

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

Studying the book of Psalms is a different experience from any other Bible book. Each of the 150 Psalms can stand alone but they were nevertheless grouped by the Holy Spirit into 5 sections. These are unlike the chapter divisions of the rest of the Bible which were added by translators, sometimes helpfully and sometimes not. Each of the 5 sections ends with a similar prayer of thanks to God. The first one, 41:13, sets the tone for the rest, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.” Each section has a unique theme and there are some themes running through the whole book. As you come across these themes it would be good to write them down and then review and add to them. The overriding theme is the Christ who was to come, Jesus, so expect more than anything in each Psalm to meet Jesus Christ in some aspect of His life and ministry.(Lk.24:27; 32, 44-47)

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 1 sets out the choice we will face in every Psalm – in whom will we trust? We are urged to walk, stand and sit in His counsel.(v.1) We are to delight in His law and to meditate on it day and night.(v.2) The result is that we become like a tree planted by a river which never runs dry, rather than one struggling to survive in the desert which is destroyed by adversity. Our constant ‘leaves’ mean that life is always evident and our ‘fruit’ is the fruit of the Spirit, regardless of circumstances.(Gal.5:22.23) Every Psalm asks us to make up our minds – the river or the desert? Christ or self?

Psalm 2 plunges us straight into politics, the attitudes of leaders to Jesus Christ. In their arrogance they reject His rule and promote their own. The Jerusalem Christians recognised the significance of this Psalm in their own situation when Peter and John were ordered to keep quiet about the risen Christ yet politely but firmly refused.(Acts 4:25,26) The believers remembered how the Psalm continued with God laughing at earthly leaders who dared to play God and who would be dealt with in judgement, and how He would make Christ king anyway. The writer of Hebrews would pick up this theme in his opening statement about Jesus as the Son of God.(Heb.1:5; 5:5) Leaders at every level from presidents and prime ministers to mayors and MPs should begin every day in leadership by asking the question, ‘Who is the King today?’

Psalm 3 by contrast describes a leader under intense pressure to the point where people have written him off. The setting is the time when Absalom was David’s son, winning support from the people, proclaiming himself king and driving David for the moment into exile.(II Sam.15) David prayed in desperation and then went to sleep. When he awoke he had his confidence restored that

the Lord, not he, would deal with those who followed Absalom. And He did! He is our shield of faith.(Eph.6:16)

Psalm 4 extends the same discovery to all the other tough times in life when people are against us. Again there is one simple solution – pray, acknowledge we cannot fix anything of ourselves and then trust Him not just to fix the problem but to fix us by living through us. Then we will have something to offer to the needy world around us who have no hope, joy or peace. Paul applied this Psalm to the place, sometimes, for righteous anger that leads to appropriate action rather than just raised blood pressure.(Eph.4:26)

Psalm 5, like the two before it, is a prayer addressed to God. It begins as we so often do with groaning and complaining and ends with joy and confidence which springs from the security of knowing and trusting Him. It recognises that what brings this change of mood is a fresh realisation that to enter His presence we need first to acknowledge that all of us are utter sinners whose only hope is complete forgiveness. Paul uses this Psalm to demonstrate that all have sinned.(Rom.3.9)

Psalm 6 is another prayer beginning in the depth of despair and ending on a note of hope because we know God hears. The reason for despair is grief, the result of feeling alone in the face of overwhelming opposition. The grief may be internal in the form of depression or external because of those who are giving us a hard time. Jesus quotes verse 7 in Matt.7:23 to express His sorrow at those who pretend to serve Him but do not trust Him. The ultimate grief is in death and its anticipation. Won't it be too late then to give thanks to God? The answer comes in the fresh recognition of God's lovingkindness by which we know He cares, has forgiven, is in us and is in charge. What a relief!

