

BIBLE STUDIES ON SELECTED PSALMS (PSALMS 1, 8, 13, 34, 72,
90, 103, 150) WITH AN INTRODUCTION

PREPARED FOR JOINT USAGE OF THE SISTER PRESBYTERIES OF
CHOGORIA PRESBYTERY OF KENYA AND THE PRESBYTERY OF
THE NORTHERN PLAINS IN THE UNITED STATES

PREPARED BY DR. STEPHEN A. REED

PROFESSOR AND CHAIR OF DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND
PHILOSOPHY

JAMESTOWN COLLEGE, JAMESTOWN, NORTH DAKOTA

JULY 2, 2012

Introduction

The book of Psalms is the hymnbook of Israel. Here one finds some of the most exalted religious poetry ever collected in one book. The Psalter is a collection of different types of literature such as complaints, thanksgivings, hymns, and wisdom songs. The people who wrote these psalms felt emotions such as sorrow and joy, love and hate; experienced the human events of birth and death, sickness and health; and saw war and peace, victory and defeat. Fully human like us they had their feet firmly planted on earth, but they directed their praises, prayers, and thanks, and doubts to God who was active in their midst. They did not live life alone on earth but in the presence of God.

Even though written over two millennia ago, the psalms are like mirrors in which we can see and understand our own emotions, experiences, and faith. Martin Luther wrote that “the psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.” Throughout the centuries the psalms have been used to express praise and thanks in worship services, to provide guidance and strength in private devotions, and to provide hope and consolation for the sick and dying.

Many of the psalms are addressed to God and so often the psalmist speaks to God as “you.” Sometimes the psalmist speaks about God. God is understood to be related in various ways to different realms of reality. One can speak about God and the world, God and the nations, God and the individual. I have chosen selected psalms which address how God is understood to be related to various realms.

The psalms were first written in Hebrew and then were later translated into Greek, Latin, Syriac and other languages. Sometimes there are textual variants in the different translations. Scholars have to decide how they should translate particular texts. This is sometimes why different translations into the same language, like English, may vary. The ancient Hebrew texts did not have any punctuation so modern scholars add this to make it easier for us to understand. Ancient copies of the Bible also did not have standard ways of dividing texts into parts like paragraphs in prose or stanzas in poetry. Modern scholars add these details as well.

Every translation and even every edition of the Bible is different so it is not possible to give instructions which will relate to each copy of the psalms that a person may have in front of one. Often, however, one will find some of the following features in a text of the psalms. If one has a Study Bible, there may be additional notes and comments at the bottom of the page.

1. Psalm + Number of Psalm
2. Description or title of Psalm

3. Superscription

4. Text itself

5. Textual notes (either as footnotes or side notes)

Most of the Psalms have a superscription written above the text which is not numbered. There are three types of information which can be found in the superscriptions: liturgical collections, technical terms used in worship and historical notes. Psalm 57 has all three types of information: “To the leader: Do Not Destroy. Of David. A Miktam, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.” Superscriptions vary in the different translations when one compares Hebrew and Greek and Syriac versions. Some superscriptions are already found in the Dead Sea Scrolls for some psalms but even here they sometimes vary from other Hebrew texts. These superscriptions appear to have been added by later scribes to psalms.

Some of the psalms have specific individuals listed in the superscription. Some 73 are “of David.” Other names found are Solomon, Moses, Korah, and Asaph. While the expression “of David” might mean written by David it might also be an indication that the psalm is written for David or in honor of David. While traditionally David was understood to be the author of many or even all of the psalms, many scholars today doubt that David wrote many of them. Thus, I will usually refer to the author as the “psalmist” and not assume any specific author.

Modern titles for psalms give various kinds of information to the reader. For instance in the Harper Collins Study Bible which uses the New Revised Standard Version one finds “National Lament of Prayer for Help” for Psalm 44 which tells about the type or genre of the psalm identified by “lament” and “prayer for help” which might well be two different types. The label “national” lets one know that the psalm likely reflects a “we” group who is praying this prayer. We do not learn about the particular problem which gave rise to this psalm. A title like “Human Wickedness and Divine Goodness” in Psalm 36 tells us about the content of the psalm. These titles vary in different translations.

Some translations of the psalms leave empty spaces between lines of the psalms to indicate basic parts of the psalm. As an example scholars have divided Psalm 12 into four parts.

These divisions might suggest the following outline:

Verses	Description
1-2	Prayer to LORD for help from those who speak falsehoods
3-4	Prayer that LORD will punish those who speak falsely
5-6	Speech of LORD in verse 6 followed by general statement about God’s words
7-8	Prayer of community of confidence that God will protect them

Verses 1-2 and 7-8 are prayers addressed directly to God and include invocations “O LORD” in verse 1 and verse 7. In verses 3-4 there is an indirect prayer made to God (May the LORD cut off all flattering lips”. In verses 5-6 there is first of all a speech of the LORD followed by a statement about God’s promises spoken by someone else.

These divisions make sense but the overall structure of the psalm still may not necessarily have four parts. For instance 1-2 and 3-4 seem linked together because of the common topic of the misuse of language found in both sections. In English one has “flattering lips” in verse 2 and verse 3 and “lips” in verse 4. Verses 5-6 and 7-8 seem separate from each other as well as 1-4 because they imply different speakers that are prominent in each section. It may be that 1-4, 5-6 and 7-8 are the major parts of this psalm in terms of the content.

