so, what was that experience like? Was it peaceful? Pleasant? Calming? How would you describe it?
4. Psalm 23:3 speaks of the LORD restoring one's soul. What does that process look like?
5. For whose sake are we guided "in the paths of righteousness" (Psalm 23:3)? What does that say to you?
6. What are you afraid of? How does the LORD's presence help you and me overcome fear (Psalm 23:4)?
7. What about verse 6 do you find encouraging? Why does that thought or concept encourage you?

WEEK 5

PSALM 42

When Christians name their favorite psalm, Psalm 42 is often at the top of the list. And, without fail, people will quickly quote from the psalm's opening words, which are some of the most beautiful in all of Scripture:

As the deer pants
for streams of water,
so my soul longs for you, my God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When can I go and see God? (vv. 1–2; translation my own)

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 35
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 37
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 40
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 41
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 42

Surely the reason is because these words capture the human condition and the biblical hope: we live in a broken world, but long for God's presence and restoration.

Psalm 42 opens Book 2 of the Psalter (Psalms 42–72), a book that continues the emphasis on the King but begins to look beyond David himself.

Book Two of the Psalter continues the story of the reign of King David. But other actors enter the stage. Psalms of the Korahites and Asaphites, priestly singers during the reigns of David and Solomon, occur at the beginning of the book. A lamenting David appears in the heart of the book, and it ends with a royal psalm ascribed to Solomon, which we may read as the blessings of David upon his son and successor, Solomon.

David's reign comes to an end, and the kingdom is placed in the hands of the descendants of the king chosen by God to rule over the nation of Israel.¹⁹

As such, Book 2 of the Psalter begins to shift the focus from King David to his enduring legacy within Israel.

Psalm 42 is a fitting transition, therefore, because it brings together two elements of David's legacy: his psalm writing and his worshipping. It evokes the idea of his psalm writing by ascribing Psalm 42 to "the Sons of Korah," the group David charged with keeping and singing the temple worship songs. And it evokes David's worship by expressing the very essence of Israelite worship. Since David was known as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), Psalm 42 would have been seen as continuation of his legacy. But what is the portrait of worship found in Psalm 42?

To begin with, the psalm is a lament. The primary issue, it seems, is the man is unable to enter the temple and participate in worship. It is not clear why this is the case. Perhaps he is writing from exile in Babylon, where the people were physically distant from the temple. Or perhaps he is ritually unclean due to an illness or a death in the family or something else and is therefore not allowed in the temple. This latter explanation makes more sense to me. But, whatever the reason, the situation is made worse by mockers. Apparently, there are people who have used this opportunity to taunt the man for his suffering and to question God's love for him.

Interestingly, when the man cries out to God, he asks chiefly neither for relief from suffering nor justice for his mockers. Instead, he expresses a longing for the presence of God. The way in which the psalmist expresses his longing is by using a key image: that of water. In ancient Israel, people depended almost exclusively on seasonal rains. Most streams in Palestine were fleeting, flowing no more than a few hours after each rain in the Negev or a few days in the Judean highlands or up to a few weeks or months in the northern region. As

such, every living creature was singularly dependent on rain. When rain came, life flourished; when it didn't, life withered and death threatened.

And some creatures were more vulnerable than others. Deer, especially female deer, were particularly vulnerable, since they nourished the young and shielded them from predators. As such, it is profoundly important that Psalm 42 uses the deer as the image of the ideal worshiper.

the image of the thirsty deer conveys most vividly the psalmist's singular yearning for God...The image of the grazing doe represents the petitioner in worship and prayer... fully dependent and vulnerable, searching and satisfied by God's salutary presence.²⁰

In Psalm 42, the deer represents human life “east of Eden”: living in the shadow of death while longing for God's presence.

What are we doing when we pray Psalm 42? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one upon whom we wait: the Lord Jesus. He adopted this very disposition in the Garden of Gethsemane: “And he [Jesus] said to them [his disciples], ‘My soul is sorrowful unto death. Stay here and watch’” (Mark 14:34; Psalm 42: 5–6, 11–12).²¹ The Apostle Paul summarized it like this:

He emptied himself
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself,
becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!
(Philippians 2:7–8)

As such, when we pray Psalm 42, we are, on the other hand, committing to adopt this disposition ourselves. We, like the fragile and frightened deer, should long for God's life-giving presence, so

that we can say from the depths of our soul: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, my God.”

QUESTIONS

1. In American culture, the ideal citizen is someone who is strong and independent, someone who “pulls himself up by his own bootstraps.” But how does this square with Psalm 42 and its portrait of the ideal person of God?
2. Former professional wrestler and governor of Minnesota, Jessie Ventura, once said “religion is...a crutch for weak-minded people.” Yet Psalm 42 seems to critique this idea. In what way does Psalm 42 offer a critique?
3. In an affluent culture where food and drink are abundant, how might the ancient practice of fasting help us to remember what it means to hunger and thirst for God?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

1. In Psalm 42:1 the psalmist speaks of his soul panting for God. Recall a time when you were in utter desperation for God’s presence, power, or restorative work in your life. What did you learn during that season of life? How did God show Himself to you?
2. Has despair ever taken you to a place where you’ve thought, “Where is God?” (Psalm 42:3)? If so, what was helpful in that time of despair? What was not helpful?

3. The central factor in spiritual despair is that people are often listening to themselves instead of talking to themselves. In Psalm 42:5, to move out of despair, the psalmist talks to himself.

4. When dealing with despair, what truths have you found beneficial to “talk to yourself” about?

5. Why would the psalmist repeat the same truths in Psalm 42:5 & 11? If you are dealing with despair right now, how would you like for us to pray for you?

WEEK 6

PSALM 73

While Psalm 73 does not enjoy the same popularity as Psalm 42, it does hold another honor: scholars consider it *the* central psalm in all the Psalter. As Walter Brueggemann has said, Psalm 73 “is central theologically as well as canonically.”²² In other words, the psalm encapsulates the meaning of the whole Psalter (theologically central) and, as such, has been placed the very center of the Psalter’s structure (canonically central).

