



MORE THAN PRAYERS

SEEING JESUS IN THE PSALMS

MATT STAFFORD • 12 SESSIONS

**NEXT
LEVEL**  **ONLINE**

— OZARK CHRISTIAN COLLEGE —

Session 1: An introduction to the Psalms and Hebrew Poetry (Psalm 1)

Summary: The Book of Psalms contains the collected prayers and songs of the Jewish people written from the time of Moses to the return from their exile in Babylon. These songs and prayers reflect universal human experiences, they teach us how to pray by their example, and they ultimately point us to the answer to those prayers in Jesus Christ.

Notes:

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

- The Psalms are presented to us in five books, the number five corresponding to the five books of the law (Genesis to Deuteronomy). God speaks to us through the five books of the law, and we speak to him through the five books of the psalms.
- Books 1 & 2 (1-72) are largely psalms of David (72:20). David experienced both victories (military, leadership, integrity, and known as a man after God's own heart) and tragedies (the violent death of his best friend and two sons, the deaths of two infant sons, betrayal by advisors and his own son, illness, life as a fugitive, sibling rivalry, a broken marriage, failure as a parent, and sexual sin). He is a type of "everyman" that we can all identify with in many ways.
- Book 3 (73-89) wrestles with God's apparent abandonment of the nation during the Jewish exile in Babylon in 586 BC. Where was God and what about his promises? Can he be trusted?
- Book 4 (90-106) answers the questions of Book 3 with a resounding "The LORD reigns"
- Book 5 (107-150) expresses thanksgiving for the salvation of God in all of its aspects. It includes many festival songs used in Israel's gathered worship.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW POETRY

- Parallelism: correspondence between two or more lines of poetry. This has the effect of slowing us down and encouraging reflection, aiding with memory, and making Hebrew poetry more easily translated into other languages.
- Imagery: the use of metaphor and symbolic language to promote reflection and increase understanding
- Chiasm: an ABA pattern in which a sequence of ideas is presented and then repeated in reverse order, creating focus on the central idea by framing it

Discussion:

1. According to Psalm 1, what does it mean to be blessed by God?
2. What does verse 1 suggest about the influence that others can have on our faith and practice? Is this verse advocating separation from non-believers?
3. In verse 2, what does the phrase "the law of the LORD" refer to?
4. What does it mean to "meditate on the law of the LORD"? In what way is it like chewing on something?
5. The primary metaphor of Psalm 1 is a tree planted by streams of water. How do the characteristics of a tree correspond to a "blessed" life?
6. In what ways does chaff represent the opposite of those characteristics?
7. On the scale from chaff to mature tree, where would you place yourself? What actions can you take to grow? How can your community help you in that growth?
8. What does it mean to be "known" by the LORD (vs. 6)?

Session 2: Tools for Interpreting the Psalms (Psalm 2)

Summary: The royal psalms demonstrate Israel's belief that God was reigning through his anointed king. This *messiah* was seen as a "son of God", displaying the glory of God and doing the work of God in securing justice, leading the people and extending God's rule to the nations. Jesus came preaching "the good news of the kingdom", and the early church understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of these psalms.

Notes:

ROYAL PSALMS

- Royal psalms are about the reign of God through the reign of the king. The people could look at the king and his majesty, glory, power, and wealth and get a glimpse of what God was like.
- The king was charged with doing justice, protecting the poor and powerless, leading the nation in battle and extending their territory, acting as a co-ruler with God.
- The Hebrew word *messiah* means "anointed one." The Jewish people in the first century hoped that God would send a "messiah", a David or Solomon-like king, to free them from Roman oppression. The early church saw Jesus as the fulfillment of this psalm and other royal psalms.

SIX INTERPRETIVE LENSES

Author: What was the author's intended meaning (the AIM)?

- Who was the author? When was the psalm written? What was going on in the world at the time? What was happening in the author's life?
- Psalm 2 is a psalm of David (Acts 4:25) for the occasion of his son Solomon's anointing as king.

Theology: What does this psalm tell us about the nature and character of God?

- God is sovereign, just, active on the earth, and good (blessing those who take refuge in him).

Editor: Why is the psalm placed in this order? How might it be linked to the psalms before and after it?

