

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY IN THE BOOK OF PSALMS – PART FIVE

Let us go back to the same approach we used in the first three sections of the Psalms as we study this final group.

Each Psalm is a 'prescription'. But the right prescription must be fitted to the right disease. Read one Psalm at a time and then answer these questions.

1. Was the writer admitting a particular problem or need? What was it? How do people have the same need today?
2. To what extent had the writer's need been met by the end of the Psalm? What questions still remain unanswered?
3. What answer does the writer find to his own questions? How does the New Testament present the same idea?
4. To a person facing what sort of life circumstances might you recommend this Psalm?
5. What does the Psalm teach us about Christ?

When you have completed this section of Psalms, answer two more questions.

6. What ideas have you found repeated in more than one Psalm?
7. How does each Psalm lead on to the next one?

Psalm 107 introduces this final section of the Psalms with a review of some of the reasons we have for giving thanks to God. Always the cause is the same, His loving kindness. Paul frequently repeats the same idea in the New Testament for example in Col.3:15-17 where he urges us to be thankful for His peace, His word and His authority in all we do. We would normally say 'please' first for what we want and then 'thank you' when we receive it. In our relation with God it can be reversed if we heed this Psalm and recognise all He has already given us and who He is. The Israelites were to say thank you first for their redemption from Egypt and the way they were led through the wilderness to the land of Canaan. He met their thirst and their hunger as He meets our thirst for His Spirit and our hunger for His word. Some were prisoners like Joseph, Samson and Jeremiah in the Old Testament or Peter and Paul in the New, and the Lord got them out of jail. We can be trapped in the prison of our own habits but He will free us if we truly trust Him. Some imprisoned themselves in needless rules but Jesus sets us free.(Mark 7:19) Others like Jonah or the disciples of Jesus were caught in storms at sea and were rescued as we will be delivered from our storms of inner anxiety if we remember His loving kindness. Four times the simple secret is revealed. When we cry to the Lord in our trouble He will save us out of our distress. We will see adversity in the lives of the wicked but God's loving provision for the needy who look to Him. We will witness arrogant leaders taking their people nowhere but the needy being cared for by Him. Thank you Lord!

Psalm 108 continues to praise God with musical accompaniment for who He is, above all His loving kindness. But now the writer links this to His truth which defines for us who He is. Jesus according to John is the Logos, the written word of God.(Jn.1:1,14) Jesus Himself claimed to be the Truth who both opened the Way to God and provided us with the Life of God.(Jn.14:6) In this Psalm He is praised first for His deliverance of us, then for His provision and His promise of victory over our enemies. We cannot do these things ourselves but in His strength we can.

Psalm 109 is a lengthy complaint about the behaviour of David's enemies who had attacked him verbally and physically over and over again without justification. David demanded God's judgement on those who had treated him so badly and set out in detail what he hoped would happen to his attackers and their descendants. More than anything what he needed was to know that God

had heard him and would act. Knowing that God hears us and has our problems under His control is the first necessary step to forgiving those who abuse us. It is a portion of His lovingkindness which David longed for and so do we.

Psalm 110 is a powerful answer to the complaint of the previous Psalm. Verse 1 is quoted by Jesus to the Pharisees to show them that the promised son of David in the future would also be one who could be called Lord and would one day rule the world after defeating His enemies.(Matt.22:44) The son of David, a title often given to Jesus, would also be the son of God. Verse 4 offers another remarkable clue to the identity of Jesus, as a priest in the order of Melchizedek who came to meet Abraham in Genesis 14 after he had freed Lot and his family from the invading armies and gave him bread and wine. Hebrews (5:6; 6:20) develops this explanation to explain that Jesus was like Melchizedek in that he was a high priest for ever who would continually offer His own life as the one complete sacrifice for our sin. Knowing this is the one satisfying, lasting answer to our doubts when we are under attack.

Psalm 111 returns to the theme of why and with whom we should praise and thank God. He has done amazing things in the world and for us personally beginning with our redemption from the slavery of sin and including His provision for our basic needs every day. He has been absolutely faithful to what He promised so we can always trust Him. But trusting Him leads to doing what He commands us. For this to happen we need to study His word regularly and in depth. Learning the word of God and praising Him is intended to be both a private experience and a shared one.