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 45
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 46
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 69
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 72
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 73

Structurally, we notice Psalm 73’s centrality in a number of ways: for example, it sits numerically almost at the exact center of the collection, with 72 psalms before it and 77 after it. Furthermore, the psalm opens the all-important middle book of the Psalter, Book 3 (Psalms 73–89). As such, scholars have suggested that Psalm 73’s location indicates its overall importance: it serves as a *summary* of the whole Psalter. Here in a single psalm, therefore, we find the overall trajectory of the Psalter in *miniature*: it moves from obedience (Psalm 1) to praise (Psalm 150), from doubting God’s loving-kindness (Psalm 25) to trusting his loving-kindness (Psalm 103).²³ One scholar, J. Clinton McCann, has taken the idea a step further. He suggests Psalm 73 not only represents the message of the Psalter in miniature, but also the whole of Israel’s faith: “Psalm 73 is a microcosm of Old Testament theology.”²⁴

If this is true, then Psalm 73 is of extraordinary importance, for it

distills into a single psalm the essence of biblical faith. But what is this essence? Here it is helpful to look closely at the structure of the Psalm:

Plight of the psalmist (vv. 1–3)

Prosperity of the wicked (vv. 4–12)

The turning point (vv. 13–17)

Plight of the wicked (vv. 18–20)

Prosperity of the psalmist (vv. 21–28)

The structure traces the basic struggle of faith, the journey of those who live life before God in a broken world.

The psalm opens with the classic problem of living life before God: people of faith affirm, on the one hand, “surely God is good” to his people (v. 1), but recognize, on the other, “the prosperity of the wicked” (v. 3). The problem is that the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous suffer. Why do the good die young while the wicked grow old? Why do workers with integrity struggle in life while their wicked bosses get rich? Why do healthy people get cancer while those who abuse their bodies stay strong? In other words, the psalmist asks the question: “What good is it to be faithful to God?”²⁵

In exploring this question of faith, the psalmist is “deeply troubled” (v. 16), but then something happens. Suddenly, the psalmist gains insight into the true nature of reality and the destiny of the righteous and unrighteous. He sees that, in the end, the unrighteous will be “completely swept away” (v. 19) while the righteous will be “taken into glory” (v. 24). But why this sudden change? What happened that caused this sudden clarity? We find the answer at the center of the psalm, its turning point:

When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply
till I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end (vv. 16–17)

The sudden change occurred when the psalmist entered the presence of God; suddenly he perceived things clearly. This experience didn't change the psalmist's circumstances; it changed his perspective. And this, according to one scholar, is the essence of biblical faith: neither receiving "payoffs" for following God nor an exhaustive explanation of life, but, by coming into God's very presence, to enjoy "trustful communion."²⁶ What the psalmist learned is that God alone is enough; that fellowship with him is enough to carry us through life into glory.

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 73? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the God of Israel, the "sovereign Lord" (v. 28) of history, the one who both cares for his people and charts the course of human destiny. He is the one who will judge the living and the dead at the end of time. And, as the book of Revelation makes clear, he is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ (Revelation 19:11–21; see esp. v. 15). We are, on the other hand, committing to wait upon the Lord Jesus like the psalmist waited upon God:

But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds (v. 28)

In the midst of questions about the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the unrighteous, we commit to do the following: to draw close to God and take refuge in him, and to proclaim the comfort and clarity this gives us.

QUESTIONS

1. Growing up, my "second family"—the household where I spent most of my time outside of my own—suffered a terrible tragedy: their oldest son, a college athlete studying medicine, died suddenly of an unknown heart defect. When I came to their house, the youngest son, one of my best friends, said this: "How could this

happen to someone so young and full of life, someone with so much good to give the world?” Take some time now to share one of your own experiences like this, when tragedy happened to a good person and caused people wonder why bad people continue to prosper.

2. Now discuss this: What light might Psalm 73 shed on this question?

3. Finally, consider how you might craft this answer for friends, family, coworkers, etc. who might be going through this.

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

1. How do you tend to react/respond when good things happen to bad people (Psalm 73:3-5)?

2. What do you do when the good you’ve done seems to be rewarded with bad things (Psalm 73:13-14)?

3. God’s perspective on life can only come by entering into His presence. How did entering the sanctuary affect Asaph’s perspective?

4. How has living in community with other believers affected your perspective on the issues of life?

5. As a group, what can we do better to help one another in times of crisis of belief?

WEEK 7

PSALM 89

Psalm 89 plays a key role in the larger Psalter, acting as a hinge between Books 1–3 and 4–5. That is why the psalm has been placed at the end of Book 3.

The psalms in Book Three of the Psalter reflect events that took place during the period of the divided kingdoms of ancient Israel, the

subsequent obliteration of the northern kingdom in 722 by the Assyrians, and, finally, the destruction of the southern kingdom by the Babylonians in 586. When the reader reaches the end of Book Three, the nation of Israel, with a Davidic king at its head, is no more...it ends in the despair of exile.²⁷

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 74
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 78
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 80
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 88
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 89

The Psalter follows the chronology of the kingdom of Israel, and Book 3 brings us to the most painful point of the story: the people in exile without a king. Psalm 89, sitting at the end of the book, therefore raises the searing question of that time:

Lord, where is your former steadfast love,
Which in your faithfulness you swore to David? (v. 49)

Books 4–5 will address this question, casting a vision for a future Davidic king, the Messiah. We will discuss those in turn. But, for now, we focus on the question raised in Psalm 89.

To understand Psalm 89's exploration of this question, it is helpful to observe the overall structure:

Hymn to Yahweh (vv. 1–18)

Oracle about Davidic Covenant (vv. 19–37)

Lament on failure of Davidic Covenant (vv. 38–51)

While most lament psalms move from lament to praise, this one does the opposite: it moves from praise to lament. And this movement is essential to understanding the message.

The psalmist begins with a hymn praising God's character (vv. 1–18), focusing on his "two key attributes": his "steadfast love" (*hesed*) and "faithfulness" (*emunah*) (v. 1).²⁸ These attributes, he says, were displayed when God established a covenant with David and promised it would last "forever" (vv. 2–4). As such, the psalmist next recounts in detail God's very covenant with David, rehearsing the prophetic oracle that was delivered to the king (vv. 19–37). Here he emphasizes that God swore on his very "holiness" that he would never "betray my faithfulness" by "violating my covenant" (vv. 33–37). In light of this, the psalmist wants to know why the people are enduring their current experience:

But you have rejected, you have spurned
You have been very angry with your anointed one.
You have renounced the covenant with your servant
And have defiled his crown in the dust (vv. 38–39)

What the psalmist is asking, therefore, is: If God's promise of a Davidic king was grounded in his "steadfast love" and "faithfulness," then what does it mean when there is no king? Has God broken covenant? Has God gone back on his word? Has God proven himself unfaithful? These are the questions that the final section of the psalm, the lament portion, raises (vv. 38–51).