Psalm 7 moves prayer to a new level. It is a Shiggaion, a wild passionate song, so a very public celebration of the message of the last few Psalms. It begins with the conviction that because we have taken refuge in God we are safe from the enemy whether internal or external. It reminds us that we cannot sin and be at peace at the same time. It expresses excitement about what God will do against all attacks because we have trusted Him. There is one simple condition of victory, repentance which means we do not have to face the judgement of God and fall into the pit we have dug by our rebellion. James 1:15 uses this Psalm to explain the progression from temptation to spiritual death. But we have been rescued. Thank you Lord. You are so good to us!

Psalm 8 is another song to be shared publically in worship. It leaves the struggles of the last few Psalms behind to look again at the big picture. The Lord is the Creator, all wise, all powerful, evident in His work as we look at the stars. Who He is and what He has done is clear even to a new baby! Jesus quotes this Psalm in Matt.21:16 to remind the religious leaders and the listening crowd how babies can see what the religious have missed. How could anyone doubt who is in charge in the face of opposition? And what is equally exciting is that He has put us in charge of His work on earth, on the ground, in the air and the sea to care for what He made. What a privilege!

Psalm 9 continues the public celebration of the wonders of the Creator who has put us in charge not just of the physical earth to care for it well but of the spiritual task of caring for those who are oppressed and struggling. It is hugely exciting to be able to tell and show those who are suffering that we can hide in Him and watch two things happen. The wicked will eventually self destruct and face the judgement of God. Because of the blood of Christ we are forgiven and safe for eternity. This Psalm develops further the challenge of not only walking confidently with God but of walking beside those for whom life is hard, to share the same discovery with them. This is the underlying principle for Paul when urging us to 'Bear one another's burdens.'(Gal.6:2; Rom.15:1) Let's do it!

Psalm 10 pauses from the series of songs to be sung in confidence of God's victory over those who oppose us to express again the question which is in our hearts in tough times. Why does the Lord seem distant when the enemy who seeks to destroy us is so close? First the writer, not necessarily David this time, explores the heart of the enemy. In his pride he denies the existence of God, believes himself invincible and lets everyone know he is in charge. Like Peter, the writer compares the enemy to a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.(I Pet.5:8,9) Our earthly enemies are simply agents of Satan and need to be recognised as such. They convince themselves that if there is a God, He does not see or care. The writer of the Psalm commits the situation to the Lord confident that He will deal with the enemy. Like Peter he knows that if he humbles himself before God,(I Pet.5:6) and so resists the Devil, the enemy will flee.

Psalms 11,12 and 13 are short but passionate questions from doubt during adversity, cries for help in hard times. What is so valuable about these Psalms is that God inspired them to be included to encourage everyone struggling with doubt, fear or anger that it is OK to have such feelings and that God wants to hear from our hearts. Psalm 11 asks how the Lord can urge us to fly like a bird to take refuge in Him when the enemy is likely to shoot us in mid-flight? The answer is rather to ask the question - whom do I trust in hard times, not how secure are my circumstances? James reminds us that life is a trial in which the Lord encourages us to persevere in trusting Him.(Jas.1:12)

Psalm 12 struggles with the observation that there seems to be a high drop-out rate among believers who lie to each other and flatter rather than telling the truth. The Lord always tells the absolute truth, so trust Him rather than His so-called followers. Paul warns how damaging such people are particularly when they pose as teachers.(Rom.16:17,18)

Psalm 13 acknowledges that so often we feel down because we have been talking to ourselves rather to Him. We have hidden from God like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden,(Gen.3:8) not He from us. No-one is hidden from God.(Heb.4:13) On the other hand God's wisdom is hidden,(I Cor.2:7) but it is hidden in Jesus Christ,(Col.2:3) so when we enjoy Him all the secrets will be revealed. He longs for us to listen only to Him and enjoy His best.

Psalm 14 is a key Psalm which invites reflection on the ideas which have gone before. It will be repeated almost word for word in Psalm 53 which is about the same distance into Book Two. The opening verses provide the fundamental concept of the chapter in Romans which in turn is the foundational argument of that book.(Rom.3:7-10) And where would our understanding of the gospel be without Paul's letter to the Romans? The fool can be very intelligent, with multiple degrees and the ability to use big words but he is a fool because he thinks and lives as if there was no God, knowing perfectly well Who and What God is, according to Rom.1:18-23; 2:12-16; 10:14-21. All humanity start life as fools, until as Proverbs 1:1-7 puts it, we become the simple, open to learn or be led astray, after which we can become the wise, able to recognise what is true, apply it and build on it. Those who persist in being fools know that they face the judgement of God for their rejection of His wisdom and their persecution of His people who trust Him. When Jesus came He began to reveal salvation and the process of restoring people to normal. Why stay a fool?

