

Explore the Bible®

LEADER GUIDE

Psalms

Summer > CSB

Robert Smith, Jr., General Editor

LifeWay | Adults

LIFE BY DESIGN

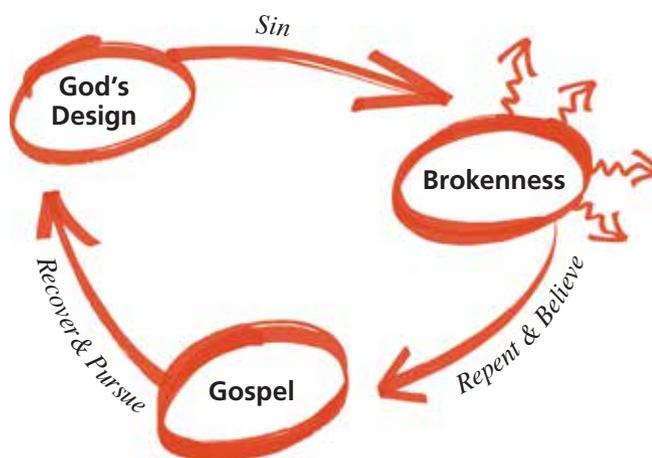
We live in a broken world. This brokenness is seen in suffering, violence, poverty, pain, and death around us. Brokenness leads us to search for a way to make LIFE work.

The Bible tells us that God originally planned a world that worked perfectly—where everything and everyone fit together in harmony. God made each of us with a purpose—to worship Him and walk with Him. (See Genesis 1:31 and Psalm. 19:1.)

Life doesn't work when we ignore God and His original design for our lives. We selfishly insist on doing things our own way. The Bible calls this sin. Sin leads to a place of brokenness. The consequence of our sin is separation from God—in this life and for all of eternity. (See Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23.)

At this point we need a remedy—some good news. Because of His love, God did not leave us in our brokenness. Jesus, God in human flesh, came to us and lived perfectly according to God's Design. Jesus came to rescue us—to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. He took our sin and shame to the cross, paying the penalty of our sin by His death. Jesus was then raised from the dead—to provide the only way for us to be rescued and restored to a relationship with God. (See John 3:16, Colossians 2:14, and 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.)

We don't have the power to escape this brokenness on our own. We need to be rescued. We must ask God to forgive us—turning from sin to trust in Jesus. This is what it means to repent and believe. Believing, we receive new life through Jesus. God turns our lives in a new direction. (See Mark 1:15, Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 10:9.)



When God restores our relationship to Him, we begin to discover meaning and purpose in a broken world. Now we can pursue God's Design in all areas of our lives. God's Spirit empowers us to recover His Design and assures us of His presence in this life and for all of eternity. (See Philippians 2:13 and Ephesians 2:10.)

Now that you have heard this Good News, God wants you to respond to Him. You can talk to Him using words like these: My life is broken—I recognize it's because of my sin. I believe Christ came to live, die, and was raised from the dead—to rescue me from my sin. Forgive me. I turn from my selfish ways and put my trust in You. I know that Jesus is Lord of all, and I will follow Him.

Excerpted from Life on Mission: A Simple Way to Share the Gospel.

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*Evangelistic emphasis

» MEET THE WRITERS

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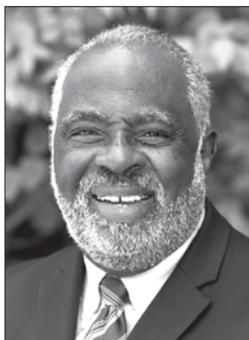
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A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR

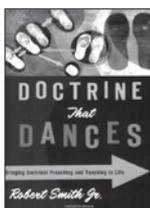


Sometimes, when reading the Bible, it seems as if our lives are worlds apart from those included in the pages of Scripture. It is easy to ponder, sometimes with guilt and secrecy in our hearts, whether the Bible is relevant to feelings we have today, thoughts we have today, struggles we have today, or situations we face today.

This study in the Book of Psalms holds good news for you. A psalmist has likely written about whatever feelings you might experience in any situation in which you find yourself. These lessons speak to those who are soaring on the heights of spiritual growth and to those who are in the depths of spiritual weakness. It legitimizes the feelings of those seeking God's recompense for persecutors and those seeking forgiveness for doing wrong to others. It teaches lessons for dealing with the perils or the successes of life with great grace, patience, and faith while extolling the loving kindness of our God, who is always worthy of praise.

This journey through the Book of Psalms is for you. If you earnestly apply its lessons, it will benefit you and those around you as you seek to walk the narrow path surrounded by distractions, faith challenges, and contemporary thought.

Robert Smith, Jr.



Dr. Smith serves as the Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity and professor of Christian preaching at Beeson Divinity School, Birmingham, Alabama. He is the author of *Doctrine That Dances: Bring Doctrinal Preaching and Teaching to Life*.



WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

Hallelujah [ha luh LOO yuh]—exclamation of praise meaning “Praise Yahweh!”

Hermon [HUHR muhn]—place name meaning “devoted mountain” and located in the extreme north of Israel

Hyssop [HISS uhp]—a small, bushy plant well suited for use as a brush to dab the doorposts of Israelite homes with the blood of the Passover lambs (Ex. 12:22); also associated with purification rites, such as the cleansing of lepers (Lev. 14:4)

Iniquity—one of several Old Testament terms for sin (Hebrew, *awon*); denotes a deliberate overstepping of the limits of God’s law

Massah [MASS uh]—from a root word meaning “to test,” a place near Mount Sinai where the Israelites put God to the test by demanding water (Ex. 17:7)

Meribah [MEHR ih buh]—from a root word meaning “to complain” or “to find fault,” a place near Mount Sinai where the Israelites put God to the test by demanding water (Ex. 17:7)

Mizar [MIGH zahr]—place name meaning “little hill” or “little mountain”; probably part of the same mountain range as Mount Hermon in the extreme north of Israel

Rebellion—one of several terms for sin in the Old Testament; Hebrew word (*pesha*) denotes defiance and willful disobedience

Redeemer—a term that referred to a kinsman who pays a price to secure the release of someone or something, or who delivers his relatives from difficulty or danger; when used of God, the idea is redemption from bondage or oppression, typically from one’s enemies

Selah [SEE luh]—the exact meaning is unknown, but likely indicated a pause or intensification of instruments or voices in worship

Sheol [SHEE ohl]—in Jewish thought, the abode of the dead or death in general

Sin—one of several related terms for sin in the Old Testament (Hebrew, *kata*); means to miss the mark

Valley of Baca [BAY kuh]—a place name that means “weeping” or “a place of weeping”; used figuratively to describe brokenness or barrenness of the soul

Zion [ZIGH uhn]—a biblical term that sometimes refers to Jerusalem, to the temple built by Solomon, to the whole nation of Israel, or to the heavenly city of God in the new age

BIBLE READING PLAN

- 1. Psalm 1
- 2. Psalm 2
- 3. Psalms 3–4
- 4. Psalm 5
- 5. Psalms 6–7
- 6. Psalms 8–9
- 7. Psalms 10–11
- 8. Psalms 12–14
- 9. Psalms 15–17
- 10. Psalm 18
- 11. Psalms 19–21
- 12. Psalm 22
- 13. Psalms 23–24
- 14. Psalms 25–26
- 15. Psalms 27–28
- 16. Psalms 29–30
- 17. Psalm 31
- 18. Psalms 32–33
- 19. Psalm 34
- 20. Psalms 35–36
- 21. Psalm 37
- 22. Psalms 38–39
- 23. Psalms 40–41
- 24. Psalms 42–43
- 25. Psalm 44
- 26. Psalm 45
- 27. Psalms 46–47
- 28. Psalms 48–49
- 29. Psalm 50
- 30. Psalm 51

- 1. Psalms 52–53
- 2. Psalm 54
- 3. Psalm 55
- 4. Psalm 56
- 5. Psalms 57–58
- 6. Psalm 59
- 7. Psalms 60–61
- 8. Psalms 62–63
- 9. Psalms 64–65
- 10. Psalms 66–67
- 11. Psalm 68
- 12. Psalm 69
- 13. Psalms 70–71
- 14. Psalm 72
- 15. Psalm 73
- 16. Psalms 74–75
- 17. Psalms 76–77
- 18. Psalm 78
- 19. Psalm 79
- 20. Psalm 80
- 21. Psalms 81–82
- 22. Psalms 83–84
- 23. Psalms 85–86
- 24. Psalms 87–88
- 25. Psalm 89
- 26. Psalm 90
- 27. Psalms 91–92
- 28. Psalms 93–94
- 29. Psalms 95–96
- 30. Psalms 97–99
- 31. Psalms 100–101

- 1. Psalm 102
- 2. Psalm 103
- 3. Psalm 104
- 4. Psalm 105
- 5. Psalm 106
- 6. Psalm 107
- 7. Psalm 108
- 8. Psalm 109
- 9. Psalms 110–111
- 10. Psalms 112–114
- 11. Psalm 115
- 12. Psalms 116–117
- 13. Psalm 118
- 14. Psalm 119
- 15. Psalms 120–122
- 16. Psalms 123–125
- 17. Psalms 126–128
- 18. Psalms 129–131
- 19. Psalms 132–134
- 20. Psalm 135
- 21. Psalm 136
- 22. Psalms 137–138
- 23. Psalm 139
- 24. Psalms 140–141
- 25. Psalms 142–143
- 26. Psalm 144
- 27. Psalm 145
- 28. Psalm 146
- 29. Psalm 147
- 30. Psalm 148
- 31. Psalms 149–150



USING THIS GUIDE TO LEAD

» PRIOR TO THE GROUP TIME

1. Study the core passage.

Read *Understand the Context* to get a clear picture of how the core passage connects to the whole. Use *Explore the Text* to gain an understanding of the passage. Consult a study Bible and a Bible commentary like *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible in both print and digital formats) to gain additional insight into the passage. Seek to define key words, phrases, places, and actions taken. Record ideas and insights gleaned from your personal study. Write a summary of the truths you discovered using the statement printed under the session title as a starting place.

TIP: Start preparing early. Life happens, and it tends to happen closer to times we are scheduled to lead a Bible study group.

2. Create a group time plan.

- a. Review *First Thoughts* for the session to identify a direction for the session and why that session is important to today's adults.
- b. Review the suggestions included in *Lead Group Bible Study*, identifying the suggestions you believe will work best with your group.
- c. Consider ways of incorporating a Bible Skill into the study, either following the suggestion given (see shaded box in each session) or by developing your own idea.
- d. Consult *QuickSource* (available from LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible) and the *Explore the Bible* blog (Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible/Adults/LeaderExtras) for additional questions and group time activities.
- e. Visit the *Explore the Bible* Ministry Grid page (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible) for additional ideas and insights.
- f. Review the *Explore the Bible Leader Pack* items suggested. Determine how to best use the items in your group's setting.

3. Gather your resources.

Use the list in *Gather the Following Items* on the first page of each session as a starting place. Make sure you have everything you need to lead the group time using the plan you created. Make sure you have additional copies of *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* for anticipated guests.

TIP: If you plan to use the Suggested Music Idea and your small group meets with other groups prior to the study time, consider incorporating the music activity into the large group time.

4. Review and refine.

➤ DURING THE GROUP TIME

5. Arrive early.

The group time starts when the first person arrives. Make sure you are that person, so that you can set the tone and direction for the group Bible study time. Greet everyone as participants arrive and focus their attention on the Bible study.

6. Lead the group in a time of Bible study.

Use the plan you created to lead the group time. Record notes along the way to help you remember how the group responded. Remember, every group experience takes a few unexpected twists and turns; be flexible.

TIP: You can record your plan on a piece of paper and carry that into the group gathering, open the Leader Guide to the Lead Group Bible Study page and guide with those pages open, or use the DOC file provided on the CD-ROM included in the *Explore the Bible Adult Leader Pack* to create your own custom notes. (The DOC file is also included in the digital bundles and digital Adult Leader Pack. See LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible for more information.)

➤ AFTER THE GROUP TIME

7. Evaluate and record.

Review Practice for ideas to encourage the group to put into practice the truths discovered. Record prayer requests and other insights you gained about the group and specific participants. Use these notes to help you be a better guide in the future.

8. Start preparing to lead the next group time.



INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS

»» BACKGROUND

Through the centuries the Book of Psalms has been a favorite part of the Bible. In virtually every situation of life, people have found help in the psalms—in trials, sin, public and private worship, prayer, doubt, praise, and thanksgiving. The book focuses on God and humanity and on how those two are in dialogue. In that dialogue the psalms reveal much about God and our relationship with Him.

Many of the words in the Book of Psalms are addressed to God. Since those words were inspired by God, they are the words God has given us to speak to Him. Therefore, in studying the Book of Psalms one can learn the way God desires us to address Him.

Throughout church history, Christians have written hymns and songs with the words of psalms as lyrics. They have also prayed using the words of psalms to express praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. For spiritually healthy Christians, worship and prayer are central. The Book of Psalms gives us words for praise and prayer.

»» TITLE

The Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms means “hymns of praise.” The word comes from a root word that means “to praise.” “Hallelujah” comes from the same root. A Hebrew word meaning “spiritual song” was translated into Greek as *psalmos*. We get the word *psalms* from that Greek word. The Hebrew term *nebel* means “harp.” That term was translated into Greek as *psalterion*, and we derive our word *psalter* from that translation. People often refer to the Book of Psalms as “the Psalter.”

»» ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE PSALMS

Of the 150 psalms, 116 have superscriptions, or titles. Of those 116 superscriptions, 100 of them mention a proper name, possibly in connection with authorship or origin. Of the 100 psalm superscriptions that mention a proper name, 73 of those have the name of David. It is not certain whether the titles were primarily indications of authorship. For example, the Hebrew word translated “Davidic” often appears in superscriptions. The word can mean “to David,” “for David,” or “by David.”

However, some biblical statements make it likely David wrote numerous psalms. First Samuel 16 and 17 describe David as a young man with unusual musical gifts. After the exile, over 500 years after David’s lifetime, the inhabitants of Jerusalem patterned their worship after “David the man of God” and they used “the musical instruments of David” (Neh. 12:24,36). In light of that information, “Davidic” psalms could have been written by or for David, approved by him, or used by him in worship.

In order for the Book of Psalms to reach completion, the individual psalms had to be collected and combined. Tracing the development of the book involves speculation to some degree, but the first step in its formation was the writing of individual psalms under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Next, the authors shared the psalms with others. At some point many of the psalms began to be used in small or large worship gatherings. King David brought the ark to Jerusalem, and surely he also collected worship instruments, personnel, and texts like psalms. Under Solomon, when the temple was built, more time and personnel were devoted to the production and use of the psalms. In the temple the psalms found their greatest use among the people. Then, just as hymns are placed in a hymnal today, psalms were placed in collections that grew until finally the authorized

collection reached 150 psalms. This collecting process continued perhaps for as many as five centuries, since some psalms were composed during the exile.

» LITERARY FORM OF THE PSALMS

The psalms are poetry, and the Book of Psalms demonstrates that poetry is a powerful medium of communication. Poems achieve more than a transfer of information. Using figures of speech like similes, metaphors, word pictures, and personifications, poetry draws us into experiences and feelings. The language of poetry is concentrated and heightened. Prose expresses ideas in sentences. Poetry often uses individual words and their relationship with other words to communicate meaning. A great amount of truth is conveyed in a minimum number of words. Therefore, it is always best not to read poetry by skimming through it. If we read the poems of Psalms too quickly, we will miss much of the meaning.

Poems in English usually have rhyme and meter. Hebrew poetry rarely rhymes and does not display certain rhythmic pattern. The defining mark of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Parallelism is sometimes called “thought rhyme.” A second line is parallel to a first line in some way, and sometimes the parallelism stretches for numerous lines. The second line may be parallel to the first line by stating the same truth with different words (see Pss. 2:1; 19:1-2), or it may make a point by stating the opposite of the first line (see 20:7-8), or it may extend the idea of the first line (see 46:7).

Psalm 98:8-9 says, “Let the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains shout together for joy before the LORD, for He is coming to judge the earth.” The point is that when the Lord comes to bring righteous judgment and redemption, the joy of His reign will be universal. Even the created order will experience the blessings of His rule. The psalmist expressed that fact with a poetic word picture that creates a mental image. It is as if the mountain peaks form a quartet and say to one another, “Let’s do a few numbers for the King!” It’s a joyful, even humorous image. It brings happiness, just like God’s eternal reign will bring happiness. Thus, the poetic form amplifies the meaning.

» TYPES OF PSALMS

The psalms address the full range of experiences in our walk with God. Some psalms appear to have been written specifically to pray for God’s blessings on Israel’s king. They are usually called royal psalms. Wisdom psalms provide general observations on life and consequently address some of the same issues as books like Proverbs or Ecclesiastes. Nature psalms give praise to God as Creator and reflect a biblical theology of creation. The main theme of praise psalms is the declaration of the greatness of God. Similarly, thanksgiving psalms express gratitude to God for His great works. The purpose of some psalms is confession of sin, so they are called penitential psalms. Some psalms express confident faith in God, like Psalm 23. Psalmists also wrote poems with feelings of grief or sorrow. Those are the lamentation psalms. Sometimes psalmists even expressed their desire for the wicked to suffer God’s righteous judgment, and poems with that theme are called imprecatory psalms. Virtually every possible human emotion and spiritual condition are reflected in the psalms. No matter what we are going through or how we feel, God can use the psalms to reveal Himself and His truth.



TYPES OF PSALMS

LAMENT—emotional cries to God for deliverance from distressful situations

Pss. 3–5; 7; 12–13; 17; 22; 25–27; 35; 39–44; 54–60; 62; 64; 69–71; 74; 77; 79–80; 83; 85–86; 88; 90; 94; 120; 123; 126; 134; 137; 140–142; 144

THANKSGIVING—expressions of gratitude to God for His abundant blessings

Pss. 9–11; 16; 23; 30–31; 34; 48; 62; 66–68; 75; 91–92; 106–109; 115–116; 118; 121; 124–125; 129; 131; 138–139

HYMN—declarations of the greatness of God

Pss. 8; 15; 19; 24; 29; 33; 46; 52; 65; 81–82; 87; 100; 103–105; 111; 113–114; 117; 122; 135–136; 145–150

ROYAL—prayers for God’s blessings on Israel’s king, some with messianic implications/fulfillments

Pss. 2; 18; 20–21; 45; 50; 61; 63; 72; 84; 89; 101; 110; 132

ENTHRONEMENT—celebrations of God’s rule over all His creation

Pss. 47; 93–99

PENITENTIAL—expressions of contrition and repentance

Pss. 6; 28; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143

WISDOM/DIDACTIC—practical guidelines for godly living

Pss. 1; 14; 36–37; 49; 53; 73; 76; 78; 112; 119; 127–128; 133

THE PATH

Believers should embrace godly wisdom because obedience to God's Word is the path of true life.

PSALM 1:1-6

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 1:6

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 1, First Thoughts (p. 14), and Understand the Context (pp. 14-15). View the video introduction by Robert Smith, Jr. at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible or on the Leader Pack CD-ROM.
- **STUDY** Psalm 1:1-6, using Explore the Text on pages 15-19. Review the Introduction to Psalms (pp. 10-11) to gain insight into the context for this new study. Pay close attention to the contrasting illustrations of the righteous and the wicked person.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 20-21). Tailor the plans for your group using the ideas included online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. If you choose to use either of the testimony suggestions under More Ideas (p. 22), enlist your volunteers ahead of time.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides (PSG); A large sheet of paper or a whiteboard and markers; and Prepared index cards for the icebreaker. Make copies of: **PACK ITEMS 2A,B** (*Handouts: Types of Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 3** (*Poster: Summer 2017*); **PACK ITEM 9** (*Poster: Authorship of the Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 10** (*Poster: Psalm 1:6*).



FIRST THOUGHTS

KEY DOCTRINE

The Scriptures

The Holy Bible is a perfect treasure of divine instruction.

The road forks, but your GPS indicates no such fork. You are on your own for this decision. Do you go right or left? Sometimes the decision determines how long the journey will take. In some rare cases, the decision determines whether you will reach your destination. Either way, you have to make a decision.

(In PSG, p. 12) **With whom or what would you consult if faced with making a decision about a road that is off the map? Would you admit that you needed any help deciding which road to take?**

BIBLE SKILL

Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

The psalmist wasn't the only one to emphasize the importance of life choices. Compare Psalm 1 with Deuteronomy 30:19-20 and Matthew 7:24-27. How are these passages similar? What common themes are found in all three passages? Write a summary statement of the teaching found in all three passages.

The Bible repeatedly describes life as a journey. On this journey we face daily choices about which path to take. Do we follow God's instructions, or do we listen to what the world says? Some people reject God's way completely. Others constantly struggle to make godly choices. No one gets it right every time; nevertheless, we must always seek to choose correctly.

Psalm 1 describes two paths that people can select. One path leads to life, and the other leads to death. At the beginning of Israel's history, Moses set two ways before the people. The Israelites had to choose the way of life and blessing or the way of death and adversity (Deut. 30:15). Later, Jesus likewise identified two ways—the narrow way that leads to life and the wide way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13-14). These two ways are the only two options available. Every person will decide which way he or she lives. While the right choice seems obvious, most people make the wrong choice. Believers should embrace godly wisdom because obedience to God's Word is the path to true life.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 1

Few people use the word *blessed* in daily conversation; however, it is a very important word in the Bible. The Hebrew word rendered "how happy" in the Christian Standard Bible translation of Psalm 1:1 is often translated "blessed." That word appears over 20 times in the Book of Psalms alone. The word can also be translated with phrases like "Oh, the blessedness of" or "truly happy." The secular understanding of happiness is that it is an unpredictable emotion that comes and goes depending on what happens to us. The Bible, however, describes happiness, or blessedness, as an ongoing state of being that results from faithfulness to God and is independent of what happens to us.

A twofold "blessed" or "happy" statement introduces the Book of Psalms. The first psalm begins with "happy," and the same word occurs in

the final clause of the second psalm. The first psalm states that happiness results from refusing the world's foolishness and choosing to meditate on God's instruction. The second psalm states that happiness results from taking refuge in God. Thus, these two psalms serve as a fitting introduction to the book. With matching terminology, they announce two central themes—confidence in God's Word and reverent worship of God. The first psalm is also related to the final psalm. In Psalm 1 God blesses the righteous, and in Psalm 150 the righteous bless God. The Book of Psalms begins with what God does for us and ends with what we do toward God.

Finding happiness is a major goal for most people. To discover how to be happy, God's people look to God and His Word. The Book of Psalms reveals much about the shape of a happy, or blessed, life. Psalm 32 states that God's people are joyful or blessed when God forgives their transgressions: "How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!" (v. 1). Psalm 40:4 says that trusting God results in being happy: "How happy is anyone who has put his trust in the LORD." When we trust in ourselves or someone else, we are insecure because humans are not always reliable. Trust in God is the foundation for a happy life.

Worshipping God also leads to happiness: "How happy are those who reside in your house, who praise you continually" (Ps. 84:4). Psalm 106:3 affirms: "How happy are those who uphold justice, who practice righteousness at all times." Doing right makes God's people happy. Sin results in sadness. Psalm 1 also teaches God's people how to be happy.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PATH OF LIFE (PS. 1:1-3)

The first psalm states that the way to happiness involves a clear choice. The inspired writer places the reader at a fork in the road. Taking one road leads to enduring happiness. Taking that road requires refusing the wrong road.

VERSE 1

The first verse states what the *happy*, or blessed, person does not do. He ***does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers!*** The verse expresses a progression that degenerates from bad to worse, from walking to standing to sitting. At first, the psalmist refers only to walking in the counsel of the wicked. But the next step is stopping to stand with sinners, and finally comes sitting down with people who mock.

The words used to describe wrongdoers also progress from the *wicked* to *sinners*, and finally to *mockers*, or those who even scoff at godliness. To enjoy the blessed life, we do not abide with such people. The apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth "not to associate with sexually immoral people" (1 Cor. 5:9). He went on to clarify that he did not mean to avoid all sinners completely. To do that, we would have to move to another planet! But his words serve as a warning to be careful about our close associations.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Psalms: An Overview" in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 1:1

¹ How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers!

Verse 1 also communicates a progression in the location of encounters with the ungodly. First, their *advice* is overheard. Next comes standing in their *pathway*. Last is sitting down in their *company* or seat. In the Bible, sitting in a seat often refers to a position of instruction. That language is carried over into the modern world when we refer to a professor occupying a chair. It's an honored position of instruction. To sit in the seat of mockers, someone would have to earn a degree in sin and lecture on mockery. That's not the way to be happy.

Happiness results from the right kind of associations. Specifically, to be happy, we must choose not to associate closely with ungodly people. If we do not learn to say no to the influence of ungodly people, we cannot live faithfully for God, and we will limit our joy. "No, I am not going to take ungodly advice." "No, I am not going to walk down a sinful path." "No, I will not make fun of the truth." When we are unwilling to say such things, we forfeit happiness.

How do you balance expressing love to ungodly people while refusing to be influenced by them?

PSALM 1:2-3

² Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

VERSES 2-3

In verse 2 the subject changes from what the blessed person does not do to what the blessed person does: **his delight is in the LORD's instruction.** When some people think of instruction, they envision attending school or listening to a lecture, so it may sound strange to speak of delighting in instruction. But what if we know and love the instructor? What if the instruction is the key to our happiness and prosperity? For God's people, such things are true of God and His instruction.

The word translated *instruction* is often translated "law." Sometimes it refers to all of God's verbal revelation, and sometimes it refers more specifically to the legal sections of the Old Testament. Laws reveal the character and principles of the people who make those laws. For example, in the United States, laws against murder reveal that we value human life. On the other hand, laws allowing abortion reveal that we are confused about that value and we apply it inconsistently. God's law reveals His character. He forbids murder because human life is important to Him. He demands exclusive worship because He is the only true God and He wants us to relate to Him. So, we delight in God's law because it reveals God's character to us. We get to know God better by means of His instruction.

Only people who live by the law delight in the law. Lawbreakers hate the law because it pronounces them guilty and leads to their punishment. People who obey God's law delight in it because it protects them from going down the wrong road, it reveals to them the character of God, and it shows them how to live a happy life.

Verse 2 also states that blessed people meditate on God's law. In fact, they do so **day and night.** Some people connect meditation exclusively

with Eastern religions. The meditation described in the Bible is different. It is not meditating on nothingness or on our own thoughts. The Bible calls us to meditate on the one true God and His Word (Pss. 63:6; 77:12; 119:15; 143:5).

In Isaiah 31:4, the word translated *meditates* refers to a lioness growling over her prey. The lioness is brooding over the prey she has killed, announcing that it belongs to her, and preparing to eat it. Similarly, meditating on God's Word is delighting in it, looking at it as life-sustaining provision. As the lioness consumes her prey, we consume God's Word, taking it into our system and digesting it so that it changes our thinking and living. Meditation is rumination or digestion. As food enters our stomachs and is digested and gives us strength, God's Word enters our souls, gets into our spiritual bloodstream through meditation, and becomes holiness and love. God's Word is powerful (Heb. 4:12). When we take it into our spirits through meditation, God's Spirit uses it to change us and bless us.

Verse 3 announces the results of refusing ungodliness and choosing to delight in and meditate on God's instruction. Israel is a semi-arid region. Rains are seasonal. Trees have to survive a long dry season until the rains return. In times of drought, the survival of trees is not certain and always dependent on the timely arrival of rain. The tree described in verse 3 is *planted beside flowing streams*. This tree is not dependent on seasonal rains. Even in the dry season it is not without water because the stream provides a perennial supply of water. That's the picture of people who refuse sin and receive God's Word. God blesses them with perennial provision. Their survival is never in danger. God takes care of them month by month, year by year.

The tree that represents the blessed person also *bears its fruit in its season*, its *leaf does not wither*, and *whatever he does prospers*. Thus, when God's people say no to the ungodly and yes to God's Word, God provides for us and makes us prosperous. Many Americans associate prosperity with being wealthy financially. Prosperity in the Bible is both spiritual and physical. Spiritually, prosperity is walking with God in faithful fellowship. Physically, prosperity is being free from the danger of poverty and starvation. That is far from the modern Western conception of prosperity as being rich. Psalm 1:2-3 is similar to Jesus' statement in Matthew 6:33—when we seek God and His righteousness, He meets our needs. In Psalm 1 the blessed life is like a perennially healthy tree that fulfills the purpose for which God made it—bearing fruit. The image of bearing fruit is also in the New Testament, where it refers to living in a way that demonstrates fellowship with God (see John 15:1-5; Gal. 5:16-23).

How might your lifestyle or daily schedule change if your delight in and meditation of God's instruction increased?

THE PATH OF DEATH (PS. 1:4-5)

PSALM 1:4

⁴ The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away.

VERSE 4

The Hebrew text of verse 4 begins with two words that express a strong negation. They may be translated “not so” or “not like this.” This negation expresses definitively that everything just written about blessed people is not true of **the wicked**. The wicked do not refuse the ungodly ways of the world. Instead, they endorse ungodly ways and participate in them. They walk in the advice of the wicked, they stand in the path of sinners, and they sit in the seat of mockers. Instead of delighting in God’s instruction, they invent their own instruction. They are a law unto themselves. Instead of meditating on God’s instruction, they fill their minds with worldly thoughts.

The wicked **are like chaff that the wind blows away**. When farmers in the ancient Near East harvested grain, they took it to threshing floors that were usually located on the tops of hills to take advantage of the wind. On the threshing floor, they crushed the grain, either with a large stone or with the hoofs of animals walking on the grain. Next, they pitched the grain into the air with a special shovel or fork. The grain was heavier, so it would fall to the ground. But the chaff was wispy and light, so the wind blew it away. The chaff was also worthless, and farmers wanted the wind to take it away. In that way they separated the useless chaff from the valuable grain.

Jeremiah compared the wicked to a destitute bush in the wilderness (Jer. 17:5-8). The psalmist’s illustration is even more severe. Are the wicked like a tree that is not perennially watered? No, they are not permanent enough to be compared to a tree. Would a small bush be a more appropriate analogy? No, a bush is still too big. Would it be accurate if we compared the wicked to a slender stalk of wheat? That’s closer, but the whole stalk is still too large for an accurate comparison. Would just the head of the stalk be small enough? No, that is still too large. The psalmist compared the wicked to the smallest part of the smallest part of a stalk of wheat—the worthless sliver called the *chaff*.

Comparing the righteous to the wicked is like comparing a perennially watered tree that is permanent and prosperous to the chaff of wheat that is worthless and blown away by the slightest gust of wind. John the Baptist used the same analogy when he stated that Jesus’ judgment of the wicked is like the disposal and burning of chaff: “His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn. But the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out” (Matt. 3:12).

PSALM 1:5

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand up in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

VERSE 5

The wicked will not stand up in the judgment. They will be present for the judgment, but they will not be able to endure it. They *will not stand*, but they will kneel. In eternity they will acknowledge the lordship of Jesus, but it will be too late for their salvation (see Phil. 2:9-11).

The Old Testament affirms a coming judgment, and the New Testament reveals that judgment more specifically. Christians will be rewarded according

to their works (see 1 Cor. 3:8,11-15; 2 Cor. 5:10) and will not face eternal condemnation (see John 5:24; Rom. 8:1). God has given followers of Jesus the gift of eternal life (see John 3:16; Rom. 6:23). Revelation 20:11-15 describes the final judgment of the wicked. They will be thrown into the lake of fire.

After the judgment, sinners will not be in the assembly of the righteous. They will not be allowed to enter heaven. Heaven is reserved for those who have submitted to the lordship of Jesus. In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham spoke from heaven to the rich man in the fire of judgment and said "a great chasm" separated them, "so that those who want to pass over from here to you cannot; neither can those from there cross over to us" (Luke 16:26).

(In PSG, p. 18) **How should God's warning about the future of the wicked affect you? How should you feel? What should you do?**

THE CONCLUSION (PS. 1:6)

VERSE 6

Psalm 1 includes encouragement for the righteous: *the LORD watches over* their way. People who love and obey God may feel like their good lives go unnoticed. God notices. He knows who we are and all we do. Hebrews 4:13 says, "No creature is hidden from him, but all things are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give an account." God knows the good we do. He hears us pray. He knows our tears.

The psalm concludes with a reminder of the judgment that awaits the wicked. God's way leads to happiness, but the way of the wicked *leads to ruin*. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death." In the garden of Eden, the serpent's lie to Eve was that disobeying God would lead to greater power and knowledge, but sin led only to judgment and death.

All of us, to some degree, have taken the advice of the wicked, stood in the path of sinners, and sat in the seat of mockers. We have all sinned. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus, who never sinned, took our sin on Himself when He became our sacrifice on the cross. When we turn to Him in faith, He forgives us, gives us eternal life, and empowers us to live for Him. The result is that we experience God's blessing.

(In PSG, p. 19) **What does this verse teach about the security of those who follow God? How does this security impact our behavior?**

PSALM 1:6

⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ICEBREAKER: In advance, write several pairs of opposite items on index cards—one on each card (for example, winter/summer; college football/professional football; romantic movie/action movie). Mix up the cards and give one to each person as they enter. Lead group members to find their opposite and learn which of the two each prefers. Invite volunteers to share any fun fact they learned about their partner. Explain: *All of these opposites require someone choosing one thing over another—you can't have winter and summer at the same time.* Ask: *How do you decide which to choose in any of these areas?* Say: *While none of these were matters of life and death, today we will discuss how we make decisions when the consequences of making the wrong decision are much greater.*

EXPLAIN: Direct attention to First Thoughts (PSG, pp. 12-13). Emphasize that Psalm 1 describes two paths that people can select. One leads to life; the other leads to death.

TRANSITION: *Psalm 1 functions as an introduction to the entire Book of Psalms.* Call attention to **Pack Item 3** (Poster: Summer 2017) and **Pack Item 2** (Poster: Types of Psalms). Give copies of **Pack Items 2A,B** (Handouts: Types of Psalms) to each person in the group to use as a reference throughout this study of Psalms. Point out that **Pack Item 9** (Poster: Authorship of the Psalms) shows the authors of each of the psalms.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CHART: On a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, create a chart with two columns: “The Path of Life” and “The Path of Death.”

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 1:1-3, directing the group to listen for phrases that explain the state of being for the two paths on the chart.

ASK: *What does the first line of the psalm tell us about the state of being for the person on the path of life?* Share from the PSG the paragraph that begins, “The righteous person, according to biblical standards ...” (p. 14).

DISCUSS: Lead the group to call out any actions or behaviors identified in these verses that the righteous do and don't do. Record responses on the chart. Discuss how delighting in God's law helps keep us from the negative behaviors described in verse 1.

ASK: *What is the godly fruit that God desires for His followers to produce? How can worldly wisdom hinder growth? How does reading the Bible nurture the development of this godly fruit?* (PSG, p. 17)

TRANSITION: *We've filled out most of the chart for “The Path of Life.” Now let's look at the rest of the psalm to fill out the other side of the chart.*

READ: Direct someone to read Psalm 1:4 as the group listens to identify the state of being for the person on “The Path of Death.” Record the answer on the chart.

HIGHLIGHT: Invite a volunteer to explain what chaff is, using details from the PSG (p. 17).

ASK: *What contemporary images might convey the same biblical truth as the metaphor of the chaff?*

SUMMARIZE: *The wicked are the opposite of everything that is said about the righteous in verses 1-2. We can assume that if the happy person does not follow the advice of the wicked, the wicked person does, and so on for the other descriptions from verse 1. However, there are specific details about what the wicked won't do in verse 5.*

READ: Direct the group to read Psalm 1:5, looking for what the wicked will not do. Lead the group to call out responses for you to fill in on the chart.

ASK: *How should God's warning about the future of the wicked affect you? How should you feel? What should you do? (PSG, p. 18)*

READ: Call on a volunteer to read Psalm 1:6, and encourage the group to call out additional items to include on the chart. Then, using **Pack Item 10** (*Poster: Psalm 1:6*), point out that verse 6 is this week's memory verse. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*), and encourage everyone to use it as a reminder to memorize Scripture.

HIGHLIGHT: *Verse 6 emphasizes God's protection over the way of the righteous. But because He doesn't watch over the way of the wicked as He does the way of the righteous, they are led to ruin.*

MINI-LECTURE: Emphasize that the righteous aren't right with God because of the good things they do: *We don't become righteous because we avoid following the advice of the wicked, taking the path of sinners, or joining with mockers. We are righteous because we have been saved by faith in Christ Jesus. Our actions and behaviors reflect our salvation. They don't contribute to it.*

ASK: *What does this verse teach about the security of those who follow God? How does this security impact our behavior? (PSG, p. 19)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Using the chart, lead group members to reflect on which illustration from nature would best describe their spiritual life right now: *If you have felt more like a tree planted by streams of water, is it because you have maintained the spiritual disciplines of delighting in God's Word and meditating on it? On the other hand, if your spiritual life has been more like chaff, is it because you haven't been avoiding the behaviors of verse 1?* Lead the group to quietly reflect on these questions: *What might you need to change in your life? Or what good things are you doing that you need to make sure you keep doing?*

REVIEW: Lead the group through the second question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 20): *As a group, list ways ungodliness is promoted in our world today. How can your Bible study group help one another not be influenced by this misinformation?* You may choose to play music during this time (see p. 22).

REMIND: Encourage everyone to read through Psalm 78 and study Session 2 in the PSG in preparation for the next group time.

PRAY: Thank God for watching over the way of the righteous, and ask Him for the strength to continue on the path of life.



PRACTICE

- Review your group list, looking for people whose attendance may have dropped off recently. Encourage them this week, emphasizing that the start of a new unit of study is a great time to get back into the habit of group life.
- Contact group members who were not present. Remind them they can stay current with the group by using their Personal Study Guide. Allow them to share prayer requests, asking for permission to share the requests with others in the group.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Display two pots, one with moist potting soil and one with dry sand and gravel. Open up a package of seeds, and ask group members to decide in which pot the seeds would most likely take root and grow. Emphasize that Psalm 1 will present two contrasting images from nature that will help us evaluate what kind of “soil” we’re producing in our lives.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement the discussion of Psalm 1:1, enlist a volunteer with a testimony about how following wicked advice or the wrong crowd got him or her off the path of life, what the consequences have been, and how he or she got back on the right path. You may also choose to use a current news story about a public figure who showed a lot of promise early in his or her career, but who fell as a result of poor choices.
- To enhance the study of Psalm 1:2, identify a senior adult from outside your group whom you respect for his or her commitment to Bible reading and Scripture memory. Invite this person to share with your group how he or she has developed this discipline in his or her personal life.
- To further support the discussion of verse 5, lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 18).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to quietly reflect on the first question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 20): *What is the role of the Bible in your life? How much time would you say you spend reading and studying the Bible on a weekly basis? What actions can you take to increase that time?*

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Play a recording of the hymn “Trust and Obey,” by John H. Sammis. Lead the group in singing the chorus together.

Many of the psalms were intended to be sung! Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE PAST

We can learn from the past as we observe God's faithfulness in contrast to humanity's unfaithfulness.

