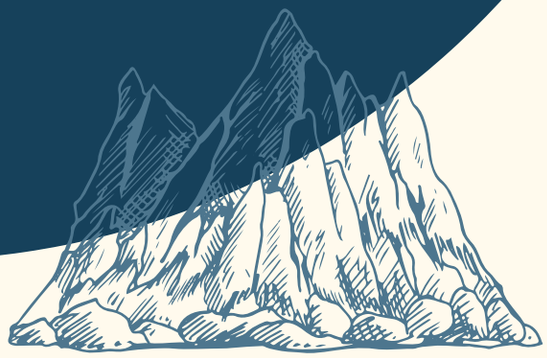
Psalms Reading Guide

A PSALM
is the work of angels,
a heavenly institution,
a spiritual incense.

– ST. BASIL



Intro

FROM CHARLES MORRIS

When I read a news article online, I read it differently than I would a love letter from my wife, Janet. And I wouldn't read a letter from Janet the same way I would read stories like *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. Knowing what we are reading tells us a lot about how we should read it.

Of course, when we read the Psalms, we know we are reading God's Word. That is the first thing to know—that God is speaking to us just like He does in all of Scripture.

But there is something unique about the Psalms. All through the Bible God speaks to us in a variety of ways—history, law, prophecy—but in the Psalms He does something different: He invites us to speak to Him. He gives us words to express all our doubts, sorrows, fears, confidences, praises, and joys. And He does so through divine poetry. The Psalms are full of metaphors and images that touch our soul and engage our imagination.

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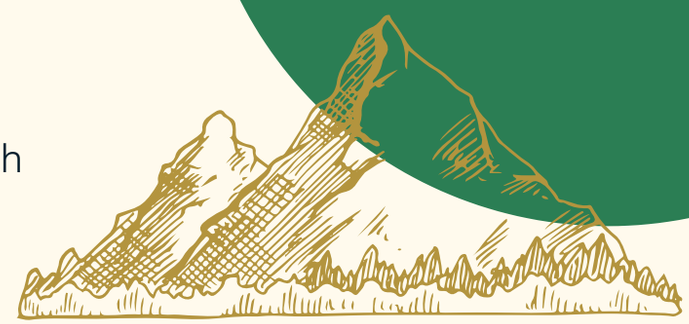


It is not surprising the Psalms are just as diverse as our human emotions and experiences. I am always humbled to realize how completely the Lord understands my soul. I cannot tell you how often I have been at a loss for words in prayer only to find a psalm that prays it for me.

This reading guide is designed to

open up a rich variety of expression.

I pray you will dig into them more deeply and use them more often in genuine conversations with the Lord. He wants us to be honest when we speak to Him and He wants us to honestly listen when He speaks to us.

My deepest thanks go to two team members for which this project could never have been completed. First, to Dan Warne, speaker and director for *El Faro de Redención* (Lighthouse of Redemption) and second, my wife, Janet, who is a gifted student of God's Word.

The Lord is my Shepherd;
I shall not want,

Charles Morris

TASTE AND SEE
THAT THE LORD
IS GOOD;
BLESSED IS THE
ONE WHO TAKES
REFUGE IN HIM."
PSALM 34:8

A psalm is a city of refuge from the demons,
a means of getting help from the angels,
a weapon against fears by night,
a rest from toils by day,
a safeguard for infants,
an adornment for those at the peak of health,
a consolation for the elderly,
a most beautiful ornament for women.
It comforts the lonely.
It takes command of the passions.
It is the elementary textbook of beginners,
the improvement of those advancing,
the solid support of the mature,
and the voice of the church.
It brightens the feast days;
it validates the sorrow that is in accordance with God.
For a psalm calls forth a tear even from a heart of stone.

**A psalm is the work of angels,
a heavenly institution,
a spiritual incense.**

ST. BASIL THE GREAT (4TH CENTURY)

1 How to Read the Psalms

In Hebrew, the title of the book of Psalms is *tehilleam* which means "songs of praise."

That may seem strange when you add them up and realize there are more psalms of lament than there are of praise. And yet, the book as a whole moves in the direction of praise. Read through it and you'll notice that the joy begins to overtake the sadness until the last seven psalms where praise takes over completely.