Psalm 15 provides a lovely contrast to the acknowledgement that all have sinned.(Rom.3:23) If we not only take refuge in Him when we are in trouble but choose to make Jesus our permanent home, like the branch in the vine,(Jn.15:1-11) here are some examples of what we will look like. There is something immensely attractive about those with integrity who are genuine and real. What you see is what you get. What you hear is true and caring, not critical and destructive. The person of integrity chooses not to go the way of the community he lives in but to support his fellow believers.

He sticks to what he promises even when it costs him. He is not interested in money for its own sake and cannot be bought at any price.

Psalm 16 goes on to describe just how good life will be in our new home in Christ. We have the ultimate security system. Our best friends with whom we will be mutually supportive are our fellow believers. To us they are the royal family! Together we choose not to go with the rest of the world who in their foolishness have chosen other gods. Some people are obsessed with what they will inherit materially. Forget it. We are heirs of Christ.(Rom.8:12-17) What more could we want? He will continually, day and night, offer us His wisdom on every situation we face. His presence in us will give us inexhaustible joy and confidence whatever we face including, one day, death itself.

Psalm 17 is another Psalm that starts with a confidence in our relationship with God that we are right with Him and therefore He will hear and act. Such a pure heart is not arrogance but the result of repentance and trust in Christ's work for us on the cross. We too can be in such a position. This means that when we face adversity and the attacks of the enemy yet again we can know who will win. As in Psalm 10, the image is of the prowling lion, used often to picture Satan.(I Pet.5:8,9) We seem to be a persecuted minority but as in the story of Daniel, the Lord will stop the lions' mouths.(Dan.6:22) We do not need to be like those who see success as position and possessions which they will pass to their descendants. We will be utterly satisfied with knowing Him.

Psalm 18 is the longest Psalm so far. It is recorded also, word for word, in II Sam.22. It is David's summing up of the many times in his life when he faced attack, feared at first and then trusted God and was rescued. He had been attacked by animals while a shepherd,(I Sam.17:31-40) by Goliath, repeatedly by King Saul who should have seen him as a loyal friend, and then by a succession of enemies from inside and outside Israel. He uses the picture of the Rock to describe how safe he knew he was in Christ.(I Cor.10:4) Each time the situation would seem hopeless until he cried to God for help. David uses powerful poetry to describe his heavenly Superhero moving into action to rescue him. Nothing was too hard for God, but victory was dependant on him trusting the Lord to keep him clean from sin. It is not automatic. Neither should we expect to stand by and passively watch God defeat the enemy. Again David uses vivid language to describe how much of what He does will be through us. Expect to be at the heart of the action. Pass this expectation to your children.

Psalm 19 sets out a remarkable proposition. God has spoken to us in two ways, through creation,(v.1-6) and through His word.(v.7-16) The sky has two ways of telling its story. The sun comes up day after day to give us light and life. Earth is just the right distance from the sun to give us an environment in which many kinds of life can flourish. The stars every night present us with a fascinating summary, understood by many ancient people in cartoon form, of the story of salvation.(Gen.15:4-6) Paul uses this Psalm in Rom.10:18 to remind us that no-one has any excuse for not having trusted God because of not having heard the Bible message. The second half of the Psalm goes on to show how the scriptures are an even better way to know God. They can restore us to God's original plan for man, make us wise, give us joy, purity and enlightenment. They are true, right and immensely desirable. They warn us, and if we listen, reward us. They show us our problem of sin and God's means of salvation which leads on to a God-ruled life.(II Tim.3:16,17) Let's allow the Bible to fill our minds and then our mouths.