Shifts in speakers within a psalm may indicate something about how the psalm was used in worship. It is useful to notice empty spaces within psalms and ask what they might mean.

The psalms are written in poetry. This is not ordinary language which we call prose but special language which takes more time to write and is sometimes difficult to translate into other languages. One feature of poetry is that there is more figurative language in poetry than in prose. Another aspect of Hebrew poetry is parallelism which means that individual lines often parallel previous lines. Two or in some cases three lines will convey a similar thought or idea.

When one reads Biblical poetry one needs to read more slowly than one reads prose. One must pay attention to figurative language which is used. In prose one thought often leads to the next thought in a sequence. This is somewhat different in poetry. There is still a sequence of thought that links together lines of a poem. In poetry, sometimes the flow of thought is interrupted as the poet pauses and then restates ideas. One needs to appreciate the flow of the ideas which enrich the meaning of the poem.

Lines of poetry are often made up of two or more parts. The first part of a line of poetry starts at the beginning of a line and then the next corresponding part (s) is indented below it. What complicates this is that in many Bibles there are two columns per page. While this works fine for prose texts, it is inadequate for poetic texts. Often the poetic line will not fit in the narrow column and so the end of a line must be indented.

One can compare Psalm 13:3-4 first when there is plenty of space to place all of the words on a line. Here the indentation shows the first and second parts of a poetic line.

³ Consider and answer me, O LORD my God!

Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death,

⁴ and my enemy will say, ‘I have prevailed’;

my foes will rejoice because I am shaken.

When one puts two columns on a page, however, there is not enough space to keep all of the words of a partial line of poetry on one line. Here one must indent the remaining words of a line. Below I indicate the spacing as is found in the New Revised Standard Version that I am using. When one reads psalms it is helpful to note the poetic lines of the psalms and the parts which are parallel to each other. One cannot read poetry as fast as one can read prose.

³ Consider and answer me, O LORD
 my God!
 Give light to my eyes, or I will
 sleep the sleep of death,
⁴ and my enemy will say, 'I have
 prevailed';
 my foes will rejoice because I
 am shaken.

One basic type of parallelism is synonymous parallelism in which two similar ideas are placed one after another: "Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment (Psalm 1:5a) is parallel to "nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." (Psalm 1:5b). The other type is antithetic parallelism: "for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous" (Psalm 1:6a) contrasts with "but the way of the wicked will perish." (Psalm 1:6b). Poetry also uses figurative language such as the righteous being compared to trees planted by streams of water that bear much fruit (Psalm 1:5) and the wicked being compared to "chaff that the wind drives away" (Psalm 1:4).

The way that a psalm is formatted and arranged on a page of your Bible can help you when you read the psalm. Each Bible uses a different way of formatting and one should be attentive to that. Older English translations before the Revised Standard Version of 1945 did not format poetry differently than prose. If one is reading the King James Version of 1611 one will not see special usage of indentation for the poetry.

Questions for reflection:

1. What types of prayers do we use for different purposes?
2. What are ways that we communicate with God? Publicly, privately
3. Do we need special times and places where we pray and worship?
4. Have you ever tried to write a prayer in poetry? Does God pay more attention to prayers that are carefully crafted as prayers that are simply extemporaneous?
5. Many of the psalms were probably accompanied by music and sung during worship. The poetic arrangement of the psalms made this possible. Have you ever tried to write several verses to a tune?

Psalm 1

Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm. It describes the contrast between two groups of people with two different ways of life: the wicked and the righteous. A person belongs to either one group or the other. The psalm has an educational function to teach the right way of life. The psalm intends to motivate the reader to proper behavior by saying that two ways of life will lead to two different results. You will reap what you sow. A popular American slogan is “Crime does not pay.” Jesus speaks like a wisdom teacher in Matthew 7:13: “Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

The psalm can also be called a “torah” psalm. Other Torah psalms are Psalm 19:7-13 and Psalm 119. “Torah” is a Hebrew word for teaching, instruction, revelation and law. The source of wisdom is God. Torah can sometimes refer to the revelation that God gave to the people through Moses but can also refer to any instruction from God. Since the term “law” has often been understood in a negative way because of Paul’s treatment of “law” in the New Testament, it is probably better to refer to it as “teaching” or “revelation.” When Paul speaks about “law” he indicates that it leads people to a knowledge of their sinfulness. He says that you cannot be saved by following the law but must be saved by grace. But “torah” was a source of joy for people in ancient times as is evident if one reads through Psalm 19 and 119.

The term for “torah” is used twice in this psalm: “their delight is in the *law* of the LORD”, and “and on his *law* they meditate day and night.” The focus of the psalm is on the person who meditates and delights in the law of God in contrast to those who pay no attention to God’s instruction. The image of meditation has sometimes been compared to a cow which chews its cud over and over again. In order to digest grass, the cow must do this. In a similar way, meditation means repeating the words of God over and over again. Joshua is told that he should meditate on God’s law and that this will lead to prosperity and success for him (Joshua 1:8). This psalm indicates that the same promise is for anyone.