The answer, of course, is "no": God has not been unfaithful or gone back on his word. But how then should the people understand the loss of the Davidic kingship? This question will be answered

by the rest of the Psalter (Psalms 90–150). What these psalms will show is that Israel misunderstood the Davidic kingship, that they too closely aligned the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Israel. The kingdom of God would indeed continue, and God would, in time, bring forth a true and final king in the line of David. However, this king and his kingdom would not come in the form of another earthly kingdom; it would come as the Messiah bringing a heavenly kingdom to earth. What Psalm 89 signals, then, is the starting point for a “re-evaluation” of kingship.²⁹ Its anguished soul searching opens the possibility that the loss of Davidic kingship does not reflect God’s failure but, instead, Israel’s failure to properly understand kingship.

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 89? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the long-promised Davidic king, the Messiah. He is God’s firstborn son, “the most exalted of the kings of the earth” who will reign “forever” (Psalm 89:26–29). As Christians, we know this king to be the Lord Jesus, whose return we wait for. We are, on the other hand, committing to wait upon the Lord Jesus in the manner of Psalm 89: namely, we commit to continually “re-evaluate” our conceptions of God’s work on earth. That is, we pledge to consider the extent to which our cherished practices and institutions are of God: our views of preaching, of worship, of Bible study, of church leadership, etc. There are good reasons that we do what we do, but, as Psalm 89 reminds us, our practices are often shaped by tradition as much as God’s truth.

QUESTIONS:

1. During college, I served for a summer in The Christian Ministry in the National Parks (Grand Canyon). The ministry was comprised of people from many different denominations. One Sunday, after our worship service, I was helping to clean up the sanctuary and picked up the items on the altar: the cross and cups and trays for the Lord’s Supper. Suddenly, I heard a woman shriek, and she came across the room and took them from me, scolding me for touching

them without special gloves. As it turned out, in her tradition it was radically disrespectful to God to touch such things with bare hands. Can you think of time when you stumbled upon a practice that others held dear but which you didn't think was a matter of spiritual significance?

2. Reflect on a time when you were bothered by someone else's practice or by a change in church life (It could be a change in worship, in preaching, in baptism, etc.).

3. How, then, might praying Psalm 89 help us with these issues?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

Psalm 74

1. In what way can difficulties serve as teachers for us? What can we learn from this psalm about depending on the Lord during difficult times?

2. When have you felt deserted by the Lord or others?

3. How do you feel about your present circumstances? In what area of your life do you need the Lord's help?

Psalm 78

When considering a psalm that emphasizes the act of remembering, we should take the time to consider this psalm as a whole. As you do, perhaps revisit the narrative account of Exodus; these events are recorded in Psalm 78. There is great confidence and hope that

accompanies the realization that God has so powerfully intervened to care for his people, and a sobering awareness that in spite of the Lord's miraculous acts the wandering human heart is still prone to forget and stray.

1. Recount the ways in which the Lord has been faithful to you.
2. Who has he used to encourage you in your journey with Christ?

Psalm 80

1. What does this Psalm teach us about how to process difficult situations that we don't understand with the Lord?
2. Remember the reading and discussion from Week 3 on biblical lament. Have you incorporated prayers of lament in your personal life with the Lord?

WEEK 8

PSALM 90

Psalm 90 opens Book 4 of the Psalter (Psalms 90–106). As such, it begins the process of helping Israel to “re-evaluate” its perspective on kingship.

At this juncture in the story of the Psalter, the Israelites are in exile in Babylon; Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed; and the only hope of survival in these bewildering circumstances is for the people to go back—to remember—a time in their past when God, not an earthly king, was sovereign over them. With the words of Psalm 90, Moses calls the people to remember the exodus from Egypt and the wilderness wandering... The exile in Babylon was a new wilderness, and the means of survival was to once again rely completely on Yahweh.³⁰

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 90
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 91
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 92
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 93
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 94

Book 4, in other words, helps Israel to remember a time before the institution of kingship, a time when God alone was their king.

And it is for this reason that the only psalm attributed to Moses, Psalm 90, appears at the beginning of Book 4. By opening with Moses, Book 4 takes Israel back to a time before David and kingship in Israel, a time when Yahweh reigned over the people without a human king. As its opening verses suggest, this psalm locates Israel's monarchy in an even grander view of human history. It shows the monarchy, like all of human history, is a speck on the timeline of the cosmos—a timeline over which God has always reigned.

Psalm 90 does so in particular by setting two different kinds of time in contrast: divine time and mortal time:

Everlasting divine time (vv. 1–2)

Fleeting mortal time (vv. 3–6)

Mortal time a result of sin (vv. 7–12)

Mortal time lived in God’s presence (vv. 13–17)

The psalm thereby draws attention to the “brevity of human existence” in comparison to the “inconceivable timelessness of God.” Robert Alter calls Psalm 90 a “haunting meditation on human transience.”³²

This raises a question: Considering the brevity of human life, how can people possibly make a difference in the scope of cosmic history? Doesn’t this brevity cast all human efforts as trivial and meaningless, ultimately covered by the sands of time? According to Psalm 90, this is not the case. People can live meaningful lives and make lasting contributions, so long as they do it in a certain way: *coram Deo* (“before God”).

The secret to a meaningful life is to live it “sheltered by God.” When people make God their “dwelling place,” entrusting themselves to him, their mortal lives become part of God’s eternal work. And, as such, their work is “established”:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place
through all generations.
Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting
you are God. (vv. 1–2)

May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us;
establish the work of our hands—
yes, establish the work of our hands (v. 17)

In English, the word “establish” holds only general meaning, but in Hebrew it is a technical term used to describe the building of foundations for temples, palaces, and even the cosmos itself. When Psalm 90 uses the imagery, therefore, it shows that those who make God their “dwelling place” are anchored like the stone foundations of a temple.