PSALM 78:5-8,32-39

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 78:35

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 78, First Thoughts (p. 24), and Understand the Context (pp. 24-25).
- **STUDY** Psalm 78:5-8,32-39, using Explore the Text (pp. 25-29). Review verses 9-31,40-72. Note the transitions between descriptions of Israel's unfaithfulness, God's punishment, and God's compassion. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Commentary*, available at LifeWay.com.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 30-31). Consider ways to emphasize the memory verse during this session (Ps. 78:35). Customize your group plans using the ideas included in *QuickSource* and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. If you choose to use any of the suggestions under More Ideas (p. 32), gather your information in advance.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers. For More Ideas: A young adult list of skills taught by parents (see p. 32); and Volunteers to share how they came to faith in Christ. Make copies of: **PACK ITEMS 2A,B** (*Handouts: Types of Psalms*). Prepare to display the following Pack Items: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Egypt and the Holy Land*); **PACK ITEM 4** (*Time Line: Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: Messianic Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Education

An adequate system of Christian education is necessary to a complete spiritual program for Christ's people.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Coaches and athletes spend significant time watching video footage of previous games. They examine each play and analyze every mistake. In the same manner, they also scrutinize the things they did well. They then seek to correct their errors on the practice field and duplicate their successes as they prepare for the next contest. Likewise, in life, we can learn from the past.

(In PSG, p. 22) **What are some ways we can learn from the past? As we analyze our own past, what should we be looking for?**

Psalm 78 called for Israel to learn the lessons of its history. Verses 5-8 directed each generation to teach the next generation about God. In verses 32-37, the psalmist looked back at Israel's failures in history. He observed that repentance was the sole means for a growing relationship with God. In stark contrast to Israel's repeated unfaithfulness, verses 38-39 point to God's compassion and His willingness to forgive. We can learn from the past as we observe God's faithfulness in contrast to humanity's unfaithfulness.

BIBLE SKILL

Compare Bible translations to gain a clearer understanding.

Compare Bible translations of Psalm 78:38. Look for synonyms and different ways translators approach this verse. Use a Bible dictionary to compare the meaning of the words translated differently. How does the translation comparison give you a greater understanding of the key words and ideas in this passage?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 78

The superscription of Psalm 78 calls the psalm "A Maskil of Asaph." The term *maskil* appears in the titles of 13 psalms (32; 42; 44; 45; 52-55; 74; 78; 88; 89; and 142). The term also occurs in Psalm 47:7, where it is translated "wisdom" in the line "sing a song of wisdom." The word *maskil* is based on a verbal root meaning insight, understanding, or wisdom. Thus, a maskil was likely a poem or song requiring contemplation or imparting insight or wisdom.

Asaph was a levitical leader of music in worship. During most of the history of Israel, the Levites worked to support the service of worship, helping the priests in the tabernacle. According to 1 Chronicles, King David appointed some of the Levites to lead music in worship, "to celebrate the LORD God of Israel, and to give thanks and praise to Him" (1 Chron. 16:4). Asaph is referred to as "the chief" of that group of praise leaders (1 Chron. 16:5). Later, David divided the Levites into four divisions (1 Chron. 23:2-5). The fourth division was responsible for the music of worship. Levites in the fourth division were to "prophesy accompanied by lyres, harps, and cymbals ... giving thanks and praise to the LORD" (1 Chron. 25:1,3). David placed all those worship musicians under three leaders, and one of the leaders was Asaph. Again, Asaph seems especially prominent among music leaders. Wherever they are listed, Asaph is mentioned first (1 Chron. 25:1-9).

The work of Asaph endured. Over 250 years after Asaph's lifetime, King Hezekiah "told the Levites to sing praise to the LORD in the words of David and of the seer Asaph" (2 Chron. 29:30). Over 250 years after Hezekiah, praise leaders were appointed in the time of Nehemiah based on the fact that "in the days of David and Asaph, there were heads of the singers and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God" (Neh. 12:46). Asaph is also remembered through his descendants, who are listed among the returnees from exile in Ezra 2:41. Ezra 3:10 mentions that his descendants were still leading music in worship. Worship leadership by people bearing Asaph's name suggests the possibility that some of the psalms with Asaph's name may have been written by one of his descendants in his honor.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Covenant as a Biblical Theme," available digitally in the Summer 2017 *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator*.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

TEACH FOR THE FUTURE (PS. 78:5-8)

This psalm of Asaph begins with an exhortation to pay attention to its message: "Hear my instruction; listen to the words from my mouth" (v. 1). The psalmist refers to the contents of the psalm as "my instruction" (v. 1). The word translated "instruction" is the Hebrew word *torah*. That word often refers to all of God's law and can also refer to the first five books of the Old Testament. Another word that describes the contents of Psalm 78 is "wise sayings" (v. 2). The original Hebrew word is the same word used in the title of the Book of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is a book of "wise sayings." Thus, two words that describe the contents of Psalm 78 also refer to two major parts of the Old Testament Scriptures. Such a beginning emphasizes the importance of the psalm and captures the attention of readers.

Another word the psalmist used to describe his composition is "mysteries" (v. 2). The same word is also translated "riddle" (Judg. 14:12-19). Elsewhere, it is parallel to "proverbs" or "wise sayings," as here in Psalm 78 (see Ps. 49:4; Prov. 1:6; Ezek. 17:2; Hab. 2:6). The word referred to something whose meaning is not as clear and must be contemplated to be understood. The fact that the psalmist used this word to refer to a review of past events tells us that he is interested in more than a recital of bare facts. He will focus on the salvation God accomplished through past events and the contemporary importance of that salvation.

Jesus quoted Psalm 78:2 to refer to His use of parables (Matt. 13:35). A parable is a comparison—this is like that. The word in Psalm 78:2 translated "wise sayings" had the same meaning. Wisdom teachers taught their students unfamiliar concepts by referring to what was familiar to them. The writer of Psalm 78 taught contemporary spiritual lessons and offered a spiritual challenge by referring to Israel's familiar past.

Most people in the ancient world did not read history books, so historical data came to them as information "that our fathers have passed down to us" (v. 3). In an oral culture, each successive generation had the responsibility to tell the story of the history of its people. In Psalm 78, Asaph exhorted the people of Israel to do exactly that.

PSALM 78:5-6

⁵ He established a testimony in Jacob and set up a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children ⁶ so that a future generation—children yet to be born—might know. They were to rise and tell their children

PSALM 78:7-8

⁷ so that they might put their confidence in God and not forget God's works, but keep his commands. ⁸ Then they would not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not loyal and whose spirit was not faithful to God.

VERSES 5-6

Asaph did not begin with God's creation or even with God's covenant with Abraham. He began with God's covenant with His people at Sinai and His gift of the Law. The first two lines of verse 5 are synonymously parallel. **Testimony** is synonymous with the **law**. **Jacob** is synonymous with **Israel**, which is appropriate since God changed Jacob's name to "Israel" (Gen. 32:28).

Asaph wrote that the law was the document God **commanded our fathers to teach to their children**. Surely he was referring to God's words in Deuteronomy 6. As God was preparing His people to enter the promised land, He told His people to love Him and keep His laws in their hearts. Then He said, "Repeat them to your children" and told them to talk about His laws regularly in their homes (Deut. 6:7). God also told them to recite His acts that rescued them from Egypt and to exhort their children to obey His law (Deut. 6:20-25).

The psalmist seems to refer to at least three generations. First, *fathers ... teach to their children*. Then, the next generation—**children yet to be born**—would **rise and tell their children**. By referring to more than the first generation in the wilderness, the psalm communicates that intergenerational instruction was to continue in Israel in perpetuity.

The purpose of the parental reminders of Israel's history was so that future generations might know. How could future generations know what God had done for Israel unless someone told them? They could not. Who should tell the children of future generations? God gave that responsibility to parents and grandparents.

VERSES 7-8

The purpose of passing the history of God's saving work to the next generation was not mere retention of information. The psalmist was not promoting the learning of history for history's sake. He stated three purposes in teaching the past. First, he wanted the next generation to know the past **so that they might put their confidence in God**. Knowing the ways God has powerfully worked on behalf of His people in the past increases our faith in God's power to work in our lives in the present. It has been said that faith is a bridge from the past to the future. When we remember what God has done in the past, faith builds a bridge to show us that God will work in our lives in the future.

The second purpose for teaching the past is so that they would **not forget God's works**. The writer of Hebrews wrote to Christians, "don't throw away your confidence" (Heb. 10:35). Then he reminded them of the confidence in God demonstrated by saints in the past (Heb. 11:4-40). Knowing God's past work gives us confidence in His work in our lives in the present and future.

Third, the psalmist wanted his generation to remember the past so that **they would not be like their fathers**. Referring evidently to the Israelites who wandered in the wilderness after deliverance from Egypt, he called them **a stubborn and rebellious generation**. In Deuteronomy, Moses and God Himself referred to Israel's stubbornness in the

desert (Deut. 9:6,13; 10:16; 31:27). The psalmist knew that history well. To know Israel's history was to know Israel's sin. The psalmist did not want the people of his generation to repeat the sins of the past.

The apostle Paul told the story of the sins of Israel in the desert for the same purpose, as a warning for others not to walk in their ways (1 Cor. 10:1-13). Contemporary Christians are to follow this biblical example and teach our children. We should teach them about the sin of past generations and exhort them to shun it. We should teach them about the faithfulness and power of God in the past and exhort them to trust and obey Him.

How should you be involved in teaching the Word of God to the next generation?

REMEMBER THE PAST (PS. 78:32-37)

In verses 9-31, Asaph recorded some events in Israel's past that were important to remember. He referred to God's deliverance of His people from Egypt (v. 12), His miracle of parting the Red Sea (v. 13), His miraculous leadership and provision in the wilderness wandering (vv. 14-16), Israel's rebellion and complaints in the desert (vv. 17-20), and the mercy and judgment God showed to them (vv. 21-31). All these events are recorded in the Books of Exodus and Numbers, books Asaph surely knew.

VERSE 32

The psalmist had just cited historical expressions of God's judgment against sin and His mercy in spite of sin. Throughout Israel's experiences of mercy and judgment, they kept sinning. Israel's sin was not in ignorance. They sinned despite the multitudes of God's revelatory acts and words throughout their history.

Genesis 15:6 says, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." Abram was made right with God by his belief, or faith (Rom. 4:1-5; Gal. 3:6-9). The word translated "believed" also appears in Psalm 78:32, except that Israel ***did not believe***. The psalmist was emphasizing that the Israelites were not right with God.

The Israelites' unbelief is incredible in light of all God had done for them. ***Wondrous*** translates a Hebrew word that refers to something so astonishing that only God can accomplish it. In the Old Testament it refers to God's cosmic wonders and historical miracles (Ex. 15:11; Job 37:16; Pss. 77:14; 89:5; 118:22-23; Isa. 9:6; Jer. 21:2). It is applied to humans almost exclusively to express what is beyond human ability (2 Sam. 13:2; Prov. 30:18). The psalmist was stating that God had performed works that were truly awe-inspiring, yet amazingly Israel *did not believe*.

PSALM 78:32

³² Despite all this, they kept sinning and did not believe his wondrous works.

PSALM 78:33-35

³³ He made their days end in futility, their years in sudden disaster. ³⁴ When he killed some of them, the rest began to seek him; they repented and searched for God.

³⁵ They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer.

PSALM 78:36-37

³⁶ But they deceived him with their mouths, they lied to him with their tongues, ³⁷ their hearts were insincere toward him, and they were unfaithful to his covenant.

VERSES 33-35

Some of God's "wondrous works" (v. 32) were works of judgment. He caused the lives of some of His people to **end in futility**. *Futility* can also be translated "breath," or "vapor." When we exhale on a cold day, we see our breath as a vapor. The vapor is visible for only a moment and then it's gone. That's the way God made the lives of some of His people. Their lives are without substance as God's judgment for their stubborn sin.

When the psalmist wrote that God **killed some of them**, he was likely thinking of a specific event, like the one Numbers 21:4-7 describes. The Hebrews in the wilderness spoke against God and Moses, and God sent poisonous snakes that killed some of them. If we are shocked when we read that God killed people, then we should remember that from the beginning God has stated that the penalty for sin is death (Gen. 2:17). Instead of being surprised that sin leads to death, we should be grateful that God in His mercy allows us time to repent before death (Ps. 103:8-13).

After God killed some people, others confessed their sin and God provided rescue. The psalmist wrote that they **repented and searched for God**. In other words, they turned from their sin and to God. The psalmist added the explanatory note that they **remembered** the nature of God, that He was **their rock, the Most High God, their Redeemer**. Remembering often leads to repenting. When we remember who God is and all He has done, we are moved to repent of sin and turn to Him. Jesus told the Christians in Sardis, "Remember ... and repent" (Rev. 3:3).

VERSES 36-37

Unfortunately, the repentance of the Hebrews in the wilderness was insincere and self-deceptive. Verse 36 says **they deceived God with their mouths**. They did not fool God, but their mouths expressed sentiments that were not felt in their hearts. Their words were deceptive. **They lied** to God. God spoke through Isaiah of people who "honor me with lip-service—yet their hearts are far from me" (Isa. 29:13). Asaph was writing of the same duplicitous phenomenon, the easy sin of speaking holy words while thinking unholy thoughts and living unholy lives. Jesus quoted Isaiah when He stated that His generation was guilty of the same sin (Matt. 15:7-8).

People will always be tempted to say they are right with God when they are not. Even when our repentance is heartfelt, sometimes it is short-lived. We can quickly repent of our repentance. Like the Israelites during Hosea's lifetime, commitment to God can be "like the morning mist and like the early dew that vanishes" (Hos. 6:4). True repentance results in a growing relationship with God that includes willing obedience (Acts 26:20; 2 Cor. 7:9-11).

How do people today speak holy but insincere words about their relationship with God? Why do they do so?

COMPASSION IN THE PRESENT (PS. 78:38-39)

VERSES 38-39

In the incident of sin and judgment described in Numbers 21, God provided an emblem—a bronze snake—for His people to look at and live (vv. 8-9). God’s judgment was tempered with mercy. All who sinned deserved to die, but God gave a means of salvation. Thus, verse 38 states that **he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them**. The word translated **compassionate** was used to refer to the relationship between a mother and her unborn child. What tender, loving compassion God has for us.

God’s mercy is not limited to a few historical examples. Verse 38 says he often turned His anger aside. Nehemiah 9, for example, reviews part of the history of Israel and recites a five-fold cycle of rebellion and judgment followed by God’s compassion (vv. 16-31). Verse 39 also states that God remembers humanity’s weaknesses, a truth that is echoed in Psalm 103, where God’s remembrance is also paired with His compassion (vv. 13-17). God’s greatest expression of His compassion for sinners is in the Person and work of Jesus. God incarnated Himself in human flesh because of His love and mercy for us. His death on the cross as a sacrifice for our sin was the perfect expression of His righteous wrath against sin and the perfect expression of His love for sinners.

The remainder of Psalm 78 continues to trace the history of God’s great saving acts on behalf of Israel—the plagues in Egypt, the exodus, and the conquest of Canaan (vv. 40-55). But these verses also continue the dismal history of Israel’s forgetfulness and idolatry (vv. 40-42, 56-58). God responded to Israel’s sin with further judgment and even the scattering of the ten tribes of Israel in the north (vv. 59-67). The psalm ends with a note of hope. The Southern Kingdom, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, remained, and the dynasty of David was intact (vv. 68-72). Surely the psalmist hoped that David’s descendants would shepherd the people as David had, “with a pure heart and ... with his skillful hands” (v. 72).

(In PSG, p. 29) **How does God’s compassion shown in the past give us hope for the present? What is the connection between God’s compassion and humanity’s limitations?**

PSALM 78:38-39

³⁸ Yet he was compassionate; he atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them. He often turned his anger aside and did not unleash all his wrath. ³⁹ He remembered that they were only flesh, a wind that passes and does not return.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ICEBREAKER: Write on the whiteboard or a large sheet of paper: “Those who do not learn from history ...” Point out the phrase and ask group members to complete the well-known quote. They should recognize that the complete quote is “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” For fun, note that you can find several variations on this quote on the Internet, such as “Those who don’t learn from history will wind up in summer school,” or “If history repeats itself, I am so getting a pet dinosaur.”

LEAD: Guide the group to discuss the meaning of this quote. Ask: *Based on your own experiences or the state of the world today, do you think this saying is true?*

TRANSITION: Explain that Psalm 78 called for Israel to learn the lessons from history. Refer to **Pack Items 2A,B** (*Handouts: Types of Psalms*) and point out that like in Psalm 1, which we studied in the last session, Psalm 78 is a wisdom/didactic psalm, which means it was intended to teach the Israelites something. To set the context for this study of Psalms, review **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Psalms*).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DISCUSS: Invite group members to list lessons or specific skills they learned from their parents and/or lessons or skills they’ve taught their own children. After several group members comment, ask those who commented why they or their parents thought these lessons were important to pass on.

READ: Enlist a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 78:5-8, directing the group to listen for what parents were to teach their children, and why they were to teach them.

SUMMARIZE: *According to verse 5, fathers were to teach their children God’s law. Hebrew poetry often emphasized repetition of ideas rather than sounds. Thus, “testimony in Jacob” and “law in Israel” are synonymous.*

ASK: *What are the reasons for teaching children God’s law, according to verses 6-8? From the PSG: What are some ways people teach future generations about God and His love? What types of teaching will most likely touch a future generation? (PSG, p. 26)*

SUMMARIZE: Use the first paragraph under Verses 32-34 in the PSG (p. 26) to summarize verses 9-31. Note that verse 32 refers to the miraculous ways God revealed Himself to the Israelites while they were wandering in the wilderness following their release from captivity in Egypt.

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 78:32-37, and challenge the group to listen for the consequences of continued sin. Ask another volunteer to read Numbers 14:34.

SUMMARIZE: Highlight the Sinai Desert on **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Egypt and the Holy Land*) to show where the Israelites wandered and rebelled in the desert. Say: *God’s righteous judgment was that the entire generation of those who rebelled against God in the desert would die there. Numbers 1:46 lists the number of fighting men at more than 600,000, so if they were all married, that’s a total of 1.2 million people. That’s one funeral every 17 minutes! While verse 35 indicates*

that some did repent when they remembered God as their rock and Redeemer, they always seemed to lapse back to unfaithfulness.

ASK: How did the people demonstrate insincere hearts toward God in verses 35-37? How do people do the same today? From the PSG: *Why do tragedies cause people to turn to God? How would you define the difference between a genuine turning to God and a temporary turning to God?* (PSG, p. 28)

TRANSITION: *These verses paint a grim but accurate picture of human nature. Thankfully, it isn't human nature that saves us. Let's look at our last section of Scripture.*

HIGHLIGHT: *Verses 32-37 talk about what the people did in spite of God's goodness. Verses 38-39 talk about what God did in spite of the people's wickedness.*

READ: As you read aloud Psalm 78:38-39, ask for group members to listen for the one word that gives us hope in the face of God's righteous judgment.

ASK: *How did God atone for the guilt of the people? What substitute sacrifice has He offered for our sins? From the PSG: How does God's compassion shown in the past give us hope for the present? What is the connection between God's compassion and humanity's limitations?* (PSG, p. 29)

GUIDE: Use **Pack Item 7** (*Chart: Messianic Psalms*) and **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*) to discuss how God's sending His Son and His characteristics display His compassion.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Invite group members to reflect back on the answers from the discussion about what they learned from their parents and what as parents they are passing on to their children. Say: *Whether it's cooking or changing a tire, there is value in all the things we try to pass on to our children. But what are we doing to pass on those lessons that have eternal significance? What did you learn today about human nature and God's compassion?*

DIRECT: Create smaller teams and direct each team to discuss the questions and create a list of answers to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 30): *List some ways your Bible study group can teach younger individuals about God and His compassion for humanity. Ascertain practical methods for achieving these ideas.* Call teams back together to discuss their answers. Make sure to discuss programs and opportunities your church already offers, as well as ways parents can lead their children at home. Emphasize that our responsibility is not only to the next generation but also to people our own age.

REMIND: Encourage group members to read through Psalm 23 and study the Session 3 content in their PSG in preparation for the next group time.

PRAY: Read the summary statement for this session under the title on page 21 of the PSG: *We can learn from the past as we observe God's faithfulness in contrast to humanity's unfaithfulness.* Lead the group in prayer, thanking God for leaving us a record in His Word of His relationship with His people, and asking God to help us learn from the past as we observe His faithfulness.



PRACTICE

- Review your group list, focusing on faithful, mature group members who are not involved in any areas of ministry in the church. Follow up with them this week, and challenge them to teach the next generation. Ask God to use you to develop and encourage them.
- Pray for your own children or children in your life this week. Commit to intentionally passing on something you have learned in your relationship with God to the next generation.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

In advance, obtain a list from a college or young adult group in your church of “things I wish I’d learned from my parents.” Alternatively, you can post this question on Facebook or other social media: *Now that you are an adult, what is the most helpful skill you learned from your parents?* Share responses.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement your discussion of Psalm 78:6, enlist several volunteers to share how they came to faith in Christ. Encourage them to share specific details about who taught them about Jesus and what kind of example that person set.
- To further your discussion of Psalm 78:32-37, discuss: *Are people more likely to learn from the mistakes of the past or from God’s demonstration of “wondrous works” in the past? Why?* Guide group members to reflect on how this has been true in their own lives.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Prior to the session, find out from your children’s ministry leadership whether there are any current needs for children’s small group leaders or volunteers in the ministry. Emphasize to your group that they have just spent an entire session on the mandate to teach the next generation the law and the testimony of God. Encourage group members to prayerfully consider how they could meet these needs.

Obtain a list of all the new and expectant parents in your church. Give one name to each individual or couple in your group, and challenge them to pray for new parents each day this week, so that future generations might know the law and testimony of our God.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

During the Summarize and Challenge section, play a recording of the hymn “In His Time,” by Diane Ball. During the prayer, thank God that our salvation is based on His faithfulness, not ours.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE SHEPHERD

God can be trusted since He is always good.

PSALM 23:1-6

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 23:1

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 23, First Thoughts (p. 34), and Understand the Context (pp. 34-35). Record any questions about this psalm you might want to explore as you study.
- **STUDY** Psalm 23:1-6, using Explore the Text (pp. 35-39). Pay special attention to notes on translation differences, as group members are likely to be very familiar with this psalm. Some may even have it memorized. For further insight, consult the *Explore the Bible Commentary*, found in both print and digital format at LifeWay.com.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 40-41) and More Ideas (p. 42), in *QuickSource*, and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Brainstorm creative ways to use the Suggested Music Ideas (p. 42) that are appropriate for your group.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or a whiteboard and markers. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: **PACK ITEM 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 7** (Chart: *Messianic Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (Poster: *God in the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God

God is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe.

FIRST THOUGHTS

We use many terms to describe stress—*anxiety, pressure, tension, angst, burnout*. Many people experience its symptoms. Writers, talk show hosts, and other “experts” offer their remedies. Some of the common themes are to slow down, avoid stressful people, take more vacations, sit in a hot tub, get more exercise, and drink less caffeine.

(In PSG, p. 32) **What factors cause the greatest stress today? What remedies have you heard offered for dealing with these factors?**

When we experience anxiety, it affects every part of our lives. In our homes we are less prepared emotionally to meet the needs of our family members. Anxiety also affects job performance since it results in absenteeism and burnout. Most of society’s remedies for anxiety are flawed because they do not address humanity’s most basic need—a love relationship with the one true God who made us, knows us, and has the power to restore us. God relates to us as a loving shepherd who provides for all our needs. Therefore, we need not be anxious. We can rest in Him and His providential care. Others may disappoint us or abandon us. He will not.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 23

Some psalms can be classified as psalms of faith or trust. These psalms express confidence in God and in the utter dependability of His character. In such psalms the psalmists usually expressed confidence that God would deliver them, care for them, or bless them in some way. For example, the psalmist wrote in Psalm 16: “I said to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; I have nothing good besides you.’ ... I always let the LORD guide me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken” (vv. 2,8). In Psalm 27 the psalmist wrote, “The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom should I fear? ... Though an army deploys against me, my heart will not be afraid; though a war breaks out against me, I will still be confident” (vv. 1,3). The writer of Psalm 37 wrote confidently: “For evildoers will be destroyed, but those who put their hope in the LORD will inherit the land” (v. 9). The psalmist of Psalm 91 wrote: “I will say concerning the LORD, who is my refuge and my fortress, my God in whom I trust” (v. 2). Then he extended the promises of God’s blessings to all who put their faith in God: “Because you have made the LORD—my refuge, the Most High—your dwelling place, no harm will come to you; no plague will come near your tent” (vv. 9-10).

The Book of Psalms expresses the full range of human emotions: joy, fear, gratitude, doubt, celebration, and disappointment. Some of the

BIBLE SKILL

Memorize verses and apply them to a real-life situation.

Memorize or refresh your memorization of Psalm 23. Recite it aloud. Read it aloud again, putting emphasis on the personal pronouns. Write the psalm in your own words, reflecting on how the truth of this psalm can be seen in your own life.

psalmists wonder aloud where God is or why He has not come to the rescue. Others look at the inequities of human existence and doubt God's justice. Psalms of faith express no such questions or doubts. Instead, they express full confidence in God and in His holy attributes.

Psalm 23 is "a psalm of David" and portrays God as a shepherd. David had been a shepherd, so he knew sheep and the life of a shepherd. Another psalm of David (28:9) and a psalm of Asaph (80:1) refer to God as a shepherd. The prophets also referred to God as a shepherd (Isa. 40:11; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:12,15). Just as the Old Testament repeatedly refers to God as the Shepherd of His people, Jesus called Himself "the good shepherd" (John 10:11,14).

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PROVIDES (PS. 23:1-3)

VERSE 1

The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need. Why do life's challenges make us anxious? We become anxious because we are insecure about our needs being met. When we face a financial challenge, we fear that our financial needs will not be met. When we face an emotional challenge, we fear that our emotional needs will not be met. The writer of Psalm 23 expressed confidence that his needs would be met. His shepherd was *the LORD*. When our shepherd is the sovereign and all-powerful God of the universe, we don't need to fear whether our needs will be met.

A sheep's lot in life is totally dependent on who its shepherd is. Some sheep suffer because their shepherd is not attentive to their needs or diligent in meeting their needs. But the Lord Himself is our Shepherd. He knows our needs because He knows everything. He is so committed to caring for us that He gave His life to save us. Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. ... I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:11,15). That gives us security. We are sheep, the Lord is the Good Shepherd, and He is going to take care of His sheep.

That doesn't mean that we will be without problems. The superscription of this psalm says that it is a Davidic psalm. David was in danger many times, but he trusted his Shepherd to lead him and provide for him. He was able to write: *I have what I need*. When we're anxious, God gives us security.

VERSE 2

Verse 2 is a beautiful picture of serenity: ***He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters.*** Literally, the last two words are "waters of rest." We live in a fast-paced world, and it's getting faster every day. As we face pressure after pressure, we begin to think we've got too much to do and too little time to do it. We even fill our vacations with so much activity that we feel pressure. We become physically and emotionally exhausted, the stress builds, and green pastures and still waters begin to sound pretty good.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 23:1

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I have what I need.

PSALM 23:2

² He lets me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside quiet waters.

Resting, or being still, is not a sin. In this verse the psalmist does not initiate his rest, God does: *he leads me beside quiet waters*. A wonderful consequence of God’s love for us is that He does not want us to be distressed. When we are tired or in a stressful situation, He leads us into rest. The Gospels record that Jesus rested. Jesus would submerge Himself in ministry, meeting the needs of people by preaching, teaching, and healing. Then He would spend time away from people resting, alone with the heavenly Father in prayer. Then, the pendulum would swing back again and Jesus would minister to people. Jesus’ life was characterized by alternating between serving the Father and resting in the presence of the Father. Followers of Jesus should pattern our lives after His. Maybe you need to rest in God’s presence. When God is in charge, He lets us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside quiet waters.

PSALM 23:3

³ He renews my life; he leads me along the right paths for his name’s sake.

VERSE 3

Sometimes, sheep fall over on their backs and need someone to set them on their feet again. God the Shepherd does that for those who are in His flock. David wrote, *he renews my life*. God helps us start over again. David knew what it was like to be defeated. He committed adultery with Bathsheba. After that, Psalm 51:12 says he prayed, “Restore the joy of your salvation to me.” He needed God to put him back on his feet. In Psalm 23 David expressed confidence that God does that for His sheep. Maybe you feel defeated and down. Spiritually or emotionally, you are flat on your back and you need God to restore you. He can do that.

This verse says that God not only renews us but also leads us *along the right paths*. God puts us on our feet again and then leads us down the right paths. When a shepherd led his sheep, *right paths* were the paths that led to food and away from the danger of predators. For a sheep, this verse describes full recovery from distress to stability, from danger to safety, from privation to provision.

(In PSG, p. 36) **David drew metaphors from his life experience. How would you convey the biblical truth in these verses using contemporary analogies from your own life experience?**

PSALM 23:4

⁴ Even when I go through the darkest valley, I fear no danger, for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me.

GUARDS (PS. 23:4)

VERSE 4

Sometimes even walking on the right paths leads through a dark valley. Even when we walk with God as our Shepherd, some days we are in the valley instead of the mountaintop—in the shadow instead of the sunlight. The psalmist’s testimony was *I go through the darkest valley*. The Hebrew word translated *darkest* is a compound word consisting of the words for “shadow” and “death.” Thus, some translations render the word

“shadow of death.” Others take the compound word as a superlative: the worst kind of darkness, death’s darkness. One scholar refers to the word as “the strongest word in Hebrew for darkness.”¹ It was used to refer to the thick darkness of a mine shaft (Job 28:3). Job also used it to refer to the darkness of his eyelids when they were tired from weeping (Job 16:16). David had walked through valleys that were that dark.

Valleys are dangerous for sheep. As they pass through canyons, predators like wolves and lions hide among the rocks, ready to attack. Canyons are especially dangerous in the dark. Furthermore, sheep are prone to panic. In Idaho, one night in 2013, two wolves attacked a flock of sheep, and 176 sheep died. Only about ten sheep died of bite wounds. The others died as a result of running in panic, piling up on one another, and suffocating. For almost all of those sheep, the cause of death was not a wolf attack but fear.

When those sheep died that night, where was the shepherd? Why didn’t he hear the panicked cries of the sheep? Why didn’t he run to fight off the wolves and rescue the sheep? Obviously, no shepherd was there. Sheep have no natural means of defense. Without a shepherd, sheep are without protection. Still, the writer of Psalm 23 wrote, *I fear no danger*. Why not? Was he ignorant of the dangers around him? No, he was not afraid because the Shepherd was with him even when he was walking through the dark valley. He wrote, *for you are with me*. David knew the Shepherd would use His rod to fight off the enemies and lead him through the darkness.

What are some spiritual and emotional “predators” that stalk our faith and our joy? How does God protect us and help us survive each one?

God does not say to us, “Go through that dark valley alone and I’ll meet you on the other side.” No, He says, “Take My hand. I’ll walk through the valley with you.” When we are walking through a dark valley, friends can encourage us and family members can comfort us. But what people do for us cannot compare with what God does for us during our dark days. He is “the God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 1:3) and He says to us, “I will never leave you or abandon you” (Heb. 13:5).

(In PSG, p. 37) **How do the sheep express trust in the shepherd? In what ways is obedience a function of trust?**

HOSTS (PS. 23:5-6)

In verses 5-6, the metaphor of our relationship with God shifts from a shepherd and his sheep to a host and his guest. The psalmist pictured God

as a host who is lavishly gracious. He welcomes us and provides for us when enemies are pursuing us.

PSALM 23:5

⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

VERSE 5

Romans 12:18 says, “If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Even when we obey that verse, sometimes we have enemies. They are enemies not because we want to be their enemy, but because they have decided to be our enemies. David had enemies. One of his enemies was King Saul. David served Saul faithfully. But Saul hunted David and tried to kill him. David wrote to the Lord that He provided for him **in the presence of my enemies**.

Hospitality was important among nomadic shepherds in the Near East. Imagine enemies pursuing one of those shepherds with the intent to do him harm. The shepherd pushes his flock through the wilderness as fast as he can to try to get to safety. He sees a cluster of tents in the distance. Flocks and herds are nearby. The impressive camp obviously belongs to a wealthy and powerful man. Will the owner of those tents welcome him and protect him, or will he ignore him or even send him away? What a relief when the fleeing nomad in the wilderness sees that the host welcomes him and prepares a table spread with a feast for him. As long as he is in the presence of the gracious and powerful host, he is safe.

Have you ever faced opposition from an enemy? Did you find refuge and relief in God’s presence?

We are nomads in a wilderness. We’re pilgrims passing through this world on our way to our heavenly home (Phil. 3:20). We will face opposition along our journey (John 15:18-21; 2 Tim. 3:12). Psalm 23 says that even if we have enemies at our heels, we have a gracious Host who welcomes us, protects us, and provides for us. God is our Shepherd and our Host.

The psalmist also wrote, **you anoint my head with oil**. This practice may seem strange to us, but anointing the head with oil was a courtesy in the ancient Near East. It meant the one being anointed was a guest of honor. If a host wanted to indicate that guests were not welcome, he or she would fill their cups halfway. Filling it halfway communicated that the guest should drink that small amount and leave. But a full cup meant the guest was welcome and could stay as long as he or she wanted. The psalmist said, **my cup overflows**. When we are in God’s presence, we are welcome to stay. How wonderful that the almighty, holy God of the universe wants us in His presence. In His presence we have His great provision and protection. All of us face conflict sometimes. It is a joy to know that during those times God welcomes us into His presence and meets our needs.

VERSE 6

David did not know everything that was going to happen to him in the future. However, because the Lord was his Shepherd, he knew his future would include **goodness and faithful love** as long as he lived.

Followers of Jesus can know that *goodness* will follow us as well. Romans 8:28 says, “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” In the end, God somehow brings good out of every circumstance for those who love Him. Every cheerful day and every crisis, every delight and every dilemma, will be used by God for good. When a cloud arises in our lives and we begin to feel stressed, we can declare by faith that somehow God is going to work in our circumstances to bring good. Goodness will follow us.

Faithful love will also follow us. God does not treat us as we deserve but according to His faithful love. Our heavenly Host gives us His steadfast love. It follows us, as if He comes behind us wiping away our sin as soon as we confess. Sin and guilt don’t follow us. God’s faithful love follows us.

Psalms 23 concludes with the words: ***I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.*** The Hebrew phrase means literally “for length of days.” Some translations render the phrase “forever,” taking it to refer to days that go on and on without end. Dwelling in *the house of the LORD* means to remain in His presence. That is what David wanted to do. In Psalm 27 he expressed his desire to stay in God’s presence, “gazing on the beauty of the LORD and seeking him in his temple” (v. 4).

God created every human being with the need for a relationship with Him. We find joy in that relationship, and when people attempt to find joy without God, it is like taking aspirin for cancer. But when we place our lives in the care of God, who is our Good Shepherd and gracious Host, the joy of our present and future with Him overshadows the stresses of this world. We know God through Jesus who is God the Son and the Savior from sin. John 10:11 says Jesus is the Good Shepherd who died for us. Hebrews 13:20 says He is the Great Shepherd who rose from the dead for us. First Peter 5:4 says He is the Chief Shepherd who is coming for us.

(In PSG, p. 39) **What characteristics of God give confidence in times of trouble and in times of prosperity? How do verses 5 and 6 encourage a person facing a time of trouble? How do these verses bring perspective to those experiencing a time of prosperity?**

1. John E. Hartley, “salmawet,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 767.

PSALM 23:6

⁶ Only goodness and faithful love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD as long as I live.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ICEBREAKER: Divide the whiteboard or a large sheet of paper into three columns, giving each column the headings “First Person,” “Second Person,” and “Third Person.” List the singular, plural, and possessive pronouns below each one (first person: I, we, me, my, mine, ours; second person: you, yours; third person: he, she, it, him, her, they, them, his, hers, theirs). As everyone arrives, direct attention to the board. Ask people to call out which pronouns they would typically use in the following situations: a conversation with a friend; providing eyewitness testimony to a jury; writing a history paper; singing a love song; writing a letter to the editor; recapping a game you watched on TV; praising God; and praying to God.

SUMMARIZE: *Think about the two psalms we’ve discussed so far. Psalm 1 described the contrast between two paths of life. All the pronouns were in the third person. Psalm 78 gave the history of God’s faithfulness and Israel’s unfaithfulness. Almost every pronoun is third person. But Psalm 23 is different. Every single verse in the psalm has at least one first-person pronoun, and there are even a few second-person pronouns as well. There’s a reason Psalm 23 is one of the most beloved chapters in the entire Bible: it may be the most personal.*

TRANSITION: Refer to **Pack Item 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*), and point out: *Psalm 23 is a thanksgiving psalm, which means it was a response to something God had done for the psalmist—in this case, David. David, who knew a thing or two about shepherding, described God as his Shepherd. In this session, we will learn how God shepherds us as well.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Call for a volunteer to read the first two paragraphs of Understand the Context in the PSG (p. 33). Direct someone else to read aloud Psalm 23:1-3, asking the group to listen for details David might have included from his firsthand experience as a shepherd.

DISCUSS: Encourage group members to share words or phrases from these verses that are especially comforting to them right now.

ASK: *What are some ways God provides safety and the necessities of life? What keeps people from recognizing His involvement in providing these things?* (PSG, p. 35)

LIST: Write, “The Lord is my _____” on the whiteboard or on another sheet of paper. Explain that while the shepherd metaphor was very understandable to the ancient Hebrews, not many of us today have firsthand experience with sheep and shepherds. Ask: *David drew metaphors from his life experience. How would you convey the biblical truth in these verses using contemporary analogies from your own life experience?* (PSG, p. 36)

TRANSITION: *Not only did the shepherd provide for the flock, he also protected the flock.*

READ: Invite someone to read aloud Psalm 23:4.

HIGHLIGHT: Refer back to the list of personal pronouns on the board. Point out that David had stopped talking *about* the Lord (third person) and now spoke directly *to* the Lord (second person).

DISCUSS: *Why it is important to have a personal relationship with God when we are going through dark valleys? Why isn't it enough during these times to simply "know about" the Lord? Use **Pack Item 8** (Poster: God in the Psalms) to guide the discussion. From the PSG: How do the sheep express trust in the shepherd? In what ways is obedience a function of trust? (PSG, p. 37)*

MINI-LECTURE: *While this is no guarantee that God won't lead us into danger to accomplish His purposes, often we find ourselves in dark valleys because we went there ourselves. Use the background information about the rod and the staff (PSG, p. 37) to talk about how the shepherd could use his staff as a club to defend the sheep, but he could also use it as a crook to pull sheep back from dangerous situations.*

SHARE: Invite group members to share testimonies of times when God kept them from danger or when they felt His presence in the midst of a dangerous situation. Be prepared to share a story from your own experience.

TRANSITION: *While we are in our darkest valleys, God is not only with us, but He also continues to provide for our needs.*

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Psalm 23:5-6. Point out that in these verses the psalmist continued to talk to God rather than about God.