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

- | | |
|--|------|
| I. Contrast between righteous & wicked | 1-5 |
| A. Beatitude concerning righteous | 1-3 |
| 1. Description of activities | 1-2 |
| 2. Description of destiny of righteous | 3 |
| B. (Curse) concerning wicked | 4-5 |
| 1. Negation of above | 4a |
| 2. Description of destiny of wicked | 4b-5 |
| II. Reason: Contrast | 6 |
| A. Yahweh knows righteous’ way | 6a |
| B. Way of wicked will perish | 6b |

Most of this psalm is focused upon the righteous and the blessing upon the righteous. Three verses deal with the righteous person and two deal with the wicked person. There is no specific mention that the wicked are “cursed” but they are not blessed. A parallel text in Jeremiah 17:5-8 contrasts those who are cursed with those who are blessed. For both the righteous and the wicked there is a description of their way of life and a description of their destiny. The psalm concludes with the reason for their different destinies: Yahweh (the LORD).

The psalm starts out with a “blessed” statement upon a person. There are two different terms in Hebrew which are sometimes translated as “blessed”: *ashre* and *baruk*. This psalm uses the term for *ashre* which can also be translated as “happy”. Calling someone happy is a means of evaluating a person’s state or condition. It means that something good has happened to someone and we let them know this. It is similar to saying “Congratulations”. Those who do not believe in God and his actions in the world more commonly say that someone is lucky or fortunate. The source of this happiness is God because he is the one who has given us Torah.

The first verse illustrates synonymous parallelism which means that ideas are repeated with slightly different words. There are three parallel statements in verse 1: “do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers.” While these statements are not identical they are similar. They all relate in various ways to being influenced by people who do not follow God. Some have thought that these three statements indicate a progressing heightening of wickedness: first the adoption of principles of the wicked as the rule of life, secondly persistence in the practice of notorious offenders, and finally the deliberate association with those who mock at religion. In verse six one finds antithetic parallelism—two lines that make a contrast between the destinies of the righteous and the wicked.

The psalm introduces the whole book of psalms. It indicates that obedience to the Torah should lead to praise of God. It specifies the right attitudes and actions for proper behavior. The one who is righteous is one who meditates upon the Torah that God has given. The psalm shows the kind of person that God desires to follow him and live in relationship to him. Those who meditate upon Torah are in the right place to give thanks, pray for help and give praise to God.

Questions for reflection:

1. What plant imagery is used to refer to the blessed and the one who is not blessed? What does this mean? Compare Jeremiah 17:5-8.
2. How can we live a life that is blessed? What should we not do? What should we do?
3. The psalm speaks about two groups of people: those blessed, and those who are not blessed. Is it always easy to tell the difference between these two groups of people? Are we sometimes like both of these groups?
4. What are ways that we can meditate on God’s word in our lives?

Psalm 8

This is a creation hymn which celebrates the prominent role which God has given humans on earth. It addresses God personally as you. The psalm begins and ends with the same statement: “O LORD, our sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” This is an example of an inclusio. The psalm starts out as communal praise (“our Sovereign”) but then shifts to a personal reflection (“When I look at your heavens”).

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

I.	Communal praise	1-2
II.	Individual adoration	3-8
	A. Exclamation (question)	3-4
	B. Direct praise (answer)	5-6
	C. List of subdued creatures	7-8
III.	Communal praise	9

The psalm starts out speaking about God as king who rules over every possible foe and enemy. He is sovereign and his name is majestic. He has power over all and has established a place of refuge (bulwark) to provide protection from all foes. It is unclear who might be an enemy of God. In Canaanite religion Baal must defeat forces of evil named Yamm (the Sea) and Mot (Death) before order can be established and the world can be made secure. There are hints of Yahweh battling powerful forces in Psalm 74:13-14 and Psalm 89:11.

The expression “Out of the mouths of babes and infants” is odd and it is difficult to imagine how Yahweh could establish order from such weakness. Perhaps that is the point. God is so powerful that he can work even through babes and infants. Jesus quotes this in Matthew 21:16 where he says “Out of the mouth of babes and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself.” This is in response to children who cry out “Hosanna to the son of David” when Jesus enters Jerusalem. Babes in their simplicity acknowledge God. They symbolize human weakness and humility, but even they are strong when they take the name of God on their lips and are greater than God’s enemies.

The psalm then turns reflective as the psalmist looks at the moon and stars and the heavens which God has created and realizes how insignificant humans seem in light of this. There is a sense of wonder at what God has made. When the psalmist speaks about God’s connection to the world he refers to the heavens as the “work of your fingers” (v 3) and the creatures living on earth as the “works of your hands” (v 5). The created world is God’s “handiwork” or his “finger work”. Such language implies that God has made things in our world much as humans make things with their fingers and their hands. There is no question, however, that God’s work is much more extensive than what humans can make. Because what is in the

world-- even humans who are sons of Adam--has been made by God, everything belongs to God and God has a right to how what he has made is used.

Yet beyond the wonder of what God has made there is a sense that this makes humans seem rather small and insignificant in the world. Why indeed would God care about each of us? There are over 7 billion people in our world today. It is inconceivable that God would give much attention to humans as a whole, let alone each of us as individuals.

Other Biblical texts also ask this question about “What is man?” It often is found in the context of humans suffering. One finds Job 7:17-18: “What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment?” In Psalm 144:3-4 one finds “O LORD, what are human beings that you regard them, or mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a passing shadow.”