- Keywords that link Psalms 1 and 2: blessed, way, counsel, stand, sit, scoff, meditate, perish
- Two major themes of the Psalms are that God is good (Psalm 1) and the LORD reigns (Psalm 2).

Jesus: Does the psalm point us to Jesus in any way? Did he quote the psalm? Did someone connect with the psalm? On what occasion might Jesus have prayed this psalm?

- His baptism (Matt. 3:17), Peter's confession (Matt. 16:13-20), His transfiguration (Matt 17:5)

New Testament: Is the psalm quoted by the writers of the New Testament? How did they understand the meaning and application of the psalm?

- God is sovereign (Acts 4:25,26); Jesus is the son of God (Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5)

Me (the Reader): How does the psalm apply to my life today? What can I learn from it about God, the world, and myself?

Discussion:

1. Give some examples of the ways in which the nations rage against God and his messiah today.
2. What are the "bonds" and "cords" that they wish to throw off?
3. What is God doing during this rebellion? Does this bring you any comfort?
4. What descriptions of God are found in this psalm? What is the significance of each of them?
5. How is the promise of verses 8-9 being fulfilled in the church?
6. What does it mean to "kiss the son" (vs. 12)? What does the psalm suggest about our posture toward the son of God?
7. What is true of the individual in Psalm 1 is true of the community in Psalm 2 (blessing for obedience, curses for rebellion). Compare the common words and how they are used in each psalm: blessed, way, counsel, stand, sit, scoff, meditate, perish

Session 3: Psalms of Creation (Psalm 8)

Summary: There are four major psalms of creation (8, 19, 29, and 104). Psalm 19 focuses on the sky, Psalm 29 on the waters, and Psalm 104 on the earth. Psalm 8 however, focuses on mankind and our place in the cosmos. It turns out that we are at the center of it all. The psalmist is incredulous that the LORD would consider human beings at all given the beauty and scale of the universe. And yet He has, making him worthy of our worship.

Notes:

ORIENTATION AND DISORIENTATION

- Psalms of Disorientation (lament): Psalms 3-7 (enemies, illness, injustice) “How many are my foes? How long will you turn my glory into shame?”
- Psalms of Orientation: Psalm 1 (God is good), 2 (God is sovereign), 8 (God is creator of a good world and co-ruler with mankind) “How majestic is your name!”

PSALM 8

- The ABCBA chiastic structure of Psalm 8 places mankind at the heart of God’s purpose
- “O YHWH, our Lord” - the divine name YHWH is indicated in English translations by LORD (all caps), the title *adonai* (lord, master) is indicated by the English word “Lord” (lowercase). His name and majesty frame the psalm.
- From the vast heavens to tiny infants, God’s glory is on display, leaving us speechless
- God is revealed as an artist (“the work of your fingers”)
- Mankind was made a little lower than *elohim* (the mighty ones, angels), created in the image of God (*imago dei*).
- God gave mankind authority to rule over the three domains of creation: earth, sky and water
- Jesus fulfills this psalm, being made “a little lower than the angels”, tasting death for us, and becoming the second Adam. The first Adam “broke” creation when he fell, failing in his purpose, but the second Adam restored it (Hebrews 2:5-9).

WORLDVIEW QUESTIONS

- This psalm answers the four major questions that a worldview must answer:
 - Origin: How did we get here? Where did we come from?
 - Identity: Who are we? What does it mean to be human?
 - Purpose: Is there meaning to life? What is our purpose?
 - Destiny: What happens when we die? Is this all that there is?

Discussion:

1. In what way has God established strength (or “ordained praise”) from the mouths of infants? How does this silence the enemy and avenger? (Matt. 21:16)
2. How is God’s glory displayed in the heavens? On the earth? (Give some examples.)
3. What evidence is there that God cares about creation? About human beings?
4. What does this psalm have to say about the value and dignity of every human being, especially children?
5. How does this psalm answer each of the four worldview questions?
6. What does it mean to “rule over the works of your hands”? How does this psalm inform our approach to environmental stewardship?

