

As for God, his way is perfect;
the word of the LORD is flawless.
He is a shield
for all who take refuge in him.
For who is God besides the LORD?
And who is the Rock except our God?
Ps. 18:30-31

The Psalms. We find 150 of them in our Bible. Some, like Psalm 117, are very short, comprising a scant two verses. The longest is Psalm 119 totaling a whopping 176 verses! The Psalms were written during a 1,000 year period, the earliest being composed almost 2,500 years ago and the oldest about 3,500 years ago. The word “psalms” comes from the Hebrew word meaning praises. Hence, reflecting much of its contents, the Psalms are a “book of praises.” The Psalms became both a prayer book and hymnbook for Israel’s worship, being used in the public and private worship of pious Jews. Early Christians began to refer to the Psalms as the “Psalter”, which literally means “collection of harp songs” or “songs set to music.”

The Psalms are essentially poems that were often set to music for worship. While poetry in general can be difficult for most of us, poetry written in the vicinity of 3,000 years ago, in a cultural situation that was very dissimilar to our own, entails unique challenges! What we find in the Psalms is not a neat and tidy systematic theology, but rather theological reflections on the relationship of God to his people. As C.S. Lewis points out, “the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons.” (Lewis, p. 10)

In reading this poetry it is important to keep in mind that not only were the poems written in a Near Eastern context addressed to God, they were also written before Christ. While some of the psalms point to Christ, and reflect on the hoped for Messiah, they were written at a time when God’s people worshipped through animal sacrifice in a temple setting.

Poetry, while difficult, is a rich and textured way to communicate. In the Psalms we will encounter:

- **Parallelisms** – Parallelisms refer to the way one phrase in the poem interacts with the phrase which follows it.¹ For example: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger” is followed with, “or discipline me in your wrath.” (Psalm 38)

¹ Tremper Longman, in his excellent book, [How To Read the Psalms](#), points out that there are at least 7 different types of parallelisms in the Psalms. (Longman, pp. 99-105)

- **Imagery** – God is personified as a “rock” (62). “shield” (Psalm 28), “fortress” (Psalm 62), and “shepherd” (Psalm 23) to name but a few of the images employed.
- **Simile** – Similes are a way to use an image and paint a picture for the reader by comparing it to something else. “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” (Psalm 42)
- **Metaphor** – A metaphor is similar to a simile but more explicit and clear. “To you I call, O Lord my Rock.” (Psalm 28)

The language of poetry is not always as clear as literal language. But it nevertheless communicates in a way that normal prose cannot. As we encounter rich symbols through metaphors, similes and parallelisms, the text of the poem probes the nature of God and our relationship with him in a manner that would not otherwise be available to us. Old Testament scholar Tremper Longman ponders why the Psalms use so many images to talk about God.

Why are there so many? The answer may lie in God’s own nature. Briefly the answer is this: images, particularly metaphors, help to communicate the fact that God is so powerful and mighty that he can’t be exhaustively described. Metaphor . . . may be accurate, but is less precise than literal language. Metaphor preserves the mystery of God’s nature and being, while communicating to us about him and his love for us. (Longman, p. 121)

When you read the Psalms they seem to lack order. They move randomly from one topic to another. This is for good reason. The Psalms were collected over roughly a 1,000 year period. It is generally agreed that Ezra the scribe collected and arranged the psalms in their present order. His scheme of arranging was not based on chronology but on progression of thought and usage of the names of God in the Psalms.¹ For example, while the psalms are literally in the Hebrew “songs of praise”, there are more psalms of lament (where the psalmist cries out in distress) than psalms worshipping God. As we move through the Psalter, however, there is a strong movement from lament to praise, so that “by the end of the book we have a virtual fireworks of praise.” (Longman, p. 45)

Old Testament scholars have tried to separate and categorize the psalms by topics. A classic thematic categorization would look something like this:

Psalms of:

- Praise
- Nature
- History
- Society

¹ The Psalms have been arranged into 5 books. This may be an effort to parallel the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Old Testament.