Yet in Psalm 8 the psalmist is not overwhelmed with the question “What is man?” He recognizes the special role that humans have in the world that gives us significance. We are indeed lower than God but he applies royal language to humans. He has crowned humans with glory and honor and has given them dominion. Kings are crowned and have dominion over others. Here humans have been given dominion over the works of God including the living creatures on earth and in the sky and in the sea.

Humans should remember that God is the sovereign over the heavens and the earth. Humans are given sovereignty over the creatures of the earth but this does not mean that they should forget that God is the true king. Human dominion has been given to us by God and we remain accountable to God in our dominion.

This psalm reminds us of the story of creation in Genesis 1 where humans were also given dominion over all the living creatures. The Hebrew word for “dominion” is different in Genesis 1 than in Psalm 8 but the terms are synonyms. Dominion means having authority and power. This does not mean that we are free to do anything we please but that we have been given the abilities to rule. God has given humans permission to make choices in this world.

Questions for reflection:

1. Can we have a sense of wonder when we look at the heavens and earth which God has created? What does this sense of wonder mean for how we live our lives?
2. What are the ways that we exercise our authority over animals?
3. What types of responsibility do we have in this dominion? Should it matter if we contribute to the extinction of species? Should we be concerned about preserving the lives of species of animals like the rhinoceros or the elephant?
4. Considering human history, how well have humans done in exercising dominion in this world?

Psalm 13

Psalm 13 is a lament or a complaint of an individual. When people are in trouble they cry out to God. Sometimes they are in the midst of trouble and expect God to help them. This kind of a psalm is a complaint. Sometimes people experience a disaster in their lives such as the death of a loved one. One still may cry out for God to help at such time but one does not expect a person to come back to life. This kind of a psalm is a lament.

There are three common parts to a lament: complaint, petition, praise. In a complaint a person informs God of the problem that one is facing. This usually includes an “invocation” which is addressing God. The expression “O LORD” in verse 1 is the invocation. Such psalms are personal. Often God is addressed as “you.” The complaint is found in verses 1-2. Often the specific trouble is not mentioned. It is difficult to know if the psalmist is sick, is falsely accused or is suffering some other affliction. Perhaps the psalm is vague so that it can be used by many people who are struggling with various afflictions.

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

I. Invocation and complaint	1-2
A. Relative to God (How long? 2X)	1
B. Relative to self (How long?)	2a-b
C. Relative to enemy (How long?)	2c
II. Petition for help	3-4
A. Petition proper	3a-ba
B. Motivations (lest . . .) possible consequences	3bb-4
1. Death of self	3bb
2. Enemies will gloat	4
III. Praise	5-6
A. Expression of confidence in God’s help	5a
B. Vow of praise	5b-6

While we do not know specific details about the trouble of the psalmist we do hear about how the one who prays has been affected by the difficulty. It relates to their relationship to God, their own reflections and their relations to other people. In Psalm 13 the psalmist speaks about how God has forgotten him and has hidden his face from him. The psalmist no longer senses God’s presence. On a personal level the psalmist speaks about pain and sorrow which is experienced. On a social level, enemies seem to be victorious over the psalmist. When the psalmist experiences trouble, it affects one’s relationship to God, to others and to self.

Once the psalmist has identified the personal struggle, one finds the petition. Here is where God is specifically asked to help. The repetition of “How long” occurs four times in verses 1-2 which indicates that this struggle has lasted a long time. The words “How long”

imply persistence in prayer. We want instant responses from God. We are impatient. If God has forgotten you, then he needs to be reminded of the trouble. If God has hidden his face then one must seek his attention so that he can help. The fact that God is addressed implies a trusting relationship in God. Also the sense that God has forgotten and turned away is a different experience than what the psalmist has previously experienced.

Various means are used to motivate God to help. We have already mentioned the trusting relationship and the persistence in prayer. The psalmist also says that he will sleep the sleep of death if God does not act quickly. In addition, he indicates that if his prayer is not answered then his enemies will rejoice and feel that they have won the battle. Finally the psalmist promises that he will rejoice in salvation or deliverance and will seek God in the future.

Why does God seem to delay so long when we pray to him? God has a different perspective than we do about time. God has to answer the prayers and concerns of all people and manage to be fair to them. In the movie “Bruce, Almighty” God grants the human, Bruce, the responsibility of answering prayers and he finds out how difficult this is. Suffering and waiting can teach us important lessons. Prayer is not like magic that automatically works. We would not learn to trust and have faith in God if we got everything that we wanted. We would be spoiled children. God remains in control and decides about how and when he will answer our prayers. God has not designed a world without problems and difficulties.

In a lament song, there is often a movement from sorrow and despair to confidence and joy. This is somewhat surprising because it usually takes time between when we pray and when we receive answers to prayer. A good example of a complaint given by a specific individual is found in 1 Samuel 1-2 where Hannah comes to the temple and complains that she is barren and prays that God will give her a child. After Eli understands her prayer he says “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him” (1 Samuel 1:17). She gets pregnant, honors the vow that she made to God and then brings a thanksgiving offering to the temple. Many of the lament psalms imply that the person complains, makes a petition, receives the answer to the petition and then gives God thanks for the answer to the prayer.