Session 4: The Torah Psalms (Psalm 19)

Summary: The Hebrew word *Torah* means “instruction” or “revelation”, and a *Torah* psalm is a psalm focused on the “law of the LORD”. Psalms 1, 19, and 119 are all *Torah* psalms, revealing to us that God speaks to all of humanity, compelling us to listen, to know him, and enter into a relationship with Him. Psalm 19 is also a psalm of creation, highlighting the glory of God on display in the skies.

Notes:

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS WORLD

- God speaks to humanity through the created world
 - Clearly (vs. 1), the heavens (far) and the skies (near) declare and proclaim
 - Continually (vs. 2), the orderly cycles of nature are the basis of modern science
 - Completely (3-4), Romans 1:19-20, God’s eternal power and divine nature are clearly revealed so that there is no rational reason to deny this reality
- Consider the beauty, strength, and life-giving power of the sun
 - Ancient people worshiped the sun, but God tucks it into bed
 - The bridegroom represents the glory, beauty, and life-creating capacity of the sun
 - The champion highlights its strength and constancy
- Theologians call this general revelation. God speaks silently to everyone through His creation.

GOD SPEAKS THROUGH HIS WORD

- Just as the sun gives life, warmth and power, so does the Word of God enlighten the soul
- The nature of the law: perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, true, enduring forever, righteous altogether
- The effect of the law: revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens eyes
- The desirability of the law: more valuable than gold, sweeter than honey, a warning and a reward

GOD SPEAKS WITHIN US

- Through the *Torah*, YHWH reveals our errors and hidden faults. We hear his voice within our hearts, convicting and motivating us to resist willful sins and great transgressions
- David recognizes that he hears the word of God internally, and YHWH hears his meditation.
 - The Holy Spirit’s presence in the psalmist’s life (Psalm 51:11; 139:7-12)
 - The law of God written on our hearts (Romans 2:15)
 - The Holy Spirit convicting us of sin (John 16:8-11)

GOD HAS SPOKEN THROUGH JESUS

- Jesus our Rock (cornerstone, 1 Peter 2:6-8)
- Jesus our Redeemer (one who can purchase us out of our slavery to sin, Colossians 1:13-14).
- The final and perfect way God made himself known is in Jesus (John 1:1-5,14,18; Hebrews 1:1-4)
- Just as the *Torah* is the revelation of God and the means of salvation to the Jew, so Jesus is to the Christian, the perfect and final revelation of God, and the means by which we are saved.

Discussion:

1. What are some things we learn about God from paying attention to the heavens and skies?
2. Some people believe that scripture and science are inherently in conflict. Are they in conflict? If so, how can we reconcile God’s world with God’s word?
3. What are some practical ways that we can experience the illuminating effects of God’s word in our daily lives?

4. When have you sensed God speaking to your heart? Do you sense Him listening to your heart?
5. In what ways has Jesus been your Rock and Redeemer?

Psalm 22 - Psalms of Lament (Psalm 22)

Summary: Laments are prayers that express anger, frustration, grief and disappointment with God. They are some of the most common prayers in the Book of Psalms. Of the laments, Psalm 22 is one of the most intense, expressing the psalmist's feelings of abandonment by God during one of the most trying times of his life. The psalm takes on greater significance because it was prayed by Jesus from the cross.

Notes:

ELEMENTS OF LAMENT

- Address: the names that the psalmist uses to address God (YHWH, *Elohim*, *El*, etc.)
- Complaint: the heart of the lament, "If God is good and powerful, explain this"
- Request: a prayer for God to act
- Motivation: a rationale for God to act
- Confidence: trust the God has heard the prayer and will act, future-oriented

DAVID PRAYS PSALM 22

- Alone (1-11)
 - Abandoned by God, David cries out three times for God's attention (1-2)
 - He reflects on his community (3-5), his humanity (6), his history (7-10)
- Surrounded (12-21)
 - Animal-like enemies: bulls, lions, dogs (12,13,16,20,21)
 - Physical suffering: poured out, bones out of joint, heart melted, thirsty, pierced (14-16)
 - Human enemies: piercing, gloating, dividing up his property (16-18)
- Seen (22-31)
 - "I will praise you" (22), his futility turns to faith
 - "Let Israel praise you" (23-25), invites others to trust YHWH as well
 - "All will praise you" (26-31), envisions universal worship, poor and rich, old and unborn

