

A prayer as you read

Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither –
whatever they do prospers.
(Psalm 1: 1–3)

Heavenly Father, you promise blessings to those who live your way. Open our eyes to understand your word and to experience your love and grace in our lives. Help us to concentrate as we read and make us an encouragement to each other. Amen.

The Psalms

Psalm 1 tells us what the purpose of the book of Psalms is. It is an instruction manual for the abundant and happy life that God offers us. In a nutshell, if we live God's way and serve his king (see Psalm 2), we will enjoy his blessing. The trouble is that we don't always feel this is true in our experience, and so many of the 149 Psalms that follow are prayers or teaching which grapple with how to live when your faith says one thing but your experience seems to say something different. That tension is probably something we are familiar with in our own lives too. The book of Psalms encourages us to take those feelings to God and shows us how to live out our faith in practice by following God's law and declaring his praise.

The great news is that the final psalms are a series of hymns and songs of praise, perhaps encouraging us that although weeping and trouble may remain for the night, joy will come in the morning. Or that if you stick at praying for long enough, you will always end up in praise.

How to use this study guide

- Begin by asking God to help you to understand his word - perhaps using the prayer on the opposite page.
- You will have a passage of the Bible printed in the booklet to read. There are also some questions to get you thinking as you read the passage. It might be helpful to read these out first, then read the passage and think through the questions together.
- Read through the notes and talk about them. Does anything particularly strike you?
- The 'Act' questions are to get you thinking about how you can help each other put it into practice.
- Note down some things you could pray for each other in the coming week. Look back at what you wrote last week - have there been any answers to prayer you could thank God for?
- Finish by talking to God about what you have read. There is a prayer or some suggestions to get you started.

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PSALM 1

Read

- ¹ Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither –
whatever they do prospers.
⁴ Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

As you read

- What are the two categories of people in this psalm?
- What characterizes their lives?
- What is the outcome? Why?

Glossary

Law of the Lord – *the Bible in general, not just laws or commandments; to the psalmist this would have meant the first 5 books of our Bible*

Yield - *give*

Wither - *shrivel up*

Chaff - *the dry, useless outside bit of a grain of corn, which you can't eat*

Righteous - *people who know and trust God*

Reflect

Happiness. We all want the new school year to be a good and happy one. This time last year no one would have guessed lockdown would happen and this year is no different. (Hopefully) it will be a much less dramatic year, but for all of us, there will be a mix of good things and bad things to come, most of which are completely unknown right now. So how can we be sure we have a happy and good year no matter what happens? Christians have found that Psalm 1 gives us some important answers to this question.

Psalm 1 describes 'blessed' people, or more simply 'happy' people. The psalmist describes the blessed person as someone who lives with God's approval on their life and the result is that they have a stability that the psalmist compares to a deeply

rooted tree. They flourish regardless of the weather – or any other outward circumstances! The other group the psalmist describes are 'the wicked'. They are like dusty, useless chaff blowing around in the wind, looking for approval here, there, and everywhere and on their way to destruction. I think we know which group we want to be in!

The secret. If you want to be blessed, the secret is in where you linger. Did you notice what the blessed person doesn't do in v.1-2? They don't drift along with the majority of people who reject God's ways or sit down with people making fun of the Bible. Instead they spend their time delighting in and thinking about what God has told us about himself. If we want to live with God's blessing on our lives, we need to read what he says about how to enjoy that blessing. Christians believe that God's word, the Bible, is his manual for living life in his world and if you use it, you will find out that life works a lot better!

Two ways to live. Unlike many of the psalms, Psalm 1 is not a prayer or a song of praise. At the beginning of the book, it is a challenge to choose. Whose approval do you want? That's usually why we drift along with the crowd, isn't it? We don't want to stand out and face the disapproval of our peers, but in the end it will only be God's approval that matters.

Act

- When are you most tempted to look for the approval of other people instead of God?
- As Christian students, how can you help each other to avoid drifting along with the crowd in the way the psalmist describes in verses 1-2?
- Are you spending time getting to know God's word in the Bible? How can you encourage each other to do this more?
- Jot down some things you would like to pray for each other this week.