SUMMARIZE: Using the information in the PSG (pp. 37-38), discuss differences of opinion among Bible scholars who think the psalmist has shifted to a banquet metaphor in these verses and those who believe he is still talking about shepherds and sheep. Point out that in either case the verses emphasize that God is present with His people while not removing them from their enemies, and He provides for their needs in the midst of trouble.

REFLECT: Lead the group to consider how a follower of Jesus who lives in a country in which the church is persecuted might understand verse 5. *What comfort could they draw from this verse that people who have never known persecution wouldn't understand?*

ASK: *What characteristics of God give confidence in times of trouble and in times of prosperity? How do verses 5 and 6 encourage a person facing a time of trouble? How do these verses bring perspective to those experiencing a time of prosperity? (PSG, p. 39)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

ENCOURAGE: Point out that Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep (John 10:11). All the promises we see in Psalm 23 have their fulfillment in Christ (see Matt. 11:28; 28:20). Point to **Pack Item 7** (Chart: Messianic Psalms) to discuss Christ's fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Ask: *Which means the most to you?*

CHALLENGE: Direct the group to complete the second question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 40): *Sometimes, when we are overwhelmed by a situation, it becomes difficult to discern God's provisions. Enlist your Bible study group to analyze some of each other's troubling times. Determine practical ways to incorporate mutual support into the life of your Bible study group.*

PRAY: Lead in a time of silent prayer for the persecuted church. Ask that believers around the world would experience God's provision in the presence of their enemies. After a few minutes, voice a closing prayer, thanking God for how He provides, guards, and hosts us.



PRACTICE

- Contact anyone absent from the group last session, making sure they have a PSG. Extend an invitation to attend Bible study next week.
- Review your group list, focusing on those who may be going through a dark valley right now. Identify at least two group members to whom you can send a personal card this week.
- Use social media to remind everyone of the memory verse for this session (Ps. 23:1).

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Use First Thoughts in the PSG (p. 32) to introduce this session.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement your discussion of Psalm 23:1-3, ask: *Name a time when you felt like God gave you permission to take a break from something or walk away from a job you felt was finished.* Alternatively, invite them to share times when they felt like they were forced to rest, perhaps because of a health challenge or an unforeseen circumstance. Ask: *What did you learn about your relationship with God during that time?*
- To add to your exploration of Psalm 23:5, enlist a combat veteran to share a personal testimony of how he or she experienced God's provision in the presence of enemies.
- To aid the group in Scripture memorization, lead them to complete the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 39).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Emphasize that in a study of Psalm 23 it would be especially appropriate to encircle fellow group members who are experiencing dark valleys right now. Spend some extra time to close this session with prayer for anyone in the group who is experiencing especially difficult times.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

During the prayer section, play a recording of Psalm 23 set to music. Some options include "The Lord Is My Shepherd," by Keith Green; "Psalm 23," by John Michael Talbot; and "Psalm 23," by Shannon Wexelberg.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

OUR RESPONSE

Thanksgiving is the proper response to God's answer to our prayers.

PSALM 138:1-8

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 138:1

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 138, First Thoughts (p. 44), and Understand the Context (pp. 44-45).
- **STUDY** Psalm 138:1-8, using Explore the Text (pp. 45-49). Highlight words or phrases that emphasize God's supremacy. Refer to a Bible dictionary to gain understanding of significant words and phrases. Pay special attention to notes on translation differences, as group members are likely to be very familiar with this psalm. Some may even have it memorized.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 50-51, More Ideas on page 52, *QuickSource*, and ideas online at *MinistryGrid.com/ExploretheBible*. Add variety to your plans for your group in this session by using at least one idea from More Ideas (p. 52).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (*LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers. Prepare to display the following Pack Items: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 12** (*Poster: Psalm 136:1*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Jesus

He will return in power and glory to judge the world and to consummate His redemptive mission.

BIBLE SKILL

Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

Review the Old Testament Book of Ruth, paying particular attention to Ruth 2:20. In chapters 1 and 2, Naomi was portrayed as bitter because of the great hardships the Lord had allowed to enter into her life. In Ruth 2:20, however, Naomi recognized God's kindness. Compare Ruth 2:20 to Psalm 138:6, looking for common words and ideas. What do the similarities teach us about God's love and the fulfillment of His purpose? How are His love and purpose connected?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Some reactions are instinctive. For example, whenever people see an object flying toward their head, they duck. Other reactions are developed through experience. When a batter hits a ball, the outfielder begins moving to the spot where he can catch it. Other responses are shaped by personal allegiance. If the outfielder catches the ball, fans of his team cheer. If they are fans of the batter's team, they groan.

(In PSG, p. 42) **What other categories for reactions would you suggest other than instinctive, developed, and allegiant? What example would you give to justify that category?**

Psalm 138 encourages believers to develop a thankful heart. This mindset begins with thanking God for everything He does. But a thankful heart entails more than saying "thank You." It also acknowledges that eventually everyone will recognize that God is sovereign. Some will joyfully embrace His sovereignty. Others He will subjugate. Thus believers can trust God's promise to complete His purpose in their lives and can find a reason to be thankful even in the tough times.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 138

Psalm 137 is a lament that expresses the sorrow the people of Judah felt while they were living in Babylon. The Babylonians had conquered Judah, destroyed Jerusalem and the beloved temple, and exiled thousands of Judeans to Babylon. In Psalm 137 the psalmist lamented separation from Jerusalem and announced Babylon's future doom.

The next psalm represents an abrupt change of subject and mood. In Psalm 137 the psalmist confessed that he felt no inclination to sing praise to God. In Psalm 138 the psalmist happily expressed his intention to sing praise. The mood of Psalm 137 is somber and grim. The mood of Psalm 138 is joyful and confident. Psalm 137 states that praise to God is not found in the foreign nation of Babylon. Psalm 138 declares that all foreign nations will give praise to God.

The dramatic shift in mood evident at the beginning of Psalm 138 is not unusual for the Book of Psalms. Every experience we face, every emotion we feel, is somehow represented in the psalms. Sometimes, like the abrupt shift from Psalm 137 to 138, our experiences and emotions change quickly and dramatically. The Book of Psalms is a book of life. It came from real experiences in the lives of real people, and God inspired those people to write about those experiences.

Psalm 138 is a Davidic psalm, the first of a series of Davidic psalms in Psalms 138–145. Some commentators have written that this psalm was composed on the occasion of God’s promise to David concerning the permanence of David’s dynasty (2 Sam. 7). Psalm 138 mentions God’s promise (vv. 2,4) but does not specify the content or nature of the promise. Therefore, perhaps it is best to conclude that the historical circumstance behind Psalm 138 is uncertain. Such is the case for most of the psalms, and leaving the particular background as an open question in no way diminishes the meaning or value of the psalm.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

I WILL THANK (PS. 138:1-3)

Psalm 138 could be classified as a praise psalm, a thanksgiving psalm, or both. The psalm expresses both praise and thanks to God. Generally, thanksgiving is expressed for God’s works, what He has done for us. Praise is expressed for God’s character, who He is. It does not seem that all the psalmists followed that sharp distinction, but the different emphases of praise and thanksgiving are helpful to keep in mind. Sometimes we may not be moved to express thanks for His works because we cannot see God at work in our circumstances. But God’s holy attributes do not change, so He is always worthy of praise in every circumstance.

VERSE 1

Parents teach their children to say “thank you” to anyone who gives them something. Most parents are attempting to teach something more important than polite manners. They are trying to cultivate in their children a genuine attitude of thankfulness. If it is important to express thanks to people, how much more important is it to express thanks to God who gives all good things to us and does more for us than we could ever repay? “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows” (Jas. 1:17).

Expressions of thanksgiving are throughout the Book of Psalms, and Psalm 138 is one example. We have all said “thank you” just to be polite, even when we didn’t really mean it (like when we receive a present that we don’t like). But the psalmist told God, ***I will give you thanks with all my heart.*** The psalmist’s gratitude was sincere and profound. Sometimes we say “thank you” when we feel so grateful that no words can really express just how thankful we are. Gratitude is what brand-new parents feel when their first baby is born and the doctor says, “Your baby is perfect.” It’s what a cancer patient feels when she hears the surgeon say, “We got it all, and it was benign.” To comprehend giving thanks *with all my heart*, it is helpful to consider another way of saying it—“No part of my heart is not grateful.” The writer of Psalm 103 expressed something similar when he wrote: “My soul, bless the LORD, and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (v. 1).

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “The Heart: A Hebrew Understanding,” an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Summer 2017 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

PSALM 138:1

¹ I will give you thanks with all my heart; I will sing your praise before the heavenly beings.

Record and share some moments when you were grateful to God with all your heart.

The psalmist also told God that he was going to **sing your praise**. In the original Hebrew this phrase is one word. The word translated *I will sing your praise* is used only in poetry and almost exclusively in Psalms. The vast majority of its uses focus on praising God. Sometimes this word is parallel to the word for singing (Pss. 27:6; 101:1) and sometimes it is linked to a musical instrument (Pss. 33:2; 71:22; 98:5; 149:3). The people of Israel employed their voices and their musical instruments in expressing praise to God. Psalmists also wrote that they would sing God's praise for the entirety of their lives (Pss. 104:33; 146:2). They stated that they were offering praise music because of what God had done (Pss. 9:11; 105:2) and because of His holy attributes like love and justice (Ps. 101:1).

The psalmist wrote that he would sing praise to God **before the heavenly beings**. *Heavenly beings* translates the Hebrew word that is customarily translated "God." The psalmist is addressing God, so it makes no sense to say, "I will thank and praise You, God, before God." Hence, another translation is likely. *Heavenly beings* is possible, just as "sons of God" refers to angelic beings in Job (1:6; 2:1). Some commentators think it is more likely that *heavenly beings* refers to great persons on the earth, especially since the psalmist refers to kings in verse 4. The likely possibility is that it refers to false gods (the word here is in its usual plural form). It is similar to Psalm 82:1, which says that God "pronounces judgment among the gods." Israel was surrounded by the idols of false gods and the people who believed in them. Even many Israelites worshiped false gods. In Psalm 138 the psalmist said to God that though he was in the presence of the images of false gods, he would not worship them. Instead, before them and in defiance of them he would offer praise to the one true God.

VERSE 2

The psalmist also fell to his knees in reverence before God and gave thanks to God while facing the temple in Jerusalem. God is everywhere and cannot be limited to one space, but the temple represented His presence among His people on the earth. He declared to His people that He would associate His name with that place (Deut. 12:2-7). The psalmist surely valued that location because he gave thanks to God by bowing toward it, likely with powerful memories of being in God's presence there with God's people.

The psalmist thanked God for His attributes, specifically **constant love and truth**. The word translated **promise** can be translated "word" or "utterance." God is worthy of our praise because He has made great both His word and His name above everything else.

PSALM 138:2

² I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your constant love and truth. You have exalted your name and your promise above everything else.

VERSE 3

The psalmist also expressed gratitude to God because He had heard and answered his prayer. God's answer to our prayers may not always be what we want, but He knows best, and what a blessing to know that God answers prayer! The psalmist also testified that when he called on God, He **increased strength** in his soul. Not only does God work for us in answer to prayer, He also works in us. Prayer changes things, but it also changes us.

(In PSG, p. 46) **What motivates a person to express thankfulness? Are some motives better than others? Explain.**

THEY WILL BOW (PS. 138:4-6)

VERSES 4-5

Two similar and recurring themes in the Book of Psalms are God's reign over all the nations and the praise all nations will offer God one day (Pss. 22:27-28; 46:10; 86:8-9; 102:15). Psalm 138 is "of David," and David was the king of Israel. Naturally David would think about not only other nations but also the kings of those nations. So when David wrote about the praise other nations would offer the one true God, he singled out their kings.

Just as David expressed thanks to God in verse 1, David wrote that **all the kings on earth will give ... thanks** to God when they have heard what He has promised. They **will sing of the LORD's ways**. Here, David used the covenant name of God, Yahweh, the name God gave Himself. Kings will no longer worship the false gods of their nations, but the one true God by name.

The one true God is worthy of universal worship, **for the LORD's glory is great**. Sometimes *glory* is used as a synonym for greatness (1 Chron. 22:5), a synonym for praise (Luke 17:18), or a synonym for heaven (Ps. 73:24). Glory also refers to the expressed, or manifest, greatness of God. When Jesus was born, the angels said, "Glory to God in the highest heaven" (Luke 2:14) because God's greatness was being manifested in Jesus' birth. In Exodus, the glory of God is repeatedly associated with manifestations of His greatness and power (Ex. 16:7,10; 24:16-17; 33:18,22). God's glory will be made known, and all nations and their kings will sing of the Lord's ways (see also Phil. 2:9-11).

How do you feel about the fact that one day the great leaders of the earth will give praise to the one true God? What difference does it make in your daily attitude?

PSALM 138:3

³ On the day I called, you answered me; you increased strength within me.

PSALM 138:4-5

⁴ All the kings on earth will give you thanks, LORD, when they hear what you have promised. ⁵ They will sing of the LORD's ways, for the LORD's glory is great.

PSALM 138:6

⁶ Though the LORD is exalted, he takes note of the humble; but he knows the haughty from a distance.

VERSE 6

The psalmist carried forward the theme of God's greatness by stating that **the LORD is exalted**. God is far greater than we can conceive, and He is perfectly holy (Isa. 6:3). He says, "For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9). However, in spite of God's unfathomable greatness, He is not aloof from humanity: **he takes note of the humble**. In this context, **the haughty** are people who are impressed by their own greatness, not God's. They exalt themselves, not God. God knows those people too, yet only from a distance. Intimacy with God is obstructed by pride. In Psalm 131:1-2, David professed that he was not among the proud, but among those who are as humble as children. Psalm 138:6 is a call for all of God's people to humble themselves (see also 1 Pet. 5:5-6).

(In PSG, p. 48) **In what ways could this verse be seen as a promise and a threat? How would you describe the difference?**

PSALM 138:7

⁷ If I walk into the thick of danger, you will preserve my life from the anger of my enemies. You will extend your hand; your right hand will save me.

GOD WILL FULFILL (PS. 138:7-8)

VERSE 7

David concluded this psalm with a confident affirmation of his faith in God's work in his life. **If I walk** brings Psalm 23:4 to mind, and the point here is essentially the same as in that verse. In Psalm 23 David professed his belief that God would be with him and help him in deep darkness and in the presence of enemies. In Psalm 138 David declared his faith that God would protect him from **the thick of danger** and from **the anger of my enemies**.

In the Old Testament the **hand** of God usually represents His power. Exodus 32:11 states that God brought His people out of slavery in Egypt "with great power and a strong hand." In Psalm 138 the psalmist refers to God's power to save him in the midst of difficulty. The type of difficulty is not specified. The fact that the nature of the difficulty is left open-ended means that we can apply this verse to our troubles whatever they may be. No matter what we may face, God will help us.

PSALM 138:8

⁸ The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me. LORD, your faithful love endures forever; do not abandon the work of your hands.

VERSE 8

This verse begins with a life-changing affirmation: **the LORD will fulfill his purpose for me**. The verb translated *fulfill* occurs only five times in the Old Testament, all in the Book of Psalms. It means "to complete." One of the most encouraging truths is that God is at work in our lives in a way that will fulfill His intentions. Sometimes we do not feel God's presence, but He is with us. Sometimes we do not see His work, but He is bringing His plans for us to completion.

David is an example of God's fulfillment of His purposes. God's plan was for David to be the king of Israel. While Saul was the king, that seemed impossible. When Saul and his men were pursuing David, it seemed more likely for David to fall by the sword than to rise to the throne. Yet, God's purpose was fulfilled. God's plan was also for David's dynasty to endure forever (2 Sam. 7:16). When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, that plan seemed impossible. However, when Jesus was born, God the Father gave to Him "the throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32). Jesus reigns now, and His reign will indeed endure forever (Rev. 11:15).

Just as God's plan came to pass in David's life, His plan for us will also be fulfilled in His time. As the apostle Paul affirmed, "he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

The word translated *faithful love* is one of the richest words in the Old Testament. It is sometimes translated with words like "lovingkindness," "mercy," "steadfast love," and "covenant love." It refers to mercy given to unworthy people and to deliverance or protection given by one who is more powerful. The Old Testament affirms repeatedly that God related to His people in that way. He chose the Israelites as the special recipients of His mercy, and He gave it to them faithfully. He bound Himself to them in a covenant based on His grace and love, and He always kept that covenant. According to Lamentations 3:22, "Because of the LORD's faithful love we do not perish, for his mercies never end."

When life is going well and we feel comfortable, affirmations of faith like those in this psalm may not seem as precious to us. But this verse helps us profoundly in moments when we are beaten and bruised by pain and we wonder why God's hand of blessing has been removed and whether He will ever bless again. When we are there, it changes everything to remember that God fulfills His purpose for us and that His loving and merciful character is eternal. How do we know God will fulfill His purpose for His people? His pledge is His character. His lovingkindness is eternal.

David began this psalm by expressing thanks to God, and he ended it with the unalterable foundation for our thanks—God's holy, eternal love. God's glorious character never changes, so He is always worthy of our praise. Jesus was the personification of thanksgiving. He gave thanks to God the Father (Matt. 15:36; 26:27; John 11:41). If our Lord expressed thanks, so should we.

If you called to mind God's faithful love and praised Him for it every day, what difference would that make in your life?

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: Draw a large heart on the whiteboard or on a large sheet of paper. To the left of the heart, write “Halfhearted.” To the right, write “Wholehearted.” Form two teams, and give a marker to one person on each team. Explain that the group will have two minutes to come up with as many synonyms for “halfhearted” and “wholehearted” while their designated scribe writes them on the board. Give prizes to the winning team.

ASK: *What are some things you are only halfheartedly interested in? What are some things you are wholeheartedly passionate about? Would you say that your thanks to God is more often halfhearted or wholehearted? What makes the difference?*

HIGHLIGHT: Display and refer to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*) and point out that Psalm 138 is a thanksgiving psalm, which means it was a response to something God had done for the psalmist.

TRANSITION: *In Psalm 138, David stated that he would give God thanks with his whole heart. That may not always be our first instinct, but as we strengthen our allegiance to God, it will become more and more natural.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Psalm 138:1-3 as the group listens for physical actions that demonstrated wholehearted thanksgiving.

ASK: *Before whom did David say he would sing praise? In which direction did David say he would bow? What do these two things have in common?*

EXPLAIN: *We can't see heavenly beings with our physical eyes. And at the time David was writing this psalm, the temple hadn't been built yet. Solomon built it after David died (see 1 Kings 7). A thankful heart does not depend on what can be seen with our eyes.*

ASK: *What may cause a person to hesitate in giving thanks to God? What roadblocks get in the way of a person developing an attitude of thankfulness? (PSG, p. 44)*

DISCUSS: Reread verse 3. Note that David was referring to a previous experience—he has shifted from talking about what he would do to what had happened in the past. Lead group members to share previous experiences of when God answered prayer.

ASK: *What motivates a person to express thankfulness? Are some motives better than others? Explain. (PSG, p. 46)*

TRANSITION: *Thankfulness is often expressed for what God has done. But worship is expressed for who God is. In the next section, let's pay attention to why David wrote that all earthly kings will worship the Lord.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 138:4-6.

CLARIFY: *God has a special relationship with His people, Israel. Israel is the nation to whom God has made specific promises of blessing. Yet, verse 4 says that all the kings on earth will thank God when they hear what God has promised. Use material from the PSG's explanation of verse 4 (pp. 46-47) to clarify that even rival kingdoms will rejoice in God's new regime.*

ASK: *According to verse 5, why would other kings of the earth sing of the Lord's ways?*

GUIDE: Instruct two volunteers to look up Genesis 12:3 and Romans 1:4 and be ready to read them aloud at the appropriate times in the following mini-lecture.

MINI-LECTURE: *Although God's promises were made to Israel, God is clear throughout Scripture that all nations will benefit from the blessings God poured out on His chosen people. When God first blessed Abraham, He told him that He would make Abram into a great nation (see Gen. 12:3). Ultimately, this promise has its fulfillment through Jesus Christ, who, though He is a descendant of Abraham according to the flesh, is the Savior of all people through His death and resurrection (see Rom. 1:4).*

ASK: Reread verse 6, and discuss: *In what ways could this verse be seen as a promise and a threat? How would you describe the difference?* (PSG, p. 48).

TRANSITION: *In our last section of Scripture for today, we'll see how David expressed confidence in God's love, omniscience, and power.*

READ: Call on someone to read Psalm 138:7-8. Instruct the other group members to listen for any words or phrases that remind them of other psalms they have studied.

SUMMARIZE: Use the information under Verse 7 in the PSG (pp. 48-49) to emphasize that David faced danger from enemies both before and throughout his reign.

HIGHLIGHT: Reread verse 8. Lead the group to identify the three conclusions David came to regarding himself and God: first, that his life has meaning; second, that God's love is eternal; and third, that God would complete what He had begun in David's life.

ASK: *How does enduring a danger or a trial make a person more aware of God's will and working in his or her life? How does enduring it foster a thankful attitude?* (PSG, p. 49)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

SHARE: Call attention to **Pack Item 12** (Poster: Psalm 136:1), and discuss ways to develop a truly thankful attitude. Use the three bulleted summary statements in the PSG (p. 50) as a guide: *Believers should joyfully give thanks to God for what He does, including answering prayer. Everyone will ultimately recognize God's sovereignty, some out of thankfulness and others out of fear. Believers can rely on God's power to fulfill His purposes in their lives.*

CHALLENGE: Read the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 50): *With your Bible study group, share reasons for being thankful. Discuss how the group can work at incorporating more thanksgiving into the prayer life of the group. Record steps that you can take.* Suggest that when group members share prayer requests at the end of this session, they voice those things they are thankful for in addition to the needs they are praying for.

PRAY: Lead in a time of sharing prayers of thanksgiving, as well as any prayer requests.



PRACTICE

- Email the group after the session, encouraging group members to practice thanksgiving to God by expressing thanks to a spiritual role model in their own lives. Suggest that they send that person a handwritten note.
- Use social media to remind the group of the memory verse for this session (Ps. 138:1).

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the focus idea, lead group members to list all their favorite dishes in a summer picnic. Encourage them to share any side dishes they always have as part of a picnic. Ask: *How would you finish this sentence: "No summer picnic is complete without the _____."* Say: *Now imagine we looked at our prayer time like a picnic. What are the essential elements of any prayer time? How would you complete the sentence, "No prayer is complete without _____"?*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the group's understanding of Psalm 138:4-6, ask a group member to read aloud Philippians 2:9-11. Emphasize that there will come a day when, at the name of Jesus, even those who have rejected salvation will bow in worship to Him.
- To further supplement your discussion of Psalm 138:5, refer back to your discussion of the path of life versus the path of death from Psalm 1 (Session 1). Help the group to see the connection between the righteous in Psalm 1 and the humble in Psalm 138, and the wicked/sinners/mockers in Psalm 1 and the haughty in Psalm 138.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Encourage the group to use the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 48) in their personal quiet time this week. Guide them to journal about the common words and ideas they find when they compare Ruth 2:20 to Psalm 138:6. Consider how thanksgiving can grow out of extreme hardship.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

To close the session, read aloud or sing the chorus of "Serve the Lord With Gladness," by B.B. McKinney. Lead the group to consider the connection between praise for who God is and thankfulness for what God does.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

HIS PRESENCE

Security is found in the assurance of God's presence.

PSALM 84:1-12

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 84:12

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 84, First Thoughts (p. 54), and Understand the Context (pp. 54-55).
- **STUDY** Psalm 84:1-12, using Explore the Text (pp. 55-59). Review information on the sons of Korah and the Valley of Baca. As you study, take note of the titles the psalmist used for God, as well as the three verses that discuss happiness.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 60-61) and More Ideas (p. 62), ideas in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Look for ways to incorporate the Key Doctrine (Religious Liberty) into the session (PSG, p. 58).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers; and Images of places with a significant emotional connection to people in your group (such as a football stadium, your church's sanctuary, a local landmark, or a cemetery). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 7** (Chart: *Messianic Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 8** (Poster: *God in the Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 9** (Poster: *Authorship of the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Religious Liberty

Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Some locations evoke emotion. A monument to soldiers who lost their lives may move you to great emotion. Visiting the place where you and your spouse became engaged or honeymooned can rekindle your love for one another. What makes a place important to us is what happened there and the symbolism it carries in our lives.

(In PSG, p. 52) **What locations or memorials cause you to react with intense emotion? Why do you respond with intense emotion at that specific location?**

Psalm 84 recounts the emotions the psalmist felt when he visited the temple in Jerusalem. The sacred structure reminded ancient Israelites of God's close presence. They regarded it as God's house, His dwelling place on earth. The psalmist's experiences at the temple created an intense longing for God's sanctuary. When he was absent, he ached to go there. When he was present, he yearned to stay there. He understood that his personal happiness was coupled with the presence of God, and for him the sense of that presence was strongest at the temple. So, in a real sense, the psalm is a prayer for God's presence. Security is found in the assurance of God's presence.

BIBLE SKILL

Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words or phrases.

Use a concordance to find other uses of the term "anointed" in the Bible. Read selected passages and make notes of findings that help you better understand the term. Read the entry for the term in a trusted Bible dictionary, adding to your notes. What key insights did you gain about the term?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 84

The superscription of Psalm 84 says it is a psalm "for the choir director." The Hebrew word translated "choir director" has the sense of excelling or presiding, hence the idea of leadership. The word occurs 55 times in the Book of Psalms. Because of the context, it is likely that the intended leadership involved music or a choir.

The superscription also says this psalm was to be "on the Gittith," and the meaning of "Gittith" is uncertain. All the psalms to which that term is attached are joyful in tone and express praise to God (Pss. 8; 81; 84). Such a context suggests that it is some sort of musical term. Further, "on the Gittith" seems to indicate that the Gittith was a type of musical instrument. As for what kind of musical instrument, two possibilities seem most likely. First, Gath was the name of a Philistine city (Josh. 11:22; 1 Sam. 5:8; 17:4). Therefore, some interpreters conclude that Gittith is derived from "Gath" and refers to a type of musical instrument that the Philistines commonly used. David spent time among the Philistines of Gath and could have become familiar with the instrument, especially since he was a musician (1 Sam. 21:10-15). Second, the Hebrew word *gat* means "winepress."

Therefore, “Gittith” may have been a musical instrument related to worship celebrations connected with the grape harvest.

Psalms 84 is one of 11 psalms with a superscription referring to “the sons of Korah” (Pss. 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88). Some interpreters have proposed that the psalms associated with Korah’s family originally formed an independent collection of psalms later added to other collections, and a series of such combinations eventually formed the entire Book of Psalms.

Korah was the great-grandson of Levi, the original head of the Levites whom God designated as the tribe that would help the priests with the tabernacle (Ex. 38:21; Num. 1:47-53; 18:21-29). Korah rebelled against Moses and Aaron during the time when the Hebrews wandered in the Sinai wilderness (Num. 16). However, Numbers 26:9-11 states that the sons of Korah were not involved in the rebellion. Later, the sons of Korah were prominent singers of praise among the Levites (2 Chron. 20:19). After the exile, the descendants of Korah were gatekeepers in the temple (1 Chron. 9:19-21). This family clearly had a principal role in Israel, especially in the nation’s worship. Therefore, it is not unlikely that “a psalm of the sons of Korah” indicates that the psalm was authored by someone in that family.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PASSION (PS. 84:1-4)

Because the psalmist expressed such longing for the joy of appearing in the presence of God, some interpreters conclude that he was separated from the temple in Jerusalem. However, this psalm comes from the family of Korah, and that levitical family served at the doorway of the temple. Therefore, it is possible that this psalm was written by someone who was at the place of worship all the time. Though he had daily access to the temple, he did not take for granted the privilege of being at such a special place. Familiarity resulted in even greater devotion.

VERSE 1

Lovely translates a Hebrew word that refers to something or someone that is beloved. In every use of the word except in this psalm, the word refers to God’s people as the object of His love (Deut. 33:12; Pss. 60:7; 108:7; 127:2; Isa. 5:1; Jer. 11:15). Thus, the psalmist chose a poignant word to refer to his sentiments about the place of worship. As God loves His people, the psalmist loved God’s house. Clearly he felt strong affection for the temple.

The writer referred to the temple as **your dwelling place**. The building was not God’s dwelling place in the same way humans live in houses. When Solomon finished building the temple, he prayed, “But will God indeed live on earth? Even heaven, the highest heaven, cannot contain you, much less this temple I have built” (1 Kings 8:27). Yet, Solomon next asked God to be attentive to the prayers that were offered in that place. He built it at God’s command, and he was dedicating it to the worship of God (vv. 28-30). Earlier, when God had told Moses to build a tabernacle for Him, it was

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Birds as Biblical Imagery” in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 84:1

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD of Armies.

“that I may dwell among them” (Ex. 25:8), and then He promised to meet with His people above the mercy seat in the tabernacle (vv. 21-22). God is everywhere simultaneously, yet He promises that when His people gather in a designated place to worship Him and seek Him, He will meet with them there and reveal Himself to them.

In the new covenant age in which we live, God has not ordained that His presence should be associated with a special building. Instead, He calls His people His sanctuary (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). What is the special place of God’s dwelling today? We are! God’s Spirit dwells in us. The apostle Paul used word pictures to describe the unity of followers of Jesus as “God’s household,” and “a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:19-22). So God’s presence in the world today is manifested in His people as individuals and as Christ’s unified body the church.

The title **LORD of Armies** calls attention to God’s universal reign and power. *LORD* is God’s personal name, Yahweh. It is compounded with a military term for *armies*. This title affirmed God as the true commander of Israel’s army. However, Israel quickly acknowledged that God likewise commanded an angelic army. Later the word also was coupled with “heaven” (see 2 Kings 17:16, KJV) to denote God’s authority over the heavenly bodies. Thus, *LORD of Armies* is a title that expresses divine sovereignty. God commands. Humanity, angels, and even inanimate objects must obey.

PSALM 84:2

² I long and yearn for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh cry out for the living God.

VERSE 2

The psalmist emphasized how much he loved being in the temple by his use of two strong verbs—**long and yearn**. *Long* is the same word used to refer to Jacob’s longing for his father, Isaac, when he had not seen him for some twenty years (Gen. 31:30). *Yearn* communicated the idea of being spent, or finished. Thus, sometimes it is translated as “faint.” Clearly the psalmist felt strongly about being in the temple. **The courts of the LORD** were the plazas and colonnades surrounding the temple. The psalmist loved being in God’s presence and in the presence of the people who had gathered in the area to worship. He did not long for the temple because he loved the building, the traditions, or the happy memories of being there. He wanted to be at the temple because he desired to be with and worship **the living God**.

PSALM 84:3-4

³ Even a sparrow finds a home, and a swallow, a nest for herself where she places her young—near your altars, LORD of Armies, my King and my God. ⁴ How happy are those who reside in your house, who praise you continually. *Selah*

VERSES 3-4

Perhaps the psalmist had seen birds flying, perching, and making nests in the temple precincts. It occurred to him that among all birds, they were most blessed. They were in the most special place in the world, the place where the one true God had made His name to dwell.

The psalmist may have chosen to refer to the **sparrow** and the **swallow** not only because they were commonly seen in the temple area, but also because of what people associated with those species of birds. Sparrows are tiny and common, so they were not valued highly. Jesus said sparrows were sold for a penny or two (Matt. 10:29; Luke 12:6). Even the lowliest of animals is welcome to come to God’s house and is endowed with special status by having a nest there. Swallows fly all day (Prov. 26:2), so they appear restless. People grow weary just watching them on the move constantly. Yet even

swallows must settle down to build a nest and raise their young. The psalmist declared that swallows who do so in the area of the temple are especially blessed, just as all people are blessed by being there.

When the psalmist referred to **those who reside in your house**, he was probably referring to priests and Levites who served in the temple. *Reside* may be poetic exaggeration referring to spending much time at the temple, but at some points in history at least a few people lived in rooms connected to the temple (Neh. 13:4-9). The psalmist wrote of **how happy** such people are to be in God's house and to praise Him **continually**. *How happy* is the same word that begins the Book of Psalms to describe the person who delights in God's instruction.

THE PRIORITY (PS. 84:5-7)

VERSE 5

A beatitude is a saying that describes the blessed life, like Jesus spoke in Matthew 5:3-10. The psalmist wrote back-to-back beatitudes. In verse 4 he wrote that people who dwell in the temple are blessed, and in verse 5 he wrote that people who get their strength from the Lord are blessed. Many circumstances weaken us. Where do we look for strength? Do we seek strength from other people, ourselves, our hobbies, or our work? The people who look to the Lord for their strength are living the blessed life.

In verse 4 the psalmist wrote of people who reside in the temple. In verse 5 he wrote of people who travel to the temple. They are the people who look to the Lord for their strength. The phrase **whose hearts are set on pilgrimage** is literally "highways [are] in their hearts." Part of their spiritual and emotional composition was the desire to go to the temple to offer praise to God. The longing to worship God was built into the fabric of their being, so their hearts were equipped with a GPS, and the chosen destination was always worship.

VERSES 6-7

If **the •Valley of Baca** was a specific geographical area, its location is unknown. However, *Baca* could be translated as a common noun instead of a proper noun, and the word means "weeping." Everyone has been through a "valley of weeping." Those whose hearts are set to worship **make it a source of spring water**. In worship, our emotional wilderness can become an oasis. The **autumn rain** is the early rain. Yet, even when the rainy season is only beginning, the valley of weeping will be showered with blessings. Such is the power of worship.

The writer of Psalm 73 was struggling through a difficult time of doubt. He wrote that "it seemed hopeless until I entered God's sanctuary." His worship experience was "like one waking from a dream," and afterward he testified, "God is the strength of my heart" (Ps. 73:16-17,20,26). The experience of worship can bend our question marks into exclamation points.

They go can also be translated "they walk," so the image of pilgrimage continues in verse 7. **From strength to strength** likely is a way of saying that those going to worship get stronger and stronger instead of weaker and weaker as they make the pilgrimage to the temple. The anticipation of appearing

PSALM 84:5

⁵ Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

PSALM 84:6-7

⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baca, they make it a source of spring water; even the autumn rain will cover it with blessings.

⁷ They go from strength to strength; each appears before God in Zion.

before God in Zion invigorates them. *Zion* is another name for Jerusalem, and appearing before God in Jerusalem meant worshipping at the temple. The psalmist's passion for worship was the same as that of the psalmist in Psalm 27 who wrote, "I have asked one thing from the LORD; it is what I desire: to dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, gazing on the beauty of the LORD and seeking him in his temple" (Ps. 27:4).

(In PSG, p. 57) **What was the value of God's presence for the psalmist? How does God's presence serve as a source of strength?**

THE PRAYER (PS. 84:8-9)

VERSES 8-9

Hear my prayer was a way of asking God to permit the psalmist's desire to be fulfilled. The psalmist addressed God as **God of Jacob**, which is a common alternate way of saying "God of Israel." Jacob's name was changed to Israel, and he is often referred to by that name (Gen. 32:27-28).

In verse 9 the psalmist prayed for the king. He referred to the king in two ways. First, he called him **our shield**. Ancient kings, just as in modern governments, conscripted armies so they could protect their citizens from invasion. Thus, the king became the *shield* of the people. Second, the psalmist called the king **your anointed one**. People were anointed with oil for several reasons. Men were anointed to be king as a ceremonial gesture that enacted God's appointment to their role. Numerous times both Saul and David are referred to as "the LORD's anointed" (1 Sam. 24:6; 26:9; 2 Sam. 1:14,16; 19:21).

Prayer is a part of right worship. The psalmist prayed specifically for the king of Israel. The Bible also instructs Christians to pray "for kings and all those who are in authority" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). God blesses and guides people in authority (Prov. 21:1), and He answers the prayers of His people (John 14:13-14; 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15).

(In PSG, p. 58) **Why was it so important for the psalmist to ask God to direct the king? How did the realization that God anoints rulers and leaders impact how the psalmist prayed?**

THE PRESENCE (PS. 84:10-12)

VERSE 10

The psalmist offered two contrasts that emphatically express how happy he was to be in God's presence in the temple. First, he contrasted one day at the

PSALM 84:8-9

⁸ LORD God of Armies, hear my prayer; listen, God of Jacob. *Selah*

⁹ Consider our shield, God; look on the face of your anointed one.

PSALM 84:10

¹⁰ Better a day in your courts than a thousand anywhere else. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than live in the tents of wicked people.

temple with **a thousand** days elsewhere. How much more valuable is being in the place of worship and in God's presence than being any other place and doing anything else? It is a thousand times more valuable! The psalmist preferred one day in worship over three years of being in his second-favorite place!

Second, the psalmist contrasted being at the door of God's temple to being **in the tents of wicked people**. The sons of Korah were doorkeepers. Serving as a doorkeeper can be an uncomfortable job. It requires being on one's feet and sometimes being exposed to cold and rain. Being inside a tent, on the other hand, was comfortable. Still, the psalmist preferred serving at the door of the temple. Clearly he loved the place of worship.

VERSES 11-12

Why did the psalmist love the place of worship so much? We misunderstand him if we think he valued that space because of his fondness for the building or the beauty of its surrounding courts. He loved the temple because he loved the God who was worshiped there. Verse 11 begins with **for**, or "because," and what follows is the reason he loved the temple. He loved the temple because the God of the temple is great and worthy of worship.

Verse 11 is the only place in the Bible where God is called **a sun**. Similarly, Jesus called Himself "the light of the world" (John 8:12). As the light of our lives, God provides illumination and direction. As our **shield**, God provides protection. Ephesians 6:16 says that God gives us a "shield of faith" that protects us from "all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

The psalmist also extolled God as the One who gives us **favor and honor**. If people want grace and forgiveness, they may find it only from the one true God. If people want to live glorious lives, God is the only hope. Many people think that a life characterized by faithful worship and obedience to God would be boring, or that they would miss a lot of fun. To the contrary, we miss nothing good by pursuing God, because **he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity**.

The writer concluded his psalm by returning to the word **happy** that he had used in verses 4 and 5. People who praise God in the place of worship are happy (v. 4), people who look to God for strength are happy (v. 5), and people who put their trust in God are happy (v. 12). The psalmist ended his poem by referring to God. God, not the place of worship or the people who worship there, is the source of our strength and joy. We love the place of worship because we love the One we worship there, and only in Him will we be satisfied.

Think about people you know who assume that knowing and loving God will hinder their enjoyment of life. What could you share from your own life that would show them that a love relationship with God results in joy, not boredom?

PSALM 84:11-12

¹¹ For the LORD God is a sun and shield. The LORD grants favor and honor; he does not withhold the good from those who live with integrity. ¹² Happy is the person who trusts in you, LORD of Armies!

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: Hold up each photo you printed of places with a significant emotional connection for the people in your group (see Gather, p. 53), and guide group members to call out the emotions they associate with each image. (Alternatively, you could simply say the name of the significant place.)