JESUS PRAYS PSALM 22

- Common language and circumstances ("My God, My God...mocking crowd, poured out, bones out of joint, heart melting like wax, thirst, evildoers, pierced hands and feet, cast lots for clothing)
- Hebrews 2:12 quotes Jesus speaking vs. 22, and vs. 31 sounds very much like "It is finished."
- Jesus demonstrates that God is present in our suffering. He hasn't abandoned us, rather He is experiencing our pain with us. The fact that God is an infinitely higher order of being suggests that he has the capacity to experience the totality of human suffering at an ultimate level.
- Jesus wept (John 11:35) and was "a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3).

Discussion:

1. Have you ever prayed a lament that included all five elements as found in the psalms? What was the occasion? What was the result?
2. How do you feel about the accusation of abandonment that David levels at God? Is he out of line in speaking to God in this way?
3. David's memory of God's past faithfulness only seems to make his present suffering that much more confusing. How can recalling the past give us confidence in God's help in the present?
4. Is it enough to know that even though God doesn't always remove suffering, He is still suffering with you?
5. In what ways has God made his presence known to you during times of suffering?

6. How does the psalmist's vision of the universal worship of God help you press on through seasons of lament?

Session 6: Psalms of Trust (Psalm 46)

Summary: What you believe about God may be the most important factor in how you handle hard times. Psalm 46 is a beloved psalm of trust in which the community of God expresses their confidence in the character of God to sustain them in the midst of crisis. These powerful lyrics give us a pattern for praying today when it feels like our world has been turned upside down.

Notes:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

- Authored by the Sons of Korah (Psalms 42-49, 84,85,87,88), priests
- The Assyrian invasion of Judah in 701 BC threatened the annihilation of the Jewish people. Jerusalem was besieged, crowded with refugees when King Hezekiah made his bold stand of faith (2 Chronicles 32, 2 Kings 19, Isaiah 37).

THE CHARACTER OF GOD IN THE CRISIS

- Our refuge, strength, and very present help in trouble
- Verses 2-3 describe the worst-case scenario: the undoing of creation (reuniting of land and sea)
- Rivers were a source of life and defense. Jerusalem had the Gihon spring to sustain the city during this crisis, but the psalm points to God himself as the River, the life-sustaining One
- The city was the “holy habitation”, the home of God, so He will protect it
- God will help her “when morning dawns”. The angel of the LORD put 185,000 soldiers to death in the night. Their general Sennacherib returned to Nineveh where he was promptly assassinated by his own sons (Isaiah 37:36-38)
- LORD *Sabaoth* (hosts) refers to YHWH as the commander of the angel army
- Fortress, a strong tower in which to shelter in safety (Proverbs 18:10)
- An invitation to remember what God has done (learn from history) and rest (be still)

JESUS IS “GOD WITH US”

- His name is Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23), God condescended, entered into our grief and struggle
- Jesus promises a river flowing out of us, the Holy Spirit (John 7:38) who will make His home in us. The Holy Spirit is our comforter (strength-giver), *paraclete* (walks alongside), and is received at baptism (Acts 2:38). The church is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16,17) as are our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- Jesus calms the storm saying “Be still” (Mark 4:39-41), the disciples knew he was God.
- Jesus helps us “at the break of dawn.” When we enter the long night of death, Jesus who rose at the break of dawn will raise us in the morning as well. *Weeping may remain for the night, but joy comes in the morning* (Psalm 30:5).

Discussion:

1. The psalmist describes an “end of the world” scenario, the undoing of creation itself. In such a time, what hope do believers have that others do not? (Luke 12:4-7)
2. In what ways has God been an “ever present help” in trouble in your life?
3. Reflect on the two metaphors for the Holy Spirit. In what ways is the Holy Spirit like a river? What does it mean to you to be the “holy habitation” of God?
4. God helped us at the break of dawn when He raised Jesus from the dead. How does the resurrection of Jesus enable us to experience peace in the midst of chaos?

5. Inspired by Psalm 46, Martin Luther wrote the hymn *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* over 500 years ago. As you read the lyrics again, what timeless truths in the song impress you today?
6. What spiritual practices help you to “be still and know that I am God”?