I think there's a message for us in that arrangement. The Psalms seem to be organized to show us where the world and our own lives are headed. We too will move out of sorrow into the joy of unrestrained praise—and the Psalms tell us why. From beginning to end they declare that the Lord reigns, that He will set His messianic king on the throne, and that—through Him—His people will be blessed and the world brought under control.

Still, there are ups and downs along the way. God's people despair of hope. The struggle to live by faith is real. "How long, oh Lord" is one of the constant refrains of the Psalms. Yet, the movement is always in the direction of hope. As believers, we know the King has come and paid for our redemption but we are still waiting for His return.

The Psalms invite us to live in that space in conversation with our God, pouring out our doubts, sorrows, joys, fears, confidences, and praises freely and directly to Him. What comes through loud and clear is that He wants us to talk to Him and to listen when He talks to us.

Charles Spurgeon called the Psalms the "Treasury of David." King David's vital relationship with the Lord was a rich treasure that now belongs to us through faith in Christ. We are the Lord's royal sons and daughters who can boldly draw near to His throne of grace and say what's on our hearts –and the Psalms give us the words. They cry out to Him in pain, ask Him questions, listen to His wisdom, make requests, claim His benefits, and declare His infinite goodness. Mark Futato breaks them down into six types in his book *Interpreting the Psalms:*

1. HYMNS
2. LAMENTS
3. SONGS OF THANKSGIVING
4. SONGS OF CONFIDENCE
5. DIVINE KINGSHIP SONGS
6. WISDOM SONGS

Each of these categories are a priceless ingredient in our life of faith. All of them work together to lift our eyes to the Lord. Lament leads us to faith, faith to confidence, confidence to praise and thanksgiving!

Ask yourself,

HOW IS GOD SPEAKING TO ME IN THIS PSALM?
WHAT RESPONSE DOES IT CALL FORTH?
WHAT EFFECT DOES HE WANT IT TO HAVE IN MY LIFE?
IS IT PRAISE? THANKSGIVING? CONFIDENCE? WISDOM?

Make no mistake, if you ask the Lord to speak to you, He will. The Holy Spirit will use the Psalms to reshape both your heart and your life.

Let's take a look at them one type at a time.

2 Types of Psalms

1. THE HYMN

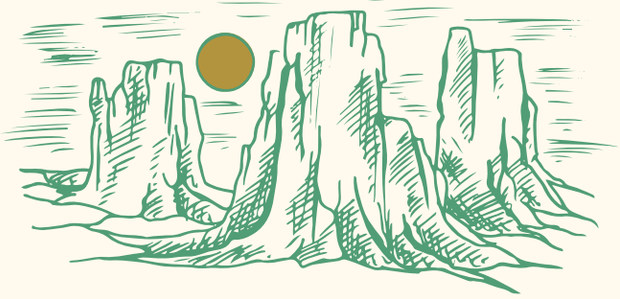
(Psalm 66, 95, 100)

One of the greatest treasures we have in the Psalms is God's own inspired words to use when we praise Him.

The hymns are exuberant and almost always contain an invitation for others to join in the joy. Sometimes the psalmist simply reminds his own soul to praise the Lord but usually the entire creation, all the nations, even the angels in heaven are encouraged to sing their part in the chorus.

When you read the hymns, look for the invitation:

PSALM 95:1
"Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation."



PSALM 103:1
"Praise the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, praise His holy name."

PSALM 148:7
"Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths."

PSALM 150:6
"Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD."

The reasons for praising the Lord are vast but they can generally be divided into two categories: His creation of the world and His lovingkindness towards His people, especially shown in His deeds of redemption.

Be sure to notice the "for" in a hymn and pay attention to the reasons the Lord is worthy of praise.

PSALM 13:6
"I will sing the LORD'S praise, For he has been good to me."

PSALM 92:1,4
"It is good to praise the LORD ... For you make me glad by your deeds, LORD; I sing for joy at what your hands have done."

PSALM 96:1,5
"Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth ... For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens."

PSALM 117:1-2
"Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples! For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever."

2. THE LAMENT

(Psalm 12, 13, 14)

The Lament Psalms are passionate expressions of grief or sorrow. They tend to be just as disoriented as we are when we're in that state. They ask questions that echo our deepest feelings of confusion about our own lives and the state of the world. How comforting to know the Lord understands our pains and perplexities and gives us the words to express them.

Listen for the questions in the Laments:

PSALM 6:3
"My soul is in deep anguish. How long, LORD, how long?"