Pray

Heavenly Father, we want to flourish and grow like trees planted by streams of water. Please root us in your word and watch over us. Help us to choose this week to live your way instead of following the crowd. Help us to make time to consult the manual you have given us for the happy life. As we read your word, open our eyes to see wonderful things about you and may we live under your blessing. Amen.



PSALM 2

Read

- 1 Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
- 2 The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
- 3 'Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.'
- 4 The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
- 5 He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
- 6 'I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.'
- 7 I will proclaim the Lord's decree:
He said to me, 'You are my son;
today I have become your father.
- 8 Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
- 9 You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.'
- 10 Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
- 11 Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
- 12 Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

As you read

There are 4 scenes in this psalm:

- What do 'the nations' say and do in v.1-3?
- What does God say and do about this in v.4-6?
- What does the King say and do in v.7-9?
- What should everyone say and do in v.10-12?

Glossary

Shackles – a chain for a prisoner (like handcuffs)

Wrath - anger

Zion – another name for Jerusalem or, symbolically, the place where God reigns

Reflect

Psalm 1 was quite a cosy picture: trust and follow the Bible to live the good life. If that's true why are people trying to follow God often in the

minority? Does that mean God isn't in charge? Let's see what Psalm 2 has to say.

v.1-3 Shove off God. People, whether kings or kids, don't want God to be in charge and that's the picture the psalmist describes here. The Bible calls this 'sin'. Sin isn't doing some particular wrong thing - it's an attitude that says to God, 'Shove off! I'm in charge. No to your ways.' How will God respond?

v.4-6 God laughs. The psalmist says that God laughs. That's a bit surprising, isn't it? I think it's a bit like a mum laughing at a 2-year old's tantrum. The tantrum is ridiculous: the mum sees the big picture and wants what is best for the child; the child is powerless and can't survive without her. God says to his rebellious world, 'You're not in charge; my King is in charge.'

v.7-9 The King speaks. This psalm is quoted lots of times later in the Bible (for example, Acts 4:23-26) so we know it is about Jesus. The Bible teaches that God sent Jesus into the world and people conspired against him and even killed him, but that didn't mean God was no longer in charge. God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him, showing that his death had broken the power of sin and that he was God's true King. Christians believe that one day everyone will see him as he is and bow down before him.

v.10-12 A place of refuge. The picture of the angry king is quite scary and those strutting around opposing him need to watch out, but fortunately the psalm ends with a very reassuring picture. This king is Jesus, the one who died to make peace for us and to take the punishment we deserve for our rebellion. He says to us, 'Come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). If we come willingly to him, there is nothing to fear, only blessing and refuge.

Act

- How does this psalm encourage us when life seems out of control?
- What does it mean for you to take refuge in God's king?
- Jot down some things you would like to pray for each other this week.

Pray

Great and almighty God, we cannot even think how great you are. And we are so small! Thank you that King Jesus is not just powerful and mighty but also loving and forgiving. Please forgive us for our 'tantrums' and help us to serve him gladly. Ame



PSALM 3

Read

A psalm of David. When he fled from his son Absalom.

- ¹ Lord, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
- ² Many are saying of me,
'God will not deliver him.'
- ³ But you, Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
- ⁴ I call out to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy mountain.
- ⁵ I lie down and sleep;
I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.
- ⁶ I will not fear though tens of thousands
assail me on every side.
- ⁷ Arise, Lord!
Deliver me, my God!
Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
break the teeth of the wicked.
- ⁸ From the Lord comes deliverance.
May your blessing be on your people.

Background/Glossary

A little bit of background is useful here. The title tells us that the psalm is by David when he fled from his son Absalom. Perhaps someone in your group knows the story and can fill everyone in. The details are in 2 Samuel 15 and 16. The short version is that David (of Goliath-killing fame) was king of Israel. After some personal failings on David's part and major problems between siblings (if you think your family is a disaster zone, read 2 Samuel), David's son Absalom led a successful rebellion with the result that David and his court had to run for their lives while their enemies poked fun at them. This Psalm is set the next morning as David wakes up to remember all that has happened and to prepare for the battle that is bound to follow.

assail – come against me

As you read

- How does David describe his circumstances?
- How does he describe God?