Session 7: The Penitential Psalms (Psalm 51)

Summary: A penitential psalm is one in which we confess sin, seek forgiveness, and promise repentance. Traditionally Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143 bear this designation. In Psalm 51, David asks for mercy and promises repentance, providing us with a model for approaching God when we sin.

Notes:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The superscription connects this psalm to the prophet Nathan's confrontation with David about his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. The narrative in 2 Samuel 11-12 is linked by these three two-word phrases in Hebrew: "I'm pregnant", "You are the man" and "I have sinned against the LORD."

PRAYER FOR REMOVAL

- Request (1-2)
 - Four asks: Have mercy, blot out, wash me, cleanse me
 - Transgressions (law breaking), iniquity (internal disharmony), sin (failure of purpose)
 - Basis: God's steadfast love (*hesed*) and abundant mercy (compassion, feeling for us)
- Confession (3-6)
 - Confession is "to say the same," to speak the truth. David cannot escape his guilt
 - His sin is "against you God, and you only" (ultimately), it is deep and broad in its effects
- Request (7-9)
 - Metaphors: Hyssop, snow, broken bones, wash me, hide your face, blot out

PRAYER FOR REPLACEMENT

- Request (10-12)
 - Create in me a clean heart (the same word in Genesis 1:1 of God creating the cosmos)
 - The word "spirit" occurs in all three verses. Repentance is the work of the Spirit.
 - Removal of the Spirit (1 Samuel 16:14), Replacement with a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19)
- Promise (13-17)
 - I will teach others as they learn from my mistakes. Redeem this mess I've made.
 - I will worship. "Bloodguilt" is retribution from Uriah's family. David's worship resumes.
 - I will surrender. To obey is better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22)
- Request (18-19)
 - Zion is the community of God, made vulnerable by David's sin, sin always impacts others

THE ANSWER TO DAVID'S PRAYER

1,000 years after this psalm was penned, Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate who uttered these two words in Latin, *Ecce Homo*, "Behold the man." David was "the man who had sinned against the LORD", but on that day another stood in his place. Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2).

Discussion:

1. If you have time, read 2 Samuel 11-12 and try to put yourself in David's sandals and think about what he is feeling when writing this psalm. What emotions, fears, and anxieties has his moral failure and attempted cover-up created? Is this always the inevitable consequence of sin?
2. What are some of the ways that we deal with guilt in modern times? (Good and bad)
3. Does verse 5 support the doctrine of "original sin" or is David suggesting something else here?

4. "Sin is always communal." How did David's sin affect others -- his family, his fellow soldiers, the nation, other nations? Have you ever justified your sin by insisting that no one else is affected?
5. In what sense is David's prayer for forgiveness and repentance ultimately answered by Jesus?

Session 8: Psalms of Wisdom (Psalm 73)

Summary: Many psalms offer practical wisdom for living a good life, while others teach by recounting Israel's history. Psalm 73 addresses the universal question of God's goodness and power in light of human suffering, asking, "if God is good and all-powerful, why do bad things happen to good people"? The psalm addresses the flip side of that question, asking, "why do good things happen to bad people"?

Notes:

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

The psalms of Book 3 were likely collected for use during the exile of the Jewish people in Babylon beginning in 586 BC. This event set up a major crisis of faith for the Jewish people. How could God abandon his temple, his city, and his people to the pagan Babylonians? What about God's promises to David and to Abraham? These psalms express the pain, frustration, and eventually the hope of the Jewish people during this crisis of faith.

THE PROPOSITION (1)

- God is good, just, and all-powerful, and the psalmist strives to be "pure of heart," living God's way.

THE DILEMMA (2-16)

- When he saw wicked people living "the good life", he wondered if he'd been duped.
- The wicked are pain-free, healthy, trouble-free, never ill, powerful, insatiable, arrogant, influential, free to do as they please, living the easy life and always getting richer
- To abandon the faith would be to betray the faithful, but Asaph's heart is just not in it anymore.