ASK: *Why do we associate certain places with particular emotions? What are some places that have special emotional significance for you or your family?*

DIRECT: Direct attention to the information on Psalm 84 on **Pack Item 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*). As the psalm is read throughout the session, invite the group to pay attention to words and phrases that show why Psalm 84 is a royal psalm.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Direct attention to **Pack Item 9** (Poster: *Authorship of the Psalms*). Note that unlike the previous sessions, this session focuses on a psalm written by someone other than David. Provide a brief overview of who the sons of Korah were, and point out how many psalms are credited to them.

READ: As you read aloud Psalm 84:1-4, direct half the group to listen for phrases that describe how the psalmist felt about God's dwelling place, while the others listen for phrases that describe how the psalmist felt about God Himself.

ASK: *What one emotion seems to describe how the writer feels about both God and His house?*

HIGHLIGHT: Direct attention to verse 3. Invite group members to imagine how they would respond if a family of pigeons took up residence inside your church's sanctuary. *We would probably insist that the building and grounds committee take care of the problem! Yet the psalmist used this circumstance to express delight in God's care for all creation.*

ASK: *What role does passion play in worship? How does the expectation of God's presence impact that passion?* (PSG, p. 56)

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 84:5-7, and guide the group to notice how the psalmist described those who live in God's house.

ASK: *The subheading for this section of Scripture in the session outline is "The Priority." What is the connection between these verses and the idea of making worship of God the highest priority?*

HIGHLIGHT: Use Verses 6-7 in Explore the Text (pp. 57-58) and Verses 5-7 in the PSG (pp. 56-57) to provide background on the Valley of Baca. Emphasize that it wasn't necessarily a place but a metaphor. *Baca* derives from the Hebrew term meaning "to weep." So the Valley of Baca is similar to Psalm 23's "valley of the shadow of death" (KJV).

ASK: *What was the value of God's presence for the psalmist? How does God's presence serve as a source of strength?* (PSG, p. 57)

READ: Direct someone to read Psalm 84:8-9. Remind the group that Psalm 84 is classified as a royal psalm, and that verse 9 is one reason why.

ASK: *What is the specific prayer in verses 8-9? Who is the psalmist praying for, and why?*

DISCUSS: Direct another volunteer to read the explanation of verse 9 in the PSG (pp. 57-58). Discuss how a godly king was a shield for his people.

ASK: *Why was it so important for the psalmist to ask God to direct the king? How did the realization that God anoints rulers and leaders impact how the psalmist prayed?* (PSG, p. 58) Read the Key Doctrine (Religious Liberty) on page 58 of the PSG. Discuss how we do this today.

GUIDE: Note that the “anointed” referred literally to the king of Israel, but that it is also a reference to Jesus, the coming Messiah. Explain that the Hebrew word translated “anointed one” is *mashiyach*, where we get our word “Messiah.” Point to **Pack Item 7** (*Chart: Messianic Psalms*) and review the different prophecies related to the Messiah.

READ: Invite someone read aloud Psalm 84:10-12. Encourage the group to listen for repeated themes from earlier sections of this psalm. Direct them to make a buzzer sound every time they hear something that is a restatement of an earlier theme. Read slowly.

ASK: *How has the idea of a shield changed from verse 9 to verse 11?* Review **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*). Use the poster as a way to reflect on the many roles of God in our lives. Lead group members to discuss which of God’s titles is most meaningful to them.

SUMMARIZE: Remind the group that the role of the sons of Korah was to serve as gatekeepers to the temple (see 1 Chron. 9:17-24): *Their job was to stand for long hours at the temple door. Verse 10 must have been very inspiring for them in their service.*

HIGHLIGHT: Point out that Psalm 84:12 tells us true happiness results when we put our complete trust in the Lord.

ASK: *What modern-day illustration might convey the same trust as the psalmist expressed? What makes God’s presence so compelling?* (PSG, p. 59)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

READ: Summarize the session by reading the four bulleted statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 60): *Believers are to worship God passionately in light of who He is. God offers strength for life to those who seek to worship Him. Believers are to pray for their leaders and for God’s direction as they lead. Believers are to respond to God’s presence with worship and praise.*

CHALLENGE: Guide the group to examine the first question set under In My Context in the PSG (p. 60): *As a Bible study group, share some of the blessings God has bestowed on you. Discuss how an awareness of these blessings impacts how you approach worship. Challenge each other to remember the blessings shared during your next worship experience.*

DIRECT: If your Bible study group meets before your weekly worship service, encourage your group members to have verse 10 on their minds as they enter worship this morning. Use one of the Suggested Music Ideas (p. 62) to help prepare the group for corporate worship.

PRAY: Thank God for the ability we have to worship freely in our country.



PRACTICE

- Review your group list, taking note of anyone who may come to group time but skip out on corporate worship. Follow up with that person this week, encouraging him or her to be a part of a weekly worship experience.
- Text or email group members this week to give them a preview of the upcoming session. Encourage them to begin memorizing Psalm 95:6.
- Pray for your government leaders this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an alternative to the Focus Attention idea, ask group members in advance to bring their own pictures of significant places in their lives and to be prepared to share with the group the meaning behind their significant place.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To complement your exploration of Psalm 84:1-4, invite group members to describe the most beautiful and awe-inspiring places of worship they have ever seen. Some may have visited the great cathedrals in Europe, for example. Challenge the group to consider that the most profound worship experiences don't always happen in the most ornate or elaborate houses of worship. Discuss how the heart of worship is more important than the place of worship.
- To supplement your discussion of Psalm 84:8, print a list of local, state, and national political leaders, including your state's senators and congressional representatives. Make copies for each person in your group and encourage everyone to pray for our "shields" each day this week.
- To further your discussion of Psalm 84:10, compare the work of the sons of Korah to the guards at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington Cemetery. Despite being rigorous, demanding work, it is possibly the most coveted assignment in the Marine Corps.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the first challenge activity, remind group members of the chorus to the hymn "Count Your Blessings," by Johnson Oatman, Jr. Quote the chorus as you lead them to reflect on the blessings God has bestowed on them.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Play the song "Better Is One Day," by Matt Redman, during the In My Context activity. The hymn "Count Your Blessings," by Johnson Oatman, would also be appropriate.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE CREATOR

Believers should worship God above all else because He is sovereign.

PSALM 95:1-11

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 95:6

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 95, First Thoughts (p. 64), and Understand the Context (pp. 64-65). Make notes about words and phrases that may require additional explanation during the group Bible study session.
- **STUDY** Psalm 95:1-11, using Explore the Text (pp. 65-69). Note the shift in voice that happens in verse 9, and meditate on why the psalm shifts from the psalmist talking about God to God talking to His people. Read the account of Israel's rebellion in Numbers 20:1-13 to aid in your understanding of Psalm 95:7-8. As you study, take note of what this psalm teaches us about the nature of worship.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 70-71). Modify your group plans using More Ideas (p. 72) and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Consider how to bring fresh meaning to this session's memory verse (Ps. 95:6).
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A copy of the game Clue® for the Focus Attention activity (p. 70); and "Creation Superlatives" for More Ideas (see p. 72). Make copies for each group member of: **PACK ITEM 5** (*Bookmark: Memory Verses*). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 11** (*Poster: Psalm 95:6*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God

There is one and only one living and true God.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Highways are populated with warning signs. Traffic lights, stop signs, and yield signs govern the flow of travel. Flashing yellow caution lights tell of potential dangers. Speed limit signs indicate the maximum safe speed of travel. Whenever we fail to heed warnings or just ignore them, terrible consequences can occur.

(PSG, p. 62) **What traffic warning sign would you rate as the most useful or important? Explain.**

Psalm 95 calls us to worship God. He is worthy of worship. The psalmist lays out a case for worshipping God. He created everything, including humanity. He cares for His creation. He is the One who secures our salvation. However, God inspired the psalmist to abruptly interrupt this hymn of praise and warn people to be faithful to Him. Believers should worship God above all else because He is sovereign and has demonstrated loving kindness. Our lives should demonstrate our worship of Him through obedience.

BIBLE SKILL

Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

Psalm 95 refers to the Israelites' hardening their hearts at Meribah and Massah in the wilderness. Read what happened at Massah and Meribah in Exodus 17:1-7; Numbers 20:1-13; 27:12-14; and Deuteronomy 32:48-52. In what ways did the Israelites test God in these locations? What were the consequences in each case? How do these historical events shed light on the meaning and application of Psalm 95?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 95

In the Bible, giving praise to God through music is not peripheral, it is central. After God delivered His people from the Egyptians, Moses and the Israelites sang praise to God (Ex. 15). After God gave His people victory over Hazor, Deborah and Barak praised God in song (Judg. 4-5). King David appointed Levites to play musical instruments and put the chief of the Levites in charge of the singing (1 Chron. 16). First Chronicles 23 says that 4,000 levitical singers participated in leading musical praise in Israel. Second Chronicles 5 relates the story of 120 Levites playing trumpets during the Feast of Tabernacles. Others were playing different musical instruments. The volume of a 4,000-voice choir and hundreds of instrumentalists must have been tremendous. The purpose of their impressive musical production was "to praise and thank the LORD" (2 Chron. 5:13).

Exhortations to praise the Lord are found frequently in the Book of Psalms. When a descriptive superscription does not stand at the beginning of a psalm, interpreters use the contents of a psalm to determine the context of its origin, as far as that is possible. Psalm 95 alludes to Israel's experiences at Meribah and Massah (v. 8). Those places are located in the Sinai wilderness and are infamous sites of Israel's complaining against God and Moses because of a lack of water. The names Meribah and Massah referred to a place near Rephidim, near the southern tip of

the Sinai Peninsula (Ex. 17:1-7). Elsewhere, Meribah refers to a place in the northern area of Sinai near Kadesh Barnea (Num. 20:1-13; 27:12-14; Deut. 32:50-51). Thus, the two places named Meribah are at the two extremities of the wilderness through which Israel wandered. Also, the two occasions of complaining against God at those two places occurred near the beginning and near the end of the wilderness wandering. Therefore, mentioning Meribah and Massah may have been a way of referring to the entire experience of wandering in the wilderness—from north to south, from beginning to end.

Since Psalm 95 refers to Israel's experience of wandering in the wilderness, it is possible that this psalm was used in worship during the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths. The purpose of that feast was to commemorate the Israelites' sojourn in the wilderness and God's provision for them there. After they were settled in Canaan, Israel's worship leaders could have prompted the Israelites to remember their sinful rebellion and God's merciful provision in the past as a means of celebrating the holy attributes of God and His saving deeds on their behalf.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WHAT (PS. 95:1-2)

VERSE 1

In the first verses of Psalm 95, the pronouns are plural, not singular. So this psalm could have been used in a setting of corporate worship. It exhorts God's people to worship God and offers direction to them concerning how to worship.

Many corporate worship services begin with a call to worship. Sometimes the call to worship is a song offered by a choir, praise team, or all the people in the congregation. Sometimes a worship leader exhorts the people in the congregation to turn their hearts and minds to God, and sometimes he or she reads Scripture like the first verses in this psalm.

The psalmist called people to worship with a series of imperative verbs. The first is **come**. Corporate worship is gathering with God's people and entering God's presence. The psalmist invited people to step forward into the place of worship with the people of worship before the God of worship.

Next, the psalmist called people into worship using two parallel words that mean **shout**. The first word is in a form that is used in the Old Testament to refer to joyful shouting, so some translations render it "sing" here. The second word, translated **shout triumphantly**, occurs in the Old Testament to refer to shouting in numerous situations. Today, people shout to cheer for their team, to get someone's attention in a crowd, and in great joy or sorrow. Shouting is common in the worship of some Christian groups, but most people feel uncomfortable shouting in worship. We should be hesitant to do anything that calls attention to us and distracts attention from God. However, shouting "amen" calls attention to the truth that is being proclaimed in preaching, singing, or testifying. Perhaps the time

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Shepherds: A Biblical Image of God and His Chosen Leaders," available digitally in the Summer 2017 *Biblical Illustrator* for *Explore the Bible* at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 95:1

¹ Come, let us shout joyfully to the LORD, shout triumphantly to the rock of our salvation!

before, during, and after worship would be louder if the people gathering were more excited about what they were doing.

The psalmist called people to shout to God. He called God ***the rock of our salvation***. When we are in a congregation, it is easy to focus on people around us, people on the stage, or ourselves. Worship, however, is first about God. We are in His presence. Our praising, our praying, and our thinking are directed to Him. He is the center of attention in worship.

PSALM 95:2

² Let us enter his presence with thanksgiving; let us shout triumphantly to him in song.

VERSE 2

Enter his presence translates two words in the original Hebrew. The first word refers to meeting or confronting someone. The second word means literally “his face” and refers commonly to being in someone’s presence, “before his face.” Hence, the phrase refers to appearing directly in the presence of God, presenting ourselves before Him.

The psalmist also directed worshipers how to enter God’s presence—***with thanksgiving***. Some people enter God’s presence with requests that they want God to grant or complaints that they want God to resolve. Some people enter worship not thinking of God at all. Such entrances reveal discontent, self-centeredness, or even selfishness. The appropriate way to enter worship is to think of God’s greatness and how He has blessed us far beyond what we deserve. The psalmist expressed that sentiment in Psalm 100:4—“Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.” Corporate worship includes expressing love and encouragement to other believers, but the central Person of worship remains God, so we make Him central in our thoughts and actions.

(In PSG, p. 64) **Based on this passage, how would you define worship? What elements should be included in worship?**

WHO (PS. 95:3-5)

We can express appreciation for people, and we can even praise people. However, worship is reserved for God alone. When God made a covenant with His people at Mount Sinai, the first two commands He gave them prohibited worshiping anyone or anything other than Him (Ex. 20:1-4). Yet we cannot worship God properly until we know what He is like. Then, once we know Him, we want to worship Him. One hallmark of the Book of Psalms is that psalmists repeatedly extol the attributes of God.

PSALM 95:3

³ For the LORD is a great God, a great King above all gods.

VERSE 3

The psalmist began his description of God by using the word ***great*** twice. The first phrase of this verse calls Him ***a great God***. Someone could possibly understand that to mean that God is one great God among many great gods. Next the psalmist clarified by writing that the God is ***a great King above***

all gods. That is not an affirmation that other gods actually exist. To the contrary, Deuteronomy 4:35 says, “the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.” False gods exist only in the minds of idolatrous people and in the texts and rituals of pagan religions. The one true God is the King above every conception of deity that exists. He is the sovereign Ruler of the universe.

VERSES 4-5

Jules Verne wrote a science fiction novel about a journey to the center of the earth. The main character and his companions descend into a volcano tube and encounter numerous dangers in their effort to approach the earth’s center. For a person to reach the earth’s center alive is physically impossible. Verne’s characters didn’t make it either, even though he was writing science fiction! God, on the other hand, formed the center of the earth. **The depths of the earth are in his hand.** The depths of the earth are vast and inaccessible to us, but to God the deadly core of the earth is like a pebble in His hand.

Next, the psalmist moves from the center of the earth to its outer reaches—**the mountain peaks** that stretch to the ceiling of the troposphere. What human is able to say that he or she owns such peaks? We can barely climb to them, and only during certain seasons at the risk of our lives. Yet, those majestic peaks are His. Elsewhere the Book of Psalms affirms that God made the mountains by His power (65:6) and at His presence “the mountains melt like wax” (97:5). What is titanic to us is tiny to Him.

Verse 5 refers to the **sea** and the **dry land** as a way of referring to everything in the created order. In other words, God created everything that is wet and everything that is dry, just as verse 4 affirms God’s sovereignty over everything that is low and everything that is high.

When an artist creates a work of art, it belongs to her. When an inventor develops a new product, he holds the patent. Verse 5 affirms that God created the universe, so He owns it. Psalm 24 says that “the earth and everything in it, the world and its inhabitants, belong to the LORD; for he laid its foundation ... and established it” (vv. 1-2). Like the psalmist, all creatures in heaven worship God because He created everything (Rev. 4:11).

(In PSG, p. 66) **In what ways does the earth point to the greatness of God as Creator? What parts of creation cause the greatest fear? How do these feared things point to God?**

HOW (PS. 95:6-7a)

VERSE 6

The psalmist repeated his invitation to worship. However, the mood in verse 6 is different than in verses 1-2. The mood of the first two verses is celebrative; it includes thanksgiving and shouts of joy and victory. The mood

PSALM 95:4-5

⁴ The depths of the earth are in his hand, and the mountain peaks are his. ⁵ The sea is his; he made it. His hands formed the dry land.

PSALM 95:6

⁶ Come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

in verse 6 is meditative. Three verbs in a row refer to bowing down. The first verb is translated **worship**. Its basic meaning is to prostrate oneself. Kneeling and bowing one's head in the presence of God is a posture of humility and reverence. The first two verses indicate that part of worship is joy over being in God's presence and uttering loud thanksgiving for all His saving works. Verse 6 indicates that another part of worship is reverently humbling ourselves before God in the recognition that He is the holy and awesome God and we are not. A time of worship need not be only celebrative or only meditative; it can be both.

Verse 5 expresses praise to God because of His creation of all things. Verse 6 states that God also created us, since He is called **our Maker**. Just as He created us physically, He also re-creates us in Christ. When a person is "in Christ," he or she is a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17), "created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10).

PSALM 95:7a

7a For he is our God,
and we are the people of
his pasture, the sheep
under his care.

VERSE 7a

When God made a covenant with Abraham, He promised that Abraham's descendants would be His people. He said, "I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8). The people of Israel were the descendants of Abraham. The psalmist affirmed the covenant relationship between God and Israel when he testified, **he is our God**.

God's people are in **his pasture**, and they are **the sheep under his care**. The relationship between a shepherd and his sheep is a common picture for the relationship between God and His people (Pss. 23:1; 100:3). Jesus also referred to His followers as sheep and called Himself "the good shepherd" (John 10:11). *The sheep under his care* is literally "the sheep of his hand." Holding sheep in one's hand is an unusual image, but Jesus reiterated the idea when He said that His sheep will never perish and "no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28).

Why is the relationship between a shepherd and his sheep an appropriate picture of the relationship between God and His people? What does it mean that you are in God's hand?

WHEN (PS. 95:7b-11)

At the end of verse 7, the tone of the psalm changes dramatically. The psalmist has been inviting people to worship God because of His greatness. Now he issues an urgent warning. He warns worshipers against hardening their hearts, and the warning is urgent because it is for "today."

VERSES 7b-11

The psalmist referred to hearing God's voice in the context of worship. Part of worship is speaking to God in praise and in prayer. But worship is not worthy of God if we do not hear Him speak from His Word and obey what

He says. Also, in His Word God tells us how to worship, so worship is wrong if we do not worship according to God’s Word. Jesus said, “true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth” (John 4:23). The truth that guides our worship is God’s Word.

The psalmist also warned his contemporaries not to repeat Israel’s past mistakes. •*Meribah* and •*Massah* are identified in the “Understand the Context” section (p. 64). He exhorted readers: **do not harden your hearts** as the Israelites had done when they complained to God and Moses about their lack of water. In Egypt, Pharaoh repeatedly hardened his heart against God. In response, God sent ten plagues that displayed His power and delivered the Hebrews from slavery. After God liberated them, instead of trusting God to continue to provide for them they complained about lack of food (Ex. 16). Then they complained about lack of water (Ex. 17). Just as Pharaoh had failed to believe in God’s power, the Hebrews failed to trust God when they faced adversity.

Instead of trusting God, the Hebrews in the wilderness **tested** and **tried** God. Moses used the word “testing” during the incident at Meribah and Massah (see Ex. 17:2). Meribah means “contention” or “dispute.” Massah means “test” or “trial.” Later, God commanded, “Do not test the LORD your God as you tested him at Massah” (Deut. 6:16). The word translated *tested* occurs in the Old Testament when David tested Saul’s armor (1 Sam. 17:39), when the Queen of Sheba tested Solomon’s wisdom (1 Kings 10:1), and when the Babylonians tested Daniel and his friends (Dan. 1:12,14). Treating God in that way—examining Him to determine whether He is worthy to be trusted—is blasphemy. He is God and is above our assessment. Instead, we relate to Him with worship, love, obedience, and unconditional faith.

As a result of the Hebrews’ testing God in the wilderness, God **was disgusted with that generation**. *Disgusted* is a strong word that can also be translated “loathed.” Job used this word when he was suffering so much that he was “disgusted” with his life (Job 10:1). God used this word when He said that He “abhorred” the Canaanites for all their wickedness and perversion (Lev. 20:23).

The Hebrews’ sin in the wilderness resulted in God’s judgment. God swore, **they will not enter my rest**. *Rest* for the Hebrews was entry into the promised land by means of the conquest of Canaan. That generation did not enter the promised land because of their sin. Only Joshua and Caleb, who had believed God, entered that rest (Num. 14:30,38).

The writer of the Book of Hebrews quoted Psalm 95 four times in chapters 3 and 4 of Hebrews. He argued that God still had a “rest” for His people. That rest is only in a relationship with God based on worship and trust. Such a relationship is possible in Jesus Christ. In Him we have rest (Heb. 3:7–4:11).

(In PSG, p. 69) **What are the dangers of failing to worship God? How does obedience impact worship? How are obedience and worship similar, and how are they different?**

PSALM 95:7b-11

^{7b} Today, if you hear his voice: ⁸ Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah, as on that day at Massah in the wilderness ⁹ where your fathers tested me; they tried me, though they had seen what I did. ¹⁰ For forty years I was disgusted with that generation; I said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray; they do not know my ways.” ¹¹ So I swore in my anger, “They will not enter my rest.”

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ENGAGE: Prior to everyone's arrival, write the six basic journalism questions on the board: *Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?* As the group settles in, ask: *How many of you remember the game Clue®?* (If you have the game, display it as a visual aid.) Explain that the game was all about trying to solve a "whodunit" mystery. You won the game when you were able to answer the "who," "what," and "where" of the mystery. Invite the group to call out the different suspects (Colonel Mustard, Professor Plum, etc.), places (library, kitchen, etc.), and weapons (candlestick, rope, etc.) that they remember from the game.

INTRODUCE: Invite group members to flip through the PSG (pp. 63-67) to notice that the subheadings for this session ask some of the same questions someone playing Clue®—or a journalist—might ask. Explain that studying the mystery of Psalm 95 will answer: *What are we to offer in worship? Who is worthy of worship? How are we to approach God in worship? and When are we to worship?* State: *While they aren't separate subject headings, Psalm 95 also answers the where and the why of worshipping God.*

GUIDE: Use information under Understand the Context (PSG, p. 63) to provide background on the occasion of Psalm 95. Locate Psalm 95 on **Pack Item 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*) and explain what is meant by an enthronement psalm.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 95:1-2. Encourage the group to listen for answers to what we are to do in worship.

DISCUSS: Point out the information in the PSG (p. 64) to clarify how we understand salvation from the New Testament and how the phrase is used differently in the Old Testament.

ASK: *Notice that the same phrase is repeated in verses 1 and 2. What is the phrase? What causes believers to feel this way? From the PSG: Based on this passage, how would you define worship? What elements should be included in worship?* (PSG, p. 64)

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Psalm 95:3-5. Explain that while the answer of whom we are to worship should be obvious, they should listen for how verses 3-5 describe God.

ASK: *How do the descriptions that the psalmist used differ from how we might describe God?*

GUIDE: Direct attention to **Pack Item 8** (Poster: *God in the Psalms*). Highlight images from Psalm 95 that are referenced on the pack item.

MINI-LECTURE: *Verse 4 teaches us that God is present at the deepest depths and the highest heights of creation. For the ancient Israelites, Mount Hermon would have been their highest reference point at 9,100 feet. The Dead Sea would have been the lowest point they knew at 1,400 feet below sea level and 120 miles away. Today, our knowledge of the world is more expansive. We know that Mount Everest at 29,028 is the highest point on the planet, and the Challenger Deep in the Pacific Ocean (36,200 feet) is the lowest. But regardless of whether you are an ancient Israelite or you live today, God is present in every dimension of creation. He is there because He made it.*

ASK: *In what ways does the earth point to the greatness of God as Creator? What parts of creation cause the greatest fear? How do these feared things point to God?* (PSG, p. 66)

READ: Read aloud Psalm 95:6-7a as the group listens for the answer to the question, “How are we to worship God?”

ASK: *What attitude or character trait do you associate with kneeling and bowing down? Beyond physically bending our knees, how are we to show humility before God?*

DISCUSS: *The psalmist further reinforced a posture of humility by comparing us to sheep.* Encourage group members who were present for your study of Psalm 23 (Session 3) to share what they remember about sheep.

ASK: *How is the image of sheep a fitting metaphor for the relationship between God and His people?* (PSG, p. 67)

HIGHLIGHT: Point out **Pack Item 11** (Poster: Psalm 95:6). Encourage everyone to memorize this verse this week. Distribute copies of **Pack Item 5** (Bookmark: Memory Verses) to those who need one.

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Psalm 95:7b-11.

EXPLAIN: Summarize details from Verses 7b-11 in Explore the Text (pp. 68-69) and your study of Numbers 20 to help the group understand the references to Meribah and Massah. Highlight that Moses himself was not exempt from God’s judgment.

EMPHASIZE: Lead the group to complete the Bible Skill activity on page 69 of the PSG to further understand these locations.

ASK: *What are the dangers of failing to worship God? How does obedience impact worship? How are obedience and worship similar, and how are they different?* (PSG, p. 69)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

SUMMARIZE: Direct the group to In My Context in the PSG (p. 70). Read the bulleted summary statements: *All of creation should celebrate its Creator. God should be worshiped as our Creator. All people should approach worship of the Creator with humility and reverence. Believers must consistently worship God, corporately and privately.*

REFLECT: Highlight the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 70). Direct the group to bow their heads. While music is playing (see song suggestions on p. 72), ask each question in the set: *Discuss as a group ways of holding others accountable for actively worshiping God. How can the group encourage private worship? What actions should the group take to encourage corporate worship?*

PRAY: Read verses 2-7, rephrasing the passage as a prayer to God.



PRACTICE

- Review your group list, taking note of any members who have missed three sessions in a row. Determine to follow up with them with a visit or phone call.
- Plan to spend some time in God’s creation this week. Take a hike, a long bike ride, or just a walk in the woods, and carry your Bible with you. Since shouting is repeated twice in Psalm 95, read the psalm out loud. Very loud.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an alternative to the Focus Attention idea, point out that the subheading for Psalm 95 in the CSB is “Worship and Warning.” Highlight the First Thoughts section (PSG, p. 62), and discuss the difference between a road sign directing you to a scenic overlook or a national park, and one that warns you of hazardous conditions or a dangerous intersection. Ask: *Which kind of sign is more likely to catch your attention? Why?*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To supplement your discussion of Psalm 95:3-5, in advance, compile additional “Creation Superlatives.” Research the most remote location on earth, the highest population density, the hottest and coldest spots on earth, and so forth. Use all these to emphasize the point that there isn’t anywhere on earth where God is not sovereign.
- To supplement the discussion of Psalm 95:7b-11, point out the change in voice. Note that God began by speaking directly to the people. Discuss why this is especially effective in the warning portion of the psalm.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Emphasize the last bulleted statement under In My Context (p. 70): *Believers must consistently worship God, corporately and privately.* Then lead the group to discuss the first question set: *List ways to celebrate and worship God as Creator. What do you need to incorporate into your private worship practices? What do you need to incorporate into your public worship practices? Describe how you will do so.* Challenge group members to research other Scripture that emphasizes our worship of God as Creator during their personal quiet time this week.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

To close the session, play a recording of “God of Wonders,” by Chris Tomlin. As an alternative, read or sing the hymn “Holy Holy Holy,” by Reginald Heber.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

GOD REVEALED

God reveals Himself through His creation and His Word.

PSALM 19:1-14

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 19:1

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 19, First Thoughts (p. 74), and Understand the Context (pp. 74-75). Take note of the shift from “God” in verse 1 to the covenant name Yahweh (rendered LORD) in verses 7-11.
- **STUDY** Psalm 19:1-14, using Explore the Text (pp. 75-79). Write down each benefit of God’s commandments listed in verses 7-11. Using an online concordance, compare the synonyms for God’s Word to how they are used in Psalm 19.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 80-81) and More Ideas (p. 82), in *QuickSource*, and online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible. Focus on ways to lead group members to celebrate and worship God by brainstorming creative ways to use the Suggested Music Ideas (p. 82).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers; Three sheets of paper with the phrases from Focus Attention (p. 80) written on them; and Copies of a worksheet you create for More Ideas (p. 82). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

The Scriptures

The Holy Bible is God's revelation of Himself to man, a perfect treasure of divine instruction.

FIRST THOUGHTS

We often make poor judges of character. For example, we may judge people's leadership abilities solely on the basis of their height or other physical attributes. Visual observation, however, yields limited information, and that information may lead us to incorrect conclusions. Listening to people in a personal conversation provides greater and more accurate knowledge.

(In PSG, p. 73) **How can basing our impression of a person only on appearance lead to false conclusions? What are some things about a person that can only be learned by talking to him or her?**

We can learn some about God by observing His creation, but He also reveals Himself through His Word. Psalm 19 considers both types of revelation. Observing God's creation is like looking at a person's appearance. It will tell you something about God. However, reading the Bible gives far more helpful insight into God's character and His involvement in our lives. It is like listening to God tell you about Himself and about how He loves you. As we read, He invites you and me into a personal, growing relationship with Him.

BIBLE SKILL

Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.

Compare Romans 1:18-32 to Psalm 19. How is Romans 1 similar to and different from Psalm 19? What can humanity learn about God from nature? How has humanity generally responded to the truths about God revealed in nature? How does and will God respond to humanity's idolatry and suppression of the truth?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 19

C. S. Lewis called Psalm 19 "the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."¹ The person(s) who compiled the psalms may have placed Psalms 18 and 19 together because of their similarities. Both Psalm 18 and Psalm 19 are Davidic psalms. In the inscription of Psalm 18, David is called "the servant of the LORD," and in Psalm 19 he calls himself "servant" (vv. 11,13). Also, at the beginning of Psalm 18 and the end of Psalm 19, David calls God "my rock" (18:2; 19:14). Psalm 18 celebrates God's revelation of Himself in David's life, and Psalm 19 celebrates God's revelation of Himself in nature and in the Law.

Some Bible students have claimed that Psalm 19 was originally two psalms that were stitched together at some point well after they were written. Such a conclusion is unwarranted in light of the flow of ideas in the psalm. In the first part of the psalm, David described the glory of God as revealed in the created order. Theologians refer to such revelation as general revelation because it is available generally to everyone in the world who looks at nature. In the second part of the psalm, David described the glory of God as revealed in His Word. Theologians refer to such revelation as special revelation because it is more specific and is available only to the

people who read God's Word. In the third part of the psalm, David described his desire to be clean from the sin exposed by God's revelation. Thus Psalm 19 exhibits a logical progression—from general revelation to special revelation to conviction of sin caused by receiving God's revelation.

Psalm 8:3 mentions the moon and stars and addresses God's revelation of Himself through nature at night. Psalm 19 refers to the sun (vv. 4-6) and seems to address God's revelation of Himself through nature during the day. Perhaps we should envision David rising in the morning, looking at creation, and seeing God's revelation of His existence and power. Then David turns to look at God's Word and sees God's revelation of His nature and will.

Since the first part of Psalm 19 addresses general revelation that is available to everyone, it is appropriate that the general word "God" is used, and it appears only once (v. 1). The second part of Psalm 19 addresses specific revelation to God's people who read His Word, so the covenant name of God, "LORD," is used seven times. In his final use of the covenant name of God, David calls God "LORD, my rock and my Redeemer" (v. 14). Thus, David closed his psalm by combining the covenant name of God from the second stanza and an analogy for God from nature that echoes the first stanza, "my rock."

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SEEN IN CREATION (PS. 19:1-6)

VERSES 1-2

Many people in our culture do not believe the truth of God's Word, but they believe that the skies reveal things. In fact, some unusual ideas have originated from misguided people who thought that the stars were communicating a message. The Egyptians worshiped the sun god Ra and believed that the Pharaoh was Ra's offspring. The Babylonians invented the zodiac and astrology, and people still look to the stars for messages by reading the horoscope. In 1997, a group of people in San Diego committed mass suicide when the Hale-Bopp Comet came close to earth. They believed their suicide would free them to meet a spacecraft to take them to the next level of existence, and the appearance of the Hale-Bopp Comet was the sign that the time had come to set the plan in motion. That tragedy was the result of misreading the message of the skies.

The Bible affirms that the skies reveal truth, but a specific kind of truth. The words **declare** and **proclaims** in verse 1 are verbs of communication. The heavens do tell us something—they declare truth about God. The Hebrew word translated **heavens** is used in three ways in the Old Testament. It refers to the sky where the birds fly, to space where the stars are located, and to heaven, the place where God's people will spend eternity. All three of those places tell us something about God.

The first line of verse 1 says that the heavens communicate **the glory of God**. *Glory* refers to God's manifested power and revealed character.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "Bees and Honey: From Metaphor to Realia" in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 19:1-2

¹ The heavens declare the glory of God, and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands.

² Day after day they pour out speech; night after night they communicate knowledge.

God's glory is the outshining, or the expression, of His character. The heavens tell humanity about the attributes and power of God. Romans 1:20 says, "For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made." Through the created order, God has been communicating who He is and what He is like from the beginning of earth's history. Some people have called the skies "God's oldest testament." God's communication through His creation is His oldest revelation to humanity. When we look at the night sky, inevitably we think of the enormity of the universe. The scope of the universe is beyond our ability to conceive. Our next thought is naturally about how much more great is the One who created the universe, who determines the number of stars and names them (Ps. 147:4) The heavens tell us how glorious God is.

The second line of verse 1 says, ***the expanse proclaims the work of his hands***. Humans have cleverly devised multiple theories for the origin of the universe. The Bible affirms that it is all *the work of his hands*. From the vast outer reaches of space to the intricate structure of subatomic particles, God made it all.

God's revelation through the skies is ***day after day*** and ***night after night***. It is constant, 24 hours per day. During any part of any day, any person only needs to look up to see the revelation in the skies.

VERSE 3

God's revelation in the heavens is non-verbal. ***There is no speech; there are no words; their voice is not heard***. The message God gives us by means of the skies is not with words but with pictures. General revelation is visual, not verbal. We cannot hear a voice speaking to us. People are trying to hear, though. All over the earth, scientists are using sophisticated listening devices to hear from space non-random sequences. They believe if we hear a sound that shows order, or design, it will be a sign of intelligent life somewhere in the universe.

The irony is that we are surrounded by non-random sequences on earth. Nature exhibits many intricate, complex designs, but many people are unwilling to acknowledge that the designs are signs that a great Designer put it all together. Psalm 19 declares that the created order communicates that it originated with the Designer; it is "the work of his hands" (v. 1).

VERSES 4-6

The psalmist provided three poetic illustrations for the sun's movement. First, God ***has pitched a tent for the sun***. This is a poetic symbol probably referring to what happens at night—the sun goes into a tent and the sky becomes dark. Second, when the sun rises it is ***like a bridegroom coming from his home***. The psalmist welcomed the beginning of every new day with the joy of a wedding. Third, the sun is ***like an athlete running a course***. Every day the sun finishes its race from one horizon to the other.

Verse 4 says God's revelation in the created order is ***to the whole earth*** and ***to the ends of the world***. Verse 6 says it can be seen ***from one end of the heavens ... to their other end***. For this reason, Romans 1 declares that

PSALM 19:3

³ There is no speech;
there are no words; their
voice is not heard.

PSALM 19:4-6

⁴ Their message has gone
out to the whole earth,
and their words to the
ends of the world. In the
heavens he has pitched
a tent for the sun. ⁵ It
is like a bridegroom
coming from his home;
it rejoices like an athlete
running a course. ⁶ It
rises from one end of
the heavens and circles
to their other end;
nothing is hidden from
its heat.

every person who does not turn to the one true God is without excuse. Every person on earth can see the evidence of His greatness and His character. When people see His great creative work and do not worship Him, they will be judged for worshiping something or someone other than the one true God.

(In PSG, p. 76) **What conclusions can people draw about God by observing His creation? What misconceptions about God might people draw if they only depend upon what they see in creation?**

SEEN IN HIS WORD (PS. 19:7-11)

In verse 7 the theme shifts from God’s revelation in the skies to His revelation in the Scriptures. The form of verses 7-9 is symmetrical, listing a total of 18 qualities of the Scriptures. The psalmist described the Scriptures with six different nouns, two nouns in each of the three verses. Then he described the Scriptures with six different adjectives—two adjectives in each verse. Finally, each of these three verses has two benefits of God’s Word in the lives of God’s people. The psalmist mentions six benefits in all. Thus, God’s Word is described with six nouns, six adjectives, and six benefits.

VERSE 7

Verse 7 refers to God’s Word as **instruction**. The Hebrew word is *torah*. That word often refers to the first five books of the Bible—the Pentateuch. Sometimes it refers to all the Old Testament—all of God’s teaching—and that is likely the way it is used here. Verse 7 states that God’s law is **perfect**. The word means “complete, whole.” It was used to refer to sacrifices that were acceptable or without blemish. What an exalted description of God’s teaching—all of it is without blemish or error. Further, God’s perfect revelation is **renewing one’s life**. Where do we go for renewal? We should go to God’s Word; it renews and refreshes us. When we submerge ourselves in God’s Word, we find rest for our souls.

The second part of verse 7 calls God’s Word **the testimony of the LORD**. The Bible is God’s testimony. Scripture is what He has spoken. Second Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is inspired by God.” “Inspired by God” is one word in the original Greek, and that word means “God-breathed.” The words in Scripture are the words breathed out by God. Verse 7 also says that God’s testimony is **trustworthy**. We get our word *amen* from that word. It means “true, faithful.”

This testimony is **making the inexperienced wise**. If we want wisdom for living, we read the Bible. Paul wrote to Timothy, “from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15). The Scriptures gave wisdom to Timothy, and they give wisdom to us.

PSALM 19:7

⁷ The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one’s life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise.

PSALM 19:8

⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, making the heart glad; the command of the LORD is radiant, making the eyes light up.

PSALM 19:9

⁹ The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are reliable and altogether righteous.

PSALM 19:10-11

¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold—than an abundance of pure gold; and sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb. ¹¹ In addition, your servant is warned by them, and in keeping them there is an abundant reward.

VERSE 8

Next, God's Word is called ***the precepts of the LORD*** and ***the command of the LORD***. His precepts and commands are described with the adjectives ***right*** and ***radiant***. *Radiant* can also be translated "pure." God's Word is pure, and it makes us pure. Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). God sanctifies us by means of the truth of His Word. When we do not spend time in God's Word, we should not be surprised if impure thoughts or words come to us more easily. On the other hand, when we submerge ourselves in God's Word, we should not think that we will lead dreary, joyless lives. To the contrary, verse 8 says God's precepts and commands are ***making the heart glad*** and ***making the eyes light up***. When we learn the truth and live by the truth, we find joy.

VERSE 9

Scripture is also called ***the fear of the LORD*** because of the awe and reverence it inspires. We do not approach the Bible like other books. The Almighty God of the universe inspired this book, and in its pages we encounter Him. In the Bible we learn that God has the power of eternal life and eternal death in His hands, and we learn that we are answerable to Him and we will stand before Him in judgment. Therefore, reading the Bible produces reverence, or fear of God. Scripture is also ***enduring forever***. Isaiah 40:8 says, "The grass withers, the flowers fade, but the word of our God remains forever." Finally, verse 9 refers to the Scriptures as ***ordinances***, or rules. God's rules are ***reliable and altogether righteous***.