Psalm 112 continues to develop our understanding of the role of God's word in our worship of Him in our daily lives. Again the key idea is to delight greatly in His commandments which will go hand in hand with fearing Him. We cannot delight in what we have not bothered to read and meditate on. Delighting in His word will affect the next generation and how much our home has to offer to all with whom we come in contact. The riches will be primarily spiritual riches rather than money in the bank, though the Lord may also choose to trust us with material resources to be used well. Valuing the grace of God will keep our personal behaviour on God's track so that we will always have much to offer to the needy, whether temporarily as a loan or as a gift. Living generously will mean we have nothing to fear and will eventually be greatly respected even by some of those who have opposed God.

Psalm 113 is another Psalm of praise but this time the emphasis is on the name of God. To give our name to a project is to give our authority to a plan or to the means of its provision. Moses was commanded not to use the Lord's name in vain.(Exod.20:7) This means far more than a ban on swearing. Don't ask God in prayer for something if it is not His idea. To fulfil this commandment we need to know the will of God and to do this we need constantly to be searching His word.(I Jn.5:14) To pray 'in the name of Jesus' without hearing His plan is to use His name in vain. When we search for His plan we discover on the one hand how great He is and at the same time how humble He is to have come as a man to earth to help the poor and needy. And we will want to serve as He does.

Psalm 114 looks back on one of the foundational stories of scripture, the journey from Egypt to Canaan. It took them from a place where they knew they did not belong to somewhere they would regard for ever as home just as responding to the gospel takes us from a hostile world to be at home in Christ. There were unforgettable milestones along the way. God took them through the Red Sea,(Exod.14) picturing death and resurrection as we do in baptism. He led a new generation through the same experience at the River Jordan.(Josh.3) He met the people of Israel at Mt.Sinai where the mountain erupted,(Exod.19) because God wanted their attention for His plan for life. He provided water which pictured His Spirit,(Jn.7:37-39) to give them His life on two occasions,

reminding them that they could not live His plan without His presence in their lives.(Exod.17; Num.20) As we read His word He will take us on the same journey.

Psalms 115 invites a simple choice between the God of the Bible and man-made gods. The former is our Creator who loves us, tells us the truth, remembers us, helps us, protects us and causes our families to flourish. The latter are dead, unfeeling, uncaring, cannot communicate – just like those of us who created idols. Heaven belongs to God. Earth He has given to us temporarily – but look what a mess we have made of it! The Lord waits to bless us beyond our wildest dreams. All we have to do is to trust Him wholeheartedly. Let's do it!

Psalms 116 is the song of someone who made the right choice in the depth of adversity and despair to trust the Lord and Him only. He experienced His compassion, salvation, and grace and was rescued from what seemed like inevitable sorrow and death. He is overflowing with thanksgiving for God's goodness and faithfulness. But how did he know he could trust the Lord in such desperate circumstances? Because of His word which tells what God promises and how He has kept those promises to His people in a multitude of different situations. The writer wants everyone else to know how good God is and to show his own trust in Him in his life.

Psalms 117 is the shortest of the Psalms. It adds no new information but its message is vital and needed restating to be sure it had been heard. There are two reasons all of us, worldwide, should praise God. The first has to do with His character, great lovingkindness. He cares deeply about all of us and wants to show it. He tells the truth and is the Truth.(Jn.14:6) Nothing God says or does is dishonest, deceitful or manipulative. If we really want to praise Him for His lovingkindness and truth, our whole lives will show these characteristics to the whole world, the whole time.

Psalms 118 expands the theme of the lovingkindness of God, repeating it many times and applying it to real life situations. It is so much better to trust in Him than in human beings, even rich and powerful ones. Sometimes the numbers of those against us and their strength seem overwhelming and disaster seems imminent like being pushed over a cliff. The Lord steps in often at the last moment and we have huge cause to celebrate and to tell the whole world. God is teaching me big things in tough times but never gives up on me. Remember how Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders but became the foundation of the church. This is the ultimate grounds for celebration. By His sacrifice He has blessed us and always will if we trust Him and say thank you.

Psalms 119 is the centrepiece of the final book of Psalms. It is all about the word of God and what it can do in our lives. It is divided into 22 sections of 8 verses; each section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet which has only 22 letters. My suggestion is that we work through this Psalm with a series of questions firstly looking at the overall pattern. Nearly every verse contains 1 or more of 9 words for the Bible. What are these 9 words? Take each of the 9 words in turn. What does the word mean? What special emphasis in our thinking about the Bible and its purpose does each word contribute? Now to see how these key ideas are developed section by section, let us dig deeper.