THE RESOLUTION (17-28)

- The psalmist sees things as they really are when he enters the sanctuary and worships (17)
- Elisha and his servant - "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." (2 Kings 6)
- Fact check: the wicked are actually the ones on slippery ground (18-20)
- Asaph admits his ignorant, animal-like thinking (21-22)
- He expresses gratitude for what he has that the unbeliever does not (23-26), namely an eternal relationship with God, "my portion forever"
- It is good to be near God (27-28)
- God is just (evil will ultimately be judged and condemned)
- God is good (the wicked may get good things, but the faithful get God. He is our good. Psalm 16:2; John 17:3)
- God doesn't remove suffering from us, instead he gives us the resources to endure it. He gives us His presence (Psalm 23:4) and His promise (Psalm 73:24)

Discussion:

1. Have you ever experienced a crisis of faith like that of Asaph? How was it resolved?
2. Do you think Asaph was seeing the life of the unbeliever clearly? Is it possible that we struggle with the same visual impairment?
3. What practical things can we do to maintain "sanctuary vision", to see the world as it really is, the lost as they really are, and God by our side in all things?
4. There are philosophical answers to the question of theodicy (how can God be both good and powerful and still allow evil to exist), but often what we really need are pastoral answers. How does Psalm 73 give confidence to our hearts when we experience doubt?

5. What resources do you find in Psalm 73 to help others sustain their faith in a crisis?
6. Have you ever had a sanctuary experience like that of Asaph? Describe it, before and after.

Session 9: Psalms of Praise (Psalm 103)

Summary: The Hebrew name for the Book of Psalms is *Sepher Tehillim*, Book of Praises. The psalms of Book 4 (90-106) are largely songs of praise, offering a resounding answer to the questions of faith that the psalmist raises in Book 3. As a song of praise, Psalm 103 stands out as one of the greatest lyric proclamations of the boundless love and compassion of God ever recorded in human language.

Notes:

BACKGROUND:

The psalm is framed by seven calls to praise (1-2, 20-22), first to the psalmist himself (1-2) and finally to the angels and all of creation (20-22). The number seven suggests completeness as does the composition of the lyric in 22 verses, the same number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet.

PRAISE THE LORD (1-2)

- Three times the psalmist summons his soul to praise YHWH.
- This self-talk reminds us to call ourselves to worship regularly, repetitively

REMEMBER HIS BENEFITS (3-5)

- Bring these to the front of your mind
- YHWH takes away our sin, disease and death (the three enemies of mankind)
- Crowns us with love and mercy, satisfies our desires with good things, and renews our strength

RECALL HIS CHARACTER (6-19)

- Just: works justice for all the oppressed, a theme throughout the Psalms (Psalm 68:5)
- Knowable: His ways and his deeds are known through the written word, the Bible. Natural law is also written on the human heart (Romans 2:15)
- Patient: with our sin (missing the mark), iniquity (internal disorder), transgression (law-breaking)
- Faithful love: the measure of His *hesed* is limitless as is the distance between us and our sin
- Compassionate: A father's love for his child, empathy with our mortality (dust, grass, and flowers)
- Eternal: His love is forever with those who fear him and live in relationship with him
- Sovereign: Rules over all, from the oppressed (6) to the most glorious of angelic beings (19-21)

PRAISE THE LORD (20-22)

- Mighty Ones (angels in heaven), His host (angels on earth), all his works, my soul

Is all of this too good to be true? Wishful thinking? Not if God actually came to earth and demonstrated it.

- Those closest to Jesus were convinced he was YHWH in the flesh (John 1:14-18; 1 John 1:1-4)
- Jesus destroyed the two great enemies of humanity: sin and death (1 John 2:2; Hebrews 2:14; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57)

Discussion:

1. Why summon yourself to worship before you do anything else?
2. Given that many faithful people die of diseases, has God really "healed all your diseases"?
3. Take an inventory of God's benefits in your life. Express gratitude to Him for them now.
4. Recall each of the characteristics of God in this psalm one at a time. As you reflect on them, share how you have experienced each of them in your life.
5. Which word picture in this psalm means the most to you right now?

6. What would you say to someone who claims that the God described in this psalm doesn't exist and is merely a figment of our imagination?

Session 10: Messianic Psalms

Summary: All of scripture ultimately directs us toward Jesus, and that includes the Psalms. While there is a sense in which every psalm reveals something about Jesus (it's what I have called the "Jesus lens"), there are five psalms that are particularly important because of the way they are used in the New Testament to clarify the identity and mission of Jesus.