VERSES 10-11

Verse 10 provides two illustrations that further declare the worth of God's Word. First, the Word of God contrasts with gold in that God's words are ***more desirable***. Second, God's Word is ***sweeter than honey***. This verse states that when we realize the surpassing value of God's Word, we would rather have God's Word than eat our favorite food. It is sweeter than honey and more valuable than gold.

Verse 11 describes a consequence of knowing God's Word. Scripture warns us not to follow the wrong path and promises that when we obey what God says ***there is an abundant reward***. Obeying God's Word can lead to more happiness, more friends, and more health. Hebrews 11:6 says that God "rewards those who seek him." We should not think that when we live to please God we will be miserable or bored. To the contrary, God rewards us.

When you are daydreaming, are you more likely to think, "I wish I had a million dollars" or "I wish I had more of God's Word in my mind"? Which is more valuable to you?

CELEBRATED IN HIS PEOPLE (PS. 19:12-14)

The psalmist shifted from what is in God's Word to what was in his own soul. It is natural that the psalmist would come to realize what was happening in his heart after he had been considering God's Word. The Scriptures have that effect on all people who encounter them. When we read the Bible, it helps us to read ourselves. The Book of James calls the Bible a mirror (1:23-24). Hebrews 4:12 says that God's Word judges "the thoughts and intentions of the heart." As the psalmist contemplated God's word, he became more aware of the condition of his heart.

VERSE 12

The psalmist's words constitute a prayer of confession. He wrote of his sins and asked God to **cleanse** him. What he read in God's Word led him to an awareness of his sin. The phrase **unintentional sins** was his confession that he had not seen some of his wrongdoing, but he was guilty of breaking God's law. Our fallen nature prevents us from seeing how sinful we are, and the more we learn God's truth in His Word, the more we see how much of our sin was hidden from us until God's Word revealed it to us. The psalmist was confessing his sinfulness and his ignorance.

VERSES 13-14

The psalmist also confessed his weakness. He asked the Lord to keep him from **willful sins**. *Willful* is related to the Hebrew verb that meant "to boil up." The noun referred to haughtiness or being puffed up. The psalmist mentioned the possibility that the sins of haughtiness could rule over him, and he asked God to prevent them from doing so. He told God that he needed His help to protect him from the awful prospect of being ruled by sin. Jesus also taught us to pray for such protection from sin: "Do not bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one" (Matt. 6:13).

In verse 14 the psalmist expressed to God that he wanted to please Him in what he said and what he thought. Pleasing God is more important than pleasing any other person. That is true because He is the only Person who is God. It is also true because He is our **•Redeemer**. God redeems us by the Redeemer, Jesus. Hebrews 1:1-2 says, "Long ago God spoke to the fathers by the prophets at different times and in different ways. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his Son." God speaks in the skies and in the Scriptures, and His final Word to us is in His Son and our Savior, the Lord Jesus. When we receive Him, He forgives us and frees us from sin, and He uses His Word to speak to us and renew us.

How has God used His Word to form you into His image?

1. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 63.

PSALM 19:12

¹² Who perceives his unintentional sins?
Cleanse me from my hidden faults.

PSALM 19:13-14

¹³ Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule me. Then I will be blameless and cleansed from blatant rebellion. ¹⁴ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

PREPARE: Prepare three sheets of paper with one of the following sentences written on each one: “Team One: You are doing research to write a magazine article about a famous world leader.” “Team Two: You are the search team for a prospective staff member for your church.” “Team Three: You have been set up on a blind date.”

BRAINSTORM: As the group arrives, ask: *When we want to learn about someone, how do we go about getting information about him or her?* Form three teams, and give each team one of the sheets of paper you’ve prepared. Explain that each team has five minutes to brainstorm what they would do to find out more about that person. After five minutes, give each team a minute to discuss how they would learn more about their person.

DISCUSS: After all three teams have presented, discuss the differences you heard between the three teams. Ask: *What seemed to make the biggest difference? Which “background check” would you be most invested in personally? Why?*

INTRODUCE: *In Psalm 19, the psalmist described the two ways God has given us to help us know Him better. We can learn about God by observing His creation, but He also reveals Himself through His Word.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 19:1-6. Encourage the group to keep track of the different metaphors the psalmist used to express how nature points to God.

LIST: On a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, list the various ways creation is personified in these verses.

DISCUSS: Point out all the synonyms for “tell” in verses 1-2. Ask: *What is the psalmist teaching us through these words?*

ASK: *How do you make sense of the apparent contradiction between verse 3 and verse 4? Direct the group to the PSG (p. 75) for insight.*

EXPLAIN: *In these six verses, God is simply called “God,” which in Hebrew is Elohim.*

ASK: *Do you see a connection between the generic word for God in these verses and what the verses say about how creation reveals God?*

EXPLAIN: *Creation is general revelation of God. Read Romans 1:19-20. In the second half of the psalm, we will get into “special” revelation.*

ASK: *What conclusions can people draw about God by observing His creation? What misconceptions about God might people draw if they only depend upon what they see in creation? (PSG, p. 76)*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 19:7-11. Encourage the rest of the group to take note of the different names for God used in this section compared to verses 1-6.

GUIDE: Use **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*) as a guide for reflecting on the different names for God.

EXPLAIN: Verses 7-11 use *Yahweh*, which was God's special, covenant name He revealed to His people Israel. In most English Bibles, it is rendered LORD.

ASK: *What is the significance of the psalmist's shifting from the generic Elohim to the covenant name Yahweh to refer to God?*

ASK: *"Instruction," "testimony," "precepts," "command," and "ordinances" are all synonyms for what?*

MINI-LECTURE: *Verses 1-6 described general revelation. Verses 7-11 describe what theologians call special revelation. This is the understanding of God that can only be revealed through His Word. God's Word provides people with an infallible guide for living in a right relationship with Christ.*

DIRECT: Ask a volunteer to read John 1:1,14. Emphasize that "the Word became flesh" is Jesus. Ask: *If all the words in verses 7-11 are synonyms for God's Word, and Jesus is Himself the Word made flesh, then can we say that everything Psalm 19 says about God's Word is also true about Jesus?* Read verses 7-11 out loud again, substituting the name of Jesus for each noun describing God's Word.

ASK: *How does God's Word help us avoid dangers and traps? If we know there are benefits to keeping God's Word, why do we so easily choose to disregard or disobey it?* (PSG, p. 78)

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 19:12-14. Direct the group to pay attention to the shift in focus.

ASK: *How does the focus shift? Do you see this as a normal, logical progression, or as the psalmist taking a tangent? Explain.*

SAY: *God's Word will always lead us into a greater awareness of our own sinfulness. This isn't necessarily meant to make us feel more guilty but to make us more like Him. Verse 11 shows us that we are warned by God's laws, and there is great reward in keeping them.*

DISCUSS: *What role does Scripture play in revealing our faults and shortcomings? How does God use Scripture in our lives to correct us so we can better reflect His character?* (PSG, p. 79)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DISCUSS: Read the summary statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 80): *All people are accountable to God since He reveals Himself through His creation. Believers should treasure God's written Word. Forgiveness and freedom from sin are found through faith in Jesus, the living Word.* Highlight the difference between "all people" and "believers." Emphasize that God loves us so much that He has made a way for us to know how to please Him.

CHALLENGE: Lead the group to discuss their responses to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 80): *As a group, discuss ways of making God's Word more prevalent in the life of the group. What actions need to be taken to make sure God's Word is central to all that is done by the group? How can these actions be implemented?*

PRAY: Close with a time of prayer, directing everyone to read verse 14 in unison as a prayer to God.



PRACTICE

- Contact those who were absent from the group time, asking them for prayer requests. Use the opportunity to encourage them in their spiritual lives.
- Over the course of the next week, text each phrase of verses 12-14 to your group—one phrase each day.
- Determine to pray through these verses in your own quiet time each day this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention activity, show a picture of the Grand Canyon. Ask each person to give a one-word description of the Grand Canyon. Next, show them a picture of the U.S. Constitution as it is displayed in the National Archives building. Again, ask for one-word descriptions. Discuss how both are inspiring but in different ways and for different reasons. Use this as a springboard into your discussion of the two halves of Psalm 19.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To add to your exploration of Psalm 19:1-6, direct attention to the Bible Skill in the PSG (p. 76). Form pairs and direct each pair to compare Romans 1:18-32 with Psalm 19:1-6. Assign each pair one of the questions in the Bible Skill section, and ask everyone to report to the large group.
- To supplement the discussion of Psalm 19:12-13, lead the group to consider the differences between unintentional sins and blatant rebellion by clipping several headlines from the newspaper. Choose stories related to alleged crimes committed. For each one, ask if the headline represents unintentional sin or blatant rebellion.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Make copies of a sheet of paper divided into four quadrants. Label the quadrants “Unintentional Sins,” “Hidden Faults,” “Willful Sin,” and “Blatant Rebellion.” Challenge group members to keep this sheet in their Bibles for the next seven days. Encourage them to write down anything in any of the quadrants that God reveals to them during their quiet time.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Play the song, “Let the Words of My Mouth,” by Fernando Ortega, as part of the closing prayer. Alternatively, review the words of the hymn “Praise the Lord! Ye Heavens, Adore Him,” partially written by Edward Osler, as you discuss the first section of Scripture.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

HIS LOVE

God's unchanging love gives us reasons to celebrate.

PSALM 136:1-5,10-15,23-26

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 136:1

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 136, First Thoughts (p. 84), and Understand the Context (pp. 84-85). Reflect on the session summary statement: *God's unchanging love gives us reasons to celebrate.* If we make ourselves the focus, then we starve ourselves spiritually. Begin your preparation time by thanking God for His blessings in your life.
- **STUDY** Psalm 136:1-5,10-15,23-26, using Explore the Text (pp. 85-89). Observe how the psalmist thanked God for who He is and what He does (vv. 1-5); for rescue from captivity as well as victory over enemies (vv. 10-15); and for providing for both spiritual and physical needs (vv. 23-26). Reflect on how this has been true in your own life.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 90-91) and ideas in *QuickSource*. Reference Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible for ideas to customize your session.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 1** (*Map: Egypt and the Holy Land*); **PACK ITEM 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 12** (*Poster: Psalm 136:1*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God the Father

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Most Americans point to a celebration between the Pilgrims and Native Americans in 1621 as the first Thanksgiving. However, other accounts exist of thanksgiving celebrations prior to 1621. The French Huguenots held a thanksgiving service when they arrived in 1564. Spanish conquistadors recorded that they celebrated a thanksgiving mass after they landed in 1565. In each case, at least part of the group celebrated in recognition of God's grace and provision.

(In PSG, p. 82) **What makes giving thanks so important? What does a person's willingness to give thanks to God reveal about his or her understanding of God?**

Psalm 136 begins with a call to give thanks to God. The psalmist declared that all thanksgiving should begin with God (vv. 1-5). It is not about us; it is about God. If we make ourselves the focus, we starve ourselves spiritually. By first remembering God, we will then rediscover past blessings (vv. 10-15) and can trust Him with our present and future (vv. 23-26). When good things happen, He is behind it. Psalm 136 stresses the fact that God blesses His people because He loves us. All that God gives us and the love with which He gives it should cause us to give Him praise continually.

BIBLE SKILL

Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.

Psalm 136 emphasizes by repetition the doctrine of God's love. Read the following Bible passages and take note of what they teach about God's love: Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Nehemiah 9:17; Isaiah 54:8; Hosea 3:1-5; John 3:16-18; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 1:3-6; 1 John 3:16; 4:8. How do the truths of these passages relate to what is found in Psalm 136?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 136

Psalm 136 has no superscription. Therefore, we do not know the identity of the writer or the historical circumstances in which the psalm was written. The contents of the psalm indicate only that it was written sometime after Israel's wilderness wandering, so interpreters guess dates ranging from the time of the judges to the period after the return from exile.

The form of this psalm is unique. The refrain "his faithful love endures forever" occurs 26 times, once in every verse. The form has led many readers to suggest that this psalm was read antiphonally in Israel's worship. A worship leader, a choir, or part of the congregation would sing or state the first line of the verse, and then the people would respond by saying, "his faithful love endures forever." Some churches today use responsive readings similar to an antiphonal worship experience. The Jewish scribes who copied the Hebrew text in antiquity placed each refrain of Psalm 136 on the same line as the first part of each verse, but on the opposite side of the page. That structure also suggests a responsive reading.

An example of antiphonal praise may be reflected in Ezra 3:11. When the Jews returned from exile, after they laid the foundation of the temple, they paused to give thanks to God in worship. Priests and Levites led the time of praise, and the original Hebrew may be rendered, “they answered by giving praise and thanks to the Lord.” The verb “answered” or “responded” is translated “sang responsively” in some translations. Some of the words they sang, “his faithful love ... endures forever,” are identical to the refrain in Psalm 136. It is possible that Ezra 3:11 is an instance of the antiphonal singing of Psalm 136 or another song like it.

Psalm 136 reviews the history of Israel and expresses praise to God for His consistent love throughout that history. The Old Testament records examples of God’s people following that pattern in worship. God commanded His people in the wilderness that once they settled in the promised land they were to worship by bringing offerings to Him, reviewing their history, and giving God thanks for all He had done for them (Deut. 26:1-11). Examples of their compliance with that command are in Joshua 24 and Nehemiah 9.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

IN CREATION (PS. 136:1-5)

VERSE 1

This psalm begins with an exhortation to **give thanks to the LORD, for he is good**. God is not good in the same way people are good. Only God is infinitely and perfectly good. All goodness in us and in the universe flows from His goodness, because He created everything and we are created in His image. Further, we can be good only as He makes us so, and God’s goodness is the standard by which all other goodness is measured.

We need to be reminded of God’s goodness because we are tempted to doubt it, especially in times of suffering. In such times we are tempted to think that God cannot be good since He is allowing us to suffer. We question why He does not deliver us immediately from all distress. The apostle Peter counseled persecuted believers to resist such ungodly notions, knowing that God “will himself restore, establish, strengthen, and support you after you have suffered a little while” (1 Pet. 5:10).

Regardless of the appearance of our circumstances, God is good. God also loves us. **His faithful love endures forever**. The word translated *love* in every verse of this psalm is one of the most important words in the Old Testament. It is translated with words like “lovingkindness,” “mercy,” “steadfast love,” and “covenant love.” It is difficult to capture its range of meaning with just one word. We can express the idea of the word as mercy and forgiveness given to unworthy people and deliverance or protection given to people by one who is more powerful.

The Old Testament affirms repeatedly that God relates to His people with love. In the Old Testament, God established a covenant relationship

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “The Great Hallel” in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 136:1

¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. *His faithful love endures forever.*

with His people based on His grace and love. He was always faithful to that covenant. In the new covenant era, God gives us a covenant relationship with Himself through Jesus. That covenant is also based on His grace and love, and He is always faithful to that covenant. God and the way He relates to people do not change. *His faithful love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:2-3

² Give thanks to the God of gods. *His faithful love endures forever.*

³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords. *His faithful love endures forever.*

VERSES 2-3

Give thanks in these verses is the same word used in verses 1 and 26. In the case of verse 2, the psalmist wrote that we should give thanks to God because He is **the God of gods**. To say that God is *the God of gods* does not mean that other gods exist in reality. They exist only in the fantasy of those who invent them and put their faith in them. People have always created false gods in their minds. The psalmist who wrote the previous psalm declared that such false gods are indeed “made by human hands.” They are mute, blind, deaf, and dead, and those who make them become like them (Ps. 135:15-18).

Only one true God exists. He alone is not created and not contingent. He is the Creator of everything and everyone else, all of which is contingent upon Him. He is the only Sovereign over all angelic and demonic powers, who are also created beings. We should not underestimate Satan’s power, but we should not forget that he is under God’s authority. God currently allows him to exist, but at God’s ordained time He will cast Satan into the lake of fire forever (Rev. 20:10). No heavenly or earthly power can thwart God’s work or His eternal plan in the slightest degree.

Verse 3 is identical to verse 2 except instead of *God of gods* the phrase describing the one true God is **Lord of lords**. The word translated *lords* was used to refer to deities as well as human lords like kings. The one true God rules over every human ruler. Proverbs 21:1 says, “A king’s heart is like channeled water in the LORD’s hand: He directs it wherever he chooses.” Where man rules, God overrules. We may not understand God’s ways since His ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9), but we need not doubt that He is in charge and in control.

In Revelation 19:16, Jesus is called “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.” That statement is an affirmation of the deity of Jesus and the unity of the Trinity. God the Son and God the Father are God of gods and Lord of lords, as is the Spirit of God. The three Persons of the Trinity are one, God is one, and He is the eternal sovereign Ruler over all.

(In PSG, p. 84) **How do the names used for God speak into how a person should worship? How might a wrong view of God negatively affect our worship?**

PSALM 136:4

⁴ He alone does great wonders. *His faithful love endures forever.*

VERSE 4

The one true God is worthy of our praise because of His incomparability. He is utterly unique. **He alone does great wonders**. *Wonders* translates a Hebrew

word that refers to works so astonishing that only God can do them. In the Old Testament it refers to God's cosmic wonders and historical miracles (Ex. 15:11; Job 37:16; Pss. 77:14; 89:5; 118:22-23; Isa. 9:6; Jer. 21:2). It is applied to humans almost exclusively to express what is beyond human ability (2 Sam. 13:2; Prov. 30:18). Such awe-inspiring works should result in awe for the One who performed them.

VERSE 5

One of God's wonders is *the heavens*. Other ancient Near Eastern religions deified the elements of nature. For the Canaanites, the god of grain was Dagon, the god of rain and fertility was Baal, and Baal's nemesis was Mot, the god of death. In the Bible, however, every part of nature is created by the one true God and under His authority. Also, God is not part of nature but is separate from nature and sovereign over it.

Contemporary sources estimate the diameter of the known universe, *the heavens*, as over 90 billion light years. While calculable, a distance that far is virtually impossible to picture. Genesis 1 relates that on the fourth day of creation God made the sun and the moon, which He called the "greater light" and the "lesser light." Then, almost as an afterthought it seems, the Bible adds "as well as the stars" (Gen. 1:16). Only one brief phrase describes God's creation of trillions of stars, as if to emphasize what a small task it was for God to call into existence a universe that is vast beyond our comprehension.

God created the heavens *skillfully*. That word can also be translated "with understanding." It is the same word used in Proverbs 3:19 and Jeremiah 10:12 to describe God's creation of the heavens. God's vast understanding enables Him to create a vast universe.

In verses 6-9 the psalmist further described God's creative acts. The language echoes the creation account in Genesis 1. As in Genesis 1:1, land immediately follows the heavens. Verse 6 has the verb "spread," which is the verb form of the noun in Genesis 1 translated "expanse" (Gen. 1:6-8,14-15,17,20). Like in Genesis 1, in verses 7-9 God made the heavenly bodies to "rule" (Gen. 1:18).

IN CONQUEST (PS. 136:10-15)

VERSE 10

From verse 9 to verse 10 the psalmist moved from the creation to the exodus, skipping the period of the patriarchs. His purpose was not to provide a complete accounting of Israel's early history. Instead, he was using selected historical events to illustrate God's mighty works to demonstrate His worthiness to be praised.

To deliver the Hebrews from the power of the Egyptians, God sent 10 miraculous plagues. The psalmist mentioned only the tenth plague—the killing of the firstborn sons in families that had not placed lamb's blood on the door of their house (Ex. 11-12). Thus, God demonstrated that neither Pharaoh nor the gods of the Egyptians could protect them from His power. In the ten plagues, God executed His holy judgment on the gods of Egypt (Ex. 12:12; Num. 33:3-4) and on the people who worshiped those false gods.

PSALM 136:5

⁵ He made the heavens skillfully. *His faithful love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:10

¹⁰ He struck the firstborn of the Egyptians *His faithful love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:11-12

¹¹ and brought Israel out from among them *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹² with a strong hand and outstretched arm. *His faithful love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:13-15

¹³ He divided the Red Sea *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹⁴ and led Israel through, *His faithful love endures forever.* ¹⁵ but hurled Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea. *His faithful love endures forever.*

VERSES 11-12

To describe the exodus event the psalmist used language that is common in the Old Testament with reference to the exodus. “Struck” (v. 10) is in Exodus 12:12,13, and 29 to describe God’s judgment in the deaths of the firstborn. God used the word **brought** to declare His intent to deliver the Hebrews (Ex. 7:5) and to describe the event as it was happening (Ex. 12:17,51). **With a strong hand and outstretched arm** is a phrase that occurs numerous times in Deuteronomy to express how God delivered His people (Deut. 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 11:2; 26:8).

The repetition of **his faithful love endures forever** is a reminder that God’s deliverance of His people from Egypt was an act of God’s love. God did not choose to deliver Israel because they had earned redemption, but because He loved them even though they did not deserve it (Deut. 7:6-8; 9:4-6). God still redeems people and makes them His. He does not do so on the basis of our goodness, but on the basis of His love and grace (Eph. 2:8-9). God demonstrated His love for us when Jesus died on the cross as our sin sacrifice (Rom. 5:8). We should never look at our circumstances and doubt God’s love. We should always look at the cross and know God loves us.

VERSES 13-15

The Book of Exodus relates the story of God’s astounding miracle of parting a body of water to lead His people to safety. As they passed through the sea, the water was “like a wall to them on their right and their left” (Ex. 14:22). Psalm 136 has unique language to describe that phenomenon. **Divided** can be rendered something like “divided in two” or “divided in parts.”

After the Hebrews left Egypt, Pharaoh and his army pursued them (Ex. 14). The Hebrews were free from slavery, but they were not safe until they escaped the danger of capture. God provided safety when He buried the Egyptians in the sea.

The verb **hurled** in verse 15 can also be translated “shook.” As the waters of the sea crashed down from both sides on Pharaoh and his army, one can picture a lot of shaking of bodies and chariots as if they were in a washing machine. This was the means by which God rescued His people from their oppressors. As God redeemed His people, He simultaneously brought His holy judgment on the people who had repeatedly refused to worship Him.

In verses 16-22 the psalmist continued to recount the great works of God on behalf of His people. He provided for them miraculously as He led them through the wilderness. He “struck down great kings” (v. 17) as He protected them from the attacks of the Amorites and Bashan and gave them their territory (Num. 21:31-35).

How would you describe the great works did God in saving you? In what ways has He demonstrated His love for you since your salvation in Christ?

IN COMPASSION (PS. 136:23-26)

VERSES 23-24

The term **humiliation** means to be low. It is used to refer to physical position and spiritual position. The latter can result from humbling oneself as God requires (Isa. 57:15), from the effects of sin (Isa. 2:9), or from being humbled in various ways, including God's judgment (Isa. 2:11; 13:11). The psalmist could be referring to God's remembering Israel's humiliation in Egyptian slavery and delivering them. He could be referring to their many trials in the promised land after the conquest when God remembered them by sending judges to deliver them. It is possible the humiliation was Israel's exile, and God remembered them and they returned. The **foes** could be the Egyptians, the various oppressors named in the Book of Judges, or the Babylonians who conquered and exiled Judah. Whenever God's people are down, He remembers, and we give Him praise for His gracious help.

VERSE 25

Since the psalmist had been calling to mind the exodus, the **food** in this verse may refer to God's provision of food for His people in the wilderness. However, he declared that God gives food to **every creature**, so the psalmist could have been returning to the earlier theme of the entire creation and its witness to God's greatness. *Every creature* includes non-humans too.

Our food comes from various sources, but ultimately all our food is a gift from God. In recognition of that fact, Jesus taught us to ask God for "daily bread" (Matt. 6:11). We say a prayer before every meal because we recognize God gives us our food and we are to be grateful to Him.

VERSE 26

The psalmist concludes the way he began—by calling on his readers to express thanks to God. Calling Him **the God of heaven** was a way of exalting Him over all. He is not a local or national deity. He is the one God of the whole world.

Reviewing the great works of God in history as the basis for thanksgiving has an important application. Our salvation is not based on our feelings. It is grounded in historical events—Jesus' sacrificial death and victorious resurrection. Our feelings change as we experience ups and downs, but God's saving activity in Christ does not change. ***His faithful love endures forever.***

(In PSG, p. 89) **Why is giving thanks to God important for believers? How can you help others express their thankfulness to God?**

PSALM 136:23-24

²³ He remembered us in our humiliation
His faithful love endures forever. ²⁴ and rescued us from our foes. *His faithful love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:25

²⁵ He gives food to every creature. *His faithful love endures forever.*

PSALM 136:26

²⁶ Give thanks to the God of heaven!
His faithful love endures forever.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ICEBREAKER: Once everyone arrives, form two teams. Designate them “Team Telescope” and “Team Microscope.” Explain that the teams will have two minutes to list as many items in their category for which we can thank God. Clarify that “Team Telescope” is to think of big, vast, or faraway things, while “Team Microscope” will list small or complex things. Call time, and have each team share its list.

INTRODUCE: Invite group members to locate Psalm 136 in their Bibles. Point out that readers can tell just by looking at the way the psalm is arranged on the page that it is a unique psalm. No other psalm has such an extended “call and response” format.

GUIDE: Call attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*), and invite the group to guess which category matches Psalm 136. They should be able to quickly identify that this psalm is a hymn.

TRANSITION: Use the information in Understand the Context (PSG, p. 83) to explain that this psalm was written shortly after the Israelites were released from bondage in Egypt.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Psalm 136:1-5. For a creative approach to the reading, consider using the responsive reading format described in More Ideas (p. 92).

LIST: On a whiteboard or a large sheet of paper, write the headings “Who God Is” and “What God Does.” Direct volunteers to call out the attributes and titles of God named in verses 1-3, and list these under each heading. Then record the activities of God in verses 4-5 under “What God Does.”

SAY: *The Hebrew word chesed is the main word in the refrain of Psalm 136, meaning His love is eternal. It is used almost 250 times in the Old Testament and has no exact English translation. Various translations have rendered it “faithful love,” “mercy,” “steadfast love,” and “lovingkindness.” It conveys the idea of “covenant love,” a love that is based on God’s promise to His people. Rarely is chesed used in reference to people; it is almost always used in reference to God’s faithful love toward us.*

HIGHLIGHT: Draw attention to the information in the PSG (p. 84) about the different names for God in verses 1-3. Reference **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*) to spark further discussion.

ASK: *How do the names used for God speak into how a person should worship? How might a wrong view of God negatively affect our worship? (PSG, p. 84) Why is it important for Christians to believe God created everything out of nothing? (PSG, p. 85)*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 136:10-15.

HIGHLIGHT: Use **Pack Item 1** (*Map: Egypt and the Holy Land*) to point out the context for verses 10-15. Invite the group to name specific details from the exodus story referenced in these verses. Ask: *What kind of impact do you think these stories had on the original audience for this psalm?*

MINI-LECTURE: *The Israelites often sang or wrote of their release from slavery in Egypt (see Ex. 15:4; Josh. 24:6; Neh. 9:9; Ps. 106; Heb. 11:29). Verses 16-22 of Psalm 136 go on to talk about victories the Lord gave Israel once they left Egypt. Sihon king of the Amorites and Og king of Bashan (vv. 19-20) were enemy kings the Israelites conquered before they got to the promised land (Num. 21:21-25). This victory is referenced multiple times throughout the rest of the Old Testament.*

ASK: *Why is the act of remembering an important spiritual discipline? From the PSG: Why is it so easy to forget God's blessings? What are some of the pitfalls that come from forgetting? (PSG, p. 87)*

TRANSITION: *The previous verses emphasized what the Israelites were to remember. This section focuses on what God remembered.*

READ: Instruct the group to listen as a volunteer reads aloud Psalm 136:23-26.

ASK: *Since we know God doesn't forget anything, what does verse 23 mean?*

EMPHASIZE: Direct a group member to read the second paragraph of the PSG's commentary on verses 23-24 (p. 88) that begins, "God sees our tears ..." Discuss how knowing that God remembers believers can comfort us.

REVIEW: *Psalm 136 teaches us that God reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and all of human history according to the purposes of His grace. Our appropriate response is thanksgiving.*

ASK: *Why is giving thanks to God important for believers? How can you help others express their thankfulness to God? (PSG, p. 89)*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

REVIEW: Remind the group of the opening Team Telescope/Team Microscope activity. Say: *While the psalmist recognized the cosmic works of the Lord in creation, he spent more time thanking God for His personal care for His people.*

MEMORIZE: Draw attention to **Pack Item 12** (*Poster: Psalm 136:1*). Encourage individuals to memorize Psalm 136:1 this week. You may wish to play the song suggestion (p. 92) during this time to assist with memorization.

CHALLENGE: Encourage the group to discuss the third question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 90): *Discuss with your Bible study group ways the group can celebrate God's provisions. How can thanksgiving be incorporated into the regular life of the group? What actions does the group need to take to elevate thanksgiving?*

PRAY: Close the session by going around the circle and inviting each group member to voice a one-sentence prayer of thanksgiving.



PRACTICE

- Follow up on any questions the group had during this week's study.
- Be mindful of any situations in which your group members may be struggling with a particular issue. Write them a note this week, acknowledging that being thankful in the midst of difficult times isn't easy. Pray that they will be able to focus on God's faithful love despite the circumstances.
- Determine to focus on thanksgiving in your own devotional time this week.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the focus attention idea, direct everyone to name the essential items of a Thanksgiving dinner. After everyone has had a chance to add a favorite dish to the list, ask: *What are the essential ingredients of a thanksgiving prayer?* List these on the whiteboard as well.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- Emphasize how this psalm was used in worship by reading each section of Scripture responsively. For Psalm 136:1-5, read the first line of each verse and lead the group to respond with "his faithful love endures forever." For verses 10-15, guide the men to read the first line and the women to respond with "his faithful love endures forever." Then reverse for verses 23-26.
- Expand on the "Team Telescope" idea in the Icebreaker to carry the same concept throughout the entire lesson. In round two (vv. 10-15), designate them "Team From" and "Team For," listing things God rescues people from versus things God saves people for. In round three (vv. 23-26), designate them "Team Physical" and "Team Spiritual." This time the focus will be on God's physical provisions versus His spiritual provisions.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to discuss times when it is most difficult to thank God. Note that Psalm 136:16 covers 40 years of Israel's history when the people were led to the wilderness and it may have been hard for them to thank God. Encourage group members to allow this verse to serve as a reminder to keep thanking God during their own wilderness times.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Play "Forever," by Chris Tomlin, at the beginning of the session as everyone is arriving or during the memorize activity of Summarize and Challenge.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

HIS FAITHFULNESS

God can be trusted as the One who reigns eternally.

PSALM 146:1-10

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 146:6

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 146, using Understand the Context (pp. 94-95). As you read, observe how the psalmist contrasts man's unfaithfulness with God's faithfulness. Read First Thoughts (p. 94), and respond to the question. Reflect on how this has been true in your own life. Begin your preparation time by thanking God for His faithfulness.
- **STUDY** Psalm 146:1-10, using Explore the Text (pp. 95-99). Take note of the seven irrevocable truths this psalm teaches (PSG, p. 93). Reflect on which of these seven is especially meaningful to you at this point in your life. Think about your group and consider which truths are likely to impact each person. Pause and pray for your group members.
- **PLAN** the group time using ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 100-101). Modify your group plans using More Ideas (p. 102) and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible.
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or a whiteboard and markers; and Cards for the Icebreaker activity (p. 100). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (Poster: *God in the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

The Kingdom

The Kingdom is the realm of salvation into which men enter by trustful, childlike commitment to Jesus Christ.

BIBLE SKILL

Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words or phrases.

Focus on the phrase “executing justice” in Psalm 146:7. Look up “justice” in an English dictionary to discover its basic meaning. Use a concordance to find other uses of the term in Scripture. Read the context of selected passages that include the word “justice,” and make notes of the various ways the word is used. Read the entry for the term in a Bible dictionary, adding to your notes. What insights about justice did you gain? How does that help you better understand God’s work in His creation?

FIRST THOUGHTS

Abused by a loved one. Cheated by a friend. Denied a promotion by a selfish boss. Then a confidant breaks the silence. Betrayal hurts. When people we trust shatter our confidence, recovery can take years, if we recover at all. Even worse, we carry these feelings of mistrust into other relationships, even into our relationship with God.

(In PSG, p. 92) **How does experiencing betrayal in one relationship in our lives impact other relationships? What makes it so hard for people to move past what they perceive to be a betrayal?**

Trust, or the lack of it, is an integral part of our lives. When we speak, we count on other people to trust that we are telling the truth. When loved ones and friends speak to us, we trust them until that trust is violated. After it is violated, for a long time we may be reluctant to trust.

We trust doctors with our health, mechanics with our cars, teachers and babysitters with our children, investment advisers with our money, and the driver in the next lane with our lives. Our trust has been violated so often by public figures in politics, sports, and even religion that we may wonder whether to trust anyone at all in power. We are familiar with the principle that a person is as good as his or her word, and intuitively we know it is true. However, we know that every human being will fail at some point, including ourselves. Only God is worthy of our trust all the time. Therefore, only God is worthy of our worship.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 146

Psalm 146 begins and ends with an exhortation to praise the Lord. This psalm is the first of five praise psalms that conclude the Book of Psalms, and they all have “Hallelujah!” at the beginning and the end.

Most Old Testament interpreters date the final five praise psalms to the period after the people of Judah had returned to Jerusalem from exile. In the Greek translation of this section of Psalms, the words “Haggai and Zechariah” appear in the superscriptions four times. Those two prophets served after the return from exile, in the final years of the sixth century B.C. The relationship of these psalms to those prophets, if there was any relationship, is unknown. But perhaps these psalms were written or rose to prominence during their lifetime.

Psalms of praise usually follow a common pattern that includes common elements. They usually begin with an exhortation to praise

the Lord. Often the exhortation is the imperative, “Praise the Lord!” Sometimes the words are “Sing to the Lord” or “Bless the Lord.”

Second, writers of praise psalms identified the audience they were exhorting. Psalm 134:1 says, “Now bless the LORD, all you servants of the LORD.” Psalm 96:1 says, “Sing a new song to the LORD; let the whole earth sing to the LORD.” Psalm 148 calls the angels, hosts, and the constituent parts of the created order to praise the Lord (vv. 2-4). Psalm 150:6 concludes the Psalter with the exhortation for “everything that breathes” to praise the Lord.

Praise psalms often mention the mode of praise, or how people should praise the Lord. Psalm 33:2 says to offer praise “with the lyre” and “with a ten-stringed harp.” Psalm 100 exhorts worshipers to give praise “with joyful songs” (v. 2). Psalm 150 mentions no less than seven instruments to employ in the praise of God (vv. 3-5).

The most important and usually longest part of the praise psalms is the section giving the reasons for praise. This section typically lists attributes or activities of the Lord. People are to praise the Lord because He is good or because He has redeemed us. The length of praise psalms is usually determined by the number of the attributes or deeds of the Lord that are listed as reasons to give Him praise.

Sometimes psalmists used a rhetorical question in praise of God. Psalm 89:6-8 asks three rhetorical questions, such as, “Who in the skies can compare with the LORD?” Psalm 90:11 asks, “Who understands the power of your anger?” Psalm 113:5 says, “Who is like the LORD our God?”

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE DECLARATION (PS. 146:1-2)

VERSE 1

•**Hallelujah** is literally “praise Yah.” The Hebrew word for “praise” is *halal*, and *Yah* (or *jah*) is the shortened form of the Hebrew *Yahweh*, the covenant name of God. Hence, this is transliterated into English as “Hallelujah.”

This command to praise God is plural, addressed to a group of people, indicating the likelihood that this psalm was used in worship. *Hallelujah* served as the call to worship, just as it still serves as a call to worship today. It is sad that the word *Hallelujah*, or “praise the Lord,” is trivialized so often in Western culture and even by Christians. Even in worship, *Hallelujah* should not be spoken as an empty mantra or sung as a trite jingle. In these praise psalms the word was used to call the attention of God’s people to important truths about God. The word contains the name of God, so using it lightly is misusing God’s name (Ex. 20:7).

After the psalmist directed his hearers and readers to praise the Lord, he directed the same command to his own soul. While in worship, leaders know their God-assigned role is to lead others to worship. However, they are not only worship leaders, they are also worshipers. Directing one’s

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Who Were the ‘Righteous’ in the Psalms,” an archived *Biblical Illustrator* article provided on the CD-ROM in the Summer 2017 *Explore the Bible: Leader Pack*.

PSALM 146:1

¹ Hallelujah! My soul,
praise the LORD.

heart and mind to worship God while simultaneously directing others to worship can be challenging. Worship leaders are characteristically mature, committed believers, but because they are human they can struggle with the same spiritual difficulties other worshipers face. It is not surprising, then, that the psalmist paused to command his own soul to give praise to God. He did not want to direct others to do what he was not doing.

PSALM 146:2

² I will praise the LORD all my life; I will sing to my God as long as I live.

VERSE 2

Next the psalmist stated that he would indeed praise the Lord. Just as brides and grooms vow to be faithful “til death do us part,” the psalmist vowed to praise God **all my life ... as long as I live**. Promising to do something faithfully for the rest of our lives is a serious matter. We don’t know what will happen decades from now. Circumstances change. Our thinking changes. Difficulties and temptations arise that shake our faith. Therefore, a lifelong promise is a major commitment. To keep the promise inevitably we will have to be faithful when we do not feel like being faithful. God is worthy of a lifelong commitment to worship Him.

When the psalmist wrote *as long as I live*, he possibly had in mind only his earthly life. However, the Bible teaches that people who know and trust God will continue to live after our bodies die. After death, God’s people continue to worship. The apostle John pictured them around God’s throne offering praise to Him (Rev. 5:11-13). The psalmist also declared that he intended to **sing to ... God** for the rest of his life. As the decades pass, our voices change and become weaker. Still, the psalmist committed to use his voice—strong or weak, beautiful or shrill—to praise the Lord.

THE WARNING (PS. 146:3-4)

VERSE 3

The word **nobles** occurs in the Book of Psalms several times. Psalms uses the word consistently to emphasize that people who possess rank are subordinate to God’s will and power. Psalm 47:8-9 is an exalted statement of God’s reign over the nations, and nobles appear as mere members of His congregation. Psalm 113:7-8 states that God can set the poor and needy among the nobles if He wishes. Psalm 107:38-41 promises that God can enrich the poor and displace the nobles who dare to impede His will. Consequently, Psalm 118:9 states plainly, “It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in nobles.”

Psalm 146 commands God’s people not to **trust** in nobles. The issue of trust is central in the Bible. The original sin can be identified as misplaced trust. Eve did not trust that God had their best interest in mind when He commanded Eve and Adam to abstain from eating one kind of fruit (Gen. 3:1-6). She trusted the serpent’s word more than God’s. The issue of trust remains central for God’s people. Do we trust nobles (people in leadership) or God? What do we believe people need most—government’s help, education’s help, financial help, or God’s help?