1. In the first section, v.1-8, five words are used to describe what we are to do about the Bible. What are they? What does each one mean in practice? Put them in one sentence to explain how to have effective Bible study. What in this section are promised to be the results in our lives of studying and applying the Bible?
2. The early Christians are sometimes called 'those belonging to the Way'(Acts 9:2). What does the second section,(v.9-16) teach about the effect of Bible study on our 'way', the quality of our daily lives?
3. How does the third section,(v.17-24) show us how really to understand the Bible? Why is it that we sometimes do not seem to be getting any thing out of it?

4. What help can the Bible be when we are facing great sadness.(v.25-32)
5. What effect will regular Bible study have on our own thinking?(v.33-40)
6. What marvellous discovery is going to hit us as we study the Bible and trust what the Lord teaches us? What impact will this process have on our words, way of living and inner experience?(v.41-48)
7. According to this next section how will the word of God help us when we face hard times, particularly from those who are against God? How will this make a difference when we struggle to sleep?(v.49-56)
8. What does the next section emphasise about our best response to the Lord, His word, our own behaviour and the pressure on us at difficult times? Who will be our closest friends?(v.57-64)
9. Reading or hearing the word of God is a good start but something more is needed for it to change us. How can God teaching us His word affect our view of Him and His plan for our lives? What part does adversity have in making us teachable?(v.65-72)
10. How does learning from God change our view of hard times? And how does watching our growth despite problems affect those who know us? Should adversity be enjoyable?(v.73-80)
11. When the Lord is our Teacher how does He change our view of time? When God's intervention seems slow what should be our response?(v.81-88)
12. What is unchanging and always certain in an otherwise changing world? How does knowing this help us as we face yet another new challenge?(v.89-96)
13. How can a student know more than his teachers and a young person than his elders? What effect does it have if we fall in love with God's word?(v.97-104)
14. A lamp would only be bright enough to show us where we are standing. A light would show the path ahead. How can the word of God do both for us? What needs to be the attitude of our hearts for this to be our ongoing experience? What kind of hazards await us on the path of life? How can we avoid them?(v.105-112)
15. The book of James urges us to ask for God's wisdom but to do it wholeheartedly.(Jas.1:8; 4:8) What according to this section of Ps.119 is involved in being single-minded in our search for wisdom? Where does this wisdom come from? What are the consequences of being single or double-minded?(v.113- 120)
16. If we have chosen to follow the Lord wholeheartedly what can we expect from Him when we face adversity and opposition? What will He do first which will keep me on the right track? How then will I come to regard His word?(v.121-128)
17. How does seeing and hearing the word of God develop a hunger to know more and a longing to live what we have learned? How again does this equip us to deal with those who would oppress us and lead us astray?(v.129-136)
18. What does this next section teach us about God Himself? About His word? About ourselves? About our difficult circumstances?(v.137-144)
19. There are times when we cry out desperately to God for help. When and how should we do this for God to answer us? What will we learn when we cry to Him with all our hearts?(v.145-152)
20. When we are being treated badly what should be our expectation of the Lord and His word? What should we loathe and what should we love?(v.153-160)
21. How does the theme of living through adversity continue in this next section? Where this time does adversity come from and what characterises it? In the face of such treatment what is emphasised three times as needing to be our attitude to God's word?(v.161-168)
22. Many of the preceding sections have focused on hardship and opposition from whatever cause but this last part goes deeper to look at the real reason why human life is tough. What is it? How in practical terms will choosing the Lord and His word as our response to life work out? How will our whole approach to life be changed? Why did it take 176 verses before the writer finally faced this? How long has it taken us?(v.169-176)

Psalm 120 begins a series of short simple Psalms which explore how the magnificent message of 119 applies to life. The first question is how to deal with the deceitful tongue whether some else's or my own. The answer will be in the soul which now knows the truth of the word of God which maintains peace in my heart and provides answers to the nonsense I will hear from others.

Psalm 121 describes the confidence the word will give me to look first to the Lord in difficult times rather than trying everything else first. He will be ready at all times of the day and night and in all circumstances. He will guard me from the silly mistakes I would otherwise have made.

Psalm 122 focuses on Jerusalem, the centre of which was the temple, the place in the Old Testament where God could always be found and where the word of God was kept. If we look to Him and His word we will enjoy His peace and all His wonderful resources. The city of Jerusalem has enjoyed very little peace down through the centuries and today but the new temple is our bodies,(I Cor.3:16; 6:19) where He guarantees peace if we thank Him for His promises.

Psalm 123 reminds us that when the wealthy and comfortable look down on us we have only to look to the Lord like a servant to his or her master or mistress. As we remain available to Him for service He will be gracious to us. He will give to us without limit according to our every need. Why look in any other direction?

Psalm 124 continues the theme of whose side God is on when it seems like the whole world is against us. The writer compares our escape from certain destruction to a bird escaping from a trap just before the hunter found it.