PSALM 10:1
"Why, LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

PSALM 13:1-2
"How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart?"

PSALM 22:1
"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The psalmist may not understand what's happening but he doesn't hurl his questions into the dark. He addresses them to the Lord and asks Him to both hear his prayers and answer them. The key is relationship. We are God's people, He has bound Himself to us in love, and we have the privilege of asking for His help.

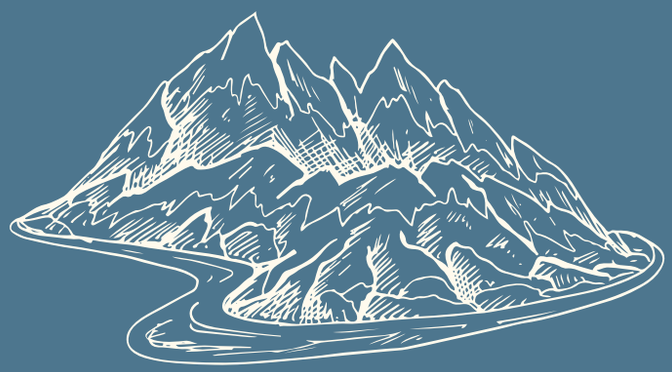
Look for the requests and make them your own:

PSALM 4:1
"Answer me when I call to you, my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress; have mercy on me and hear my prayer."

PSALM 6:2
"Have mercy on me, LORD, for I am faint; heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony."

PSALM 28:2
"Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help, as I lift up my hands toward your Most Holy Place."

PSALM 41:4
"Have mercy on me, LORD; heal me, for I have sinned against you."



The psalms of lament almost always end with the psalmist's faith restored. He knows he has been heard and he knows the Lord will answer.

Listen for the change of heart and enter into it:

PSALM 6:8-9
"Away from me, all you who do evil, for the LORD has heard my weeping. The LORD has heard my cry for mercy; the LORD accepts my prayer."

PSALM 38:15
"LORD, I wait for you; you will answer, Lord my God."

PSALMS 42:5
"Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

3. SONGS OF THANKSGIVING

(Psalm 34, 40, 124)

Lament turns into thanksgiving when the Lord answers our cries for help. The Hymns glory in the big picture of God's power and love but the Songs of Thanksgiving celebrate His intervention into our own lives. Both rejoice in the sheer goodness of the Lord and both have a place in our worship but there's something fresh and heartfelt about the Thanksgiving Songs.

There's usually a three-part structure to them: a resolution to praise, revisiting the lament, and then giving thanks again.

1. RESOLUTION TO PRAISE

The psalmist often begins by declaring his intention to glorify the Lord. Other times he simply declares his love for the Lord.

Look for the declarations and make them your own:

PSALM 18:1
"I love you, O Lord, my strength."

PSALM 30:1
"I will exalt you, Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me."

PSALM 34:1-2
"I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and rejoice."

PSALM 138:1
"I will praise you, Lord, with all my heart; before the "gods" I will sing your praise."

2. REVISITING THE LAMENT

Like a good storyteller the psalmist relives his crisis, sometimes in vivid detail, and then rejoices over the Lord's deliverance.

Think about your own story and how God has brought deliverance in your life.

PSALM 34:4-6
"I sought the LORD, and he answered me, he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles."

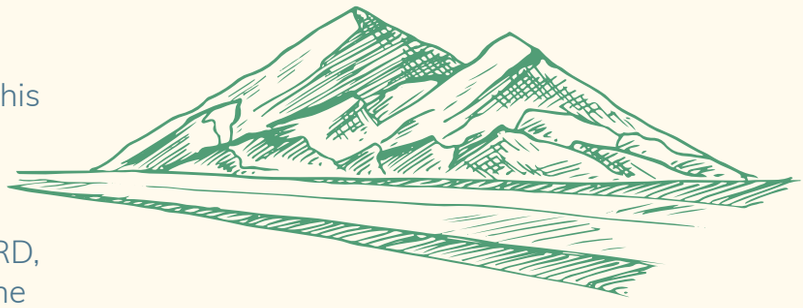
3. GIVING THANKS ALL OVER AGAIN

We can keep thanking the Lord for as long as we live and the Psalms teach us how to do it.

Look for words you can make your own.

PSALM 66:20
"Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me.

PSALM 18:49
"Therefore I will praise you, LORD, among the nations; I will sing the praises of your name."