The psalmist exhorted worshipers and readers not to trust in nobles or in any **son of man**. Why are men not worthy of our trust? They **cannot save**.

PSALM 146:3

³ Do not trust in nobles, in a son of man, who cannot save.

Both Psalms 60:11 and 108:12 declare, “human help is worthless.” In contrast, Psalm 3:8 states, “Salvation belongs to the LORD.” Therefore, the testimony of all those who trust God is, “I am at rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him” (Ps. 62:1).

VERSE 4

The psalmist offered another compelling reason not to trust in human leaders. They die, and their *plans die* with them. God’s people should refuse to place their hope in political leaders—not because they are more wicked than other people, but because they are just like other people. They will die. The psalmist referred to death in terms that echo the introduction of death in Genesis. The first man lived when God breathed into him the breath of life (Gen. 2:7), and the psalmist described death as *his breath leaves him*. Part of God’s original judgment for sin was that humanity would die and “return unto the ground” (Gen. 3:19). The psalmist also wrote that when a man dies he *returns to the ground*. Literally, it reads “his ground,” perhaps to emphasize the earthbound status of nobles.

The writer of Ecclesiastes also affirmed the transience of leaders and their plans. He was a ruler himself, yet he lamented that he would leave all he owned to someone after him who did not work for it. Those after him would rule, and he would not even be remembered (Eccl. 2:16-21). Hence, it is folly to trust in a son of man, even if he is a noble. Failing to trust in God will lead to disappointment and even ruin.

(In PSG, p. 96) **Why are people tempted to put their trust in human leaders instead of in God? What are the dangers of trusting in another person for one’s security and well-being?**

THE WORTHY ONE (PS. 146:5-9)

VERSE 5

The Book of Psalms begins with a beatitude, a saying that starts with “happy is the one who ...” (Ps. 1:1). This verse contains the final beatitude in Psalms. Here, the psalmist proclaims that happiness, or blessing, comes to those who look to God. *The God of Jacob* is a common Old Testament title that means “the God of Israel,” since the name of the patriarch Jacob was changed to Israel. Instead of trusting in human nobles (v. 3), the ones who are happy look are those who look to God for *help* and *hope*.

VERSES 6-7

The psalmist declared why he looked to God for help and hope. He described God’s attributes and activities that make Him worthy of praise and worthy of trust. Verses 6-9 comprise the largest section of this psalm, in keeping with the common pattern of praise psalms.

PSALM 146:4

⁴ When his breath leaves him, he returns to the ground; on that day his plans die.

PSALM 146:5

⁵ Happy is the one whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God,

PSALM 146:6-7

⁶ the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and everything in them. He remains faithful forever, ⁷ executing justice for the exploited and giving food to the hungry. The LORD frees prisoners.

The psalmist started with God's work at the beginning of creation. He made **heaven and earth**, the same two words that describe the totality of creation in Genesis 1:1. **Remains faithful** can be rendered "keeps faith" or "keeps truth," and God does so **forever**. Thus, verse 6 starts at the beginning and ends in eternity.

Verse 7 begins with the same Hebrew verb that is at the beginning of verse 6. God made the world and He makes **justice**. He did not create the natural order and then walk away from it. God is not passive; He is active. He continues to be involved and in charge of His world. Still, sometimes there seems to be a great distance between God's creation in the past and His help in the present. Verses 7-9 serve to bridge that distance.

Sinful humanity exploits the weak. God does not; He executes **justice for the exploited**. The Old Testament emphasizes God's justice and God's requirement that His people work for justice. Deuteronomy, for example, says the Lord is "the great, mighty, and awe-inspiring God, showing no partiality and taking no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the resident alien, giving him food and clothing" (10:17-18). The Lord proved that He gives **food to the hungry** when He provided for His people in the wilderness. All our food comes from Him, so we follow Jesus' Model Prayer and thank God for "our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11).

The Old Testament also demonstrates that the Lord **frees prisoners**. He freed His people from slavery in Egypt. He freed Daniel from the lion's den and His people from exile. The New Testament records that God miraculously freed the apostle Peter from prison (Acts 12:1-11).

VERSES 8-9

God **opens the eyes of the blind** physically and spiritually. The reference to renewed sight may continue the thought of verse 7, referring to bringing prisoners out of the darkness of the pit and back into the light. Jesus demonstrated God's ability to give physical sight to the blind (see John 9:1-11). God also opens our spiritual eyes so we can see His truth (Ps. 119:18). The word **oppressed** refers to being bowed down. Many circumstances in life beat us down, but God cares for us and lifts us up again. Psalm 147:3 says He "heals the brokenhearted."

Why does God act for our good in so many ways? The final statement in verse 8 declares that He **loves** us. He chose Israel because of His love (Deut. 7:7-8). He chose us to be saved because of His love (Eph. 1:4-5). He loves all the people in the world (John 3:16). The reference to God's love for **the righteous** does not mean that God loves people only when they do righteous deeds. *The righteous* is a reference to His people, and we are His people only by His grace, not by our own righteousness. In fact, "all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment" (Isa. 64:6). We are made righteous in God's sight only by His work in us.

Verse 9 echoes Deuteronomy 10:18, which mentions the same three categories of people: **resident aliens** and **the fatherless and the widow**. Those three groups were the weakest and most vulnerable in society. *Resident aliens* had no allotment of land to farm and often no family to

PSALM 146:8-9

⁸ The LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD raises up those who are oppressed. The LORD loves the righteous. ⁹ The LORD protects resident aliens and helps the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

support them. *The fatherless and the widow* were also without immediate support in the absence of a male head of the family. The passage in Deuteronomy states that God executes justice and gives food to such people who lived on the margins of society. The psalmist wrote that God **protects** and **helps** them. God takes care of the weak. In His law God commanded His people to do the same (Ex. 22:21-22; Deut. 24:17).

Make a list of all the actions God takes as stated in verses 5-9. How does that list affect the way you praise God? How should it affect the praise of all God's people?

THE REALITY (PS. 146:10)

VERSE 10

In contrast with human kings who rule and die, **the LORD reigns forever and for all generations**. These two ways of stating this truth emphasize that God's reign will never end. One day the kingdoms of the earth will become one kingdom under the rule of the Messiah, "and he will reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Instead of waiting for our favorite king to arise or return to the throne, the One who is on the throne forever should be our favorite.

God's people are addressed as **Zion**, a reference to their capital city. The people may have longed for a king like David to rule again in Zion, but God was already reigning there, and they should have been praising Him. The psalm concludes as it began, with an exhortation to praise the Lord. Surely those who hear or read the contents of this psalm would be more eager to worship the God described in these verses.

The psalmist used ten verbs in four verses to express the awesome works of God that make Him worthy of worship and trust from all people. He does so many things that are beyond the ability or priorities of human nobles or politicians. Paradoxically, He accomplishes some of these things through human leaders, but only those who are willing to submit to God and serve His agenda.

(In PSG, p. 99) **Can you envision the time when no earthly kingdoms exist, when God is the only King? How does that truth motivate you to worship and trust God?**

PSALM 146:10

¹⁰ The LORD reigns forever; Zion, your God reigns for all generations. Hallelujah!

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ICEBREAKER: In advance, copy the following phrases on cards, one phrase per card. (“Executes justice” is one phrase.) You will need one card for every anticipated attendee.

Executes justice / For the exploited	Gives food / To the hungry
Frees / Prisoners	Opens the Eyes / Of the Blind
Raises up / Those who are oppressed	Loves / The righteous
Protects / Foreigners	Helps / The fatherless and the widow
Frustrates / The ways of the wicked	

As group members arrive, give each person one of the cards you’ve prepared. Invite group members to open their Bibles to Psalm 146:7-9. Explain that they are to find a match to the other half of their phrase with someone else in the room. Once everyone has found his or her match, instruct group members to arrange themselves according to the order in the verses. When everyone is in place, read Psalm 146:5-10 as a choral reading. When you get to verse 7, say, “The Lord ...” and call for the first pair to say their part of the verse in unison. Repeat for each phrase in verses 7-9.

TRANSITION: Point out that since Psalm 146 is a hymn, it is appropriate for us to read it like a hymn. Ask: *Based on the section we read aloud, how would you complete this sentence: “This is a hymn about God’s _____”?* If no one says “faithfulness,” point out the title of this session.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a group member to read aloud Psalm 146:1-2. Then direct each person to discuss with a partner the one word that would describe the psalmist’s attitude toward praising God in these two verses. Go around the group and invite each pair to say their word.

EXPLAIN: “Hallelujah” is a transliteration of a Hebrew word that literally means “Praise Yahweh.” Psalm 146 is the first of the final five psalms in the book, all of which begin and end with “Hallelujah.” Reference **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*) to show that Psalm 146 is part of Book V of the Book of Psalms.

HIGHLIGHT: *The psalmist is determined to praise the Lord with his soul* (v. 1). Discuss what it means to praise God with more than just your lips.

EMPHASIZE: *Obviously, none of us have lived out our entire lives yet, and we don’t know the future. But the decision to praise the Lord is not dependent on present or future circumstances. The psalmist made the declaration without knowing what his future held.*

ASK: *What are some of the challenges of praising the Lord all your life? From the PSG: In what ways does God show Himself faithful to believers today? What are some appropriate ways of declaring God’s faithfulness to us? (PSG, p. 95)*

READ: Have someone read aloud Psalm 146:3-4. Direct the group to listen for the contrast between the first two verses of the psalm and the next two.

HIGHLIGHT: *When the psalmist warns us not to trust in man, we are led to think about God, who can save. When he wrote about man being mortal and finite, we can't help but to contrast him to the immortal, infinite God.*

ASK: *Why are people tempted to put their trust in human leaders instead of in God? What are the dangers of trusting in another person for one's security and well-being?* (PSG, p. 96)

TRANSITION: *The psalmist not only warns us against trusting in people, he also gives us several reasons God alone is worthy of our trust.*

READ: Direct a volunteer to read Psalm 146:5-9. Since you've already read verses 7-9 as a choral reading, encourage everyone to listen for additional ways God proves Himself faithful.

GUIDE: Draw attention to the paragraph in Understand the Context (PSG, pp. 93-94) about God's transcendence and His immanence. Discuss how verses 5-9 show how God is both above us and with us. Use **Pack Item 8** (Poster: *God in the Psalms*) and highlight God as Creator, Protector, and King.

REMIND: *When we looked at verses 1-2, we discussed how the psalmist declared his intention to praise God even when he didn't know what the future held. As you look at verses 7-9, which of these circumstances are positive, and which are undesirable?*

MINI-LECTURE: Read the nine areas of God's faithfulness on page 97 of the PSG. Then explain: *Of all the different people described in these verses, only the righteous and the wicked are what anyone could choose to be. Yet, God shows Himself faithful to every group described in this passage. He is even faithful to the wicked, because He has already promised that wicked ways lead to perishing (Ps. 1:6). When God frustrates the wicked, He is being faithful to His own Word.*

ASK: *In what circumstances is God's faithfulness most treasured: in times of prosperity or in times of despair? Explain.* (PSG, p. 98)

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud verse 10. Point out that the psalmist ends the same way he begins, with "Hallelujah."

GUIDE: Use the information under Verse 10 (PSG, pp. 98-99) to discuss how this verse serves as another reminder of God's faithfulness.

ASK: *How can believers show that they belong to God's kingdom? What responsibilities come with being part of God's eternal kingdom?* (PSG, p. 99)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DISCUSS: Encourage everyone to scan Psalms 146–150, and note that all five psalms begin and end with praising God. Ask: *What can we learn from this? How would it make a difference in your day if you began and ended each day with praising God?*

CHALLENGE: Focus attention on the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 100): *Discuss with your Bible study group ways of warning others who place their trust in other people instead of in God. How can you approach them in a loving and honest way? What can your group do to help others place their full trust in Christ?*

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking that believers would place their trust in God, who alone can save.



PRACTICE

- Send a message to the group that includes this session's memory verse (Ps. 146:6) as a reminder that God can be trusted in every circumstance.
- Contact those who weren't present for this week's session. Ask for their permission to share prayer requests with others in the group.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

As an alternative to the Focus Attention activity, arrange the pre-made cards on a table. As group members arrive, direct them to play a game of matching the correct phrases according to Psalm 146:7-9.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the discussion of Psalm 146:3, search the Internet for famous broken promises. Discuss why we tend to remember the promises people break more than we remember the ones they keep.
- To complement your study of Psalm 146:7, use the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 98) to explore the phrase "executing justice" more fully.
- To provide context and continuity for this entire unit of study, compare Psalm 146:9 to Psalm 1 (Session 1) and discuss how the plans of the wicked are frustrated.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the challenge, encourage the group to review the different classes of disadvantaged people mentioned in Psalm 146:7-9. Discuss ways your Bible study group can minister to some of the groups listed there.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Sing or play a recording of the hymn "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," by Thomas O. Chisholm. Point out that the first verse emphasizes God's character, the second His creation, and the third His salvation. Conclude your prayer time by singing the chorus together.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE CONFESSION

The realization of sin should move us to confession and repentance.

PSALM 51:1-17

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 51:10

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 51; 2 Samuel 11–12; First Thoughts (p. 104); and Understand the Context (pp. 104–105). Reflect on how unconfessed sin has disrupted your relationship with God or with other people in the past. Ask the Lord to reveal any areas of unconfessed sin to you.
- **STUDY** Psalm 51:1-17, using Explore the Text (pp. 105-109). Use an online Bible study tool such as *BlueLetterBible.org* to grasp the shades of meaning between the different words for sin and forgiveness used in verses 10-13. Pause and pray for your group, understanding that a session on dealing with sin could (and should) impact your group. Consult the *Explore the Bible Adult Commentary* (available in print and digital format from *LifeWay.com*) for additional insight.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas in Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 110-111), More Ideas (p. 112), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and online at *Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible*.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (*LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers; and A variety of household cleaners for the Focus Attention activity (p. 112). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (Poster: *Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 4** (Time Line: *Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 6** (Poster: *The Spirit in Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Salvation (Repentance)

Repentance is a genuine turning from sin toward God.

FIRST THOUGHTS

A package arrived at a church one day that included an old Bible and a simple note. The note told about a couple who had visited the area some 40 years prior and attended an English class hosted by the church. The man had seen some Bibles sitting in a corner and decided to take one. He packed the Bible when he returned to his home country. In the note, the man apologized for taking the Bible, sharing that he became overwhelmed with guilt every time he saw the Bible. He returned it with the hope that the Bible would find its rightful home again. The toll of 40 years of guilt had grown too heavy to bear, and he had to act.

(In PSG, p. 103) **How does guilt move a person to act? Can guilt be both good and bad? Explain.**

God has given every human a sense of right and wrong. The apostle Paul, referring to people who don't know Christ, said of them, "The law is written on their hearts" (Rom. 2:15). All people have some moral sense of right and wrong because all people are made in God's image. God has also given us an infallible guide to right and wrong in His Word, the Bible. God's Word not only tells us what is right and wrong, it also instructs us about what to do with our guilt.

BIBLE SKILL

Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to Bible verses.

Focus on Psalm 51:1-2. Read the verses aloud several times. Each time, emphasize different words or phrases as you read. For example, in one reading, emphasize each word for sin. Then read the verse again, emphasizing all the verbs. Take note of your thoughts and feelings. What feelings were evoked by the different words and phrases as you emphasized them?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 51

The superscription of Psalm 51 states that David wrote the psalm after the prophet Nathan confronted him about committing adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11-12). In this psalm David expressed deep regret for his sin and sought God's forgiveness and cleansing. Hence, Psalm 51 is classified as a penitential psalm.

By the time David became king, he was already famous. He had slain a lion and a bear, the Philistine champion Goliath, and thousands of Philistines. After David became king, he continued his military exploits by leading his army into battle against Philistia, Moab, Aram, Edom, and Ammon. He extended the borders of Israel by a stunning string of victories on the battlefield.

In spite of David's history of fighting with his men, 2 Samuel 11:1 says that when spring arrived David sent the army into battle, but he remained in Jerusalem. That was a fundamental shift in David's reign. David may have thought everything in the kingdom, and everyone, belonged to him. It was easy for him to think that way on the night when he was on the roof of the palace and saw Bathsheba bathing. David sent messengers to escort

her into his presence. Why would Bathsheba, a married woman, go to him? David was the king.

When Bathsheba became pregnant, David arranged for her soldier husband to be brought home from battle to be with his wife so it would appear that the child was his, not David's. However, Bathsheba's husband was so loyal to David and his fellow soldiers that he slept outside instead of sleeping with his wife. So David sent him back to the battle and arranged for him to be killed to cover up the sin David had committed.

God revealed to His prophet Nathan everything David had done, and Nathan confronted the king. David saw that he had not gotten away with anything; God had seen everything. David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD," and Nathan said in response, "The LORD has taken away your sin" (2 Sam. 12:13).

David confessed and God forgave, but David still experienced multiple consequences for his sin. The child Bathsheba bore to him died, David experienced treachery in his own family, and God announced that those events were His judgment because of David's sin. The Book of Second Samuel tells us what happened in David's life because of his sin. Psalm 51 tells us what happened in his heart.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GUILTY AS CHARGED (PS. 51:1-5)

VERSE 1

David approached God on the basis of God's mercy and compassion. He referred to God's mercy three times using three different terms—**gracious**, **faithful love**, and **compassion**. Sinners cannot come to God on the basis of His justice. If God gave us justice, we would be separated from Him forever.

David knew God's law, so he knew he was guilty of sin. He also knew that God had said in His law, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (Ex. 33:19). In Psalm 51 David was saying, "Be gracious to me, God."

Just as David emphasized the Lord's mercy by using three terms to describe it, he also emphasized his sin by using three terms for sin in the first two verses. Each of the terms expresses a different reason why sin is so awful. First, **•rebellion** appears in verse 1. This Hebrew word is often translated "transgression." It means to cross a boundary God has established. God's law is His boundary.

VERSE 2

Next, David referred to his sin as **guilt**. Sometimes translated "iniquity," this term refers to moral perversion or twistedness. He also used the word **•sin**, which means "to fall short" or "to miss the mark," like an arrow falling short of a target. Sin falls short of God's mark, but it also fails to hit the pleasure at which it is aiming. It always disappoints.

When David referred to his sin with three different terms, it was as if he was stacking up the evidence against himself to demonstrate how guilty

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "David's Desire—A Clean Heart" in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 51:1

¹ Be gracious to me, God, according to your faithful love; according to your abundant compassion, blot out my rebellion.

PSALM 51:2

² Completely wash away my guilt and cleanse me from my sin.

he was. Many people do the opposite. They use morally neutral vocabulary to justify sin. They call rebellion against God a lifestyle choice. They call wickedness a weakness. Sin has become sickness. Instead of calling illicit sex “adultery,” people say they have a fling or play the field. David emphatically admitted *rebellion ... guilt ... sin*.

Just as David multiplied the references to his sin, he multiplied requests for forgiveness. He asked God to “be gracious” and “blot out” his rebellion (v. 1). He also asked God to **wash away** his guilt and **cleanse** his sin.

PSALM 51:3

³ For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me.

VERSE 3

For a second time David used the words **rebellion** and **sin**. His sin was always in his mind’s eye—**always before me**. When he woke in the night, he remembered his adultery. When he saw a soldier, he thought about the loyal soldier he had murdered. When he heard a baby cry, it stabbed him in the heart to remember that Bathsheba’s baby had died.

The untold story about sin is the pain and regret it causes. Western culture glamorizes sin and hides its hideous consequences. After committing sin, so many people have confessed that they had thought they could do it and forget about it. Instead, afterward they experienced regret, misery, and guilt. Like David, their sin was always before them.

PSALM 51:4

⁴ Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight. So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge.

VERSE 4

Sin also affects our relationship with God. David wrote to God, **Against you—you alone—I have sinned**. Certainly David sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, and their families. But ultimately all sin is against God because sin is sin only because God says it is sin. To a court, murder is a crime, but to God it is a sin. It is sin because it is rebellion against His Word, an affront to His holiness, and rebellion against His lordship.

David also declared that he deserved God’s judgment. He acknowledged that God was **right** in finding him guilty of sin. He also stated that God was **blameless**. God is always blameless, but when we sin, it is especially important to remember it lest we accuse God of being too harsh in His judgment. We are guilty, and He is not.

PSALM 51:5

⁵ Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.

VERSE 5

When David wrote that he was guilty before birth and **sinful when my mother conceived me**, he was confessing that there had never been a time when he had not been a sinner. He had been born with sinful inclinations. All people are born with such inclinations inherited from our parents and ultimately from the first sinners, Adam and Eve. Ephesians 2:3 says that we are “by nature children under wrath.”

David’s sin caused painful tragedies to enter his life, but David’s sin also revealed to him the condition of his own soul. He became painfully aware that he had strayed from God, and he wanted to return to fellowship with Him. A lot of people feel estranged from God and desperately desire to know Him and to relate to Him rightly. To do so, we begin by facing our sin and confessing it to God.

(In PSG, p. 106) **What are some ways people sugarcoat or rationalize sin to deal with their guilt? Why is it easier to point out the sin in others than to deal with our own sin?**

PLEA FOR CLEANSING (PS. 51:6-13)

VERSE 6

Some people have the mistaken idea that the Old Testament teaches a legalistic religion of mere compliance to rules. To the contrary, the old covenant involved the condition of the heart. David knew that and said to God, ***you desire integrity in the inner self***. Unfortunately, we have spoiled what God desires. We are sinful in our inner selves. However, God supplies what we cannot. He teaches ***wisdom deep within***. On his own, David did not have the wisdom, or moral discernment, to avoid doing wrong. David prayed that God in His grace would give such wisdom to him. David was looking to God for restoration after his sin. We find such restoration only in Him.

VERSE 7

David also requested purity from God. ***Hyssop*** was a small plant often used as a brush. God had prescribed hyssop to be used to sprinkle blood during sacrificial rituals (Ex. 12:22; Heb. 9:19). So, when David wrote, ***purify me with hyssop***, he was asking God to allow atonement to be made for his sin. Sprinkling blood with hyssop was also a symbol that cleansing had occurred. Leviticus says that when someone had been healed of a skin disease a priest sprinkled blood with hyssop to symbolize cleansing (Lev. 14:1-7). Numbers says that those who touched a dead body were unclean. When they returned to cleanness, their cleansing was symbolized by sprinkling water on them with a branch of hyssop (Num. 19:16-19). David was confessing that he was unclean because of sin, and he was asking God to make him pure again.

What David requested God has provided for us in the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Jesus took our place and died the death we deserved because of our sin. When we put our faith in Him as Savior, the blood of His sacrifice is sprinkled over our sin. We also have the ability to live pure lives because of His presence in us. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." When we confess, God forgives and cleanses.

VERSE 8

David also asked God to give him ***joy and gladness***. People often commit sin because they think it will bring them happiness. It does not. David's sin had brought sorrow. As David suffered the consequences of his sin, he prayed that God would make him happy again.

David's reference to ***the bones you have crushed*** probably means that he had been experiencing negative physical symptoms because of

PSALM 51:6

⁶ Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within.

PSALM 51:7

⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

PSALM 51:8

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice.

his sin. In Psalm 32, David wrote that when he sinned and kept silent about it his “bones became brittle” and his “strength was drained” (vv. 3-4). Sin harms our health. Sin and guilt can lead to physical symptoms like sleeplessness, increased blood pressure, overeating or under-eating, and others. When God forgives and cleanses, He renews our strength and gives us *joy and gladness*.

PSALM 51:9-10

⁹ Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt.

¹⁰ God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

VERSES 9-10

David also referred to God’s forgiveness as blotting out all his guilt. When I was in elementary school, teachers wrote on the blackboard with chalk and erased their writing during the day with an eraser. Sometimes the eraser was covered in chalk and would not clean the board well. But at the end of each day the teacher would ask one of the students to clean the blackboard with a wet sponge. He or she would wipe all the chalk off the board until it was completely clean again. That’s what God does with our sin. He wipes it away so it is gone forever, blotted out of our lives.

In verse 10 David prayed similarly: **God, create a clean heart for me.** *Create* translates a Hebrew term that is used in the Old Testament only to refer to God’s creative work. David was asking for a new nature—a *clean heart* and **a steadfast spirit**. Only God can do that.

PSALM 51:11-13

¹¹ Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit. ¹³ Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you.

VERSES 11-13

When David prayed, **do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me**, he was stating that he wanted fellowship with God. He did not fear that God would abandon him forever. He feared that his sin would alienate him from God’s presence and power. We cannot resist temptation without God’s help (1 Cor. 10:13). At this point David knew well his weakness, and he prayed that he would not lose God’s help.

David did not pray that God would restore his salvation, since he never lost it. Instead he prayed, **restore the joy of your salvation to me**. David had a relationship with God by grace through faith. However, David’s sin had robbed him of the joy of his relationship with God, so he asked God to restore it. David also prayed for **a willing spirit**. The word translated *willing* is the same word translated “nobles” in Psalm 146:3. In addition to referring to noble rank it refers to noble or generous character. In Psalm 51 it likely refers to a spirit that will maintain commitment to God. David had a noble position; he wanted a noble spirit too.

One result of God’s forgiveness of his rebellion would be that David would **teach the rebellious** God’s ways. He could speak confidently of God’s grace because he had experienced it. After we experience God’s forgiveness, He uses us to bear witness to His salvation.

(In PSG, p. 108) **How would you describe a forgiven heart? What actions are required for a person to have a pure heart?**

DELIVERANCE THROUGH BROKENNESS (PS. 51:14-17)

VERSES 14-15

David repeated his plea for God to forgive him, this time praying, **save me from the guilt of bloodshed**. Here he introduced a new consequence of God's forgiveness—**my tongue will sing of your righteousness** and **my mouth will declare your praise**. It is possible, even common, for someone to gather with God's people and sing words of praise to God, but to do so merely as a religious ritual. The words of praise are meaningless because the singer is still in sin. How different is our worship after we have sought and received God's forgiveness and cleansing! Our words of praise and thanks are heartfelt and enthusiastic. God has opened our lips.

VERSES 16-17

Many people who have behaved immorally attend church and afterward say they feel better. Yet their behavior does not change. Even worse, some people have the idea that religious activity somehow counterbalances or compensates for disobeying God. It does not.

David was not against religious rituals. He offered sacrifices and led Israel to bring the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6:1-19). In this psalm he wrote of hyssop, the plant used in religious cleansing rituals. But David knew that God does not want mere ritual without heartfelt sorrow over sin, confession to God, and renewed obedience. He wrote plainly: **You do not want a sacrifice** and **you are not pleased with a burnt offering**. God established the sacrificial system, so it was good. But the Bible makes it clear that rituals were never meant to be performed independent of sincere confession and repentance (Ps. 40:6; Jer. 7:3-34; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-24). Further, all the sacrifices of the old covenant prepared for Jesus' perfect, once-for-all sacrifice for sins on the cross (Heb. 9:9-10:14).

David wrote that God is pleased with **a broken and humbled heart**. We have no grounds for pride in the presence of God. David's heart was broken over his sin. Such brokenness drives us to confess and repent.

(In PSG, p. 109) **How are remorse and repentance related? How are they different? Can you have one without the other? Explain.**

PSALM 51:14-15

¹⁴ Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵ Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

PSALM 51:16-17

¹⁶ You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering. ¹⁷ The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

INTRODUCE: Display several different cleaning products or supplies. Look for a variety of products that are intended for different kinds of cleaning, such as detergent for clothes, dish soap for dishes, polish for furniture, and so forth. Discuss the differences between each of them. Explain: *Different products treat stains in different ways. Some remove the stain. Others try to hide the stain. Some air fresheners will attempt to overpower an odor with a more pleasant smell. But we all know that if we want to get rid of an odor, the first thing to do is to get rid of the thing that is causing the odor.*

TRANSITION: Call attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*), and point out: *Psalm 51 is different from any psalm we've studied so far in this unit. It is one of eight penitential psalms, meaning it is an expression of repentance and a plea for God's cleansing from sin. Explain that this psalm, attributed to David, was written in response to David's greatest moral failure.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

INTRODUCE: Use the information under Verse 1 in the PSG (pp. 104-105) to establish the context for Psalm 51. Use **Pack Item 4** (*Time Line: Psalms*) to review the events that happened around the time of David.

READ: Direct a group member to read aloud Psalm 51:1-5 as the group listens for different words for sin and different terms for cleansing of sin. Write these on the whiteboard or a large sheet of paper.

ASK: *Do you see differences between "sin" and "rebellion"? What about between "blot out" and "wash away"?*

EXPLAIN: *We might be tempted to read these verses and think David was saying his behavior wasn't a sin against Bathsheba or Uriah. But by saying in verse 4 "Against you—you alone—I have sinned," David wasn't saying his sin didn't affect others. He was acknowledging that the ultimate offense was against God Himself.*

ASK: *Why is it important to acknowledge that every sin is ultimately against God? From the PSG: What are some ways people sugarcoat or rationalize sin to deal with their guilt? Why is it easier to point out the sin in others than to deal with our own sin? (PSG, p. 106)*

READ: Call on a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 51:6-13 as the group listens for the specific things David asked of God. As the group calls them out, add the verbs of request to the list.

SUMMARIZE: Use the information under Verses 7-9 in the PSG (pp. 106-107) to note that David asked for both forgiveness and a changed life. He acknowledged what God desired of him (integrity in the inner self).

ASK: *What does a right relationship with God look like? What role does forgiveness play in cultivating our relationship with God? (p. 107)*

EMPHASIZE: Point out that “create” in verse 10 is the same word used in Genesis 1 to describe God’s original act of creation, and that it is used in the Old Testament exclusively to refer to God’s act of creation. No one else can give us a clean heart when we sin. Only God can.

ASK: *How would you describe a forgiven heart? What actions are required for a person to have a pure heart?* (PSG, p. 108)

HIGHLIGHT: Call attention to **Pack Item 6** (*Poster: The Spirit in Psalms*). Discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in both the revealing of sin and the cleansing of sin in our lives.

LOOK UP: Direct one volunteer to locate and read aloud John 16:8, and another to locate and read aloud 1 Corinthians 6:11 to assist in your discussion.

TRANSITION: *Verse 13 begins to show how God redeems our brokenness. David knew he could help other sinners return to God when he was restored. The next section of verses builds on this idea.*

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Psalm 51:14-17 and another person to read aloud 2 Samuel 11:14-17.

DISCUSS: *David made it clear what will and will not please God. Lead the group to discover what pleases God in this passage: a broken spirit and a broken and humbled heart.*

EMPHASIZE: Read the last paragraph of Verses 14-17 in the PSG (p. 109) beginning, “While God no longer requires sacrificial rituals ...” Clarify that the death of Christ on the cross paid for all of a believer’s sins—past, present, and future—but explain: *Nevertheless, God still seeks evidence of our sorrow and brokenness over sin, and until we repent and accept His cleansing for our sin, our relationship with God and our usefulness to Him will be impeded.*

ASK: *How are remorse and repentance related? How are they different? Can you have one without the other? Explain.* (PSG, p. 109)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DIRECT: Refer back to the different strategies for cleaning discussed at the beginning of the session. Emphasize: *The only way to get rid of an odor is to get rid of what causes the odor. And one way to guard against stains is to eliminate those things that cause stains in the first place. For example, you’ll never have to worry about how to clean up a spilled glass of wine if you don’t have wine in the house. Similarly, there are some sins we can avoid simply by removing the temptation to commit them.*

DISCUSS: Encourage the group to discuss their responses to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 110): *Discuss as a group how the fact that everyone is a sinner should impact your group. How can your group help restore those who have been broken by sin? With a spirit of biblical love and humility, consider appropriate ways of confrontation, reconciliation with God and the group, and accountability.*

PRAY: Close in prayer by rereading the entire psalm as a prayer to God. Encourage everyone to ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind any unconfessed sin as you pray.



PRACTICE

- Understand that this session may have caused you to be aware of sinful patterns in your own life. Deal with them. Seek out a trusted friend or counselor with whom you can talk.
- Prayerfully ask the Lord to bring to mind anyone in your group who may need a “Nathan” this week. Ask God for wisdom in how to lovingly confront group members who are struggling with sin. Read James 5:20 several times.
- Follow up with your group members. Encourage them that although this session dealt with the realization of sin leading to repentance, the next session focuses on how God’s complete forgiveness of sin produces gratitude.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace or enhance the Focus Attention activity, use social media to ask: *What is the most helpful or bizarre household cleaning tip you’ve ever heard?* Share answers with group members, and invite them to share their own.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance the study of Psalm 51:1-2, use the Bible Skill activity in the PSG (p. 104). Lead the group to react emotionally to the passage by sharing their thoughts and feelings related to each reading of the verses.
- To enhance your discussion of Psalm 51:10-13, invite group members to share humorous stories of their kids (or kids they know) getting caught doing something they shouldn’t have been doing to emphasize the difference between genuine repentance and sorrow for getting caught.
- To reinforce the teaching from Psalm 51:14-17, emphasize the three evidences of a repentant heart David displayed, using the information in the PSG (p. 109).

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

To supplement the challenge, provide a list of accountability questions for men and women in your group (several samples can be found online). Encourage group members to find accountability partners and to give someone permission to ask the hard questions.

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Play “Psalm 51” from Charlie Peacock’s *West Coast Diaries, Vol. 2*. Alternatively, play or sing the hymn “Nothing But the Blood,” by Robert Lowry, as part of your closing prayer.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE CLEANSING

God's complete forgiveness of those who turn to Him in faith produces gratitude.

PSALM 32:1-11

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 32:11

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 32, First Thoughts (p. 114), and Understand the Context (pp. 114-115). In addition, review Session 10 on Psalm 51. Keep in mind that even though Psalm 32 appears before Psalm 51 in the canonical order of the Psalms, it really can be seen as a sequel to Psalm 51.
- **STUDY** Psalm 32:1-11, using Explore the Text on pages 115-119. Compare and contrast the words used for sin and forgiveness in Psalm 32 and Psalm 51. Consult the *Explore the Bible Commentary* (available in print and digital format at LifeWay.com) for additional insight.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study on pages 120-121 and More Ideas on page 122. Refer to the resources at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible for more ideas. Consider how to bring fresh meaning to this session's memory verse (Ps. 32:11).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploreTheBible).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers. For More Ideas (p. 122): A device to show a YouTube clip of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy from Act V of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; and A can of air freshener. Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Salvation (Justification)

Justification is God's gracious and full acquittal upon principles of His righteousness of all sinners who repent and believe in Christ. Justification brings the believer unto a relationship of peace and favor with God.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Sin leaves us feeling dirty. We may even avoid people who know about our grievous actions. We may become obsessed with the thought that everyone knows. We may try to hide our pain and guilt from others. The one person we can't seem to fool, however, is ourselves—and certainly not God.

(In PSG, p. 112) **To what measures might a person go to regain a sense of being clean? What kinds of things do people turn to in an effort to feel clean again?**

Every one of us commits sin. Most of us know that sin is harmful; we can see the effects all around us. We know that God forgives, but we also need to know that He cleanses. David had experienced God's forgiveness; now it was time for David to feel clean again. God delights in restoring His people, making them clean again. David shared some key insights about the cleansing experienced by those who seek God's forgiveness and who then live in light of that forgiveness with a clean heart.

BIBLE SKILL

Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.

On one side of a vertical line, identify words and phrases in Psalm 32 that describe sin. On the other side, note words and phrases in Psalm 32 that describe what God does with our sin when we confess. Meditate on the words and phrases in both lists, confess all sin, and give thanks and praise to God for His forgiveness.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 32

The superscription of Psalm 32 states that it is a "maskil." The verb form of this word occurs in verse 8 and is translated "I will instruct." A maskil was likely a composition intended to impart wisdom or understanding. Therefore, some refer to Psalm 32 as a didactic, or teaching, psalm. The subject of the psalm is confession and forgiveness, so it is classified as a penitential psalm.

The superscription calls Psalm 32 "of David." Verse 3 refers to a time when the author of the psalm "kept silent" about his sin. Second Samuel 11–12 recounts such a time in David's life. He had committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. As a result of his adultery, Bathsheba gave birth to a child. Until sometime after the child's birth, David kept silent about his sin.

As the months passed, David likely thought that the secret of his sin was safe. Uriah had come home around the time of conception so it was unlikely that people connected the pregnancy to David. Uriah had died in battle, so people had no reason to think that David was responsible for his death. People possibly even lauded David for taking the widow Bathsheba into the palace to care for her.

Then one day the prophet Nathan visited David. He told the king a story about a poor man who owned only one lamb and treated her like

a pet. A rich man with many sheep and cattle stole the poor man's sheep, killed it, and served the meat to a guest. When David heard Nathan's story he was outraged and insisted that the rich man should be punished for his wrongdoing. Nathan then revealed that the story was actually about David. "You are the man!" he said. When David realized that God had revealed his sin to Nathan, he confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan proceeded to announce that God would judge David with suffering because of his sins (2 Sam. 12:1-15).

Psalms 51 and 32 were probably written sometime soon after David's heinous sin. Psalm 32 seems to have been written later than Psalm 51. David had sinned, suffered from guilt, confessed, received God's forgiveness, and reflected on what had happened in him. He wrote Psalm 32 to testify to his experience and to instruct others in the agony of sin and the blessing of forgiveness.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE CONTRAST (PS. 32:1-4)

VERSES 1-2

David contrasted the joy of being forgiven with the weight of living with unconfessed sin. Verses 1-2 are bound together by the use of *how joyful* in both verses. The repetition of *how joyful* emphasizes that the subject the psalmist described in this psalm, forgiveness, truly leads to happiness.

Verses 1 and 2 have four nouns for sin and three verbs describing what God does with sin. The first word for sin is **transgression** (Hebrew *pasha*). Sometimes it is translated "rebellion" (Ps. 51:1). It refers to stepping over a line, transgressing a known standard. Sin is a transgression of God's law. Transgression can be against other people, but ultimately it is against God and the moral law He has established. That is why David prayed in Psalm 51:4, "against you—you alone—I have sinned."

The second word David used to refer to his wrongdoing was **sin**. The Hebrew term translated *sin* (*kata*) refers to missing or falling short of a target. In our relationship with God the target is complete obedience to Him and close fellowship with Him.

The third word for David's wrong is translated **iniquity** (Hebrew *awon*). Synonyms are "corruption" and "crookedness." Sin corrupts the one who sins and twists God's standards.

David's fourth word for sin is **deceit**. Joshua 9:22 refers to the inhabitants of Gibeon deceiving Joshua and Israel by telling them that they were from a far country when in fact they were local to Canaan. Hosea 7:16 describes a bow that looks strong but in fact is not trustworthy, just as Israel's faith in God was not trustworthy. Amos 8:5 refers to dishonest scales—weights that appear to weigh correctly but are inaccurate so the merchant weighing can profit. David had hidden his sin. His cover-up was deceit, attempting to appear innocent when he was not.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read "The Thanksgiving Psalms," in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 32:1-2

¹ How joyful is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! ² How joyful is a person whom the LORD does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit!