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 90? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the king of the cosmos. We proclaim that he is “from everlasting to everlasting” and reigns over time and space. We are, on the other hand, committing to wait upon our true king in the manner of Psalm 90: to entrust ourselves to him, making him our “dwelling place.” In doing this, we trust that the “work of our hands” will be “established” as part of his eternal work.

We are called to entrust ourselves and our allotted time to God with the assurance that, grounded in God’s work and God’s time, our lives and labors participate in the eternal...Psalm 90 is finally, therefore, not an act of futility but an act of faith. And it is also an act of hope...“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith.”³⁴

No matter how small the work, when it is done *coram Deo*, “before God,” it is done as part of eternity.

QUESTIONS

1. Practically, what does it mean to make God our “dwelling place”? And how does this allow us to live in the “wilderness” of life?
2. Have you ever wondered whether you make a difference, whether the work you do matters? Maybe you lead a Bible study, disciple

young mothers, babysit for a neighbor, or clean up after church events—even though you believe God has called you to these, you still struggle to see fruit. How might Psalm 90 help shed light on your concern?

3. At some point in life, all of us will experience the untimely death of a friend or family member. This inevitably leads to questions of regret and “what if?” In light of Psalm 90, how might you help someone journey through the untimely death of a friend, colleague, or loved one?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

Psalm 90

1. From 90:2-6, list all the ways you can see how God and humans differ. What do you think is the biggest difference between God and people? What difference is hardest to understand?

3. Why is it important to remember that life is short? How often do you think about the shortness of our life on earth? What kind of circumstances will bring this topic to mind? Does this knowledge impact your priorities?

WEEK 9

PSALM 106

Psalm 106 concludes Book 4 of the Psalter, bringing its themes to a climax. In particular, it shows how Israel's original wilderness experience is instructive for its "new wilderness" experience—exile. Highlighting the twin themes of Israel's rebellion and the Lord's faithfulness, Psalm 106 shows that the very reason for Israel's hope in the original wilderness is the same hope for this "new wilderness" of exile: the loving-kindness (*hesed*) of Yahweh.

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 95
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 97
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 99
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 105
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 106

The psalm does this in a rather unique way: by retelling Israel's story through poetry. Interestingly, this is one of only three historical psalms in the whole psalter, with the others being Psalms 78 and 105. And it is no accident that two of these, Psalm 105 and 106, occur side-by-side:

Psalm 106 may be considered the twin psalm to Psalm 105—but the fraternal, rather than the identical twin. Both are historical psalms and hymns that recount the history of the people as the narrative of the Lord's fidelity to the covenant people. But whereas Psalm 105 accentuates the positive... Psalm 106 eliminates the positive—it narrates the history as the story of one rebellion after another.”³⁶

Psalm 106, then, goes to great lengths to highlight Israel's history of rebellion. Yet it does so not to be negative but hopeful, casting light on the goodness and mercy of God.

We can see this intent by looking more closely at the structure of the psalm, which frames the covenant history of Israel and God between two calls to praise:

Call to Praise (vv. 1–5)

Exodus (vv. 6–12)

Mt Sinai (Horeb) (vv. 13–23)

Wilderness (vv. 24–33)

Promised Land (vv. 34–39)

Exile (vv. 40–46)

Call to praise/cry for salvation (vv. 47–48)

Thus the psalm makes clear (vv. 4, 45) that the reason for Israel's hope, despite its chronic sin, is because God "remembers his covenant" and responds in "loving-kindness." And this is why his people should praise him.

As Psalm 106 turns to 107, we see the reason for the call to praise: the prayer of the people in Psalm 106:47 becomes the praise of the people in the very next psalm, Psalm 107:2–3:

Save us, Lord our God
And gather us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise (106:47)

Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story—
those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
those he gathered from the lands,
from east and west, from north and south (107:2–3)

Psalm 106 closes Book 4 with the people in exile, crying out to be delivered and "gathered" from the nations (106:47). Psalm 107 opens Book 5, the final book of the Psalter, with the people having been delivered from exile, praising God for "gathering" them from foreign lands (107:3). Taken together, the two psalms highlight the message of Psalm 106: the hope of the people is God's loving-kindness.

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 106? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the God who “remembers” his covenant and shows loving-kindness to his people, despite their constant rebellion. We are, on the other hand, committing to wait upon our divine king in the manner of Psalm 106: by retelling the story of our faith, highlighting God’s faithfulness despite our own faithlessness, and ultimately praising God for this.

QUESTIONS

1. Psalm 106 is a model for corporate prayer. Yet how comfortable are we in following its lead, that is, in publicly confessing our own sins as the people of God?
2. How often do you incorporate confession in your prayer life: private, familial, and public?
3. Do you think it possible to truly praise God for his mercy and loving-kindness if we have not owned our sin in confession?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

Psalm 99

1. How does God execute judgment and righteousness among His own people?
2. Have we personally witnessed the vengeance of God against sin? Provide examples.
3. Are we cultivating reverence in our worship? How are we doing this? Is our worship becoming more reverent or less reverent?

WEEK 10

PSALM 109

This is one of the most difficult passages in all of Scripture, part of a small group of psalms known as *imprecatory* psalms (Psalms 12, 44, 58, 83, 109, 137, 139). The term ‘imprecatory’ comes from the Latin *imprecari*, which means to call down curses on one’s enemies. Since that is what these psalms seem

to do, they are often given the label of “imprecatory.” As we shall see, however, this label is ultimately misleading. If we are to pray these psalms as Christian Scripture, we must first understand what they are doing.

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 107
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 108
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 109
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 111
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 112

To see why these psalms are called “imprecatory,” we need only look at an excerpt of Psalm 109:

May his [my enemy’s] days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven a from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.
(Psalm 109:8–13)

Here it seems the psalmist is asking God for vengeance: to annihilate the psalmist's enemy, leaving his wife a widow, his children orphans, and their home a ruin—so that his wife and children will be “wandering beggars” (v. 10).

Understandably, this language has long troubled interpreters, who have wondered how a Christian could pray such things. And, for some, the answer is simple: a Christian should not pray these psalms. Even C. S. Lewis held this view:

In some of the psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth... We must not either try to explain them away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious... We should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it.³⁷

From this perspective, the imprecatory psalms “belong to the spirit of the O.T. and not the N.T.” and it is therefore “impossible that such language should be repeated in its old and literal sense by any follower of Him Who has bidden us to love our enemies and pray for them that persecute us.”³⁸

The underlying idea here is that the very words of these psalms are *unchristian*. But why? Those who hold this view assume two things: 1) these psalms utter curses against enemies, and 2) such curses are the opposite of what Christ calls his followers to do to enemies (to forgive them). But as we shall see, these assumptions turn out to be false.