- Imprecation (prayers for the defeat and overthrow of the wicked)
- Penitence (prayers of penitence over the psalmist's failures)
- Messiah

Tremper Longman delineates a slightly different scheme:

- The Hymn
- The Lament
- Thanksgiving Psalms
- Psalms of Confidence
- Psalms of Remembrance
- Wisdom Psalms
- Kingship Psalms

While these categories may be helpful we should be careful to be flexible in our reading and study of these poems. In many of these psalms we find that 2, 3 or even 4 categories are present. The psalmist's are very fluid and seem to be completely uninterested in being boxed in by the categories of modern scholars!

Of the 150 psalms in our Bibles 116 of them have title inscriptions prefaced to them. These titles which introduce the individual psalms include musical inscriptions, historical situations and notes on authorship. The accuracy of these titles has been a source of debate and many of them were most likely added at a later date. The titles, however, do help us to know who wrote many of the psalms and in what historical context they were penned. Roughly half of the psalms are attributed to David, Israel's second king.¹ Two psalms are attributed to King Solomon (72, 127), twelve to Asaph (50, 73-83), nine to Korah (both Asaph and Korah refer to singing-clans that assisted in worship), one each to the wise men Heman (88) and Ethan (89), and one to Moses (90). The remaining 49 psalms are anonymous.

The Psalms are the most widely quoted Old Testament book by New Testament authors. They have been a spiritual guide, prayer manual, inspiration, hymnbook and tutor in worship for generations of God's people. Consider these quotations by influential believers from church history.²

The Psalms are referred to as, "an epitome of the whole Scriptures." Athanasius, 4th century theologian.

The Psalms were called, "a compendium of all theology." Basil, the Bishop of Caesarea, 4th century.

¹ Many have understood the title "Psalm of David" to mean of Davidic character or "belonging to a collection entitled David." This may reflect that these Psalms were not necessarily all authored by David but rather written in the style that David established when he did write.

² Longman, p. 52.

INTRODUCTION

Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, called them, “a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament.”

As we read and study the Psalms we will learn about both God and ourselves. They will incite our emotions, inform our minds and, if understood correctly, move our wills. Santa Barbara Community Church has the privilege to spend 13 weeks studying, discussing and reflecting on this, quite possibly, the most influential and beautiful book of the Bible. As with any homegroup, to gain anything it is vital that we come prepared, having spent time in the text. What is especially crucial in a study—discussion of the Psalms is that we come to our small groups ready to talk about how the Psalms have penetrated our souls.

STUDY ONE
PRAYER

Let's face it, a lot of Christians are not exactly sure how to go about praying to God. If there is crisis and their life is in real trouble, maybe prayer comes a little easier. A drowning man can always yell, "help!" But, day to day prayer doesn't always come so easily. The Psalms are there to teach the Christian how to pray. This is our prayer book. When we come up empty in our attempts to pray, the Psalms become our voice. But is it only for those times when we come up empty? As Eugene Peterson points out:

The Psalms are the best tools available for working the faith—one hundred and fifty carefully crafted prayers that deal with the great variety of operations that God carries on in us and attend to all parts of our lives that are, at various times and in different ways, rebelling and trusting, hurting and praising. People of faith take possession of the Psalms with the same attitude and for the same reason that gardeners gather up rake and hoe on their way to the vegetable patch, and students carry paper and pencil as they enter a lecture hall. It is a simple matter of practicality—acquiring the tools for carrying out the human work at hand. (Peterson, Answering God, p. 3)

Christians who exercise their faith in the more liturgical traditions are used to using the Psalms in their prayers. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran and Episcopalian churches have prayer books that lead them through cycles of praying the Psalms. They have been trained that the Psalms are a magnificent tool in the work of prayer. For Christians from the evangelical church, praying the Psalms is, more often than not, an unfamiliar practice.

Can you pray to God without using the Psalms? Of course! Will your prayer life be lacking at some level if you do not use the Psalms in prayer? Beyond question. Listen to Eugene Peterson again.