Questions for reflections:

1. When we struggle with difficulties how does this affect our relationships to God, to others, to ourselves?
2. How can we help others who are struggling in our families and in our churches?
3. While churches often sing songs of praise in worship they rarely sing complaints or laments. Should they?
4. Why does God seem to forget our troubles and hide his face from us? Why does he not always answer our prayers as quickly as we would like?

Psalm 34

This psalm starts out as a thanksgiving song and the psalmist calls upon others to give thanks and praise with him. It does indicate that God can be thanked for specific concerns. Most of the psalm, however, is an instruction addressed to listeners and seems more like a wisdom psalm than a thanksgiving one.

The psalm is a partial alphabetic acrostic. This means that each new verse begins with a new letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There is one letter (*waw*) missing, and there is an additional verse with *peh* at the end of the psalm which is not part of the acrostic. While this feature can hardly be translated into English it does provide a way of organizing thoughts. This acrostic form challenges the writer of a poem to find words which start with certain letters of the alphabet. Sometimes the flow of the poem seems somewhat awkward and hard to follow because of this structure.

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

I. Invitation to thank and praise	1-3
II. Account of salvation and admonition	4-10
III. Instruction	11-21
IV. Closing line	22

The superscription of the psalm indicates that the psalm relates to the occasion when David feigned madness before Abimelech. There is a story about David pretending to be mad before the Philistine King Achish of Gath in 1 Samuel 21:10-15. Abimelech is a priest who was mentioned in 1 Samuel 21:1-9. It is hardly clear how this note helps us understand the psalm. Certainly it is a situation in which David was in trouble, but the story itself focuses upon the wisdom of David in getting out of a difficult situation. It does not mention that David sought God's help in the situation. Perhaps he should have done so as this psalm suggests.

The psalmist indicates a past situation of trouble and that he cried out for help and God answered him. Many verbs are related to God's activity here. He answers prayer, he delivers those in trouble, he hears and he saves. The angel of the LORD delivers him. He provides for those who fear God.

Even while giving thanks for what God has done, the psalmist calls upon others to seek God when they are in similar situations. He tells them to "fear the LORD" and tells them to "taste and see that the LORD is good." He makes statements about how God treats people. He says that the angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him. This is a comforting image of protection. God sends out angels on missions including protecting believers.

The expression "taste and see" is rather odd for experiencing God and his goodness. The term "taste" can be used literally for enjoying good food at banquets but it also can refer metaphorically to personal experience and perception. It can also refer to discernment. This idea may also be a link to the superscription where one literally finds "when he changed his taste before Abimelech" meaning that David pretended to be insane.

In verses 11-21 the specific details of deliverance have been left behind. Here the psalmist speaks as a teacher instructing his children. He begins this section with “Come, O children, listen to me.” In Hebrew this is literally addressed to “sons” which is what one commonly finds in the book of Proverbs as well. Here the psalmist says that he “will teach you the fear of the LORD.” The book of Proverbs says that the “fear of the LORD” is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7). To fear God is to respect God and honor him and act appropriately.

Fearing God is linked to following God’s expectations and seeking his help. Specifically he says “Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit” (verse 13) and “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (verse 14). So here he speaks generally of proper speech and proper action. Those who fear God and act appropriately will have life and enjoy good in their life.

In verses 15-22 there is an alternation of how God treats the righteous and the wicked in different ways. Attention to the righteous is found in verses 15, 17-20, 22 and attention to the wicked is found in verses 16 and 21. God will pay attention to the righteous but not the wicked. His eyes and ears and attention are given to the righteous, but he hides his face from the wicked. He listens and helps the righteous when they cry for help. He rescues them from trouble. He redeems the life of his servants.

In contrast, there will be no future for the wicked. The evil of the wicked will bring them death and they will be condemned if they hate the righteous. Sometimes the wicked make life miserable for the wicked. Like Psalm 1 there is a contrast between the wicked and righteous.

The righteous may suffer and encounter difficulty. Verse 19 says “Many are the afflictions of the righteous but the LORD rescues them from all.” The righteous are also described as “brokenhearted”, “crushed in spirit” in verse 18 and “poor” in verse 6. The letter of 1 Peter in the New Testament speaks about the suffering of Christians. It quotes from Psalm 34:12-16 in 1 Peter 3:10-12 and draws upon this understanding. Peter adds the idea of eternal life which the believers can anticipate.

Questions for reflection:

1. Verse 7 mentions the angel of the LORD helping those who fear God. Does each individual have a guardian angel and what does this mean in everyday life?
2. This psalm combines a thanksgiving psalm with instruction to others. How can those who have experienced God’s blessings in their lives share this with others and provide guidance? Should there be times in our church services and or Bible studies when this can happen?
3. 1 John 4:18 says that “perfect love casts out fear.” Is there any place any longer for “fear of God” for Christians or does love replace this?

Psalm 72

This is a prayer to God for the king and his long reign. Perhaps it was used at the coronation of a king. The psalm assumes that God will bless the people through a good king. It is also a reminder to the king of responsibilities that he must carry out on behalf of the people. The psalm provides a model of the essential characteristics of a healthy and good nation.