The first two verses also state what God does with sin. David referred to God's forgiveness in three ways. First, in verse 1 the verb translated **forgiven** literally means "lifted." In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan referred to the forgiveness of the main character, Christian, in that way. When Christian came to Christ in faith, his burden loosed from his shoulders, fell off his back, tumbled down a hill, fell into a grave, and was never seen again. What Bunyan described happens to all Christians. God lifts our sins from us and no longer remembers them against us (see Isa. 43:25).

Second, in verse 1 David refers to the joy of our sin being **covered**. In the Old Testament this word refers to mountains being covered in the flood (Gen. 7:19-20). The spiritual sense occurs in Nehemiah 4:5 where it appears in a prayer for God to refuse to cover the sins of undeserving people, and it is parallel to "erased." It also occurs in Psalm 85:2 where it is also parallel to the verb "lifted up," or "took away," as here in Psalm 32. Covering sin is a compelling picture of forgiveness. When something is covered, it is hidden from view and no longer considered.

Third, verse 2 says we are happy when God **does not charge** us with sin. The basic idea of the word translated *charge* is to use the mind in some kind of thinking activity. Sometimes the mental activity is planning (Gen. 50:20), and sometimes it is esteeming or making a judgment (Isa. 53:4). When Abram put his faith in God, God judged, or esteemed, Abram as righteous, or "credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). What a blessing to know that when we put our faith in God, He credits us with righteousness. He does not esteem us as sinners because He has lifted our sin from us and covered it.

VERSES 3-4

An old legend relates that a man wanted to climb a mountain but did not know the path. A rattlesnake slithered out of the bushes and told the man he knew the way to the top of the mountain. Coincidentally, said the snake, he wanted to go to the top of the mountain too, and he would show the way to the man if he would only pick him up and carry him to the top. The man protested, "If I pick you up, you'll bite me and I'll die." The rattlesnake assured the man that he had no intention of biting him. He only wanted to get to the top of the mountain. The man finally picked up the rattlesnake and began walking. He listened to the snake's directions and carried him to the top of the mountain. At the end of the journey he thanked the snake for his help. As he was placing him on the ground, the snake bit him. "You promised you would not bite me," said the man, "and now I'm going to die!" The rattlesnake replied, "You have no right to complain. You knew what I was when you picked me up."

Why are we surprised that we suffer when we sin? Sin could say to us, "You knew what I was when you picked me up." People have been suffering from sin without exception since Adam and Eve committed the first sin. David wrote about the suffering he experienced from committing sin and hiding it. **When I kept silent, my bones became brittle.** The word translated *became brittle* refers to becoming old and wearing out. Deuteronomy 8:4

PSALM 32:3-4

³ When I kept silent, my bones became brittle from my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was drained as in the summer's heat. *Selah*

refers to clothes wearing out. Abraham's wife Sarah used this word when she said that she was old and "worn out" (Gen. 18:12). David felt that way after he committed sin and before he confessed and received God's forgiveness. He groaned **all day long**.

David knew God allowed him to suffer. He said to God, **day and night your hand was heavy on me**. David felt God's presence, and the feeling was not pleasant because David knew that his sin had broken his fellowship with God. As Isaiah wrote to Israel, "your iniquities are separating you from your God" (Isa. 59:2). Yet, God did not leave David alone. He placed His hand on him. But when David remembered God's presence, he also remembered his guilt and separation from God, so his **strength was drained**.

David was experiencing what the New Testament calls "godly grief" (2 Cor. 7:10) and the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin (John 16:7-8). People who know and love God are not happy when they sin. Sin brings sorrow, regret, and guilt. Even worse, it breaks our fellowship with God (1 John 1:6-7). Such suffering should prod us to confess and repent so that fellowship with God and His people may be restored.

(In PSG, p. 116) **What are the dangers of refusing to confess or trying to ignore our transgressions? What keeps people from admitting a sin when the impact of doing so can be freeing?**

THE DECISION (PS. 32:5)

VERSE 5

David recorded a decision he made that had radical consequences: **I acknowledged my sin to you**. After Nathan confronted him, he confessed his sin to God. David's situation brings to mind Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. The son left his father and pursued selfish indulgence. His sinful choice did not lead to freedom and happiness; it led to bondage and misery. When he hit bottom, he decided to return to his father (Luke 15:11-32). Similarly, David chose to return to God when he was suffering because of his sin.

David used three verbs to refer to what he did. First, he *acknowledged*. Second, David wrote that he **did not conceal** his sin. He would no longer attempt to hide his wrongdoing. Why try to hide anything from God since He sees and knows everything anyway? Third, David used the word **confess**. He declared his sin to God. In fact, in this verse David used the same three words for his wrong that he had used in verses 1 and 2—**sin**, **iniquity**, and **transgressions**.

As the father of the prodigal son gladly received his son, God responded positively to David's confession. David said to God, **you forgave the guilt of my sin**. God forgives and cleanses when we confess (1 John 1:9). Sometimes people confess and ask for God's forgiveness, but

PSALM 32:5

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not conceal my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*

they still do not feel forgiven. They should believe God’s promise instead of their feelings.

David wrote that he confessed, and the next statement is *you forgave*. When David confessed, God did not delay. God is ready to forgive when we are ready to confess. The word •*Selah* occurs at the end of verse 5. If the term refers to a pause for reflection, perhaps it was placed at this strategic point to call on readers to contemplate slowly what David stated so quickly. After months of emotional, spiritual, and physical suffering, David confessed, was reconciled to God, and the breakthrough was immediate.

When Christians confess sin and God forgives, why do they sometimes not feel forgiven?

THE COUNSEL (PS. 32:6-9)

VERSES 6-7

When people experience the joy of God’s forgiveness, they want others to know the same joy. In Psalm 51, after God forgave and cleansed David, he wrote that he would “teach the rebellious your ways” (v. 13). In Psalm 32, after testifying to God’s forgiveness of his sin, he counsels all people to seek the same cleansing encounter with God. David had kept silent about his sin, and he suffered for it. Then he confessed, and God took away his guilt. Hence, he counsels people to **pray** instead of keeping silent.

David offered his counsel to **everyone who is faithful**. Such people can pray to God and **when great floodwaters come, they will not reach** them. Since the specific meaning is not stated, it is probably best to understand *floodwaters* as a general reference to trials, like the **trouble** in verse 7. David wrote that when he turned to God and received forgiveness, God became his **hiding place** of protection and joy. When storms of adversity blow against us or within us, we can run to God and He will hide us.

David’s prayer for people to call on God **immediately** reminds us that our time is limited. A Jewish legend says that a student asked, “Rabbi, when is the best time to repent?” The rabbi replied, “The best time to repent is the day before you die.” “But rabbi, I don’t know when I will die.” “Then repent today,” the rabbi said, “so you will be ready to die.” We will not be alive on earth forever, and we may not be alive tomorrow, so we should sense an urgency to turn from sin and seek God today. If we do not ask for God’s forgiveness today, the suffering may grow more acute or our sense of urgency for forgiveness will pass, or even worse we may learn to live with our sin and guilt and never experience the joys of forgiveness (Isa. 55:6-7; 2 Cor. 6:2).

PSALM 32:6-7

⁶ Therefore let everyone who is faithful pray to you immediately. When great floodwaters come, they will not reach him. ⁷ You are my hiding place; you protect me from trouble. You surround me with joyful shouts of deliverance. *Selah*

VERSES 8-9

In these verses God speaks to the people who turn to Him. God forgives those who confess, and verse 8 states that God also gives them instruction and guidance. Once God forgives us of past sin, He shows us the path to follow so we may stay in His will and avoid future sin.

When we do not turn to God, He says we become **like a horse or mule, without understanding**. Knowledge about right and happy living comes from God, so when we do not seek Him, we become like dumb animals. One day He will impose His will on those who do not follow Him willingly, as if He is controlling an animal **with bit and bridle**.

Why do Christians delay confession of sin, even when they know it is the only way to live in fellowship with God?

THE CONCLUSION (PS. 32:10-11)

VERSES 10-11

In verse 10 David laid down a divinely inspired principle—the wicked will suffer, **but the one who trusts in the LORD will have faithful love surrounding him**. This is the life of people who have sinned, lived with a guilty conscience, confessed, received God's forgiveness, and now live with a clear conscience. God takes away their guilt (v. 5), protects them (v. 7), guides them (v. 8), and surrounds them with the joy of deliverance (v. 7) and faithful love (v. 10). David does not suggest that such a life is without difficulties, but it is clean, good, and filled with love.

People who experience the blessed life of a clear conscience have abundant reasons to **rejoice**. Hence, David concludes his psalm with an exhortation for the righteous to celebrate. **Righteous ones** refers to people who are reconciled to God and walking in His way. The word translated **upright** also refers to going straight. In the context of Psalm 32, the **righteous ones** who are **upright in heart** are people who have confessed their sin, received God's forgiveness, enjoy God's protection, walk according to God's direction, and joyfully bear witness to the blessed life of being clean before God. Such a life is worth celebrating.

Have you experienced God's forgiveness? In what ways do you celebrate His forgiveness and the new life He provides?

PSALM 32:8-9

⁸ I will instruct you and show you the way to go; with my eye on you, I will give counsel.

⁹ Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding, that must be controlled with bit and bridle or else it will not come near you.

PSALM 32:10-11

¹⁰ Many pains come to the wicked, but the one who trusts in the LORD will have faithful love surrounding him. ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous ones; shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: On a whiteboard or large sheet of paper, write “RE” in large letters. Guide everyone to name as many words as they can that begin with the prefix “RE,” and write them on the board (for example: restore, renew, repair, rebuild, return, refresh, remember, etc.).

DISCUSS: *As you look at the list we’ve made, would you say these are mostly positive words or negative words? What is it about returning something to a previous state that is appealing?*

TRANSITION: *Psalm 32 is about being brought back to a right relationship with God. Chronologically, it follows Psalm 51, which we studied in the last session. In today’s session, we are going to use Psalm 51 to help us understand Psalm 32.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

GUIDE: Direct group members to pair up with the person sitting next to them. Instruct one person in each pair to keep his or her Bible open to Psalm 32, while the other person keeps his or her Bible open to Psalm 51.

READ: Direct a group member to read aloud Psalm 32:1-4 as the group listens for the different words David used for sin. Highlight the first paragraph under Verses 1-2 in the PSG (pp. 114-115) that talks about the four different Hebrew words for sin.

EXPLAIN: Use **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*) to point out that, like Psalm 51, Psalm 32 is a penitential psalm, in which the psalmist pleads to be restored to a right relationship with God.

COMPARE: Direct pairs to work together to answer these questions: *In Psalm 51:3, for what does David express regret? What does he regret in Psalm 32:3?* Call group members back together to discuss their answers.

ASK: The subheading for this part of the session is “The Contrast.” *What are the dangers of refusing to confess or trying to ignore our transgressions? What keeps people from admitting a sin when the impact of doing so can be freeing?* (PSG, p. 116)

READ: Call on someone to read aloud Psalm 32:5, and then lead the group to summarize what “The Decision” referenced in the session subheading is.

ASK: *What are some ways people try to deal with the guilt of sin other than confessing it to the Lord? In what ways have you personally learned the hard way that nothing besides confession will work?*

DISCUSS: *It took quite some time for David to come clean, and even then it was only after Nathan confronted him (see 2 Sam. 12:1-12). Ask: Why does it often take people so long to ask forgiveness?*

COMPARE: Guide the Psalm 51 partner to find verse 13. Say: *After being forgiven of adultery and murder, David made good on the promise that he would teach God’s ways.*

ASK: *What benefits await those who confess their sins to God? Which benefit provides the greatest motivation for confessing?* (PSG, p. 117)

READ: Call on a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 51:6-9, while others listen for the specific counsel David gave to the rebellious.

EMPHASIZE: *The first word of counsel David gave was for people to pray to God when He could be found (v. 6). In other words, pray before it's too late.* Highlight from the PSG (p. 117) that although the Lord is full of mercy and compassion, there is a limit to His patience, according to Romans 2:4; 1 Peter 3:19; and 2 Peter 3:9.

ASK: *What is the second word of counsel, according to Psalm 51:9?*

MINI-LECTURE: *Many of us have probably been captivated by someone's dramatic testimony of sin and forgiveness. You may have a dramatic conversion story yourself. But if we aren't careful, we can find ourselves more interested in the lurid details of the past to the point that we glorify the sin over the forgiveness. In Psalm 32 and Psalm 51, David never brought up the details of his sin. Instead, he remained focused on God's forgiveness.* Supplement your explanation using pages 118-119 and the PSG (p. 118).

ASK: *What principles should we follow when sharing our life experiences with others? How can sharing lessons learned help both the one hearing and the one telling?* (PSG, p. 118)

READ: As a volunteer reads Psalm 32:10-11, guide the rest of the group to consider how David summarized the biblical teachings.

COMPARE: Instruct the partners assigned to Psalm 51 to form one large team, and those assigned to Psalm 32 to form another. Guide the Psalm 32 team to locate phrases from Psalm 32 that support David's assertion in verse 10. Direct the Psalm 51 team to look in Psalm 51 for ways David expressed that God's faithful love surrounded him. Have each team elect a spokesperson and share their findings.

REVIEW: Point out **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*), and lead the group to reflect on how God's roles help us remain grateful to Him. Then ask: *What keeps believers from being grateful for what God has done in their lives? How can believers cultivate a lifestyle of rejoicing?* (PSG, p. 119)

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

RECAP: Read the summary statements under In My Context (PSG, p. 120): *Believers must confess their sins to the Father or face the possibility of becoming spiritually despondent. People can find rest and mercy when they confess their sins to the Father. Believers can encourage others in their spiritual life, teaching others from experience. Believers should respond to God's forgiveness with gratitude and joy.*

SHARE: Invite group members to share their responses to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 120): *Reflect on times when God gave you a clean heart. What lessons did you learn from those experiences? Take time to share with others in your Bible study group, encouraging each other.*

PRAY: Thank God for the forgiveness of sin, and pray for the opportunity to let our testimony encourage others.



PRACTICE

- Based on David’s example, rejoice in your forgiveness this week. Seek ways to express the joy you have because your transgressions have been covered.
- Email group members, encouraging them to seek out opportunities for their testimony to strengthen others.
- Contact those who were absent for this session. Inquire about prayer requests, and invite them to be present for the next session.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To replace the Focus Attention idea, search YouTube for a clip of Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy from Act V of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Explain that this scene shows the effect of unconfessed sin: *Lady Macbeth is driven mad from guilt over the murders she and her husband committed in order for him to become king of Scotland. She imagines bloodstains on her hands that she can’t wash away and ultimately kills herself.* Use this example to introduce the truth that God’s complete forgiveness produces gratitude.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- Beginning with the first session subheading, maintain a running chart on the board or large sheet of paper, following the instructions in the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 115).
- To further illustrate Psalm 51:5, ask the group to think about what they would do if there was an odor coming from their kitchen garbage can. Show a can of air freshener. Ask the group if this would be the most effective way to address the odor. Compare this to what verse 5 says about concealing iniquity.
- To personalize the group study of Psalm 51:7, invite the group to name their favorite hiding places as children. Ask: *Where would you go? What made you want to hide?* Discuss times when “hide and seek” is not a children’s game but an adult’s reaction to pain or fear.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to discuss the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 120): *List ways you can stay sensitive to the Holy Spirit so that you do not become spiritually despondent. What practices do you need to add to your daily routine to put yourself in a position to hear from God?*

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Play “Heaven Came Down,” by David Crowder, as everyone arrives for the group time.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE PROTECTOR

Believers should seek refuge in God because He is the only One who can give them strength to face temptation and evil.

PSALM 141:1-10

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 141:8

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalm 141, First Thoughts (p. 124), and Understand the Context (pp. 124-125). In addition, review **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*) and make note of the imagery throughout Psalm 141.
- **STUDY** Psalm 141:1-10, using Explore the Text on pages 125-129. As you read, consider the progression of David we've seen in the last two sessions: In Psalm 51, David expressed sorrow for sin. In Psalm 32, he expressed joy at forgiveness of sin. Now, in Psalm 141, he will express his resolve not to fall into sin again.
- **PLAN** the group time using the ideas under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 130-131), More Ideas (p. 132), ideas included in *QuickSource*, and ideas online at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to customize the plans according to the needs of your group.
- **GROW** with other group leaders at the Group Ministry blog (LifeWay.com/GroupMinistry).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers; and Several items that illustrate accountability (a heart rate monitor, a bathroom scale, a training schedule for a marathon, a weight loss program, a Bible reading plan). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*); **PACK ITEM 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 13** (*Poster: Psalm 141:8*).



KEY DOCTRINE

Salvation (Sanctification)

Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him.

BIBLE SKILL

Identify the imagery in a verse or passage, and discover what it communicates.

Highlight the different images used in Psalm 141. Note which images are used to describe righteousness and which are used to describe unrighteousness or the results of unrighteousness. Reflect on the images used and how they are similar and different. What does each image teach us about our experiences of temptation and opposition? What do they teach us about the value of righteous living?

FIRST THOUGHTS

One of the most common things runners and cyclists are encouraged to do when training is to get involved in a running or cycling club. The idea is that the group will hold one another accountable for running or riding on the days when someone really doesn't want to go. The group can also serve as a means for improving, especially if you run or ride with a group that is just a little faster than you.

(In PSG, p. 122) **What are the advantages of doing something with a group? How do our relationships impact our behavior?**

King David had his share of bad relationships. He knew all too well the importance of being in the company of others who are seeking to honor God. Instead of partnering with the wicked, he prayed for them because he knew God would judge them. With the time he had left on earth, David prayed that God would help him live a life that honored Him. Psalm 141 gives us a glimpse into the lessons David learned about prayer, dependence on God, and his need for discipline and accountability.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALM 141

Psalm 141 is inscribed with the superscription "a psalm of David." Presumably either David composed it or someone composed it who had in mind a particular time in David's life. Since Psalm 141 is a prayer, if the writer was not David, he had to know not only what happened to David but also what happened within David. He had to know the kind of prayer David uttered at such times. Perhaps the psalmist had such knowledge because he knew David or had read David's other prayers in Psalms or his words in the books of Samuel and Kings. Certainly it is also possible that David himself wrote the psalm.

As for the historical situation, some interpreters place this psalm during the rebellion of David's son Absalom. During that rebellion Absalom garnered so much support that David fled Jerusalem to meet Absalom and his forces in battle outside the city (2 Sam. 15:1-16). During that time David was separated from the sanctuary where he worshiped. Psalm 141:2 implies that he was praying without incense and offering, which would have been available to him if he had been in Jerusalem. Verses 5-6 and 9-10 also mention wicked people who were actively opposing David, which was the case when Absalom's forces attacked David and his men.

Psalm 141 is set among other psalms that share similar themes. For example, 141:1 expresses a plea for God to listen to the psalmist's prayer,

and such a plea is also found in 140:6; 142:1; and 143:1. The request for God to “hurry” and answer prayer “quickly” is found in both 141:1 and 143:7. The psalmists in both 140:4-5 and 141:9 ask God for protection from enemies and their “trap” and “snares.” Psalms 140:2 and 141:5 also both mention the planning and performing of evil things by opposing forces.

Christians have long referred to Psalm 141 as an evening, or vespers, prayer. They have seen the text as a prayer or song for evening because in verse 2 David compares his prayer to “the evening offering.” Hence, James Montgomery Boice referred to Psalm 141 as “a prayer before retiring.”¹ All believers would benefit from ending a day, or every day, with a prayer like this one.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THE PLEA (PS. 141:1-2)

VERSE 1

Appropriately, the first word in the psalmist’s prayer is **LORD**. The psalmist addressed God by name in the same way we begin conversations with other people by calling their names. It is important to remind ourselves that prayer is talking with God. Prayer is not making a speech or calling on an impersonal force. God is a Person, so to talk with Him we address Him as a Person.

God, however, is not a human being like us. The content of the psalmist’s prayer shows that he knew he was talking with God, not man. He was anxious for God to **listen** and **help**. The psalms are full of affirmations that God hears prayers and answers (Pss. 3:4; 6:8-9; 10:17; 17:6; 18:6; 28:6; 34:15). The writer of Psalm 141 surely knew of such affirmations and perhaps wrote some of them. Therefore, when he asked God to *listen*, he was praying in humility and faith, not doubt. Believers can approach God with confidence, knowing that He hears their prayers. The psalmist’s plea for God to listen shows that he knew his conversation with God was as a lesser speaking to a greater, as a child requesting help from an adult.

The psalmist’s request for God to **hurry** may sound strange to some people, but it expresses desperation, not disrespect. Such a prayer is not uncommon in Psalms. In 22:19, the psalmist prayed, “come quickly to help.” Four times psalmists called out to God with the prayer, “hurry to help me” (38:22; 40:13; 70:1; 71:12). Another Hebrew word translated “quickly” is also used in such prayers, as when psalmists prayed, “answer me quickly” (69:17; 102:2; 143:7), or “let your compassion come to us quickly” (79:8).

Do our prayers express urgency? Are we desperate for God’s help and for God Himself? Absence of urgency in prayer may indicate that we are depending on ourselves or other people, not God. Such a lack of dependence on God often results in not praying at all because we feel no need for God’s help.

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Hebrew Prayer Practices” in the Summer 2017 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Available at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 141:1

¹ LORD, I call on you;
hurry to help me. Listen
to my voice when I call
on you.

Ben Patterson is a chaplain at a Christian college. Years ago he experienced acute pain in his lower back. He was forced to lie flat on his back for almost six weeks. He couldn't do anything. He later admitted that it took him two weeks to think to ask his wife for the church directory so he could pray for the people in his church. He confessed that it was sheer boredom and frustration that motivated him to pray. He prayed every day for two to three hours, and he began to enjoy the time of prayer. Toward the end of his convalescence, as he anticipated returning to work, he also anticipated abandoning his prayer times. God convicted him that his prayer life was inadequate, not because of his schedule but because of a lack of dependence on God. He had been praying because he had been weak. As soon as his body was stronger he felt in control again and he did not feel dependent on God. Patterson later wrote, "Oh, the conceit of prayerless activity!"²

Prayerlessness is conceit because it indicates that we think we are capable of running our lives without God. Prayerlessness may be one of our worst sins because it arises from an unstated belief that we are in charge. We are not. We need God and His help, so we pray.

PSALM 141:2

² May my prayer be set before you as incense, the raising of my hands as the evening offering.

VERSE 2

The psalmist voiced his prayer to God in the language of worship. The word translated **set** appears in the Old Testament to refer to preparing a sacrifice on an altar to offer to God (Num. 23:1,29). An **incense** altar was on the west side of the tabernacle and later the temple. God stated that His people were to offer only the kind of incense that was authorized (Ex. 30:9; Lev. 10:1). He also commanded them to burn incense on the altar every morning and evening (Ex. 30:7-8). Revelation 5:8 says that bowls of incense "are the prayers of the saints" (see also Rev. 8:3-4). Hence, it is common to understand the smoke rising from the burning incense as a symbol of the prayers of God's people rising to Him.

The **raising ... of my hands** was also a worship gesture. In this verse the phrase is parallel with **my prayer**, so the reference to raising hands was another reference to the psalmist's prayer. Raising one's hands to God during prayer was a common posture, as was facing the heavens. **The evening offering** is the final worship reference. The psalmist wanted his prayer to be placed before God just as priests placed sacrifices before God.

This verse portrays prayer as an act of worship. It also portrays worship rites as sincere spiritual acts, not merely physical rituals. The essence of worship is the prayerful spirit of the worshiper. In Isaiah 1:10-17, Isaiah's "word of the LORD" mentions worship practices like offering incense and lifting hands in prayer. However, God states that He rejected this worship because the people had "abandoned the LORD" (v. 4). It is possible to follow an order of worship while thinking little or nothing about God. It is also possible for every act in worship to be filled with meaning and power because of the sincere, humble heart of the worshiper. Jesus said "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

(In PSG, p. 124) **Why do people often treat prayer as a last option? What makes some people question whether God hears their prayers?**

THE REQUESTS (PS. 141:3-7)

VERSE 3

The psalmist made a specific request from God. He wanted God to help him avoid sin. First, he asked God to **set up a guard for his mouth**. In the parallel line that follows he repeated the request, asking God to **keep watch at the door** of his lips. The Book of James affirms humanity's ability to tame all kinds of animals but states, "no one can tame the tongue" (3:8). We cannot control our own speech. However, "with God all things are possible" (Matt. 19:26). We may try and fail to cease our gossip, criticism, lying, exaggeration, boasting, or cursing, but nothing is too difficult for God (Jer. 32:17). The psalmist was wise to turn to God for help. Perhaps he had tried and failed to guard his mouth, so he was turning to God for the strength to do what he could not do on his own.

VERSE 4

The psalmist next moved from sin's fruit—the act of sinful speech—to sin's root—the condition of the heart. He asked God to prevent his heart from turning to sin. Jesus taught that sin, including the sins of speech, comes from the heart (Matt. 12:34; 15:18-19). Ultimately, our problem is not our mouths, hands, or eyes, but our hearts. When our hearts are right before God, our behavior will be right.

After asking for help with a specific sin, the psalmist then asked God to help him with all sin. He prayed that God would help him not to commit **any evil thing**. He also implied that other people influenced him when he wrote about performing wickedness **with men who commit sin**. Numerous passages in the Bible warn God's people against being influenced by the ungodly to sin (Ps. 1:1-2; Prov. 1:10-19; 2 Cor. 6:14-17). The apostle Paul expressed it succinctly: "Bad company corrupts good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33).

Jesus taught His followers to pray for deliverance from temptation and for forgiveness for past sins (Matt. 6:12-13). Of course it is best to pray for protection from future sin, avoid committing it, and have no need to ask for forgiveness. That's what the psalmist was doing. God can protect us from sin. He provides the power to obey Him and a way to escape temptation (1 Cor. 10:13).

VERSE 5

God provides His own presence and power to help us overcome temptation. He also provides His people. Hence, the psalmist asked God to use the **righteous one to strike** and **rebuke** in order to deter him from

PSALM 141:3

³ LORD, set up a guard for my mouth; keep watch at the door of my lips.

PSALM 141:4

⁴ Do not let my heart turn to any evil thing or perform wicked acts with men who commit sin. Do not let me feast on their delicacies.

PSALM 141:5

⁵ Let the righteous one strike me—it is an act of faithful love; let him rebuke me—it is oil for my head; let me not refuse it. Even now my prayer is against the evil acts of the wicked.

committing sin. In the Old Testament period God used prophets and priests to guide His people spiritually. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 highlights the importance of having the support of godly companions in our lives. The wisdom teachers taught, “the wounds of a friend are trustworthy” (Prov. 27:6). In the New Testament Jesus founded His church, and the members of His church are to help one another live righteous lives (Matt. 18:15-17; Gal. 6:1-2; Heb. 10:24-25). Believers can hold each other accountable. The psalmist viewed such accountability as **oil for my head**, or a blessing.

PSALM 141:6-7

⁶ When their rulers will be thrown off the sides of a cliff, the people will listen to my words, for they are pleasing.

⁷ As when one plows and breaks up the soil, turning up rocks, so our bones have been scattered at the mouth of Sheol.

VERSES 6-7

In the final words of verse 5 the psalmist wrote that he was praying “against the evil acts of the wicked.” In the next two verses he continued that prayer. He anticipated the suffering of the wicked and specified sinful leaders being **thrown off ... a cliff**. In contrast, he wrote that his own words were **pleasing**, and when sinners suffered for their sin they would be ready to listen to him. It is sad but true that many people are not willing to pay attention to God’s truth and follow His guidance until their sin results in suffering.

On the other hand, sometimes the righteous suffer at the hands of the wicked, and that is what verse 7 seems to describe. The psalmist portrayed such affliction poetically, comparing it to soil that is broken by the plow and scattered bones. •**Sheol** occurs in the Old Testament 65 times, and it is used in two ways. First, sometimes it refers to the place where the ungodly abide after their death. Second, sometimes it refers figuratively to death in general. It is used in the latter sense in verse 7. The reference means that the psalmist and others had suffered to the point of death.

Who are a few people to whom you look to help you live a godly life and avoid temptation?

PSALM 141:8

⁸ But my eyes look to you, LORD, my Lord. I seek refuge in you; do not let me die.

VERSE 8

What should we do when we suffer because of threats from the wicked? Some of God’s people have abandoned their faith when threatened. Others have compromised their lifestyle or their belief in the truth when faithfulness to God became unpopular. When the psalmist faced opposition, he looked to God and trusted Him for protection.

In the midst of difficulties, the psalmist told God, **my eyes look to you**. The writer of Hebrews, who wrote to Christians experiencing suffering, counseled believers to “run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1-2). When we speak to God about our struggles, our gaze is on God Himself while we only glance at our problems. Such a perspective changes

our focus, helps us to trust in God, and reminds us that God is in charge of all circumstances because we are thinking about Him and His greatness.

The psalmist promised God that he would look to Him and seek refuge in Him. In contrast with people who compromise their faith when threatened, the psalmist remained steadfast in his desire to avoid sin. He also promised God that he would continue to trust in Him. He was not indifferent about his survival, though. He prayed, **do not let me die**.

VERSES 9-10

Both Psalm 140 and Psalm 141 mention the **trap** and **snares** of wicked people (140:4-5). Such words are symbolic language that portrays the opposition and persecution faced by the psalmists. Both psalms are Davidic, so it is possible that in both cases David was writing of enemies who opposed him. Absalom certainly set traps for David in that he attempted to kill him and defeat his army in battle (2 Sam. 15–18). Earlier, Saul had tried repeatedly to capture and kill David, seeking to trap him in the wilderness (1 Sam. 18–27). David also battled against numerous foreign foes, all of whom were **evildoers** and did not believe in the one true God (2 Sam. 8:1-14). Because of God's protection, David was victorious over foreign enemies, and he prevailed over both Saul and Absalom. When David prayed, **protect me**, God answered his prayer. God did not give David a life without trials, but He allowed him to survive, rise above trials, and serve God in a way that continues to lead people to faith in Him 3,000 years later.

Verse 10 contains a prayer of imprecation, or a request for God to send His judgment on the wicked. The Book of Psalms contains several such prayers (28:3-5; 58:3-11; 109:1-15). In verse 10, the specific request is that God will **let the wicked fall into their own nets**. This is symbolic language that refers to sinners' suffering from their own sin. In this case, the sinners' intent was to hurt others, but the psalmist's prayer was that their plan would result only in their own suffering. Similar language appears in Proverbs 1:18-19.

A prayer of imprecation does not necessarily arise from vindictive motives. To the contrary, it is asking God to act in accord with His character and promise. He is a righteous Judge who punishes wickedness and rewards righteousness, and He has promised to do so (Ex. 34:6-7; Rom. 2:5-11). Imprecatory prayers demonstrate that it is legitimate for the righteous to expect God to bless them and to judge the wicked.

When you have faced pressures or persecution, did your anxiety increase, or did your prayers and trust in God increase?

PSALM 141:9-10

⁹ Protect me from the trap they have set for me, and from the snares of evildoers. ¹⁰ Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I pass by safely.

1. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 1221.

2. Ben Patterson, "Heart and Soul," *CT Pastors*, Fall 1996, accessed May 13, 2016 <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/1996/fall/6l4130.html>.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

GUIDE: As group members arrive, invite them to talk about what the different objects you brought have in common (see Gather, p. 123). Discuss how all of them relate to helping someone reach a goal—to lose weight, train for a marathon, or spend more time in God’s Word. Invite group members to share goals they have set in their own lives.

DISCUSS: *In your experience, what has made the biggest difference in either your ability or failure to achieve a goal? If no one mentions it, ask: What about accountability? Does it make a difference if you have one or more people helping you track your progress?*

SHARE: We’ve all experienced the advantages of accountability, either with a group or an individual. God has wired us for relationships, and relationships impact our behavior, both in positive and negative ways.

INTRODUCE: Call attention to **Pack Item 2** (*Poster: Types of Psalms*), and point out: *Psalms 141 is characterized as a lament psalm, in which prayers are made to God during a time of distress. Sometimes the distress comes from an outside enemy or a sickness.*

SAY: *As we look at Psalm 141, let’s try to figure out who—or what—caused David’s distress.*

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 141:1-2. Instruct the group to listen for clues as to the psalmist’s emotional state. (Is he peaceful? Distressed? Calm? Anxious?)

GUIDE: Direct attention to **Pack Item 8** (*Poster: God in the Psalms*). Discuss how David compared his prayers to incense and his praise to the evening offering. Use information under Understand the Context (PSG, p. 123) to explain how David had grown in his intimacy with God and understood that he could approach God directly without a priest.

EXPLAIN: *According to Exodus 30:7-8, offerings of incense were made in the morning and evening, and the raising of hands was a common practice in worship. It indicated both obedience and surrender.*

ASK: *Why is an attitude of worship and surrender important when we are asking God to help us?*

GUIDE: Point out the Bible Skill activity (PSG, p. 129). Note that the first image we encounter in Psalm 141 is of a worshiper pleading for God’s help. Ask: *Is this an image of righteousness or unrighteousness? Explain.*

DISCUSS: *Clearly, David was distressed and anxious when he went to God in prayer in this psalm. Why do people often treat prayer as a last option? What makes some people question whether God hears their prayers?* (PSG, p. 124)

READ: Direct someone to read aloud Psalm 141:3-7 as others listen for the two requests David made of God.

EXPLAIN: Using the PSG (p. 125), note that in verse 3, David asked for help with his speech, while in verse 4 he asked for protection from the wicked.

DISCUSS: *How are David's two requests connected? How do our words reveal our associations and relationships? (PSG, p. 125)*

EXPLAIN: Many English translations of the Bible capitalize pronouns when they are used to refer to God. Although Hebrew does not have uppercase and lowercase letters, the fact that in some translations “the righteous one” and “him” in verse 5 are not capitalized suggests the psalmist was relying on another human being to help keep his heart from unrighteous thoughts or actions.

EMPHASIZE: *By the end of verse 5, David has shifted from talking about his own desire for accountability to praying that the wicked would be held accountable for their wickedness.*

GUIDE: Lead the group to continue to note the imagery in this psalm. *What imagery is used in verses 6-7? Is this imagery describing the righteous, the unrighteous, or the results of unrighteousness?*

ASK: *What are the risks involved in refusing to be held accountable by other believers? Is holding one another accountable necessary for spiritual growth and living a righteous life? Explain. (PSG, p. 127)*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 141:8-10, and instruct the others to notice how David shifted back to talking about himself rather than the wicked.

STUDY: Remind the group of the classification of Psalm 141 as a lament and that we are trying to discern from what enemy David sought refuge. Direct attention to the commentary for verse 9 in the PSG (p. 128).

HIGHLIGHT: Direct attention to **Pack Item 13** (*Poster: Psalm 141:8*). Lead the group to repeat verse 8 in unison, and encourage them to commit the verse to memory this week.

ASK: *How does keeping our focus on Jesus help us avoid the traps and dangers found in this world? What makes recognizing Satan's traps so difficult? (PSG, p. 128)*

EMPHASIZE: *The subheading for verses 8-10 is “The Promise.” Where do you see a promise in these verses? Why was David sure that he would be safe while the wicked fell into their own nets, according to verse 10?*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

DISCUSS: *How has today's study helped you see the relationship between seeking God, seeking accountability from others, and seeking protection from enemies? Which of these is easiest for you? Which is most difficult?*

DIRECT: Point out the objects you displayed at the start of the session that symbolized accountability toward a goal. Focus on the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 130): *Review with your Bible study group prayer requests made over the past few weeks. Identify the requests God has answered and how He answered them. Discuss how seeing God's answer to prayers gives you the confidence to approach Him with your needs. Record insights gained from this discussion.*

PRAY: Close in prayer, asking God to help the group remember the three steps outlined in Psalm 141: we can worship God, we can seek wisdom and counsel from others, and we can trust God's protection from our adversaries. Pray for group members as they seek to strengthen their spiritual lives.



PRACTICE

- Send an email encouraging the group to hold one another accountable to the things we say (v. 3) and the thoughts we dwell upon (v. 4).
- Commit to a time of personal worship this week, in which you set your prayers before God like incense and raise your hands as the evening offering (v. 2).
- Send a text message of Psalm 141:8 to group members, reminding them to seek refuge in God.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

To supplement the discussion of accountability, enlist an active runner who has completed a distance race to talk about his or her training program and the benefits of being part of a training group. Direct a volunteer to read Proverbs 27:17 and discuss the “iron sharpens iron” effect of training with a group of people.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- To enhance your discussion of Psalm 141:2, study the instructions for the making of incense found in Exodus 30:34-38. Comment on the emphasis of reserving this sacred incense exclusively for the Lord and how this relates to our prayers being like incense before the Lord.
- To supplement the discussion of Psalm 141:4, research various options for web filters and Internet accountability software that can assist believers in not allowing their hearts to turn to any evil thing. Compare verse 4 to Psalm 101:3.
- As a supplement to the discussion of Psalm 141:5, highlight the Key Doctrine (Sanctification) in the PSG (p. 125), and discuss the role of fellow believers in the sanctification process.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Review the Scripture by reading the bulleted statements under In My Context in the PSG (p. 130). After each sentence, ask the group to identify which verses emphasize that point: *Believers can approach God with confidence, knowing that He hears their prayers. Believers can hold each other accountable for living godly lives. God can be trusted to lead us to live godly lives by helping us keep our focus on Him.*

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

Review the words to “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” by Martin Luther. Reflect on how the first and third stanzas especially relate to verses 8-10.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

THE LONGING

The hope of God's presence serves as encouragement during discouraging times.

PSALM 42:1-11

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 42:8

PREPARE TO LEAD THE GROUP TIME

- **READ** Psalms 42–43, First Thoughts (p. 134), and Understand the Context (pp. 134-135). Understand that even though this session will focus only on Psalm 42, the two psalms were originally seen as one.
- **STUDY** Psalm 42:1-11, using Explore the Text on pages 135-139. As you study, pay careful attention to the response to discouragement you see in these psalms. Keep your group members in mind as you prepare the session. Be aware of issues going on in your group life that may be sources of discouragement or despair.
- **PLAN** the group time using suggestions under Lead Group Bible Study (pp. 140-141). Also refer to *QuickSource* and *Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible* for other ideas. Look for ways to creatively call attention to this session's memory verse (Ps. 42:8).
- **GROW** from expert insights on weekly studies through the Ministry Grid (*MinistryGrid.com/Web/ExploretheBible*).
- **GATHER** the following items: Personal Study Guides; A large sheet of paper or whiteboard and markers; and Materials for the ideas you choose to use under More Ideas (p. 142). Prepare to display: **PACK ITEM 7** (*Chart: Messianic Psalms*); and **PACK ITEM 9** (*Poster: Authorship of the Psalms*).



KEY DOCTRINE

God the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit cultivates Christian character, comforts believers, and seals the believer unto the day of final redemption. His presence in the Christian is the guarantee that God will bring the believer into the fullness of the stature of Christ.

BIBLE SKILL

Memorize a verse and apply it to a real-life situation.

Memorize Psalm 42:5 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Write a few sentences here or in a journal stating how the verse can help you live faithfully and joyfully through a difficult time.