If we are willfully ignorant of the Psalms, we are not thereby excluded from praying, but we will have to hack our way through formidable country by trial and error and with inferior tools. If we dismiss the Psalms, preferring a more up-to-date and less demanding school of prayer, we will not be without grace, but we will miss the center of where Christ worked in his praying. . . . This is not the

latest thing on prayer, but the oldest: the Psalms, obvious and accessible as tools for prayer in the work of faith. (Peterson, Answering God, pp. 4-7).

Think about your prayer life. How have you used the Psalms as a prayer book? Is this concept of praying the Psalms new to you? If you have used the Psalms as a help in your prayer life be ready to share practical examples with your homegroup of how this has worked.

The Psalms both reflect and arouse our emotions. If we are unsure how to pray when we are in a particular frame of mind or place in life there is a psalm that can express our deepest feelings and longings. The 16th century Swiss reformer, John Calvin, pointed out that the Psalms functioned in the Christian's life something like a mirror of our soul.

There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here [in the Psalms] represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. (quoted in Longman , p. 76)

Martin Luther was another 16th century reformer. Luther was a crusty, brilliant, German who had a propensity to depression. His approach to the Christian life might be described as "earthy." Luther loved to pray the Psalms and makes the same point that Calvin made in the quote above.

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. (Luther, Word and Sacrament, pp. 255-256)

The Psalms reflect the various states, both emotionally and practically, that people find themselves in. Sadness, joy, fear, confidence, anger, doubt, shame, reverence, security, trust, are but a few of the ways the Psalms reflect our lives. Take 20-30 minutes and read some of the psalms. Wander through them for awhile. Don't make an effort at this time to be systematic. Read a few, skip a few, read some more. In your meandering record the life situations, emotions and responses to God of the psalmist. See how many states of the soul you can find. In the columns below, record the psalm and the corresponding life situation, emotion or response to God that you find. Be ready to share these with your homegroup.

Psalm

Emotion

Life Situation

Response to God

What is the difference between reading-studying the Psalms and praying them?

Psalm 27

Let's practice praying a particular Psalm. Psalm 27 is a well-known Psalm of King David that we will look at again in Study #4. For now, read Psalm 27 over several times slowly and in different translations.

How does the Psalmist **describe** God?

What does the Psalmist **want** from God?

What is the **life situation or emotional state** of the Psalmist?

What does the Psalm tell you about a believer's **relationship** with God?

As a homegroup take some time to pray this Psalm. Here are a few suggestions on how to do this.

- Break the Psalm into sections and pray it a section at a time.
- Pause after each section is prayed—read and be silent. Let the Psalm sit for a moment.
- In prayer expand on the concepts in the section of the Psalm that was just prayed before going on to the next section. Agree with each other's prayers.

PRAYER

Reflect on praying this Psalm. Did praying this Psalm enhance your communication with God?

What particular hurdles do you think that you may need to overcome to learn to pray the Psalms?

As a homegroup pray for one another that you would grow in prayer and draw closer to God in your study of Psalms.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY TWO
PRAISE
PSALMS 95-100, 113

The Psalms are best known for their exuberant praise to God. The primary character of the Bible is quite obviously God himself. In the psalms of praise the psalmist is calling upon all of creation to praise its sovereign creator. Frequently these psalms of praise will begin with a command, "Praise the Lord!" In the Hebrew this command is made up of two words. *Hallelu* = Praise, and *Yah* = God (an abbreviated form of *Yahweh*). It is from *Hallelu-yah* that we get the English word Hallelujah. We could look at any number of psalms that praise God. In this study, however, let's limit our focus to seven psalms that praise God; 95-100 and 113.

Read these psalms slowly and carefully. Try to read them in several translations. Begin by recording some of your initial impressions about praising God.