Psalm 20 is the first Psalm to look beyond our own struggles to the problems of those around us who also need to learn to talk with God. The Lord wants them too to discover the security of hiding in Him on the basis of sacrifice, looking forward as always to the cross of Christ. He will

answer their prayers as He answers ours. Then we can celebrate together our shared certainty about God's anointed who will always be saved. Remember the name Christ means 'the anointed one'. As Christians the Anointed One lives in us.(I Jn.2:20,27) We have good news to shout about!(II Cor.11:16-12:10) Those who do not know Him will fall over. We who know Him will stay standing.

Psalm 21 again by David, the king, speaks of the king in the third person, he not I. He realises his royal crown was given to him by God not seized by him in his own military strength. He describes in an objective way how good God has been to him in strengthening and saving him with goodness beyond imagining. The result has been immense joy. The king has a simple secret to pass on. Trust God always and there is then no challenge too big for God to deal with, no enemy He cannot crush. He wants everyone else to know.

Psalm 22 opens with the words used by Jesus on the cross.(Matt.27:46) The Psalms were known to the Jews not by numbers but by the opening words. Jesus' hearers would immediately have thought of this Psalm and reviewed it as they saw Him hanging on the cross. He was surrounded by His enemies, laughed at by passers-by,(v.6-8) desperately thirsty, His joints dislocated by hanging,(v.11-16) His hands and feet pierced by nails,(v.16) and His few possessions gambled for by the soldiers.(v.18) Despite the terrible sense of being alone because the Holy Spirit had been withdrawn from Him while He bore the sin of the world, Jesus would still have continued to remind His hearers of the faithfulness of God to those who trust Him even in crucifixion. The Psalm becomes more and more positive as it moves on until finally as Jesus shouted from the cross 'It is finished!',(Jn.19:30) it ends in triumph, 'He has performed it.'(v.31)

Psalm 23 is the best known Psalm of all, well worth committing to memory for the hard times. In the first half David sees himself as one of God's sheep, an idea often taken up by Jesus in the New Testament.(Jn.10:1-30; Luke 15:1-7; Matt.25:31-46) His shepherd takes care of his every need beginning with food and water, for us the word and the Spirit, so that we have a God directed life. In the second half of the Psalm David as a man speaks directly to the Lord, confident of His overflowing care under all circumstances and for all of his life. We can have this marvellous sense of His protection as we live under threat of any kind.

Psalm 24 continues the ascent from the horror of the cross in 22, to the comfort of a caring shepherd in 23, to the supreme confidence of belonging to an Almighty Creator in this Psalm. There is one simple condition for enjoying His grace towards us, clean hands and a pure heart – what we do springs from who we are inside. The first indication of where we stand with God is in the absolute honesty of what we say. This confidence is the true basis for celebration in worship. The image used is of a city, presumably Jerusalem opening its gates to Him. Jesus' welcome into the city would be a foretaste of what is to come.(Matt.21)

Psalm 25 brings confidence in our Creator and Saviour to a more personal level. David is still sure God hears and answers those who trust Him. Three times he mentions God's forgiveness of our sin which is the starting point for the relationship. He is aware that humility and honesty are essential if we really want to be forgiven. Despite his certainty about his relationship with God he does not forget that he is surrounded by enemies against whom the Lord is his only hope. Paul reminds us that we are also surrounded by enemies behind whom is the real enemy, Satan, not to be taken lightly but yet already defeated by Jesus Christ. Be aware of his tricks!(II Cor. 2:11; 11:3; Jn.16:33)

Psalm 26 builds on the theme of the integrity of those who really trust the Lord in the face of their enemies. We will have nothing to hide from God. Our focus will be on the loving kindness of the One in whose presence we choose to be constantly. So much human behaviour is conditioned by the company we keep. We are to be separate from liars and cheats yet we have been sent among them as His witnesses.(Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8) This is only possible as we are at home with the Lord, starting at the cross. Because He has redeemed us we can walk honestly among the biggest crooks.(II Cor.6:14-18)

Psalm 27 voices the unshakeable optimism we have in Christ to face the worse situation, the most vicious enemy, when we are unreservedly at home in Him. He is the one safe place in which we can always take refuge, recalling all the stories of those like Moses, Samson and David who hid in a rock in challenging times. Every human may have left us but God is there. But He is not just a place of escape. In Christ we can shout our message to the world. Imagine you are Stephen facing a hostile court and a violent death.(Acts 6:8-7:60) From Him we can go on learning because every situation is new and He has vital things to say. The tougher our circumstance the more exciting it becomes to listen to Him. Don't miss out on the fun!