Psalm 125 pictures the Lord's protection as being as settled and unchanging as the mountains surrounding Jerusalem. There is one essential condition that we also choose to be unchanging in our desire to walk only in His way.

Psalm 126 recalls Israel's delivery from slavery in Egypt, the joy they experienced and the awe their rescue by God provoked among the surrounding nations. Our salvation should still be a cause of immense joy. It begins as the Truth is sown in our and other's lives and the consequences are reaped in changed lives.

Psalm 127 emphasises how hard work, watching carefully, and long hours are futile if we are not depending on God's loving, gracious provision. In our devotion to earning money we can easily forget God's amazing gift to us of children who, if well cared for, are a far greater achievement than any material possession.

Psalm 128 extends the promise of blessing in the family to a second generation. If the Lord is everything to us we will enjoy our marriages and children and even our grandchildren will be likely to trust Him and be fruitful. Our family dining table will be a place of immense delight.

Psalm 129 warns us at the same time not to be surprised that the whole of life will be tough. We will be persecuted and bullied but the Lord will deal with those who do this. What they do to others will be turned back on them. They will miss out on God's blessing. How sad!

Psalm 130 reminds us of where God's blessing starts. When we call to Him from the depths of our heart He is waiting to forgive us totally. Then we can have absolute confidence He hears us and gives us hope beginning with redemption, freedom from our previous slavery to selfishness.

Psalm 131 is a quiet reflection by David on where he is in his life journey. His achievements had been outstanding in laying the foundation of his kingdom. His mistakes had been outrageous but were forgiven. In this Psalm he puts both aside to consider what really counts in his life. It is only his relationship with the Lord which he compares to that of a weaned child resting on his mother. He has been fed. He is loved and secure. Nothing else really matters.

Psalm 132 recalls David's great ambition to build a house for God in Jerusalem, the temple.(I Chron.22:7) He knew the Lord had made great promises to him about his descendants who would reign forever in the person of Jesus who would one day be born like David in Bethlehem Ephrathah. He longed to make the Lord thoroughly and comfortably at home in his city as He would one day be at home in His people.(I Cor.3:16; 6:19) God had anointed David as king for a lifetime but in future would anoint Jesus as His King for ever.(Acts 10:38)

Psalm 133 is another gentle meditation on a beautiful but not always realised aspect of Christian fellowship, our oneness in Christ. David compares it to oil poured over the head of Aaron the high priest which trickled down his beard. Our hair can blow in all directions in the wind but a generous dose of oil would stick it all together. Oil in the Bible pictures the Holy Spirit who alone effectively makes us one.(Eph.4:1-6; Heb.1:9)

Psalm 134 urges us to bless the Lord who blesses us. How do we bless Him? By serving Him in His sanctuary, His house, His body. The Old Testament word for bless is 'barak', literally to kneel before. The New Testament uses 'makarios', happy. We make God happy when we serve Him.

Psalm 135 praises God for who He is and for what He has done. He is good and lovely, and He has chosen us as His people. He is great and has done a wonderful job in creation. He demonstrated His power to Pharaoh to make him release the Israelites and to the kings of Canaan to compel them to let Israel possess the land God had given them. He is everlasting and compassionate in contrast to man-made gods who are nothing and can do nothing. Isn't it obvious that He is the only God to praise by welcoming Him to live in and among us?

Psalm 136 builds on the previous Psalm by reminding us 26 times, once in each verse, of His lovingkindness which is everlasting. Again we are reminded why we have every reason to thank Him, first for who He is and then for what He has done. He is good and all powerful as He showed in creation and then in delivering Israel from Egypt and establishing them in their new land. He will now do exactly the same in our lives if we let Him. All we have to do is to thank Him and let Him.

Psalm 137 was apparently written much later than David's time when the Jews had been defeated for the third time and taken captive by Babylon in 586BC.(II Kgs.25) It was a terrible experience which finally taught them the futility of worshipping other gods. For 70 unhappy years they were displaced people compelled to serve another king. Their captors tormented them by ordering them to sing the songs of worship they used to sing in Jerusalem but which now seemed totally out of place. Yet like us in difficult times they realised their only hope was to remember that God was still their only answer. They violently expressed their anger against their neighbours, the Edomites, who had urged the Babylonians on at the time of their defeat.(Obad.10-12) The Lord allowed the writer to express honestly his murderous hatred of the enemy as He wants us to tell Him frankly our worst feelings.