Most of the psalms of praise follow a similar pattern. Tremper Longman gives us an outline of this basic structure. (Longman, p. 24)

- Hymns [of praise] begin with a call to worship.
- They continue by expanding on the reasons why God should be praised.
- Hymns [of praise] often include, and often conclude with, further calls to praise.

	Call to worship	Reasons for praise	Further call to praise
Psalm 95			
Psalm 96			
Psalm 97			
Psalm 98			
Psalm 99			
Psalm 99			
Psalm 100			
Psalm 113			

In the seven psalms of praise that we are looking at in this study make note of how each of them begins. What is similar in these calls to worship? What is unique in each of them?

Many of the psalms mention singing. We know that many of the Psalms were set to music and sung during Israel's worship.

Come let us sing for joy to the Lord (95)

Sing to the Lord a new song (96)

Come before him with joyful songs (100)

I will sing of your love and justice; to you O Lord, I will sing praise (101)

Why singing? Have you ever thought about why we sing so much at Santa Barbara Community Church? Many of the psalms have been set to contemporary tunes and are

sung in churches around the world. What is it about singing that enhances our worship of God?

Jonathan Edwards, the brilliant pastor/theologian of the 18th century Great Awakening, gives us some help in understanding this aspect of praising God in worship.

And the duty of singing praises to God seems to be appointed wholly to excite and express religious affections [emotion]. No other reason can be assigned why we should express ourselves to God in verse rather than in prose, and do it with music, but only that such is the nature and frame that these things have a tendency to move our affections. (The Religious Affections, p. 44)

Do you agree with Edward's assessment of the role of singing in the worship and praise of God? How have the Psalms helped you in this regard?

Read Ephesians 5:17-19. What do these verses add to your understanding of the role of singing in worship and praise? To whom do we sing? How does this inform our understanding of what we are doing on Sunday afternoons?

The reasons for praise are the most important part of these psalms. God is being extolled for concrete acts on behalf of his people that come out of his character. Look at the table that you filled out above. In the seven psalms that we are examining in this study, how would you summarize the **reasons** the psalmist gives that God should be praised?

We have already talked about singing. But in these psalms we are invited to worship and praise God in several different ways besides singing. **How** do these psalms instruct us to praise God?

Has having spent some time in these psalms and reflecting on the praise and worship of God given you any new insights into this area of your Christian life? When is it that you are **most likely** to praise God? When are you **least likely** to praise God?

Respond to C. S. Lewis' comments about praise and the Psalms.

I had not noticed either that just as men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they urge us to join them in praising it: "Isn't she lovely? Wasn't it glorious? Don't you think that magnificent?" The Psalmists in telling everyone to praise God are doing what all men do when they speak of what they care about. . . . I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. (Lewis, p. 95)

There are numerous metaphors, images from nature and allusions to Old Testament events in these psalms. Pick out a few of your favorite and be ready to share them with your homegroup.

Okay, most of us don't write poetry. But give it a try. Write a brief psalm of praise that lifts up God! Be prepared to read this to your homegroup.

Many Christians find it difficult to praise God. It is not that these disciples don't believe in God, trust in God, love God, obey God and generally live the Christian life, but rather that they simply find it difficult to praise him the way in which the Psalms direct us. How have the Psalms helped you in this area of praising God? How do you think that you could use the Psalms better in your walk with God to help you praise him?

STUDY THREE
THANKSGIVING
PSALMS 30, 56, 75, 118

Just as the Psalms frequently erupt in praise of God they also thank God for his goodness and at times deliverance. The psalms of praise and the psalms of thanksgiving have an extremely close connection and are very similar in many ways.¹ The uniqueness of the thanksgiving psalm is that it response to the sadness or lament of the author. As the psalmist sees God's response to his predicament he worships God by thanking him.

Read these five psalms of thanksgiving. Read them slowly and let them sink into to your soul. How are these psalms **similar** to the psalms of praise that we studied last week? How are they **different**?