The last verse says “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended.” This appears to be an editorial note marking the end of a collection of prayers of David. It is also preceded by “Amen and Amen”. These words do not seem to be linked specifically to this psalm. At some stage of the transmission of the psalms, the psalms were grouped into five books. Each of books I-IV ends with a blessing upon God and the words “Amen and Amen” (Book I: Psalms 1-42, Book II: Psalms 42-72, Book III Psalms 73-89, Book IV: Psalms 90-106, Book V Psalms 107-150). In light of this it is unclear if Psalm 72:18-19 should be considered the conclusion of Psalm 72 alone or it marks the concluding blessing of Book II: Psalms 42-72 or if it serves both purposes. Probably verses 18-19 are the closing doxology for Book II.

The superscription of the psalm is “Of Solomon.” If David did compose this psalm then perhaps it was for the coronation of his son Solomon. Mention of the gold of Sheba reminds us of the visit of the Queen of Sheba to Solomon in 1 Solomon 10. There is also a prayer that the “kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts” which probably refers to far off rulers bringing honor to the king of Israel. Even if the prayer were written for the coronation of Solomon it would have been relevant for many future kings.

The prayer can be outlined as follows:

I.	Prayer for justice and righteousness	1-4
II.	Prayer for longevity of king and blessings	5-7
III.	Prayer for universal rule of king	8-11
IV.	Description of activities of King: saves weak and needy	12-14
V.	Prayer for longevity of king and blessings upon him and through him	15-17
VI.	Blessing upon God	18-19

Scattered throughout the psalm there are three basic concerns: peace and security (7, 9-11), justice, law and order (1-4, 12-14) and well-being and prosperity (verses 3, 6, 16). These are common themes that people expect for the good life and they are linked to the rule of the king. Most societies desire these aspects even if they have different political systems.

One of the central roles of the king was to maintain justice in society. While there were local law courts that tried disputes, the king was the final court of appeal for the people. There was the expectation that one could appeal to the king for justice. One finds a story of two women who come before Solomon and ask that he determine whose baby had died and whose baby was alive (1 Kings 3:16-22). Nathan brings a legal case to David related to a poor man

whose lamb had been taken by a rich man to feed a visitor (1 Samuel 12). In this case this was a parable and not a real case but it illustrates the function of a king as judge.

The challenge of justice is being fair to all people. It is easy for the rich and powerful to give bribes to affect judges and to get special attention. True justice is when even the poor and needy are given attention. The test of justice in a society is how well the widows, orphans and aliens are treated in the courts. Each of these groups has no one to help them and they are most likely to be mistreated. The rich and powerful can usually take care of themselves.

Beyond giving justice to the poor and needy, the king will provide help for the poor and needy when they are in trouble. “He has pity on the weak and needy, and saves the lives of the needy” (verse 13). The next verse says that that “From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight” (verse 14). The king protects the poor and needy from those who might oppress them. He is their helper and savior.

The king is expected to maintain peace and security in the nation. He must protect the poor and needy from those who would afflict them within the society. People also expect that he will protect people from outside enemies as well. The psalm speaks about his dominion or rule being vast and covering much territory (verse 8). It speaks of enemies submitting to his rule and bringing tribute to the nation. This is a means of maintaining good relations with neighbors. There is a prayer that nations may be blessed in this king (verse 17) which means that they will not just fear him but will desire to honor him. Perhaps this reflects good trading among nations.

People also expect economic prosperity to come from the reign of the king. The king is compared to rain that falls upon the ground (verse 6). There are prayers that the mountains and hills will yield prosperity (verse 3). There is a prayer that there will be an abundance of grain in the land (verse 16). The language suggests agricultural bounty which means there will be plenty of food.

Questions for reflection:

1. How can we use this prayer as a model for prayers for our own rulers? Note that we are urged to pray for our leaders in the New Testament.
2. In democracies we choose our leaders. What characteristics should we look at in order to make our choices?
3. Many of the prayers of this psalm seem quite idealistic. Some have thought that the fullness of these prayers can only be fulfilled when Jesus comes and rules on earth. In what ways does Jesus fulfill the expectations of this psalm during his earthly ministry? In what ways will Jesus fulfill the expectations of this psalm in the future?
4. What realistic expectations can we have that peace and security and justice can prevail in our societies? Can the kingdom of God become a present reality?

Psalm 90

Psalm 90 is a communal lament. The superscription links it to Moses, but the psalm itself relates to a “we” group which speaks. It is not a typical lament, however, and seems to be more of a wisdom reflection about the shortness of life and how one can relate to this shortness. While recognizing that humans live very short lives, it finds meaning by placing trust in God.

The psalm can be outlined as follows:

I. Invocation	1-2
A. Affirmation of confidence	1
B. Hymnic praise	2
II. Reflection upon human condition	3-12
A. Morality	3-6
B. Reason for mortality	7-10
C. Response to mortality	11-12
III. Petitions for help (series)	13-17
A. Have compassion on us	13
B. Teach us to recognize our short life	14
C. Give us happiness to match sorrow	15
D. Help us see what you are doing	16
E. Make our work meaningful	17

The psalm begins with an invocation to God and addresses God as “you.” It appeals to God as our dwelling place and speaks about the eternal nature of God. In verses 3-10 there is a reflection about human mortality in light of God’s eternity and God’s wrath. This shortness of life is viewed in part as a punishment for our sins. While one might expect that this would lead to confession of sins and begging of forgiveness it does not. This shortness of life is seen as inevitable, something that cannot be changed. In the final verses of the psalm (verses 13-17) there is a series of petitions asking God for help in making sense of our short lives.