4. SONGS OF CONFIDENCE

(Psalm 16, 23, 131)

There is not a shred of self-confidence in these songs, only overwhelming confidence in the Lord. When the trials of life begin to take their toll, these songs will lift you out of discouragement. When the future is pending and dangers threaten, they will deliver you out of fear.

Poetry plays a role in the process. A poetic image or metaphor can open up a wealth of meaning. Take the line, "He makes me lie down in green pastures." You could speak a thousand words and still not communicate a fraction of what that single picture says about the Lord's care. Poetry invites you to slow down and savor and let the images speak to your soul.

Listen for the poetic images of strength and protection and take time to ruminate on them:

PSALM 16:5
"Lord, you alone are my portion and my cup; you make my lot secure."

PSALM 27:1
"The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?"

PSALM 62:1-2
"Truly my soul finds rest in God; my salvation comes from him. Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken."

PSALM 91:2
"I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

PSALM 144:2
"He is my loving God and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge."

5. DIVINE KINGSHIP SONGS

(Psalm 20, 21, 47)

There are two types of Kingship Songs: those that focus on the human king of Israel and those that proclaim God to be king. Of course, the categories merge with the arrival of Jesus. He is both the human Son of David and the Divine Son of God, the one David himself calls "Lord."

In Psalm 2, the nations are raging in rebellion against the rule of God and He responds by installing His Son on the throne. He gives Him the nations as His inheritance and warns the kings of the earth to "kiss my Son." The message is clear: God rules through His Son who is both the Son of David and the Son of God.

Psalm 45 communicates the same message. It was originally written to celebrate the wedding of a king, possibly King Solomon. But in the New Testament the book of Hebrews identifies this king as Jesus, the one who is both God and the one God anoints as king. He is also the bridegroom who has come to betroth us as His bride.

Both types of Kingship Songs reassure us that the world is under God's control.

He is sovereign over both the forces of nature and the history of the world. Nothing can thwart His plan to bring all things in heaven and on earth under the rule of His Son. These psalms are strength for our souls in a world that seems out of control. Our God reigns and we can affirm it with conviction as we read the Kingship Songs.

PSALM 20:6
"Now this I know: the LORD gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand."

PSALM 45: 6-7
"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

PSALM 47:8-9
"God reigns over the nations; God is seated on his holy throne. The nobles of the nations assemble as the people of the God of Abraham, for the kings of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted."

PSALM 103:19
"The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all."

6. WISDOM SONGS

(Psalm 19, 119, 73)

The book of Psalms opens with a Song of Wisdom. Psalm 1 divides the world into two kinds of people and urges us to be among the "blessed." Those who scoff and ignore the Word of the Lord will be like "chaff" blown away by the wind while those who delight in the words of the Lord will be like a "tree planted by streams of water" whose "leaf does not wither." It's a sobering word of wisdom that sets the stage for the rest of the psalms.

The Wisdom Songs sound a lot like Proverbs and the other "wisdom literature" in the Bible but what makes them unique is how often we are given the words to speak. They invite us to affirm the blessing of wisdom and rejoice that God gives guidance to those who trust Him.

The Wisdom Songs invite us to rejoice that God gives guidance to those who trust Him.

Psalm 19 is a good example of this. It extolls the benefits of God's Word and the blessedness of walking in His ways:

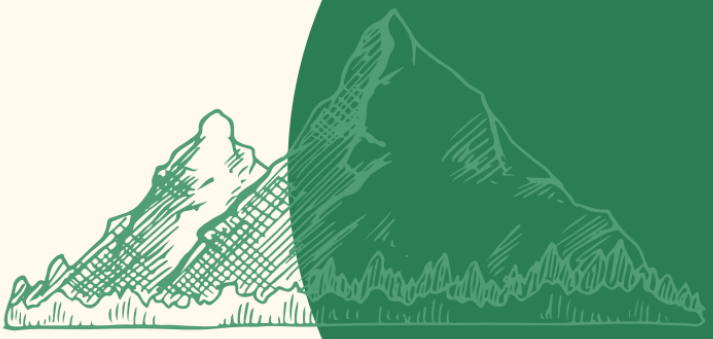
> **PSALM 19: 7-10**
> "The law of the LORD is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the LORD are firm, and all of them are righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb."