Don't forget that the category of "thanksgiving" for these psalms is not rigid. In most of the psalms there are several types of material co-existing in the same psalm. If you wrote a thank you note to a friend, for example, you might also include some information about your life in the note which had as its primary purpose to say thanks. With this in mind let's look at each of these psalms of thanks individually.

Psalm 30

Notice that the psalm begins with praise and ends with thanks.² What is the relationship between praise and thanks in the psalm?

¹ The categories of "praise" and "thanksgiving" are very close in the Psalms. Old Testament scholar C. Westermann has made the point that they are so similar that they should be seen as essentially the same with psalms of thanksgiving simply being a sub-category of praise psalms. (C. Westermann, Praise and Lament, pp.25-30)

² You may have noticed the title of the psalm, "For the dedication of the temple." If this psalm is an individual thanksgiving that is associated with David how is it "For the dedication of the temple"? William VanGemeren points out that it is best to, "consider the superscription a later addition in which the psalm was nationalized as an expression of the suffering of the nation in exile and of the restoration from exile. The "temple" must be a reference to the second temple dedicated in 515 B.C. The psalm became associated with the feast of Hanukkah, commemorating the dedication of the temple in 165 B.C. According to the Talmud the Jews recited Psalm 30 during the Hanukkah festival. (VanGemeren, p. 257)

Take note of the series of contrasts in verses 4-7. What are these contrasts attempting to convey?

“moment” and
“weeping” and
“night” and
“firm” and

Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Psalms is very helpful and insightful addition to our normal study Bible. Ponder his paraphrase of verse 4-5.

*All you saints! Sing your hearts out to Yahweh!
Thank him to his face!
He gets angry once in a while, but across
a lifetime there is only love.
The nights of crying your eyes out
give way to days of laughter.*

Notice how practical and “earthy” these psalms are. How have you experienced this in your relationship with God? How has your “weeping” become “rejoicing” **because of God in your life**? How has your “wailing” turned into “dancing” (vs. 11)?

Psalm 56

David is not happy as Psalm 56 begins. Read 56:1-7. Make a list of what David’s enemies are doing to him.

The psalm begins to change its tone in vs. 8. Eventually, what began in a rather negative manner ends with this theme of thanksgiving! “I will present my thank offerings to you.” (vs.12) Again Peterson’s paraphrase is helpful.

*God, you did everything you promised.
and I’m thanking you with all my heart.*

How did David’s understanding of God’s character bring him from fear and frustration to thankfulness?

What do you think it means to “walk before God in the light of life”? Are you doing this in your Christian life?

Charles Spurgeon, who preached, wrote and shepherded his flock in 19th century London, was one of the most gifted preachers that has ever lived. Ponder and respond to his comments on 56:13.

“That I may walk before God in the light of the living,” enjoying the favor and the presence of God, and finding the joy and brightness of life therein. Walking at liberty, in holy service, in sacred communion, in constant progress in holiness, enjoying the smile of heaven—this I seek after. Here is the loftiest reach of a good person’s ambition: to dwell with God, to walk in righteousness before him, to rejoice in his presence, and in the light and glory which it yields. Thus in this short psalm we have climbed from the ravenous jaws of the enemy into the light of Jehovah’s presence, a path which only faith can tread. (Spurgeon, p. 231)

Psalm 75

This psalm begins differently than the two we have looked at previously in this study. Here the proclamation of thanks begins the psalm instead of ending it. The repetition of “we give thanks” is to add loud emphasis to this theme of thanksgiving. What are the reasons for thanksgiving in this psalm?

The metaphor “horn” is used 4 times in this brief psalm. Horns were the primary way many animals either defended themselves or attached others. The symbol of “horns” was used often in the Old Testament as pointing to strength and power (see Psalm 18:2, Luke 1:69). The metaphor is used, as in our text, in both a positive and negative manner. Eugene Peterson updates the metaphor by rendering “horns” as “fists.” In what ways are these types of figures of speech that are so often used in the poetry of the Psalms helpful?

In what ways can you identify with this psalm of thanksgiving? How does this psalm help you to express your thanks to God?