There are many references to time in this psalm. There are references to human “days” (9, 12, 14) and years (9,10) referring to the lifetime of humans. Human life has beginnings and endings and can be measured in days and years. God sees things differently. He is from everlasting to everlasting with no beginning or end. From God’s perspective a thousand years is like yesterday or a watch in the night. Humans may be compared to plants which are renewed in the morning and then fade and wither in the evening. Humans may live 70 or 80 years if they are strong.

There are several verses in the psalm which indicate that God is angry with us because of our sins and that this brings God’s wrath (v 7, 9, 11). This might be similar to Genesis 2 where the punishment of eating from the tree in the garden is death. But still humans must turn to God

for help in their lives. They ask God for compassion. They ask that God would give them enough happiness and gladness in life to match the afflictions and evil they have experienced. They ask God to teach them to count their days and gain wisdom. They ask God to bring prosperity to their work. They want their lives to have meaning and significance.

There are some psalms in the Bible like this one which address difficult issues and do not give simple and trite answers. Those who wrote the psalm are quite troubled and perhaps even bitter about life. You may have never been in such a state of mind yourself and may never be. Some people, however, go through such feelings. The psalm may help us to understand them or perhaps help prepare us for similar thoughts ourselves.

The superscription indicates that the psalm was written by Moses. Scholars think the superscriptions were added much later to the psalms and that they do not provide much information about the origin of the psalms but something about the later interpretation of the psalms. If Moses did write the psalm, it is interesting to reflect upon what time in his life it may have been formulated. Possibly at the very end of his life when he was allowed to view the Promised Land but was not allowed to enter it. He had been leading the Israelites all his life to this place and he could even set his foot in the land. Perhaps he is also speaking for the generation which dies in the wilderness without reaching the Promised Land. How would he have dealt with this disappointment?

How many of us have unfulfilled dreams? Those who are young may have many dreams for the future and still hope that these dreams are attainable. It is easy to have much exuberance and enthusiasm while we are young. As we grow older, however, it is easy to grow bitter in life and succumb to despair. The psalm seems to reflect the experiences of those who are older and have had many experiences already. They have reached a point where their dreams may seem quite impossible for fulfillment. Some may decide to leave the faith or simply drift away. Unless we can learn to deal with such bitterness and despair, our faith may not be strong enough to last until the end. This psalm may speak to us about such times.

Questions for reflections:

1. There seems little hope of eternal life in this psalm. How and in what ways can this psalm still be relevant for Christians who do believe in eternal life?
2. Do we face some of the same frustrations in our lives as are found in this psalm?
3. This psalm has sometimes been used at Christian funerals. Sometimes verses 7-9 and 11-12 are left out. Is this appropriate?
4. How should we live wisely in light of the shortness of human life?
5. Would we be satisfied with verse 15? That gladness would match sorrow in our lives? Do you think this psalm is too pessimistic for Christians?

Psalm 103

Psalm 103 is a hymn of praise which is spoken by an individual who calls himself to bless God and gives reasons why he should bless God. Then he speaks more generally about how God has acted for his people as a whole and how because of this all created beings in heaven and earth should join him in blessing God. The psalm begins and ends with calls to “bless God.” There is an inclusio as the psalm begins and ends with “Bless the LORD, O my soul.” We often think of God blessing us but it is more unusual to think of us blessing God. While God needs nothing, we can lift up our voices in praise and this pleases God.

The psalm can be outlined as follows.

I. Call to worship (call to self)	1-2
II. Reasons for worship	3-18
A. Reasons for personal praise	3-5
B. Reasons for communal praise	6-18
1. Basic confession of faith	6-8
2. Meditation on confession	9-18
a. Temporary anger	9-10
b. 2 images of love	11-13
c. 2 images of human frailty	14-18
3. Universal reign of Yahweh	19
III. Call to worship (call to all)	20-22
A. Call to heavenly beings	20-21
B. Call to earthly creatures	22a
C. Call to self	22b

One of the central terms of this psalm is *hesed* which can be translated as “steadfast love” or “lovingkindness.” This term is found four times in the psalm (verses 4, 8, 11, 17). It is often linked to the covenant which God has made with his people. It refers to God reaching out to us with love in spite of the fact that we do not deserve His love. Because of our sins we expect justice which would bring punishment to us. Verse 8 is a quotation from a famous statement of faith that is first found in Exodus 34:6. “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love.” Here other terms of mercy and gracious and being slow to anger accompany the term for steadfast love.

After calling himself to bless God, the psalmist lists some of the benefits that God has brought to him. These include forgiving iniquity, healing diseases, redeeming one’s life from the Pit, crowning one with steadfast love and mercy, satisfying one with good, and renewing one’s youth like an eagles. This reflects the memory of the benefits that the psalmist has experienced. These benefits are understood as gifts from God and we should bless God for them.

Then the psalmist shifts to God’s actions to his people as a whole. He starts out with the fact that the Lord brings justice to the oppressed. Then he refers to how God has shown his work

to Moses and his people. He does not give any specifics but instead elaborates on the covenant love of God. The LORD is mindful that humans are sinful and deserving of punishment but God does not always accuse us and does not stay angry forever with us. His love for us overcomes his anger with our sins.