Notes:

BACKGROUND

Israel's king was a representative and agent of God to the world. The king is called a "son of God" in Psalm 2. In the first century, the Jews were eagerly anticipating a great king like David or Solomon who would drive out the Romans and reestablish the kingdom. They hoped that Jesus might be the *messiah* (anointed one), one "greater than Solomon" (Luke 11:31) because he could feed the multitudes, heal the sick and raise the dead. Surprisingly, he disappointed them at first, and then exceeded their expectations.

PSALM 2: SON OF GOD

- Declared at his baptism, affirmed at his transfiguration, and at his crucifixion
- The global expansion of the church and the judgment of the nations (Revelation 19)
- Worship (kiss) him as you would God, rejoice and tremble

PSALM 45: BRIDEGROOM

- Your throne, O God, is forever and ever (Hebrews 1:8-9)
- At his side, his beautiful bride (11). She has a new identity, a new family, and all of his affection
- The church is the bride of Christ and their union has been fruitful (Ephesians 5:22-33)

PSALM 110: VICTORIOUS KING AND ETERNAL PRIEST

- Quoted by six individuals in the New Testament, Jesus is victorious king and great high priest
- A Melchizedek-type priest (king of righteousness and peace, eternal, greater than Abraham)

PSALM 22: OUR BROTHER

- "I will tell of your name to my brothers" (Psalm 22:22)
- The founder of salvation made perfect through suffering (Hebrews 2:10-12)

PSALM 118: THE CORNERSTONE AND THE LAMB OF GOD

- Sung at Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (vss.25,26)
- Jesus identified himself with the master's son in the parable of the tenants (Matthew 21:33-46) and declares himself to be the cornerstone of Psalm 118:22. He is the cornerstone (first), capstone (last) and keystone (central) (1 Peter 2:7).
- He is the Passover lamb bound and taken to the altar (1 Corinthians 5:7; John 1:29)
- Resurrection, Jesus prayed, "I shall not die, but I shall live" (Psalm 118:17) after the Last Supper.

Discussion:

1. Hindsight is 20/20. Those closest to Jesus missed many of the clues to his identity until he opened their eyes. How have these five psalms opened your eyes to see Jesus more clearly?
2. Of all of these metaphors of Jesus the Messiah, which means the most to you right now?

3. The writer of Hebrews makes much of Jesus being a Melchizedek-type priest (read Hebrews 5 and 7). How does this priesthood of Jesus impact your relationship with God in a practical way?
4. Jesus prayed Psalm 118 knowing that his suffering and death were only hours away. How does this psalm help us “give thanks to the LORD” when we face our own trials?

Session 11: Psalms of Cursing

Summary: When it comes to reading and interpreting the Psalms, some of the most problematic verses are those in which the psalmist prays that God would curse his enemies. In fact, some cite these as evidence that the Bible is not a holy book, given that it contains such violent language. The technical term for these curses is *imprecation*, although “psalms of anger” or “psalms of wrath” may be more descriptive. In this lesson we’ll gain some perspective on these psalms and learn to pray them in light of the cross.

Notes:

THE PROBLEM:

1. The psalmist describes the nature of his enemies in stark terms such as “lions”, “snarling dogs”, “blood-thirsty men”, and “drawn swords”, effectively dehumanizing them. How is this consistent with the biblical teaching that all people are made in the image of God and have inherent dignity?
2. The psalmist prays that God would bring the worst imaginable fates upon his enemies and even innocent members of their families. How can we reconcile this with Jesus’ teaching on loving our enemies and praying for our persecutors (Matthew 5:43-45a)?
3. What do these psalms say about the nature of the God whom the psalmist assumes would side with him to do such terrible things? Do these psalms present an inaccurate understanding of God and therefore can we trust the Word of God that contains such language?