Psalm 138 is in complete contrast. David is saying thank you because God has been faithful to His word and answered his prayer. He recognises that this is a message for the whole world. There is

one condition for Him to bless us, when we humble ourselves before Him when we are in trouble. This is the lesson the Jews finally learned in Babylon 500 years later. Why are we so slow?

Psalm 139 reminds us that there is no escaping God's intimate knowledge of our lives, not just of our actions but our thoughts. We cannot escape anywhere in the distant universe or in the darkest, deepest place on earth from Him. He created us in our mother's womb. He even knows our futures. Would it not be better to listen to the expert on us before rushing into judgement on God's enemies? But first we need to hear how wisely He understands us.

Psalm 140 re-examines the battle that goes on in our minds when others treat us badly. Evil begins in the heart but then is expressed by the tongue like the attack of a poisonous snake. Their strategy so often is to trip and trap us by temptation. The only answer is to trust God to save us and so not to allow our enemies to win. The result will be disastrous for them as their malice falls on their own heads. We can be absolutely confident if we thank Him that He will protect all of us, particularly the most vulnerable.

Psalm 141 continues to explore the process of prayer in which we call on the Lord for help when we are under attack. The greatest dangers are that we will open our mouths when they should have stayed shut, and that we will be sucked in by the example of those around us who do wrong. We should be grateful for tough words from friends who love the Lord. These will strengthen our determination to resist wrong example and to reply gently but powerfully. We need to keep our eyes on Christ and leave the wicked to self-destruct.

Psalm 142 understands the loneliness of our souls when we are being treated badly by others. The Lord is the only one who always knows, understands and cares, so talk to Him first. Again David talks of the traps that are set. He wrote this when he was in the cave of Adullam pursued by Saul's men. The traps that have been set throughout history are the same – girls, glory and gold – and many well known Christian leaders have fallen into them. Recognise that He is the only answer and humbly thank Him. His goodness will overwhelm us.

Psalm 143 moves on a step further in exploring our prayers while we are suffering. Remember always that God answers because of His righteousness not our own. At our lowest point when it all seems too much He wants to lead us in prayer back to the memory of who He is, what He has done in the past and what He promises now. We would like His answer now but first He wants to teach us how to walk His path day by day, hiding in Him from trouble, enjoying Him and His loving kindness. Then He will deal with the opposition. Our job is to serve Him.

Psalm 144 reminds us that life is a battle but one which God has already won for us. Experiencing the reality of His victory begins with knowing that He is the only foundation for our lives and that if we have based our very brief lives on Him, He will move into action against our enemies. We can celebrate who He is and know that our lives will be blessed and so will our families.

Psalm 145 is the last of David's songs of praise in which he reviews some of the qualities of God and what a difference each one makes in daily life. He has awesome power which is a huge relief when we know that He can be our strength. He is gracious and merciful, and good to us which is a wonderful relief when we mess up. He sustains us when we fall over and are needy. He is righteous and kind, and right there when we want to talk to Him. He will keep us and deal with our attackers if we love Him.

Psalm 146 begins the final five Psalms of praise by unknown writers. The psalmist urges us not to trust earthly leaders who can do nothing for us and who are so temporary. He lists just some of the exciting things the Lord will do for us if we trust Him. As the Creator of the world meeting our needs is no problem to Him however downtrodden we are. He will be there for us at all times.

Psalm 147 tells us why we should praise the Lord. He has done big things in creating galaxies in His amazing wisdom and yet He cares for the smallest people who are broken hearted and afflicted. We can thank Him for the magnificent clouds which provide the rain our harvest needs and for the way He meets every need not for the powerful but for those who trust Him in their weakness. He wants to bless our whole community if we will listen to Him together. Then the world will sit up and take notice of our message.

Psalm 148 explains who should praise God, beginning with the angels in heaven and coming down to the world we live in, from the rich and powerful to the ordinary people, both young and old. We should praise Him for His name which represents His authority and power which in turn He delegates to those who serve Him.

Psalm 149 offers ideas on how to praise the Lord. We can worship Him with singing and dancing backed by a full orchestra. We can thank Him happily as we lie in bed. We can exalt Him as we use the two-edged sword of His word,(Heb.4:12) to convince people of the love of Christ. We can show the world the beauty of His salvation in our lives. Every believer can have some part of this exciting divine production.

Psalm 150 concludes this extraordinary hymn book with the command to praise God in 13 ways. We are to praise Him in our special meeting places, in the vastness of space, for what He has done and who He is. Every musical instrument they possessed had a part to play as every one of us is invited to have a special part in His plan to let all of humanity know who the real God is. Join us!