Psalm 28 takes a further look at what we can expect of the Lord in the face of the enemy. This time the issue is their hypocrisy; they talk peace but think to harm us, and will do so when the opportunity presents. Their real problem is that they disregard God and His works. In other words they are fools.(Ps.14:1) Their judgement is God's business not mine. The greatest danger is that we are dragged down by their example. As usual the only solution is to talk with God, to hide in Him. David is determined to enjoy His loving care, the relief of being carried like a lost sheep by the Shepherd.(Luke 15:1-7)

Psalm 29 is a song of praise to God. Everything worthwhile which happens as the lessons of the previous Psalms are learned is God's doing and He and He alone deserves the glory.(Matt.6:13) The reason for praising Him is because of His voice. God's way of intervening in His creation has always been by what He said. Genesis 1 repeatedly details the steps in creation "God said...and it was so." John's gospel begins "In the beginning was the Word..." God's way of changing us is by means of His Word as He speaks to us in scripture and in our hearts, communicating truth, and then making Truth into Life.(Jn.14:6)

Psalm 30 celebrated a special occasion when the House was dedicated. We are not told which house. The temple would not be built until Solomon's time. Whatever the project it was important to David and as usual there had been opposition. He had been tempted to panic and doubt but had come back to trusting the Lord. He knew he had a choice between the pit of death and the mountain of life. He determined to remain unmoved and God had dealt with the enemy and caused him to enjoy the whole experience. We have the same choice. Paul urges us whatever the pressure to choose in affliction to look at Christ not the problem.(II Cor.4:16-18)

Psalm 31 is another Psalm exploring the idea of hiding in Christ as in a Rock. There is an awareness yet again of all the enemies which surround us and want to destroy us. Their chief weapon is the mouth which slanders, lies and arrogantly attacks us. Such an assault on us can produce huge grief, sorrow, and deep distress. The secret of dealing with such attacks is not to fight back in the same way but in humility first to know we are utterly forgiven and then to answer, not in self defence, but in proclaiming the truth. If we tell Him how we feel He will reassure us and deal with the Enemy. Commit yourself into God's hands and you will be safe. Jesus and Stephen beautifully demonstrated this secret in action.(Lk.23:46; Acts 7:59)

Psalm 32 rejoices in the absolute forgiveness of God. This could have been written by David once he knew his sin with Bathsheba was completely forgiven. Whatever the circumstance he was enjoying the sense of cleanness before God which came once he acknowledged and confessed his sin that had been eating away at him.(I Jn.1:5-10) Now he knows he is safe from the worst that life can deliver. He wants everyone of us to enjoy the same confidence. Once forgiven David would be able to receive the wisdom of God again. He would be like a horse guided by his Rider, no longer out of control and heading for trouble. Whew, what a relief!

Psalm 33 is another song of celebration. This time the focus is on God's word which expresses His lovingkindness and power to change our lives. At creation He said and it was done. Why not let that be our daily experience? His plan is so much better than that of the smartest human leaders. He sees and understands us and He knows what we need. His power alone can do it. Why try to fix the world's problems in our strength? He knows who trusts Him and waits to rescue and bless us beyond our wildest expectations. This alone is to be the basis of our rejoicing.(Phil.4:4)

Psalm 34 praises the Lord because He always hears and answers our prayer. Boasting does not seem very Christian – but boast as loud as you like about how good our God is!(II Cor.10:13-18) This is the boast of the humble. He answers our prayer first when we are fearful of any kind of trouble, - poverty, enemies, death, saying the wrong thing, being broken-hearted and in pain.(Jn.19:33,36) It is a wonderful experience to see the radiance on the faces of those whose fear has been replaced by hope without necessarily knowing how God will fix our problems. Apparently the occasion for writing this Psalm was when David pretended to be crazy to avoid seeming a threat to the king of Gath.(I Sam.21:10-15) It did not work and he was thrown out. This song describes a much better way.