Reflect

A sinking feeling, v.1-2. Psalm 3 is traditionally described as a morning psalm because David talks about waking up (v.5). It must have been pretty awful to wake up the morning after he fled Jerusalem and face the new reality. It's amazing he went to sleep at all actually. In small ways

we've all faced that: big things like waking up and remembering that someone close to you has died; or smaller things like remembering the detention you got yesterday or a problem in one of your friendships that hasn't been sorted. This psalm encourages us to bring it all to God. Being a Christian isn't about being happy and singing cheerful worship music all the time! It's facing the realities of the day ahead with God.

Chin up, v.3-4. This is a great 'but!' Everything looks different when God is in the picture. The problems (traitors who want to kill him in David's case) are still there, but now David remembers God. We don't have to face the difficult day on our own. God is a shield, offering protection. Notice it is 'around' not just 'in front' or 'behind' - God is there for those leftfield attacks you aren't expecting. He is also 'my glory, the One who lifts my head high'. What a beautiful picture: David had his head down, the weight of the world on his shoulders, feeling his guilt and responsibility. When you feel like that, Christians believe that God wants you to come to him; he wants to put his figure under your chin and say, 'Chin up. I love you. Jesus died for you. You are forgiven. I have this situation under control and will use it for your good. Trust me.'

Peace and trust, v.5-8. The result of this morning encounter with God is that David recognises that God is already with him (he wasn't killed in the night!) and he can be at peace even in a context of war. Each new day is a sign of God's grace to you. Unless you are a king forced to defend your nation, I'd be careful about praying v. 7 too literally! But you can ask God to fight for you today by dealing with the problems that seem out of your control and you can trust him to always do what is for the best for his people.

Act

- If you feel comfortable to, talk about a time your day started with a sinking feeling. How can this psalm help us prepare for those days?
- How can you make time to bring your day to God each morning?
- Try to memorize v.3 and test each other.
- Jot down some things you would like to pray for each other this week.

Pray

Lord, you are my shield. Please protect me and lift up my head. Thank you that with you on my side I can face even the most difficult day. Amen.



PSALM 4

Read

For the director of music. With stringed instruments. A psalm of David.

- ¹ Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.
Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.
- ² How long will you people turn my glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?
- ³ Know that the Lord has set apart his faithful servant for himself;
the Lord hears when I call to him.
- ⁴ Tremble and do not sin;
when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.
- ⁵ Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the Lord.
- ⁶ Many, Lord, are asking, 'Who will bring us prosperity?'
Let the light of your face shine on us.
- ⁷ Fill my heart with joy
when their grain and new wine abound.
- ⁸ In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety.

Background/Glossary

The context of this psalm seems to be the same as the previous one – when David's son Absalom led a rebellion against him, but maybe he doesn't tell us too much about the context so we can more easily apply it to ourselves.

mercy – a complaint; a passionate expression of grief
delusions – proud
in reverence – with great respect
malice – wanting to hurt other people

As you read

- Why is David upset?
- What time of day does this psalm relate to?
- Who do you think David is speaking to in each section? (e.g. v.1 – he is speaking to God)

Reflect

When the lights go out. It's amazing how much worse our problems seem at night. Whether physical or emotional, pain can be overwhelming when we are alone in bed. David starts this night-time psalm in real distress (v.1), but by bringing his situation to God, he ends the psalm at peace and able to drop off to sleep calmly (v.8). So what is the secret to a good night's sleep?

Keep God in view. In v.2-3 David is talking to the people who want to get rid of him as king. During his night-time musings, the conversation

might have taken place in his head (although he has written up later for them to read!) but he isn't going round in circles. He doesn't dwell on the ways he has been wronged and what he wants to say to them. He uses the question to get things back into perspective. He reminds himself, and them, of God's promises (that David would be king) and he remembers that God will be faithful and will answer. When we're lying awake, it is hard to keep things in perspective. Remember that God hears and remind yourself of his promises.

Keep yourself in view. In v.4-5 David gives his readers some good advice. When you are mulling over a tricky situation in bed, you can become very emotional. You might tremble with fear, anger, frustration, or hurt. And those can be right responses, but just be careful where they take you. When we've been hurt, it is tempting to demonize the other person. Sometimes we can end up behaving the way they behaved to us as we fantasize revenge. David urges us to look into our hearts and to be honest to God about what we see. Then we will be freed by his forgiveness and able to ask for his help.