To begin with, the so-called imprecatory psalms do not actually invoke curses upon one's enemies. In the ancient world, there were specific formulas for cursing, and curses identified a specific person as the target. Someone would invoke a curse against a particular enemy in hopes of bringing vengeance upon them. For example, a man might have had a neighbor he despised. If it came to point

where he wanted to curse him, the man would go to a sorcerer and pay for the service of cursing his neighbor. The sorcerer would provide the exact language of the curse (usually written on an object) and instructions on how to carry out the cursing ritual. The man would then perform the ritual and utter the curse: e.g., “May my neighbor Bob be broken and go down to the earth like this pot!” Then, as part of the ritual, the object on which the curse was written would be shattered on the ground.

What we find in Psalm 109, however, is categorically different. We notice this in two areas: cursing formulas are absent from these psalms and they are intentionally generic about the ‘enemies,’ never naming them.³⁹ Rather than call down curses on particular people, then, these psalms do something else. Ultimately,

the point is not a *realization of fantasies of vengeance*, but a *restoration of justice* through God’s saving righteousness. The complaint is therefore a cry for justice in a world full of injustice. In God’s presence, it insists that the cruelty and ruthlessness the enemies heap on victims cannot be allowed.⁴⁰

In the imprecatory psalms, therefore, the psalmist is doing two things. Firstly, he is using particular people and deeds not as objects of cursing but as examples of universal sin. His prayer is not asking for vengeance on a specific person, but crying out for God’s grand promises to be realized *in general*—to vanquish all injustice from earth. And, secondly, the psalmist is not harboring wrongdoing in his heart and asking God to carry out his own vengeance. Instead, he “transfers” his “‘vengeance’ to God,” renouncing his claim to it and entrusting it to the one to whom it belongs. In this the psalmist is taking a deeply biblical and countercultural position which is grounded in Scripture: “‘Vengeance is mine,’ says the Lord, ‘I will repay’” (Romans 12:9).

But what about the second part of the question: Do these prayers contradict Christ’s instructions for how to treat enemies?

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor” and “Hate your enemy.” But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:43–44)

On the surface it seems like Christ’s words contradict the imprecatory psalms. Yet, if this were true, then we would expect the Apostles and New Testament writers to do the same. But they do not. In fact, they do quite the opposite: “The writers of the New Testament both quote from the imprecatory psalms and provide their own words of imprecation against enemies” (e.g., Acts 1:20// Psalms 69:25//109:8; Matthew 10:14–15; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:8).⁴²

The reason for this is because loving one’s enemies and praying the imprecatory psalms are two sides to the same coin. One addresses how people ought to respond to sin *personally*: they are to love their enemies and pray for them, desiring that they would come to know Christ as Lord. The other addresses how people are to respond to sin *universally*: they are to recognize it as a scourge on creation, as something that ultimately should be eradicated.

We therefore find these two ideas entwined in the cry of the early church: “Come, our Lord!” (*maranatha*) (1 Corinthians 16:22).

What happens in the world of humanity is from its very beginning a cry for God’s judgment. And the first response to that cry that is found in the gospel, the good news, is:

The stream of events will not run on forever, over blood and victims, goodness, evil, innocence, and justice. God will put an end to the course of history and will make clear that there is a difference between justice and injustice, and that this difference must be demonstrated. God will seek out the buried victims, the forgotten, starved children, the dishonored women, and God will find the hidden doers of these deeds. God will gather

all of them before God's eternal, holy will for the good, so that all must see how it stands with their lives.⁴³

To pray the imprecatory psalms, then, is to pray the *maranatha* prayer. It is to call out the terrible violence, suffering, and injustice in this world, to join those who suffer, and to beg God to intervene; more than that, it is to express hope that, in the end, God will intervene. As Gordon Wenham says, "If we do not believe in this judgment, we have no gospel to offer to the suffering world."⁴⁴

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 109? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the God of justice, who hears the cry of the marginalized and oppressed and promises to come to their aid. He will one day return to execute judgment over creation and restore all things. "Those who sing these songs sing them as a cry for change and a melody of longing for a world without tears."⁴⁵

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes,
and there will be no more death
or mourning or crying or pain,
for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4)

We are, on the other hand, committing to wait in the manner of Psalm 109: by crying out against evil in our world and asking God to vanquish it from earth. In so doing, we cry "Come, our Lord!" (*maranatha*) (1 Corinthians 16:22).

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, describe what we're doing when we pray Psalm 109.
2. A hidden sin among Christians, often treated as a kind of guilty pleasure, is the holding of grudges. I've known Christians who

would revisit past grievances, some from over 60 years ago, as a matter of daily conversation. But how does Psalm 109, and the larger counsel of Scripture, teach us to deal with personal grievances?

3. Another hidden sin among Christians, especially in the West, is apathy toward those who are suffering and oppressed. But how does Psalm 109, and the larger counsel of Scripture, teach us to deal with universal sin and suffering?

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

1. **Psalm 107** expresses the tribe of Judah's gratitude to God for their return from exile. Notice the word "some." It describes four different groups. Summarize what is said about each group during the exile.

In the Psalms, God is praised for his mighty acts in history, the stunning majesty of creation, personal and corporate rescue from enemies, and for his written revelation. In Psalm 108, for what is God praised?

3. In **Psalm 109** the psalmist is persecuted. Thus, he gives himself to prayer (v. 4). What does he pray for (vv. 6–20)? Why does he pray in this way—what has the wicked man done? How did the earliest Christians apply this psalm (see Acts 1:20)?

4. **Psalms 111–112** follow an acrostic pattern (after "Praise the Lord," the first word of each line begins with the successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet), and therefore these psalms illuminate each other. What does Psalm 111 say about "the Lord"? What does Psalm 112 say about "the man who fears the Lord"?