Psalm 35 returns to the theme of victory over our many enemies. David sees life like a battlefield with a powerful enemy but God is the hero who always wins. What a relief! He explores the tactics of the enemy. He uses hidden traps into which we fall. He robs us at our most needy times. He lies about us. He responds with evil when we do good. He ridicules us. The solution is always simple – enjoy Him, talk to Him, trust Him but don't try to answer the enemy ourselves. Let no-one but the Lord judge us. He alone is the judge.(Rom.2:1-11)

Psalm 36 investigates the mechanism of sin in our hearts. Because the fool has already chosen to live as if there is no God,(Ps.14:1) even though he knows there is one, the Devil will be able to flatter him into believing he can make a better job of running his life than God can.(Gen.3:1-5) This will show first in his words although it began in his heart, commonly as he lies in bed planning the next day. The constant alternative is to choose the lovingkindness, faithfulness, righteousness and plans of God by trusting Him and enjoying Him to the full. The key issue is pride, but consider where it leads!(Jn.16:8-11)

Psalm 37 points out why sin seems so attractive. We look at the selfish and greedy, and envy their seeming success, prosperity and comfort. We fail to notice how temporary it is and the miserable legacy of hurt and jealousy they leave behind. If in humility we trust the Lord He will always look after us and our children. The wicked self-destruct and end up hated and then forgotten. Even in hard times the Lord will look after us so that we not only have enough for us and our families but abundant grace to pass on to the needy. Our whole life is planned by God so together with Him we can enjoy the journey. Determine to travel only His way and we will enjoy the very best.(Eph.5:1-21) Look at history. Who is still remembered and loved, and who is despised?

Psalm 38 is described as a memorial but David does not tell us to what. After the previous Psalm which explains why sin is so attractive, it seems he is looking back on the bitter lessons learned from a time when he fell badly into sin. He is suffering possibly from physical pain but certainly from inner pain as he realises how his foolishness has brought God's deep disapproval upon him. But he realises that the Lord knows exactly how he feels, continues to love him and to be his only hope of salvation. His enemies are celebrating his failure and even his friends and family are keeping their distance exactly when he needs them most. He has learned that the best response to criticism at such a time is to be deaf and dumb to the enemy but to listen to God and keep talking to Him.(Lk.23:8-12)

Psalm 39 focuses on the sins of the mouth,(Jas.3) and the wisdom of keeping silent until we have first poured our hearts out to God and He has answered. Life is brief and full of uncertainty until we have our hope in Him. Gradually we experience as His response to our tears of repentance the reality of forgiveness and freedom from fear of His judgment. All too easily we blame God for adversity. Only when we learn to listen to God rather than grumble does our hurt begin to heal.

Psalm 40 moves on another step from the spiritual bog into which we fall by our sin whether by doing or by saying. David pictures the Lord lifting him out of the mud of failure on to solid rock of Christ from which he can sing in praise to which many will listen and believe. All God wants of us is the humility of trust and a hunger for truth by which we receive His word into our hearts and let Him live out His purpose through us. Religious activity is not what matters.(Heb.10:5-7) He loves us and will keep us despite our human rottenness. Life is tough and the enemy are numerous but we should not keep quiet.(Acts 20:20,27) They love to mock us in our weakness. All we have to do is to celebrate His goodness and leave our battles to Him. But please hurry up Lord!

Psalm 41 reminds us to look beyond our own troubles to the helpless and needy around us to whom we can be God's blessing even when everyone including our supposed friends turns against us. As always our confidence to support those who are struggling must begin by knowing we are forgiven. Then the gossip and slander bounce off without hurting. If God is pleased with me because of the cross of Christ what does it really matter what someone else thinks or says?(Matt.17:5)