In some of the Wisdom Songs, the psalmist isn't quite as confident as he is in Psalm 19. In Psalm 73, he even doubts the wisdom of the Lord. Looking around the world he sees the wicked prospering while the righteous aren't faring so well. But he takes his complaint to the Lord and learns the wisdom of seeing the present in light of the future. We all need this ongoing counsel of the Lord to make us wise.

As you read the Wisdom Songs take seriously both the warning that the path of the foolish “leads to destruction” and the promise that the Word of the Lord is a “light on your path.” Your Father is committed to leading you “in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:24)

PSALM 73:24

“You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.”



3 Christ in the Psalms

The New Testament announces Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, in the very first verse of Matthew and then quotes the Psalms more than 100 times to drive home the point. Nearly every New Testament writer draws on the Psalms to explain who Jesus is and what He came to do. Which means we have it on good authority that the Psalms are all about Jesus. In fact, all the Scriptures are all about Jesus—according to Jesus.

I say it every day on the program "This is Haven Today where we share the great story that's all about Jesus." A conversation Jesus had in Luke 24:44-47 helped me understand this truth. After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to two of His dejected disciples and gave them—and us—a lesson in how to read the Scriptures:

HE SAID TO THEM,

"'This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

According to His own testimony, Jesus is the key to understanding the entire Old Testament—the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms. Once we put on our Jesus glasses, we start to see Him everywhere. In the Psalms we can see Him in at least three ways: as the psalmist who prays, as the blessings we receive, and as the Lord we praise.

1. SEEING JESUS AS THE PSALMIST WHO PRAYS

I will never forget standing in a dark dungeon under Caiaphas' house in Jerusalem sharing a psalm with our travelling Haven group. It is very possible Jesus had been held in that very dungeon the night before His crucifixion. As I read Psalm 88, the words echoed off the stone walls and brought us to tears:

> **PSALM 88:6-9**
> "You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; my eyes are dim with grief."

One of the most moving ways to find Jesus in the Psalms is to hear His voice as you read them. The Psalms are filled with some of the deepest descriptions of human suffering and no one ever suffered more than Jesus. "Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death..." (Psalm 13:3).

Jesus quoted the Psalms more than any other book of the Bible. But He wasn't just quoting, He was fulfilling. When Jesus cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was speaking words that were written for Him. He was fulfilling prophecy.

In his sermon in Acts 2, Peter quoted Psalm 16 and applied it to Jesus:

> **PSALM 16:9-10**
> "Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, nor will you let your faithful one see decay."

He said that David's body was still in the grave but Jesus' body had been raised on the third day. In other words, the psalm wasn't limited to David's life—it was prophetically pointing to Jesus. He was the "faithful one" speaking in the psalm whose body God had not allowed to "see decay."

Listen for Jesus speaking and think about what it means for you:

> **PSALM 22:17-19**
> "All my bones are on display; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. But you, LORD, do not be far from me. You are my strength; come quickly to help me."
>
> **PSALM 40:7-8**
> "Then I said, "Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.

2. SEEING JESUS AS THE BLESSINGS WE RECEIVE

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 1:20, "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through Him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God."

Every blessing contained in the Scriptures finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus. The Psalms resound with promised blessing— more than we can possibly name—and they all point us to Him.

> **Every blessing contained in the Scriptures finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.**

Take the promise of finding refuge in God. Psalm 2 promises a blessing on all who take refuge in God's King. Fourteen times the New Testament identifies that king as Jesus. Which means, every time a psalm talks about taking refuge in the Lord, you can know it's pointing you to Jesus:

PSALM 5:11
"Let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you."

PSALM 31:1
"In you, LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness"

PSALM 34:22
"The LORD will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned."

“Refuge” is mentioned 43 times in the Psalms! It’s just one of countless blessings provided for us in Jesus. He is the answer to every cry of the heart and the fulfillment of every promise made by God. One of the most repeated prayers in the Psalms is for the king himself to be blessed by God for the sake of his people.

The final line of Psalm 72 says: “This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.” So how did David end his prayers? With a heartfelt request for the coming Son of David to bring blessing to the world!