WEEK 11

PSALM 110

For the early Church, Psalm 110 was a key text in identifying Jesus of Nazareth as God's long-awaited Messiah. This is visible throughout the New Testament,⁴⁶ but nowhere more so than in Acts 2 when Peter, standing before the assembly at Pentecost, gave evidence for this:

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 110
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 113
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 115
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 118
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 119

“Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said,

“The Lord said to my Lord:

““Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.””

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” (Acts 2:29–36, quoting Psalm 110:1)

This is the culmination of Peter's speech on why Jesus was in fact God's Messiah. Earlier in the speech, Peter argued from Scripture that the Messiah had to suffer, die, and be raised to life. Now he seeks to show how, according to the Scriptures, the Messiah would reign as Lord: he would ascend to heaven to sit at God's right hand and reign until the fullness of time, when he would return to restore creation.

But why was Psalm 110 so widely seen as the key text? What was it about this particular psalm that created such expectation? The answer began in ancient Israel around 1000 BC, a millennium before Jesus walked the earth. That was when David reigned as king over Israel (specifically, 1010 – 970 BC). The reason we can tie Psalm 110 to the beginning of David's reign is because, according to most scholars, it is a special kind of composition known as a *coronation psalm*.

As the name suggests, this psalm was used during a king's coronation, the ceremony when he was crowned king over Israel. The psalm itself is a word from the Lord, a two-part oracle perhaps delivered by a prophet during David's coronation. It begins with, "The Lord says..." (v. 1):

Oracle to the King (vv. 1–3)
King's enthronement
Promise of kingdom's victory
Oracle to the King (vv. 4–7)
King's installation as priest
Promise of kingdom's victory

Because the psalm is a divine oracle, it carries significant weight. It is not merely a commendation of the king or a blessing upon his reign, but a divine promise, a guarantee of what will come to pass.

Two things are especially central to the promise: the *eternality* and *universality* of the kingdom:

“The Lord has sworn,
and **will not change his mind**:
‘You are a priest **forever**,
in the order of Melchizedek’
The Lord is at your right hand,
he will crush kings on the day of his wrath.
He will **judge the nations**, heaping up the dead
and crushing the rulers of **the whole earth**.” (vv. 4–6)

Because God has bound himself to this kingdom, the kingdom takes on God’s attributes: it will last forever and will ultimately extend to the ends of the earth. And it will be a kingdom characterized by justice and righteousness.

Yet it was precisely these promises that were challenged during the exile and after. If God had bound himself to the Davidic king and kingdom *forever*, then why was there neither a king nor a kingdom now? How should the people, living under foreign rule and without a king, understand these ancient promises?

These were the burning questions that the Psalter sought to answer. It is no accident that Psalm 110 raises similar themes to Psalms 1–2 and 89, namely the destiny of the promised Davidic king, the anointed one, who would one day save his people and rule over the earth. And it is no accident that Psalm 110, composed for David’s coronation, would appear here in the fifth and final book of the Psalter, where the figure of the Davidic king makes a “dramatic reappearance.”⁴⁷ Having nearly disappeared since Psalm 89 and its depiction of the “crown in the dust” (Psalm 89:39), the Davidic king suddenly reappears in Book 5.

As such, it seems this reappearance is quite intentional: in the storyline of the Psalter, “Psalm 110 appears after the fall of the Davidic monarchy in Psalm 89 and in a sense reaffirm royal hopes.”⁴⁸

The location of Psalm 110 in the last third of the Book of Psalms may point to the way it was understood by those who

gave the Psalter its final arrangement. It is a sequel to Psalm 89 and its lament over the rejected Messiah. It is a prophetic voice repeating and affirming the promises of Psalm 2 that the Lord will claim the nations through the Messiah. Until God has defeated his enemies, the Messiah is “seated on the right hand.”⁴⁹

Psalm 110, therefore, is central to the message, not only of Book 5 but of the whole Psalter. It connects the opening promises of Psalm 2 with the seeming collapse of these promises in Psalm 89, providing an answer for how both can be true: God will accomplish his promises through an exalted kingly/priestly figure in the future.

That is why the New Testament writers frequently refer to the Psalm 110: they saw Jesus as this long-promised king. In Jesus of Nazareth they saw the anointed one, the king and priest who would suffer, die, and rise again, the one who, ultimately, would conquer the kings of the earth and restore justice. So when the New Testament quotes Psalm 110:1 and says that Jesus is the one who sits at God’s “right hand,” it is saying something profound:

The psalm holds the enthronement of Jesus in relation to the question of political power in the world. It insists that the office of Jesus concerns nations and rulers. The office of regent of God has been filled and fulfilled by a person who was not a ruler and had no national constituency... The goal of world history is not to be found in the destiny of any people or nation nor is the governance of any leader the way to it. Indeed, all the nations who think and dream of autonomous dominance and destiny are in that way enemies of the coming kingdom of God and its Messiah, including the one in which we happen to live. The psalm is a repeated invitation to think that way about the question of power in the world.⁵⁰

It is not only identifying Jesus as Messiah, therefore, but also making a larger claim about his lordship: Jesus Christ *alone* is Lord. When Christians confess that Jesus sits at the right hand of God, they

confess their allegiance to him over their allegiance to national, political, denominational, ideological, familial, or other powers of this world. As Clinton McCann says, this is a “profoundly radical affirmation.”⁵¹

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 110? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the anointed one who sits at God’s right hand. He is the Lord Jesus, who reigns from heaven and one day will return to judge the nations and restore creation. And we are, on the other hand, committing to wait in the manner of Psalm 110: by confessing our allegiance to Christ and his reign. But this is far more demanding than it might sound. It means committing to make Christ king and Lord and to identify as citizens of his kingdom, placing all other loyalties and identities at Christ’s feet. It means committing to live in the “already but not yet” reality of his kingdom, that is, to trust Christ’s lordship even in the midst of his invisible (and often imperceptible) rule.

QUESTIONS

1. Take some time now to reflect upon what it means to pray Psalm 110 today: What are we doing when we confess Christ as Lord, reigning from heaven?
2. I know of a family in a difficult situation. Despite their best efforts, they simply have not been able to escape their circumstances. They are faithful Christians and believe God is at work, but they are struggling to see it. In light of Psalm 110, how might you counsel and encourage people like this?
3. In the early Church, repeating the words of Psalm 110—that Christ is Lord—was wildly dangerous. Roman Emperor Nero (54–68 AD), for example, mercilessly hunted and tortured confessing Christians: he crucified them, fed them to lions during gladiatorial

matches, and burned their corpses as lamps at his garden parties. Today, in the West at least, we are not yet enduring such treatment, but we do face constant pressure to treat other powers as “Lord.” We face forces in sports, in school, in the workplace, on social media, etc. to embrace values that we do not share, often at a cost to ourselves. More subtly, we face pressures in our friendship groups, families, and church communities to place certain values above the Lordship of Christ. Take some time now to reflect on these different forces in your life and consider how they threaten your confession that Christ is Lord.