FIRST THOUGHTS

Life has a way of reminding us that we are not always in charge of what happens. We may get a flu shot, take vitamins, and carry hand sanitizer, yet we end up with the flu. We may exercise and watch what we eat, yet we end up with heart disease. We may even be the one who works extra hours to complete a critical project and then gets passed over for that promotion or let go. Life can just be unkind at times.

(In PSG, p. 132) **What kinds of situations might cause a person to think life is unkind or unfair? In what ways do people respond to the unfair or unkind things they encounter in life? What factors contribute to how a person responds?**

The psalmist found life to be unkind at times. Although he longed for God, he could not find God in his pain. There had been a time when he enjoyed God's presence, but it seemed like such a long time ago. Filled with despair, life's circumstances were almost unbearable. He felt as if his ship was adrift as his adversaries crushed his spirit. The psalmist was not alone in his experience. Moses spoke to God about his misery and asked God to kill him (Num. 11:15). When Elijah was afraid and alone, he too asked God to take his life (1 Kings 19:2-4). Jeremiah became so despondent that he wished he had never been born (Jer. 20:14-18). In light of such emotional experiences in the lives of faithful men of God, believers today should not be surprised that people who know and love God battle feelings of despair.

Just as our bodies are imperfect, our emotions are imperfect too, and we sometimes reach our breaking points. We live in a fallen world, no longer perfect as it was originally created. No one is immune from spiritual anguish. Refusing to wallow in self-pity, the psalmist put his hope in God, remembered God's faithfulness, and continued praising the Lord. He discovered that the way out starts by looking up to God.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

PSALMS 42–43

Psalm 42 is the first psalm in Book II of Psalms. The Psalter is divided into five such "books" (Pss. 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150). Bible students have attempted to discover why ancient Jews divided the psalms into books and whether they might have used some organizing principles. Some have suggested that rabbis sought to pattern the Book of Psalms after the five books of the Pentateuch—Genesis through Deuteronomy.

Ultimately, however, we are not sure about the reasoning of the people who put the Book of Psalms together in its current arrangement.

Psalms 42 and 43 naturally complement one another and seem to have been originally one psalm. Psalm 42 consists of two stanzas with identical refrains in verses 5 and 11. Psalm 43 has the same refrain in its final verse, so it seems to be a third stanza of Psalm 42. Perhaps Psalm 43 was composed to accompany Psalm 42 in personal prayer or in worship, so it was placed in the Psalter after Psalm 42 as a third stanza to the prayer. The eventual use of these psalms must have been in public worship, since Psalm 42 has the superscription, “For the choir director.”

Psalms 42 and 43 contain the word “God” 19 times in 16 verses. The word “LORD” occurs only once (42:8). The clear dominance of “God” stands in contrast with Psalms 1–41 in Book I of Psalms, where “LORD” is so prominent. Later in history, the Jews developed the practice of using “LORD” sparingly or not at all out of reverence for the most holy name of God that God Himself revealed to Moses (Ex. 3:14). Perhaps the writer of Psalms 42 and 43 followed the same reasoning.

Psalms 42 and 43 introduce a new pattern that cannot be missed. These two psalms begin a new book and a new theme—spiritual depression. Also, the repetition of “God” emphasizes that the psalmist turned to God when he was depressed.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

THIRSTY (PS. 42:1-4)

VERSE 1

The psalm opens with a simile that expresses a great longing for God—*as a deer that longs for flowing streams*. People living in the ancient Near East knew about the danger of thirst. Longing for water was often a matter of life and death. The word translated *streams* is literally “channels” or “ravines.” In Israel’s wilderness areas such channels are everywhere, but they only rarely contain water. So the opening line of the psalm evokes the picture of an animal wandering through unfamiliar territory, arriving at each new valley with the hope of seeing life-sustaining water.

Life’s difficulties that trouble our spirits have the benefit of creating a desire for God. Such a desire is good because God is the only One who can heal our downcast spirits. The Holy Spirit inspired the psalmist to portray desire for God as thirst for water. Thirst is a powerful analogy. Drinking water is essential, not optional. It is a daily requirement, not occasional. No one is guilty of gluttony in drinking water; doctors encourage us to drink more water for our health. The analogy communicates that we must be in God’s presence constantly to live, to make decisions, to find fulfillment, and to have joy.

Thank God, He satisfies our thirst. Jesus said, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. The one who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him.”

BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

For additional context, read “Deer as Imagery in the Old Testament,” available digitally in the Summer 2017 *Biblical Illustrator for Explore the Bible* at LifeWay.com/BiblicalIllustrator.

PSALM 42:1

¹ As a deer longs for flowing streams, so I long for you, God.

He said this about the Spirit” (John 7:37-39). When we thirst for God, He gives us the powerfully satisfying presence of His Holy Spirit that is like a river of living water.

PSALM 42:2

² I thirst for God, the living God. When can I come and appear before God?

VERSE 2

The psalmist repeated his thirst for God, emphasizing the depth of his longing. The first verse is a prayer, so it is in the second person: “I long for you, God.” In the second verse, the psalmist switched to the third person: ***I thirst for God***. It seems the psalmist stepped out of prayer and began addressing himself or someone else.

When can I come and appear before God? indicates that the psalmist was separated from Jerusalem and corporate worship. We don’t know why the psalmist was separated from Jerusalem. He could have been a nomadic shepherd, or he could have been forced into exile by enemies. Perhaps only people who have experienced great joy in worshiping with God’s people regularly can understand the sad feeling of separation from that powerful spiritual experience.

Many followers of Christ today have a special place where God worked in their lives in an unforgettable way. The place may be where they were saved and felt the burden of sin lifted from them, or where they told God that they would do anything He called them to do and go anywhere He called them to go. The special place may be where they grew close to a church family and experienced Christian love. It is not uncommon for believers who are down to think, “If I could just get back to that place, I could get out of the emotional doldrums.” The psalmist was feeling that way.

PSALM 42:3

³ My tears have been my food day and night, while all day long people say to me, “Where is your God?”

VERSE 3

The psalmist’s depression was not fleeting. He wrote, ***my tears have been my food day and night***, testifying to acute and enduring pain. He longed for the life-giving water of God’s presence, but he had only the water of his tears. His statement may imply that tears were his only food, indicating that he did not feel like eating. His crying did not abate as day passed into night.

While the psalmist faced internal struggles, he also faced external struggles. People persecuted him ***all day long***. They asked, ***“Where is your God?”*** Verses 2 and 4 affirm that God was in the temple. But He is also everywhere. Wherever the psalmist was located, God was there. The psalmist’s oppressors likely would not have denied that, so their question concerns why God was not helping the psalmist. They meant, “Why hasn’t God showed up for you? Shouldn’t He be here?”

Such a question is accusatory. Either it accused God of not caring for the psalmist, or it accused the psalmist of being sinful and undeserving of God’s presence and help. Either way, the question hurt.

PSALM 42:4

⁴ I remember this as I pour out my heart: how I walked with many, leading the festive procession to the house of God, with joyful and thankful shouts.

VERSE 4

Perhaps the psalmist was referring to prayer when he wrote, ***I pour out my heart*** (see 1 Sam. 1:15). The Hebrew wording, however, seems to indicate that the psalmist was again describing his emotional state. He was pouring

his soul “within me” or “upon me.” The phrase implies inner turmoil, as if to say, “I was turned inside out.”

The psalmist reflected on happier days. He had not only attended worship, he had also led worship. He remembered how he led ***the festive procession to the house of God***. Other psalms refer to such a worship procession (122:1; 132:6-7). Fifteen psalms that are grouped into a section all have the title “A song of ascents” (120–134). The ascent was surely to Jerusalem to worship. People who loved God and loved to worship Him were ***joyful and thankful*** as they made such journeys. The writer of Psalm 42 must have been the leader of a family, a clan, or even a tribe to have the privilege of leading the procession.

(In PSG, p. 136) **What does a thirst for God look like? How can believers create a thirst for God?**

DROWNING (PS. 42:5-8)

VERSE 5

Four times in Psalms 42 and 43 the psalmist wrote that he was ***dejected*** (42:5,6,11; 43:5). The Hebrew word has the idea of being laid low, bowed down, or prostrated. He also described his emotional state as in ***turmoil***. In other contexts that word refers to murmuring, growling, and commotion. The psalmist’s soul was bowed down and in commotion.

The psalmist challenged himself with a question: “Why am I so down?” Oftentimes we confuse the kind of despair described by the psalmist and clinical depression. This session is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment for those who suffer from clinical depression. For people struggling with clinical depression, gaining hope in God doesn’t mean foregoing medical treatment. In fact, such treatment may well be the help someone needs who is struggling with the emotionally crippling symptoms of clinical depression.

Asking about the cause of our feelings of dejection is helpful. When we do that we often discover something we can do to address the situation. For example, if we’re down because someone has wronged us, the first step out of depression is to forgive. If we’re down because we are not getting our way, the first step out of depression is to repent of selfishness and receive God’s forgiveness. Sometimes, however, the cause of our feelings is more elusive or complex. We may need time and help to understand the cause.

The psalmist preached to himself, ***put your hope in God***. He exhorted his emotions to hope. When our emotions drag us down, we can allow our emotions to speak to us, or we can speak to our emotions. It is possible for our emotions to dictate what we do. On the other hand, we can direct our emotions by exhorting them. The psalmist spoke to his soul and said, “Hope in God!” Despair, or turning his back on God, was not an option.

PSALM 42:5

⁵ Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God.

In the midst of his depression, the psalmist also continued to praise God. He wrote, ***I will still praise him, my Savior.*** Though he was down, he continued to affirm his faith. Remembering that God is our *Savior* instills hope. Instead of turning away from God, he turned to God. The Hebrew text includes the phrase “in his presence.” When we enter God’s presence, we can count on His help, since He is our Savior.

PSALM 42:6

⁶ I am deeply depressed; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and the peaks of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.

VERSE 6

The psalmist again referred to his *depressed* spirit. He wrote to God, ***I remember you from the land of Jordan.*** The region of land to which he referred is the Transjordan, the area on the other side of the Jordan River from the land of Israel. That location is confirmed by the mention of ***the peaks of •Hermon***, which were on the other side of the Jordan River. The Jordan River originated from three springs in the foothills of the Hermon range, so in that sense too Hermon was *the land of Jordan*. The location of ***Mount •Mizar*** is unknown, but the context suggests that it was located among the Hermon range. *Mount Mizar* may also be translated as “little mountain.”

Mount Hermon was in the northeast extremity of Israel in an area that was often outside Israel’s border. The reason the psalmist was in the vicinity of Mount Hermon is not known, but from the peaks of Mount Hermon one could view much of the land of Israel. The writer was separated from his homeland and from worship in the temple. He looked back toward Israel, longing to be there.

PSALM 42:7-8

⁷ Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your billows have swept over me. ⁸ The LORD will send his faithful love by day; his song will be with me in the night—a prayer to the God of my life.

VERSES 7-8

At the foot of the Hermon range, the headwaters of the Jordan River include fast-flowing streams, ***waterfalls, breakers, and billows.*** Too little water threatens life. Too much water can also be life-threatening. The psalmist used the former as an analogy in verse 1. He used the latter in verse 7. Today, when we describe a time when we were very distraught, we might say, “I was going under.” The psalmist used the language of drowning to describe his emotional state.

As the psalmist expressed the depth of his sorrow, he also expressed his faith in God. He told God that the waterfalls, breakers, and billows were *your waterfalls, your breakers, and your billows*. They were God’s because He created and sustains them. Thus, the psalmist affirmed God’s power and sovereign rule over all.

To know that God is in charge is not enough. Coping with depression also requires that we affirm God’s love. The psalmist wrote, ***the LORD will send his faithful love.*** God loves us, and He commands His love to go to us as if He is throwing us His lifeline. When we feel that we are going under, we need to know that the circumstances of our lives are not spinning out of control. God is in charge. We also need to know that God’s plan for our lives is good because He loves us. He will send His love to rescue us.

After God helps us, we sing ***his song.*** We will feel like singing again, and we will sing *His* song, a song of praise to God. Our song will be ***a prayer*** because it will be addressed to Him. We will know that He is not only the transcendent God over all the universe, but also the immanent ***God of my life.***

(In PSG, p. 138) **How can unresolved despair produce more despair? What role should a person's faith play when it comes to facing a situation that could cause despair in life?**

CRUSHED (PS. 42:9-11)

VERSE 9

The psalmist declared that God was his **rock**. God was his stability, his firm place to stand. The ground around him was shifting and shaking, but God had not moved. He could stand on God and be safe. However, in the next line the psalmist asked God, **why have you forgotten me?** When in the midst of depression or discouragement, it is not unusual to feel that God is distant.

While it is encouraging to know that other disheartened people suffer from the same doubts, it is more encouraging to hear God's answer to the question "why have you forgotten me?" During the lifetime of Isaiah, Israelites were saying that God had forgotten them. God answered, "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or lack compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet I will not forget you" (Isa. 49:15). When a woman has a nursing baby, she has a physical connection to the baby. For a nursing mother to forget that she has a baby is not possible. But God said that it is more possible than for Him to forget us. When we doubt whether God is with us, we can believe God's promise instead of our doubt.

VERSES 10-11

The psalmist closed verse 9 with a reference to "the enemy's oppression." He opened verse 10 by testifying, **my adversaries taunt me**. He also repeated the question of verse 3; they were asking him, **"Where is your God?"** People were harassing him about his faith in God. Some of God's people know what that is like today because they have had to endure it. Such comments are hard to hear. The psalmist referred to it symbolically as **crushing my bones**. It is not hard to become downcast in such situations.

Verse 11 is identical to verse 5. The same refrain is also in Psalm 43:5. The psalmist wrote this refrain more than once for emphasis. Preaching these words to himself was likely his key for surviving his depression. Also, he may have made this his refrain to represent the fact that he recited it to himself not once but repeatedly.

(In PSG, p. 139) **How does the promise of God's presence serve as encouragement during hurtful times? How does His faithful presence function as proof of His future promises?**

PSALM 42:9

⁹ I will say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about in sorrow because of the enemy's oppression?"

PSALM 42:10-11

¹⁰ My adversaries taunt me, as if crushing my bones, while all day long they say to me, "Where is your God?" ¹¹ Why, my soul, are you so dejected? Why are you in such turmoil? Put your hope in God, for I will still praise him, my Savior and my God.

LEAD GROUP BIBLE STUDY

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

ICEBREAKER: Before everyone arrives, write the following numbers on the whiteboard or a large sheet of paper: 3, 60, 64, 71. Call attention to the whiteboard and direct the group to guess which number goes with which of the following scientific estimations about water:

- What percentage of the earth's surface is covered by water? (71 percent)
- What percentage of the human body is water? (60 percent)
- How many days can you live without water? (3 days)
- How many ounces of water should you drink in a day? (64 ounces)

TRANSITION: *Fresh water is vital for survival. For that reason, the writer of Psalms 42 and 43 used water as a symbol for a relationship with God. In today's session, we're going to look at both drought and drowning to help us understand what a healthy relationship with God looks like.*

INTRODUCE: Direct attention to **Pack Item 9** (*Poster: Authorship of the Psalms*) and point out that the sons of Korah wrote today's psalm. Use information from *Understand the Context* (PSG, pp. 133-134) to provide background on the sons of Korah and to explain the connection between Psalms 42 and 43.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

READ: Direct a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 42:1-4 as the group listens for all the words connected with water.

STATE: *It is impossible to imagine someone being thirsty and not knowing they are thirsty. The problem isn't knowing when you're thirsty. The problem is knowing what will satisfy your thirst.*

STUDY: Begin a two-column chart on the board, writing "Symptoms of Thirst" in the first column and "Solution for Thirst" in the second. Guide the group to identify words or phrases from the passage that show that the psalmist knew he was spiritually thirsty. Write responses on the board.

DISCUSS: *What is the one solution given in the psalm for satisfying thirst? Record the response in the second column. What evidence do you see in our world today indicating that people know they are spiritually thirsty? With what do people attempt to satisfy their thirst?*

ASK: *What does a thirst for God look like? How can believers create a thirst for God?* (PSG, p. 136)

TRANSITION: *At the same time the psalmist was dying of thirst, he felt as though he was drowning. Let's look at how that is possible.*

READ: Have someone read aloud Psalm 42:5-8. Again, direct the group to listen for the words connected with water.

ASK: *How did the psalmist shift the way he used water as a metaphor? What does the metaphor symbolize? From the PSG: How can unresolved despair produce more despair? What role should a person's faith play when it comes to facing a situation that could cause despair in life?* (PSG, p. 138)

GUIDE: Direct attention back to the chart. Write “Reasons for Depression” in the first column and “Response to Depression” in the second. Form two teams. Direct one team to work together to look for reasons the psalmist gave for being depressed, while the other team identifies statements about dealing with depression. Acknowledge that the psalmist clearly stated he was depressed but didn’t explicitly give reasons.

CLARIFY: *We can confuse despair and depression. While the text describes deep depression, we shouldn’t confuse despair and clinical depression. In cases of clinical depression, professional Christian help should be sought.*

ASK: *Placing our hope in God (v. 5), praising God (v. 5), remembering God (v. 6), and praying to God (v. 8) are all appropriate responses when we feel like we are drowning in despair. Of these four, which have come easier to you when you’ve dealt with discouragement? Which are easier said than done?*

TRANSITION: *Just as in real life, the psalmist didn’t immediately bounce back from despair. Instead, he went from feeling like he was drowning to feeling crushed.*

READ: Invite a volunteer to read Psalm 42:9-11. Encourage the group to listen for a different reason for discouragement than what has been expressed up to this point.

HIGHLIGHT: Call attention to the commentary under Verses 9-11 in the PSG (pp. 138-139) about predators and adversaries. Highlight that up to this point, the psalmist hasn’t talked about the effect of other human beings on his emotional state.

DISCUSS: *We grew up hearing “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” It’s significant that verse 10 compares verbal taunts to the crushing of bones. Scripture acknowledges that words really can cause harm. We have all been hurt by someone’s words or actions.*

ASK: *How does the promise of God’s presence serve as encouragement during hurtful times? How does His faithful presence function as proof of His future promises? (PSG, p. 139)*

EMPHASIZE: *God understands and sympathizes with our troubles (see Heb. 4:15). In fact, His Son experienced many of the same problems while on earth. Review **Pack Item 7** (Chart: Messianic Psalms) and discuss what hope this brings.*

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

SUMMARIZE: Remind the group of the statistics from the beginning of the session. *Just as humans need water more than anything other than oxygen to survive, we need regular time with God to quench our spirits, especially when we feel like we are drowning in discouragement.*

DIRECT: Challenge the group to respond to the first question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 140): *Review your regular habits, especially your habit of spending time with God. What time of day is best for you? How can you schedule a daily time with God that will not get pushed aside by other obligations? What can you do to make sure you protect your daily time with God?*

PRAY: Invite the group to be open and honest with each other without sharing specifics. Ask for a show of hands for how many people in the group have experienced deep discouragement sometime this year. Ask them to keep their hands raised if it was sometime this month. Keep hands raised if it was sometime this week. Ask group members to keep their hands raised if they are feeling deep discouragement right now. Pray for these needs with sensitivity and compassion.



PRACTICE

- Follow up later in the week with group members who indicated they were experiencing a time of deep discouragement currently or in the past week. Let them know you are praying for them.
- Participate in the memorization of Psalm 42:8 by emailing or texting the group and quoting the verse.
- Email or call group members who have been inactive over the last quarter. Encourage them by letting them know you are beginning a new unit of study next week and that this is a great time to get back in the habit of coming to Bible study.

MORE IDEAS

FOCUS ATTENTION (FIRST THOUGHTS)

Display two glasses of water in clear glasses. As the group is watching, pour a generous amount of salt into one of them and stir it up. Use this to illustrate how even though both glasses may look the same, only one will quench your thirst. Comment that in today's session the psalmist will use water both as a symbol of thirst but also as a symbol of drowning.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

- If your area has had an especially dry summer, research news stories about the effects of prolonged drought, including rising costs of food and so forth. Use current local news to help the group personally connect with the text.
- To enhance the study of Psalm 142:5, point out the Bible Skill (PSG, p. 137). Give everyone a couple of minutes to write the verse in their own words. You may choose to use the suggested song during this time. Afterward, invite group members to share how they restated the verse.
- To complement your discussion of Psalm 142:6, print out some photos of the Jordan River Valley, Mount Hermon, and Mount Mizar. Compare the use of these images to the way a soldier serving overseas may keep photos of his or her home state nearby. Remembering our homeland can keep us encouraged when we are away from home.

SUMMARIZE AND CHALLENGE (IN MY CONTEXT)

Lead the group to respond to the second question set under In My Context (PSG, p. 140): *Ask others in your group to share about times when they were aware of God's presence when facing a difficult situation. Record insights gained from the stories of others. Discuss ways the group can represent God to others who are facing a difficulty.*

SUGGESTED MUSIC IDEAS

During the Bible Skill activity or a time of silent prayer, play a recording of "As the Deer," by the Maranatha! Singers. Alternatively, you could use "Thirsty," by Chris Rice.

Go to the Leader Helps at LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible to hear some of these psalms put to music and to download free worship arrangements of them.

LEADER PACK IDEAS

➤➤ PACK ITEM 1

Map: Egypt and the Holy Land

Sessions 1-13

Locate a map in a Bible atlas that shows Egypt and the Sinai Desert.



Pack Item 1 example from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*. The Pack is available for purchase at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible

➤➤ PACK ITEM 2

Poster: Types of Psalms

Sessions 1-13

Refer to the information printed on page 12.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 3

Poster: Summer 2017

Sessions 1-13

Create a sign to post on the door where your group meets to welcome them to the study of Psalms.

➤➤ PACK ITEM 4

Time Line: Psalms

Sessions 1-13

Locate a study Bible with a time line of the major people and events in Psalms (from 3,000 B.C. to 600 B.C.). Use it as a reference during this study.

PACK ITEM 5

Bookmark: Memory Verses
Sessions 1-13

Make a list of these suggested memory verses to distribute to your group:

- Psalm 1:6
- Psalm 78:35
- Psalm 23:1
- Psalm 138:1
- Psalm 84:12
- Psalm 95:6
- Psalm 19:1
- Psalm 136:1
- Psalm 146:6
- Psalm 51:10
- Psalm 32:11
- Psalm 141:8
- Psalm 42:8

PACK ITEM 6

Poster: The Spirit in Psalms
Session 10

Display the following Scripture verses:

Psalm 51:11; Psalm 104:30; Psalm 106:33;
Psalm 139:7; and Psalm 143:10

PACK ITEM 7

Chart: Messianic Psalms
Sessions 2,3,5,13

Use a Bible dictionary to look up Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah and their coordinating New Testament fulfillments.

PACK ITEM 8

Poster: God in the Psalms
Sessions 2,3,5-7,9,11,12

Create a poster with the following titles of God and their Scripture reference:

God is our ...

- Shield (Psalms 3:3; 28:7; 119:114)
- Rock (Psalms 18:2; 42:9; 95:1)
- King (Psalms 5:2; 44:4; 74:12)
- Shepherd (Psalms 23:1; 80:1)
- Judge (Psalm 7:11)
- Refuge (Psalms 46:1; 62:7)
- Fortress (Psalms 31:3; 71:3)
- Avenger (Psalm 26:1)
- Creator (Psalm 8:1,6)
- Deliverer (Psalm 37:39-40)
- Healer (Psalm 30:2)
- Protector (Psalm 5:11)
- Provider (Psalm 78:23-29)
- Redeemer (Psalm 107:2)

MESSIANIC PSALMS	
<i>In Psalms, the Messiah was prophesied to be ...</i>	
Reposed by Gentiles	Psalm 2:1; Acts 4:25-28
Opposed against by political religious leaders	Psalm 2:1; Matthew 26:3-6; Mark 3:6
King of the Jews	Psalm 2:4; John 1:12-13; 18:37
The Son of God	Psalm 2:7; Luke 1:31-35; Matthew 3:16-17; Hebrews 1:8-9
Reverenced and crowned King	Psalm 2:2; 16:8-10; Matthew 28:6; Acts 2:25-32; 13:30-33; Romans 1:3-4
Is complete authority over all things	Psalm 2:8,9,6; Matthew 28:18; Hebrews 1:3-4
For all people	Psalm 18:49; Ephesians 2:14-16
Rescued by God as His creation	Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34
Despised and rejected by His own	Psalm 22:6; Luke 23:23,29
Called by God while in the womb	Psalm 22:10; Luke 1:30-33
Abandoned or betrayed by His own disciples	Psalm 22:13; 41:9-10; 22:34; Mark 14:27,30,34; Luke 22:47-48
Crucified	Psalm 22:14; Matthew 27:35
Accused by false witnesses	Psalm 27:12; 35:11; Matthew 26:59-63; Mark 14:55-59
God's sacrifice for the redemption of all mankind	Psalm 41:14; Hebrews 10:10-12
A messenger of mercy	Psalm 45:1; Luke 4:22
Sitting on an ornate throne	Psalm 45:1-7; Luke 1:32-33; Hebrews 1:8-9
Condemned for God's sake	Psalm 69:9; Matthew 26:62-63; Romans 15:3
Rescued by His Son	Psalm 69:14; John 3:17
Rebuke and	Psalm 69:25a; John 20:34
Seated to the right hand of God	Psalm 69:17; 110:1,5; Matthew 22:41-45; Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33; 1 Peter 3:21-22
From the image of David	Psalm 69:9-14; 20:7-8; 132:10-17; Matthew 22:2
God will forgive sin	Psalm 69:17; Mark 16:7; Colossians 1:14; Revelation 1:5
The Creator of all things	Psalm 104:24-27; John 1:3; Ephesians 3:9; Hebrews 1:8-12
Coming in the name of the Lord	Psalm 118:26; Matthew 21:9

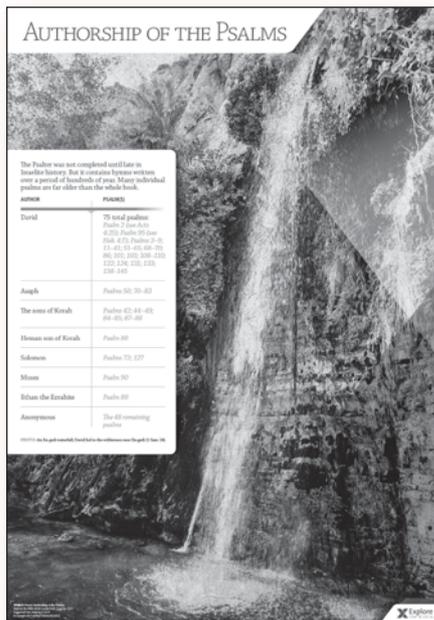
Pack Item 7 example from *Explore the Bible Leader Pack*. The Pack is available for purchase at LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible

➤➤ PACK ITEM 9

Poster: *Authorship of the Psalms*
Sessions 1,5,13

Use a Bible dictionary to create a description and list of the psalms attributed to each of these psalmists:

- David
- Asaph
- The sons of Korah
- Heman son of Korah
- Solomon
- Moses
- Ethan the Ezrahite
- Anonymous



Not long ago, my wife and I rearranged our living room to center everything around the fireplace. A few new blankets were added, but mostly we repositioned what we already had. How I get to my chair now is very different, as is the view from my chair. But the chair didn't change. I simply have a fresh view of that room that includes sitting near the fireplace.

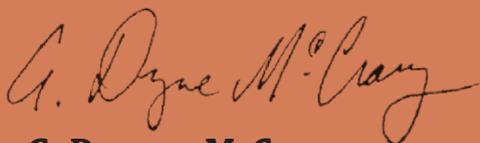
As the Explore the Bible team looked ahead to fall 2017, we began to discuss the arrangement and position of the content in our resources. Just like you, we realize the life-changing power of God's Word and want to do everything we can to get people into His Word daily. We wondered if we could rearrange the content we already have to create a different type of learning experience that would do just that.

The new *Daily Discipleship Guide* will give groups a fresh approach to Bible study that will foster deeper relationships and discipleship. Within the guide, you will find emerging educational strategies, daily Bible engagement, a link between weekly discipleship groups with what is studied in the Sunday groups, and a simple, more natural way to start new Bible study groups. The same trustworthy content you have come to expect is still there, it's just arranged in a different way to provide a different learning experience.

Unlike my living room, the way we have done it in the past will continue to be available. You simply have an alternative that may better fit the needs of your group. You can download a sample of this new resource at LifeWay.com/ExploreDaily and review a smaller version on the following pages.

The desire of the Explore the Bible team members is to provide resources that help you and your group study the Bible in a systematic way. We pray that each person in your group will become a growing follower of Christ. Thank you for allowing us to serve you through these resources.

In His service,



G. Dwayne McCrary
Adult Explore the Bible Team Leader

Your thoughts and comments are always welcome.
You can contact me at dwayne.mccrary@lifeway.com



INTRODUCING THE *Daily Discipleship Guide*

Most of us want those in our groups to study God's Word every day. We know the difference regular Bible study makes in our lives, and we want them to experience that blessing as well. With this goal in mind, we created the *Daily Discipleship Guide*:

DESIGNED ON A "CONFERENCE MODEL"

Instead of studying beforehand, you attend the group, you learn, then you build upon what you learned using five daily directed Bible studies.

GUEST FRIENDLY

Everyone who comes to the group starts on the same page. So guests, and even participants who've been absent for a while, can feel like they're tracking right along with everyone else.

GREAT FOR DISCIPLESHIP GROUPS

Groups that meet in triads or quads for deeper discipleship will love the Talk It Out section. This encourages members to meet together later in the week and gives them questions to discuss based on the previous study.

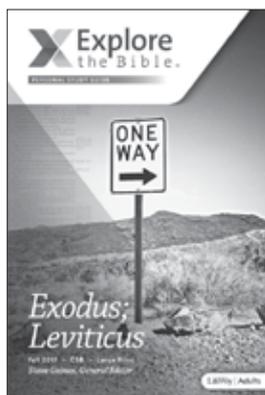
PREDICTABLE FOR PASTORS

Explore the Bible has a book-by-book discipleship plan laid out years in advance, so pastors can plan ahead and align their sermons with the *Daily Discipleship Guide's* content. We even provide free sermon outlines. And the same subject matter is covered in all Student and Adult Explore the Bible resources.

Learn even more about the *Daily Discipleship Guide* at
LifeWay.com/ExploreDaily

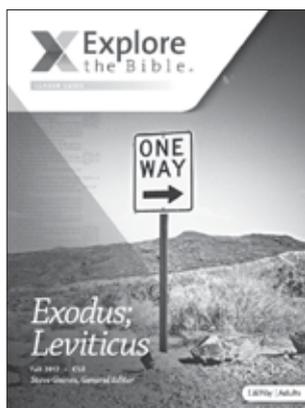
EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Start with the Essentials.



PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE

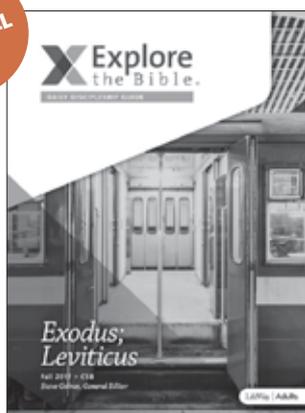
Make sure every group member is fully prepared to get the most out of each session. This useful resource provides Scripture, commentary, discussion questions, Bible study skill feature, a Bible reading plan, and additional helps. Remember to order extras for guests, so they'll feel right at home with the rest of the group.



LEADER GUIDE

Help leaders prepare for each session, giving them the essential tools they need to lead adults of all ages to dig deeply into the Bible.

NEW
FOR FALL
2017



DAILY DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE

This new resource contains the same content as a *Personal Study Guide* and *Leader Guide*. It's simply repackaged for a different type of group experience. For starters, group leaders use the same book. And potential leaders can see what they're using to lead the group, so they'll know how to do it in the future. You can learn more about this on the previous pages or visit LifeWay.com/ExploreDaily

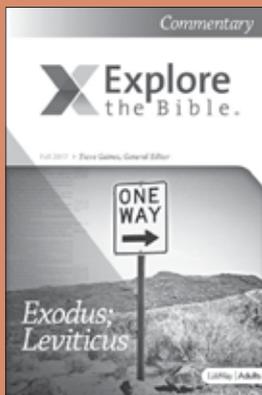
ADD OTHER HELPFUL OPTIONS

For those who want to go deeper into study, consider the popular tools below.



LEADER PACK

Help leaders prepare, present, and support the group study each week with visual aids, commentary, session plans, video overview of the study, and more.



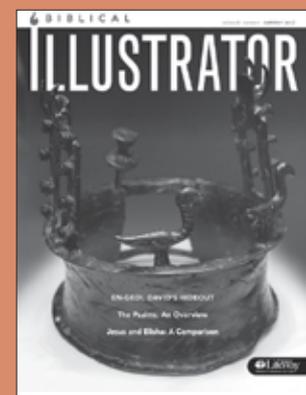
COMMENTARY

Examine the biblical context and historical background of study passages in greater depth, and explore the meanings of words, phrases, and concepts in the biblical languages.



QUICKSOURCE

This is a great tool for new leaders or last-minute substitutes and for leaders seeking a more discussion-oriented approach.



BIBLICAL ILLUSTRATOR

This quarterly resource features articles on biblical archaeology, customs, and locations, as well as fascinating photographs and maps.

For more information or to order, visit LifeWay.com/ExploretheBible

EXPLORE THE BIBLE STUDY PLAN

(FALL 2014 – SUMMER 2023)

YEAR	FALL	WINTER	SPRING	SUMMER
2014-15	Hebrews	Ezra; Nehemiah; Esther	Minor Prophets (Joel; Obad.; Nah.; Hab.; Zeph.; Hag.; Zech.; Mal.)	1–3 John; Revelation
2015-16	Genesis 1–25	Matthew 1–13	Acts 1–12	1 Samuel
2016-17	1,2 Peter; Jude	Joshua; Judges; Ruth	Matthew 14–28	Psalms
2017-18	Exodus; Leviticus	Acts 13–28	1,2 Corinthians	2 Samuel (1 Chron.)
2018-19	Galatians; James	Genesis 25–50	Mark	1,2 Timothy; Titus
2019-20	Ephesians	Numbers; Deuteronomy	Romans	Proverbs; Song of Solomon
2020-21	Minor Prophets (Amos, Hosea, Jonah, Micah)	Luke (Part 1)	Luke (Part 2)	Job; Ecclesiastes
2021-22	Philippians; Colossians; Philemon	Ezekiel; Daniel	1,2 Thessalonians	1,2 Kings (2 Chron.)
2022-23	Isaiah	John (Part 1)	John (Part 2)	Jeremiah; Lamentations



 **Explore**
the Bible®

Connections

SOCIAL MEDIA



Connect with a community of Explore the Bible users on Facebook. Post responses to questions, share ideas, and link to great blog content. Connect with us at [Facebook.com/ExploreTheBible](https://www.facebook.com/ExploreTheBible).



Get quotes, instant updates about new articles, giveaways, and more on Twitter. Follow us: [@ExploreTheBible](https://twitter.com/ExploreTheBible).

BLOG



Discover useful articles and blog posts for leading and strengthening your Bible study group. You'll find additional teaching ideas from Explore the Bible leaders, video intros, and much more. Subscribe to the blog at [Blog.Lifeway.com/ExploreTheBible/Adults](https://www.blog.lifeway.com/ExploreTheBible/Adults).

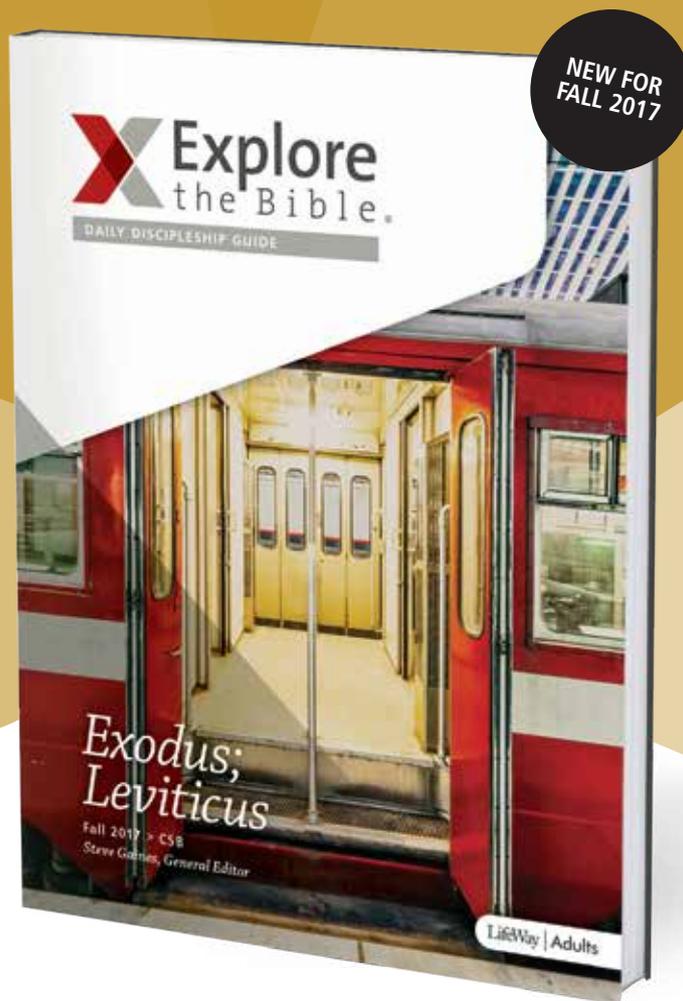
COMING NEXT QUARTER

EXODUS; LEVITICUS

- Session 1** **Reluctance** > *Exodus 3:4-14; 4:13-16*
- Session 2** **Confrontation** > *Exodus 7:1-13*
- Session 3** **Liberation** > *Exodus 12:1-13*
- Session 4** **Victory** > *Exodus 14:13-28*
- Session 5** **Sufficient** > *Exodus 16:1-5,11-20*
- Session 6** **Commanded** > *Exodus 20:1-17*
- Session 7** **Equipped** > *Exodus 25:1-9; 31:1-6*
- Session 8** **Rebellion** > *Exodus 32:1-6,11-14*
- Session 9** **His Presence** > *Exodus 39:42-43; 40:4,34-38*
- Session 10** **Set Before** > *Leviticus 1:3-9; 2:1-3; 3:1-5*
- Session 11** **Set Apart** > *Leviticus 9:15-24; 10:1-3*
- Session 12** **Set Free** > *Leviticus 16:3-10,29-30*
- Session 13** **Set Futures** > *Leviticus 26:3-16,40-45*

Egypt and the Holy Land





Does your group ever show up unprepared? This is for you.

It is actually quite common for people to forget to study before their group meets. That's one of the reasons Explore the Bible is introducing the *Daily Discipleship Guide* this fall as an alternative to the *Personal Study Guide*. Same content. Different model. Instead of studying before the group meets, participants learn at the meeting, and then they use five daily directed Bible studies to reinforce the learning all week long. Plus it's easier to train new leaders because the leader material is in the back of the *Guide*. And that's just the beginning.

See pages 146-149 in this *Leader Guide* to learn more
or visit lifeway.com/exploredaily



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