Keep others in view. David isn't so wrapped up in his own problems that he forgets his people. He wants what is good for them. His prayer relates to his role as king, but is good advice for anyone lying awake at night. One way to get your mind off your problems might be to pray for someone else or to thank God for his blessing on a friend!

Sleep tight. Having got things back into perspective and given the situation to God, David can sleep, trusting God to look after him.

Act

What stops you from sleeping? How can you use this psalm to break unhealthy thought patterns? Jot down some things to pray for each other this week. Pray them in bed tonight!

Pray

Heavenly Father, we all lie awake sometimes. Help us to keep things in perspective and trust you in those situations, and please give us all a good night's sleep tonight. Amen.



PSALM 5

Read

For the director of music. For pipes. A psalm of David.

- ¹ Listen to my words, Lord,
consider my lament.
- ² Hear my cry for help,
my King and my God,
for to you I pray.
- ³ In the morning, Lord, you hear my voice;
in the morning I lay my requests before you
and wait expectantly.
- ⁴ For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness;
with you, evil people are not welcome.
- ⁵ The arrogant cannot stand
in your presence.
You hate all who do wrong;
⁶ you destroy those who tell lies.
The bloodthirsty and deceitful
you, Lord, detest.
- ⁷ But I, by your great love,
can come into your house;
in reverence I bow down
toward your holy temple.
- ⁸ Lead me, Lord, in your righteousness
because of my enemies—
make your way straight before me.
- ⁹ Not a word from their mouth can be trusted;
their heart is filled with malice.
Their throat is an open grave;
with their tongues they tell lies.
- ¹⁰ Declare them guilty, O God!
Let their intrigues be their downfall.
Banish them for their many sins,
for they have rebelled against you.
- ¹¹ But let all who take refuge in you be glad;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
that those who love your name may rejoice in you.
- ¹² Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous;
you surround them with your favour as with a shield.

Glossary

This is a longer psalm and we will focus on v.1-3, so don't worry if you don't get every detail.
lament – a complaint; a passionate expression of grief
arrogant – proud
in reverence – with great respect
malice – wanting to hurt other people

As you read

- What do you learn about David's relationship with God in v.1-3?
- What is said about the people God accepts and the people God does not accept in v.4-12?

Reflect

v.1-3. Let's spend a bit of time thinking about what we can learn from how David prays:

Come directly. David loved the tabernacle (his 'church') with its priests and sacrifices, but he could also talk directly to God on his own. Jesus invites us to do the same. Don't wait for Sunday! Go to God every morning, like David.

Come personally. David is personal and honest with God. It is helpful to learn and say beautifully written prayers like the psalms – they help us to find words for what we feel. But we believe that it is also good and important to tell God what is on our heart and to cry out for help in our own words.

Come humbly. We have direct access to God to tell him what is on our hearts, but we should still come reverently, remembering who he is. David addresses him as 'my King and my God'. How about starting your prayers like that this week?

Come expectantly. God is King, so David expects him to make things happen. We believe that he is still God and King so we can pray expectantly too!

v.4-12 Whose prayer does God accept? It'd be great to pray like David, but will God accept us? v.4-6 are a bit worrying. David says God doesn't accept those who do wrong or tell lies, and that's all of us, isn't it? The good news is we don't have to be perfect (David wasn't). We are accepted and forgiven because of God's great love – read v.7. God rejects the proud who don't think they need him but he accepts those who come looking for refuge and help (v.11-12). The apostle John writes, 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness' (1 John 1:9). Nothing should stop you from coming!

Act

Some Christians find it easy to be direct and personal with God, but forget to come to him humbly and reverently as King. Others are very reverent, but find it hard to be personal. Talk about which is more challenging for you and how to hold both in balance.

Jot down some things to pray for each other this week.

Pray

My God and my King, thank you that I can come to you directly and know that I am loved and forgiven through Jesus. I worship you because you are God and King, powerful to act and to strong to save. Spread your protection over each of us this week.