INTERPRETING THESE PSALMS

1. The nature of poetry. The language is metaphoric and exaggerated. The violent statements that the psalmist makes about his enemies are not meant to be acted upon as commands, but rather as an expression of how he feels in the heat of the moment.
2. Anger at injustice. David’s anger in Psalm 52 is completely understandable given the contemptible thing that Doeg had done. Jesus was angry at the greed of the money changers in the temple (John 2:13-17) and at the stubborn hearts of the Pharisees (Mark 3:1-6).
3. Warning of the consequences of sin. The “law of the harvest” determines that you will reap what you sow. Harming others *always* results in a self-inflicted wound.
4. Influenced by context. The psalmist was responding to the horrors of war (Psalm 79:6-7) and appealing to God to defend his reputation.
5. Expressions of faith that God will act justly. The psalmist never prays that he might take matters into his own hands. Instead, he calls upon God to exact justice on his enemies. (Romans 12:17-21). Praying violent prayers enables us to be nonviolent.
6. Love overcomes evil. Jesus fulfills the teaching of the law by calling us to love our enemies.
 - Our enemies are not our enemies, but victims of the Enemy. (Eph 6:10-12; 2 Cor 5:16)
 - Look to Jesus who prayed, “Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing,”
 - The wrath of God against all the ungodly and unjust actions of all of human history has already been poured out on Jesus Christ on the cross, which He willingly received.

Discussion:

1. When was the last time you got really mad at injustice? How did you pray about the situation?
2. How do we move from anger to compassion when it comes to those who have wronged us?
3. Jesus got angry but also forgave. How does Jesus’ example help us overcome bitterness?
4. These psalms are often avoided in public worship out of embarrassment. How could we use them appropriately and creatively in that context?
5. Is it possible to see the same person as both a victimizer and a victim? How do we pray for them?

6. What do you think about the statement "Praying violent prayers enables us to be nonviolent"?

Session 12: Psalms of Devotion (Psalm 139)

Summary: Contemplating the infinite knowledge, power and goodness of a Being that knows and loves us fully should move us to a posture of worship and devotion. Psalm 139 is a remarkable meditation on the nature of God and his relationship with us that concludes with a vow and a prayer.

GOD KNOWS ME

- The psalm is very personal with “I, me, and my” in all but two verses. God is addressed as “you”.
- YHWH knows everything about you, your routines, thoughts, secret habits, and unspoken words.
- There is no escaping his knowledge, you are “hemmed in” by his hands, it is beyond words.

AND IS WITH ME

- There’s no escaping the reality of God even though you try to suppress this truth (Romans 1:18-21). The Holy Spirit “presence” is inescapable.
- You can’t run away by going up, down, east, or west, nor can you pull yourself from his grasp.
- Even in death (*Sheol*) God is still present (Romans 8:38-39) and so you’re never in the dark.

FROM BEGINNING

- The metaphor of hand weaving indicates the intimacy with which God crafts each and every human being. The fingertips that placed the stars (Psalm 8:3) crafted you from a single cell.
- David pauses to worship God from his soul for the extraordinary miracle of life.
- God saw me as an embryo, before my heart began to beat.

TO THE END

- All my days fashioned for me (like a potter’s work) were written beforehand.
- Trying to count God’s thoughts toward us would be like trying to count the grains of sand.
- Unaware of his presence while he is asleep, David wakes up to realize he is still bound to God.

AND I AM WITH HIM

- David’s outburst against God’s enemies is an expression of covenant solidarity with Him.
- David welcomes God’s all-seeing and all-knowing presence in every aspect of his life
- What David is desiring is what we have in Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit living in us.
- To be loved is the desire of every human being. The deepest of human loves -- marriage, family and friendship -- these require transparency. We fear letting others in. But God says, “I’m already in. I already know everything...and I still love you.” If you doubt it, just look at the cross.
- To be fully known and to be fully loved. This is what it means to be a Christian.

Discussion:

1. Is God’s complete knowledge of you intimidating or liberating?
2. Have you ever tried to “run from God”? How did that turn out?
3. How does it make you feel to know that when you “make your bed in *Sheol*” God is still with you?
4. Child-bearing was a mysterious experience to the ancients. Has science added to or subtracted from that mystery?
5. What does it mean that “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be”? Has God predetermined everything? What about human free will?
6. Is David expressing personal animosity in verses 19-22 or is he protecting God’s honor? How?

7. If God already knows everything, why does David conclude his prayer by asking for God to search him? In what sense does David want to be tested?

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