The psalmist uses some wonderful metaphors here. He speaks about how God removes our sins as far as the east is from the west. Such a distance cannot be calculated. He also uses the metaphor that God has compassion for us as a father has for his children. He has made us and knows that we are of dust. Our lives are short. We are like grass. But God's steadfast love is everlasting. This love existed before we were ever made and will continue after we die.

One might ask if we want a just God or a forgiving God. It is easy for us to want justice for our enemies—we want them punished; but we want forgiveness for ourselves. Jonah was angry with God because God did not destroy the city of Ninevah but instead forgave them when they repented. Jesus has harsh words about such an attitude: In Matthew 6:14 Jesus says “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

It is easy for people who have worked hard and are successful in life to view this as God's reward for their hard work. They feel that God has blessed them and that this success is evidence that we are great people. It is easy to have a kind of “entitlement mentality” and think that we deserve much in life and then we demand that we have rights. People take out lawsuits against others who deprive them of their rights. This attitude may extend to one's relationship to God as well. We begin to think that God is rewarding us. If this is the case then we do not really need grace or steadfast love.

In reality, God does not owe us anything. In fact we are in debt to God for all of the goodness that we have. We are not good enough to please God with our actions. We fall short of his expectations. We deserve punishment and God's anger. But God is merciful and compassionate. For this we should be grateful. We are special to God but it is not because we are so important. It is because God loves us.

Questions for reflections:

1. Can God be both just and merciful? Which God do we want?
2. What are the benefits we have experienced in our own personal lives from God?
3. What are the benefits of being part of God's chosen people and members of his covenant? Are these benefits dependent upon those who “remember his commandments” and “keep his covenant” as is mentioned in verse 18?

Psalms 150

The last psalm is a hymn of praise. Typically hymns start with a call to worship and then include a list of reasons for worship. The psalm begins and ends with “Praise the LORD” which is a short call to worship. The Hebrew word for “Praise the LORD” is Hallelu Yah. This is sometimes rendered in English as Hallelujah or as Alleluia. The “Yah” at the end is short for the personal name of God which was probably pronounced Yahweh. This name became so holy that Jewish believers would not read the name out loud. Instead they read another word “Adonai” which meant “Lord”. Many modern English translations render the personal name of God as LORD with all capital letters.

Psalms 146-150 all begin and end with “Praise the LORD”. When a psalm begins and ends with the same phrase this is called an inclusio. Another example is Psalm 136 which begins and ends with “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.”

The book of Psalms suitably ends with humans raising their voices in praise to God. While there are a large number of laments at the beginning of the book of Psalms there are more hymns of praise at the end. The Westminster Catechism (Shorter Catechism) begins with the question: “What is the chief end of man?” and the answer: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” While it is important that we bring our concerns to God we should remember the central importance of praise and worship for human existence.

Psalm 150 is unusual in that the command to “praise” (Hallelu) is found repeatedly throughout the psalm and introduces each line of the psalm. Some leader of worship calls upon others to praise God. There is no superscription which identifies this speaker. Sometimes those who are addressed to give praise are specified. In verse 6 one finds “Let everything that breathes praise the LORD.”

This psalm might be understood to be a primer to teach people about praise. It gives basic information about praise which can be understood to answer basic questions that one might ask about praise. The psalm can be outlined as follows:

Hallelu Yah

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------|
| I. Where should Yah be praised? | Verse 1 |
| 2. Why should Yah be praised? | Verse 2 |
| 3. How should Yah be praised? | Verse 3-5 |
| 4. Who should praise Yah? | Verse 6 |

Hallelu Yah

The place of worship in the psalms is often the temple at Jerusalem. This temple is a “holy place” or “sanctuary”. Other places on earth can also be considered holy. God also dwells in the heavens above the firmament so one might also consider the heavens as the holy place where people worship. We learn in the book of Revelation that the angels are worshipping God there. When Jesus spoke with the woman from Samaria (John 4) she indicated that the Samaritans worshipped at a different place than the Jews. Jesus said that “the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21). True worship involves worship “in spirit and truth.”

When people praise God they think of the many ways that God has acted and continues to act in our world. There have been many mighty deeds of God. God called Abram to follow him and travel to a new land. God delivered the Israelites from slavery. God brought them to the Promised Land. God gave them children and crops. To remember God’s work means that people realize that they exist because of what God has done for them.

Many different types of musical instruments are mentioned here including instruments which one must blow air through and instruments that must be played with fingers. In the middle of the list of musical instruments one finds “dance.” These instruments were used for worship at the Jewish temple. In the New Testament there is no mention of musical instruments and some Christians think that only the human voice should be used in worship. Some traditions have emphasized particular instruments and not included others.

Everything which has breath would include not only human beings but also other living creatures. Psalm 148 calls upon all creatures including wild animals, cattle, creeping things and flying birds to praise God (verse 10). This is to be cosmic praise. The call to cosmic praise involves evangelism—calling others to join when we worship and praise God. Perhaps we should not even mind if a bird or insects join us in our worship services.

Questions for reflection:

This psalm answers questions which we might have about worship. Some of these answers may fit our own situations. Still, we should answer each of the questions about worship from our own experience and situation.

1. Where should we worship and how do we establish holy places where worship is appropriate?
2. What are the reasons that we should worship God? What has he done for us?
3. With what kinds of instruments should we worship God? What about dance?
4. How are we inviting others to join us in worship?