PSALM 72:1-7

“Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. May he judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. May the mountains bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. May he defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; may he crush the oppressor. May he endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. May he be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. In his days may the righteous flourish and prosperity abound till the moon is no more. May he rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

Jesus is the answer to that prayer—and to all the prayers of blessing in the Psalms. When you read Psalm 115:12, “the Lord remembers us; he will bless [us],” your heart should sing out: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." (Ephesians 1:3)

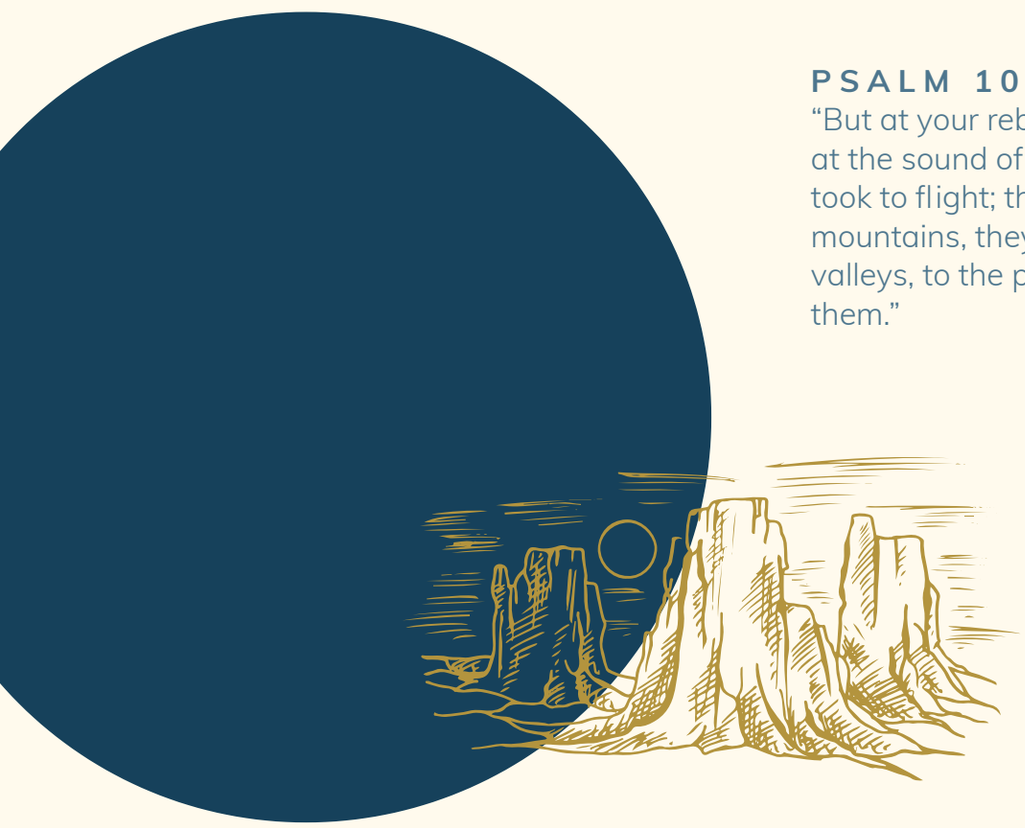
3. SEEING JESUS AS THE LORD WE PRAISE

Paul declares in Philippians 2:9-11 that God, "exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

We can join in that confession by praising Jesus as the Lord of the Psalms—not just privately, but together as God's people. He is the second person of the Trinity so we don't have to hesitate about directing our praises to Him.

In Psalm 104, the psalmist praised God for bringing order out of chaos when He created the world:

PSALM 104:7-8
"But at your rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of your thunder they took to flight; they flowed over the mountains, they went down into the valleys, to the place you assigned for them."



Now turn to Luke 8. Jesus was sleeping in the boat when a storm came down and threatened to swamp it. The disciples woke Him up saying, "Master, Master, we're going to drown." What did He do?

Luke 8:24, “He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters; the storm subsided, and all was calm.”

That word rebuked comes from the same word used in Psalm 104:7 to describe how God quelled the chaos at creation. No wonder the disciples were awed!

Jesus is our “God and Savior” (2 Peter 1:1). “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made,” (John 1:3).

We can sing all the praises of the Psalms to Him! He deserves our praise. He hears our laments, His abundance fills us with thanksgiving, He does great works on our behalf, He is our God and King!

PSALM 96:1-5

“Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.”

PSALM 103:1-5

“Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”

4 Putting It into Practice

Let's take a look at a psalm together. On a recent trip to Iraq, I was deeply moved by Psalm 34. In the midst of so much suffering, my brothers and sisters in Christ were praising the Lord like David did in this psalm. Take a moment to read it and then we'll walk through it using the tools in this reading guide.