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

Psalm 119

1. Do you pay the Bible lip service and fail to give it “life service”? How often do you read the Bible? Have you ever read it all the way through? When will you start?

2. Review the list below and for each category, think of specific examples of these benefits in your own life.

- It Produces joy (vv. 1-2, 35, 47, 77, 92, 103, 111)
- It Counsels us (vv. 18, 24, 97-100)
- It Liberates us (vv. 32, 45, 93)
- It Comforts us in Suffering (vv. 52, 67, 71)
- It Instructs us (vv. 97-104, 105, 130)
- It Gives us Peace (v. 165)

WEEK 12

PSALM 146

The Psalter opens with a two-part introduction, with Psalms 1–2 providing a “gateway to the Psalter,”⁵² which set out the twin themes of the book: the righteous person and the anointed one. Since these themes were interwoven throughout the book, we said it was helpful to ask two questions of each

psalm: Who is it we wait for? (that is, who is the long-promised anointed one?) and How do we wait for him? (that is, how do we live as a righteous person?). As the Psalter unfolded, we gradually learned both the identity of this person and how to wait for him: Jesus of Nazareth was the long-expected anointed one, the messianic king, and we wait for him by imitating the model of the Davidic king, outlined in the Psalter and perfected in the person of Christ. Now we come to the end of the Psalter and, like the beginning, we find a closing framework: Psalms 146–150. These five psalms provide a capstone and crescendo to the book of Psalms.

Historically, Psalms 146–150 have been called the “Great Hallel,” or “Great Praise,” since each psalm begins with the same word, “hallelujah!” (which, in Hebrew, means “praise the Lord!”). But why does the Psalter finish on such a strong note of praise? The clue lies in Psalm 145. This is the final Davidic psalm in the Psalter, providing the key to the dilemma of the Davidic king:

I will exalt you, my God the King;
I will praise your name forever and ever

WEEKLY READINGS

<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 1	PSALM 121
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 2	PSALM 132
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 3	PSALM 145
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 4	PSALM 146
<input type="checkbox"/> DAY 5	PSALM 150

Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures through all generations.
The Lord is trustworthy in all he promises
and faithful in all he does. (Psalm 145:1, 8, 13)

Psalm 145, then, stands as an answer to the angst of the previous psalms. While the people were still awaiting their long-promised king, they could now, with the psalmist David, put their trust in God. They could confess that God is the true king, that his kingdom is everlasting, and that he is faithful to his promises. If he has promised a final Davidic king, the Messiah, he would deliver this in due course. Because of this, the people could unreservedly praise God.

That is why the psalms that follow, Psalms 146–150, conclude the Psalter with a cacophony of praise. And this emphasis on praise is key, for it ties the whole Psalter together:

The first four books all end with an ascription of praise (41:13; 71:18–20 or 17–20; 89:52; 106:48 or 57, 48)...the concentration on praise at the end of each book and the special stress on it at the end of the whole collection strongly suggests that a main purpose of the Psalter is praise.⁵³

Yet the reason for praise is more than just God's promise of a king; it includes God's promise to restore all of creation through the king. While the Psalter begins with a focus on the people Israel and their king David, it expands the scope and vision. At the end, therefore, we find a focus on God's everlasting and cosmic reign, his Messiah ruling over the nations, and "all flesh" (Psalm 145:21) and "everything that has breath" (Psalm 150:6) praising him. As one scholar has pointed out, "These all provide links that make these psalms not simply distinct hymns of praise but a symphony of praise in five movements."⁵⁴ Ultimately, these elements lead to a universal vision of Yahweh ruling over the earth.

Psalm 146, then, contributes to this overall message. In particular, it ties the theological threads of the larger Psalter into the concluding framework:

Psalm 146 recalls both the beginning of the psalter (Psalms 1–2) and the theological heart of the psalter (Psalms 93; 95–99).⁵⁵

Like the larger Psalter, then, Psalm 146 “gives instruction about the wrong and right way to live,” and it showcases praise as a central part of the right way.⁵⁶

Indeed, Psalm 146 offers what might be called *instruction* in praise. Scholars have noticed that it adopts a common form of psalm—the instruction psalm—and infuses it with praise. This, along with its position in the larger Psalter, suggests that Psalm 146 is meant to instruct humanity in its primary vocation: “Praise—the offering of the whole self to God in worship and work—is the lifelong vocation of the human creature in response to God’s cosmic sovereignty and thus God’s comprehensive claim on human life and the life of the world.”⁵⁷

The structure of Psalm 146 highlights the nature of biblical praise: it begins and ends with the command “praise the Lord!” (vv. 1, 10) and, in between, it develops how to do this and shows why it is proper:

Praise (vv. 1–2)

Trust in God (vv. 3–5)

Character of God (vv. 6–9)

Praise (v. 10)

As the structure highlights, praise is grounded in trust, which is grounded in God’s character. You can’t have any of these without the others. And that is why the Psalter time and again expounds God’s character by recounting his past acts of goodness to Israel, and why

such accounts are accompanied with commands to trust and to praise.

Since trust is foundational for praise, Psalm 146 focuses on it. In so doing, it ties the message of the Psalter into the larger biblical storyline:

The antithesis of praising God is trusting oneself or trusting human agencies and institutions in place of God...In the book of Psalms and the Bible as a whole, wickedness is essentially a matter of trust. It involves the decision to trust someone or something other than God, and the results are empty and destructive.”⁵⁸

Against the long story of human history, which is a story of corruption and destruction, Psalm 146 presents God—the creator of the cosmos, the one who is “faithful forever” (v. 6) and who “reigns forever” (v. 10). Untouched by time, he is Israel’s shelter in ages past, present, and future. Here at the end of the Psalter, therefore, the people of God are called to respond in the only fitting way: to trust and praise.