PSALM 34

Of David. When he pretended to be insane before Abimelek, who drove him away, and he left.

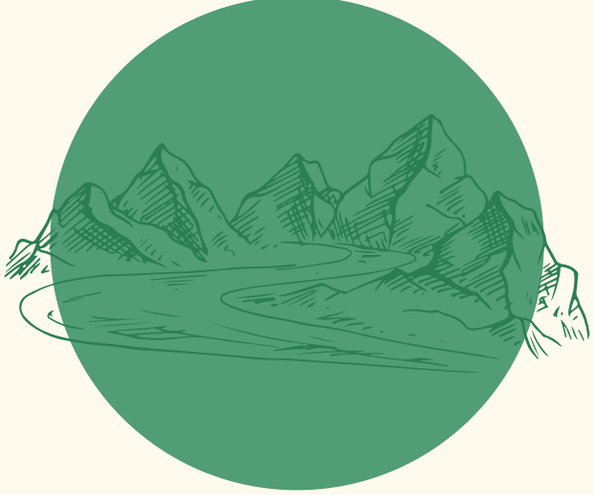
"I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together. I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

Fear the LORD, you his holy people, for those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing. Come, my children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the LORD. Whoever of you loves life and desires to see many good days, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from telling lies. Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it. The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and his ears are attentive to their cry; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil, to blot out their name from the earth. The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken. Evil will slay the wicked; the foes of the righteous will be condemned. The LORD will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned."

The title to this psalm tells us the background—and by the way, that's another useful tool when you read the Psalms. Don't overlook the titles. The story of David and Abimelek is found in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. God delivered David from the king of the Philistines in a very unusual way, and this psalm is David's way of expressing his thanks to God.

Psalm 34 is an example of a Thanksgiving Psalm. We know the Lord wants this psalm to lead us to thank Him for the ways He has delivered us out of our distress. You can see how the psalmist opens with praise, revisits his troubles, and then continues with line after line of reasons to give thanks to the Lord. There's even a section that qualifies as wisdom literature: "Come my children, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord." (verse 11)

It's also a lovely work of Hebrew poetry. It contains poetic images like "tasting" and "seeing" the goodness of the Lord. A good commentary would point out that it's an acrostic, that in Hebrew all the verses except the last follow an A-B-C-D order.



I have read this psalm in a whole new light after being in Iraq. Seeing the tremendous persecution the believers in Jesus are facing in that part of the world made the deliverance described in this psalm even more profound. But you don't have to live in the shadow of ISIS to know God's deliverance first hand. All of God's children know His care for them, how He delivers us from distress. We can all sing verses 17 and 18 with a thankful heart: "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

I WAS ALSO STRUCK BY HOW CLEARLY WE CAN SEE JESUS IN THIS PSALM.

He is our fellow-sufferer who was delivered by the Lord. He is close to the brokenhearted because He had a broken heart. Whether it's religious persecution in the Middle East, or the burden of living in a sin-cursed world, He has felt our pain. He was deserted by His friends, pursued by His enemies, and most of all, He knows what it's like to feel abandoned by the Father.

But He didn't just feel our pain; He took it away. Our greatest distress was the guilt of sin, and He took that on Himself, He bore that burden in our place. Psalm 34:16 says, "the face of the Lord is against those who do evil to blot out their name from the earth." Jesus did no evil, but He was blotted out so that our evil could be blotted out and we could be delivered.

Our greatest distress was the guilt of sin, and Jesus took that on Himself.

Verse 22 says, “The Lord will rescue his servants; no one who takes refuge in him will be condemned.” We need to remember that Jesus became that refuge when He died on the cross.

He’s also the Lord of the psalm who deserves our praise. Verse 6 says, “This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his trouble.” That Lord is Jesus. He deserves all the acclamation of this psalm:

PSALM 34:1-2
“I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. I will glory in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice.”

Psalm 34 also contains a prophecy about Jesus that's quoted in the New Testament. Verse 20 says: "The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken." John 19:36 applies this promise—that God knows and cares about the suffering of the righteous—directly to Jesus. He was delivered up from the grave of death, so that we could be delivered up from both sin and death.

Take time to really hear a psalm by applying the tools we've learned. Look for the structure, savor the images, and see the connection to Jesus. Make it your own by praying it to the Lord.

Look for the structure, savor the images, and see the connection to Jesus.

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