So, what are we doing when we pray Psalm 146? We are, on the one hand, proclaiming the one we wait upon: the “God of Jacob” (v. 5), the “maker of heaven and earth” (v. 6), the one who is “forever faithful” (v. 6) and who “reigns forever” (v. 10), the one who cares for the poor and oppressed, the widow and orphan, the enslaved, the disabled, and the foreigner (vv. 7–9). We wait, in other words, upon the good and true king of the cosmos, the one who will again send his son, the Messiah, to restore all things. And we are, on the other hand, committing to wait in the manner of Psalm 146: by trusting in God and praising him. To commit to trust is to step into the unknown of the future based on the known of the past: God’s goodness and faithfulness. And to commit to praise is, simply, to proclaim the reality of God’s goodness and faithfulness. Here at the end of the Psalter, therefore, we come full circle and pray as our Lord taught us: “May your kingdom come.”

QUESTIONS

1. In your own words, summarize the “story” of the Psalter, especially regarding its story of the coming king. How does Psalm 146 help bring this story to a close?

2. Now describe how Psalm 146 is “instruction in praise.”

3. Since its composition in 1741, Handel’s *Messiah* has become a common concert on offer at Christmas time. One of the parts that catches newcomers by surprise is when, during the famous ‘Hallelujah’ chorus, everyone in the audience suddenly stands. According to legend, the tradition began in 1743, when King George II attended the premier in London and, upon hearing the ‘Hallelujah’ chorus, was so overcome with awe and praise that he rose to his feet. Whether or not it is true, what this story shows is that outward postures reveal our inner feelings. Interestingly, Christian tradition has also understood the inverse to be true: taking certain postures can shape our feelings toward things. This, in fact, is why some traditions practice certain postures during worship services: kneeling during prayer, standing during the reading of Scripture and singing, etc. How might we today incorporate this into our praise in worshiping communities? As an example of this, please stand together now and read a classic praise psalm: Psalm 146. Afterward, please reflect on how this small change in posture might help shape your attitude of praising God.

FURTHER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM OUR DISCIPLESHIP TEAM

Psalm 150

1. How often do you really praise the Lord with the excitement indicated in Psalm 150? Do those around you want to know more about the Lord based on your praise of Him and what He’s doing in your life?

2. Think of at least one thing every day for which to praise the Lord and praise Him! Meditate on His power, love and sovereignty in your life.

3. Memorize verses 2 and 6. Recall these verses when you feel like complaining about your circumstances.

ENDNOTES

¹Gordon Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 13.

²Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 33.

³Wenham, *Psalter Reclaimed*, 35.

⁴Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 26.

⁵Craigie's full list: Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–18); Song of the Ark (Numbers 10:35–36); Oracles of Balaam (Numbers 23–24); Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32); Blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33); Song of Deborah (Judges 5); and Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1–10).

⁶Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

⁷Patrick D. Miller, "The Beginning of the Psalter," pp. 83–92, in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 91.

⁸Miller, "Beginning of the Psalter," 91–92.

⁹See James Mays, *Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1994), 40–41.

¹⁰Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: The Art of Spiritual Reading* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), 3, quoting Friedrich von Hügel.

¹¹Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 1–11.

¹²See C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 25–26.

¹³Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1–50* (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 202.

¹⁴Rebekah Eklund, *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus' Laments in the New Testament* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015).

¹⁵Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*. Translated by Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1981), 78.

¹⁶Westermann, *Praise and Lament*, 161.

¹⁷Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974).

¹⁸C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*. 2nd (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), 158–159.

¹⁹Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 73.

²⁰William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 149–150.

²¹Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*. Trans by Armin Siedlecki. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 333.

²²Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms & The Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 204.

²³Walter Brueggemann, “Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon,” pp. 189–213, in *The Psalms & the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994 [1991]).

²⁴J. Clinton McCann, “Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament theology,” in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in honor of Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm.*, by Elizabeth F. Huwiler, Jonathan T. Glass, and Roger W. Lee, eds. Kenneth G. Hoglund, 247–257 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 253.

²⁵J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. IV, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, by eds. Leander Keck et al, 641–1280 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 969.

²⁶Brueggemann, *The Psalms & the Life of Faith*, 208.

²⁷Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 85.

²⁸Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 674.

²⁹J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. IV, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, by eds. Leander Keck et al, 641–1280 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1034.

³⁰Nancy L. deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 99.

³¹Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 125.

³²Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 126–127.

³³Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 129.

³⁴J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. IV, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, by eds. Leander Keck et al, 641–1280 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1044, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr.

³⁵Gordon J. Wenham, *Reclaiming the Psalter: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 148–152.

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³⁷C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1958), 23–25.

³⁸A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), pp. lxxxviii–lxxxix.

³⁹Bernd Janowski, *Arguing with God: A Theological Anthropology of the Psalms*, trans. A. Siedlecki (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 124.

⁴⁰Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 125. Emphasis in original.

⁴¹Janowski, *Arguing with God*, 125.

⁴²Nancy deClaissé-Walford, “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms,” pp. 77–92, in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf A. Jacobson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 82.

⁴³Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. L. M. Maloney (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 68, quoting Gottfried Bachl.

⁴⁴Gordon Wenham, *Reclaiming the Psalter: Praying and Praising with the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 135.

⁴⁵Zenger, *God of Vengeance*, 79.

⁴⁶E.g., Matt 26:64; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:34–35; 7:55–56; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 1 Pet 3:22.

⁴⁷Nancy deClaissé-Walford, *Introduction to the Psalms: A Song from Ancient Israel* (St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 116.

⁴⁸Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger, Jr., *Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 479.

⁴⁹James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 353.

⁵⁰Mays, *Psalms*, 355.

⁵¹J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, vol. IV in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, eds. Leander Keck et al, 641–1280 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1131.

⁵²Robert L. Cole, *Psalms 1–2: Gateway to the Psalter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013).

⁵³Geoffrey Grogan, *Prayer, Praise & Prophecy: A Theology of the Psalms* (Christian Focus, 2001), 239.

⁵⁴Grogan, *Prayer, Praise & Prophecy*, 241.

⁵⁵J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. IV, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, by eds. Leander Keck et al, 641–1280 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1262.

⁵⁶James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 440.

⁵⁷McCann, *Book of Psalms*, 1263.

⁵⁸J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*. Vol. IV, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, by eds. Leander Keck et al, 641–1280 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 1263–1264.