Psalm 118

This psalm begins and ends in exactly the same way.¹

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
His love endures forever.*

In what ways is this psalm a communal call for Israel as a nation to give thanks? How is it at same time an individual call to be thankful? Think about the relationship between individual and corporate expressions of thanks. How are the two expressed together here in psalm 118.

What about Santa Barbara Community Church? What comes first, individual or corporate thanks? Can you have one without the other?

In 118:21 the psalmist says, “I will give thanks, for you answered me; you have become my salvation.” How has God “answered” you and become your salvation?

In ending this study think about the role of thankfulness in the Christian life. This theme of thanks plays a dominant role not just in the Psalms, but also in the New Testament.

- Hebrews 12:28
- Colossians 3:15
- Ephesians 5:20

Do you have other favorite verses that instruct us to be thankful in the New Testament?

¹ This psalm belongs to a group of psalms know as the Hallel psalms (113-118) that were used liturgically in Israel’s worship. Psalm 118 was sung during the Passover meal and, according to the Talmud, during the Feast of Tabernacles.

Do you find it difficult or easy to be thankful to God for what he has done in your life?

Make a list of the things that you are thankful to God for.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY FOUR
CONFIDENCE (PART 1)
PSALMS 11, 23, 27, 62

In this study we will be pondering a particular class of psalms that express confidence in God. As we have already seen in our study to this point, the categories and themes we find are not airtight, fitting neatly into a single psalm. The authors of these poems are fluid and in any given psalm we may find several themes operating at the same time. Confidence in God is a theme that is found throughout the Psalter. There are, however, some psalms that focus intently on the might and goodness of God and the confidence that this instills in the psalmist. It is to four of these psalms that we will look in this study.¹

Begin by reading Psalms 11, 23, 27, 62. These psalms are short and will not take a great deal of time to get through. Read slowly. Read them several times. Read them in more than one translation. Before you answer the questions below write a few notes about your thoughts and reactions to the sentiments that the psalmist is expressing.

Make a list of the words which are used in each of these psalms to describe confidence?

In the four psalms of confidence that we are pondering there is always a reference to an enemy, a threat, an evil, or an impending malady. In spite of these conditions the writer expresses a trust and confidence in God. Let's begin by focusing on the negative! In each of these psalms look for the situations, threats or problems that concern the writer. How are these difficulties described? What are they?

Confidence. It is something we all want in life. A confident person tends to do well in life. Think of your favorite sports team that is playing with "confidence" and has won their last 10 games. What about the businessperson who is "confident" in the

¹ This theme of confidence in God is a major emphasis in the psalms. We will return again to another set of psalms in study 7, further exploring how the believer is to be confident in God.

outlook for the company and makes financial decisions accordingly. Picture the individual who is “confident” as he enters an unknown social situation and within minutes has met several people and is very much at ease in this context. We all know people who could be described as confident. But what about spiritual confidence? What is the basis for the spiritual confidence described in these psalms?

What is the difference between simply being a confident person and having a spiritual confidence based on God?

Psalm 11

The context for this psalm is most likely the time during which King Saul was hunting down David and attempting to kill him. Young David, who would one day be king of Israel, was a fugitive in fear of his life for 13 years. For background you may want to read 1 Samuel 23-24.

In the midst of the threat of “bows” and “arrows” (v. 2) David asks a question. “When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” David is essentially saying, “I’m in big trouble!” “The king is trying to kill me!” “What should I do?” What is David’s answer?

Commenting on this passage, Willem VanGemeran says that, “Confidence in the Lord is a mark of Christian maturity.” Do you agree? Why or why not? If you agree why do you think that confidence is a mark of spiritual maturity?

Psalm 23

The 23rd psalm is one of the most famous of all the psalms.¹ It is beautiful, clear and comforting. It is also a psalm that is very intimate. Derek Kidner points out this personal tone.

In the word *shepherd*, David uses the most comprehensive and intimate metaphor yet encountered in the Psalms, preferring usually the more distant “king” or

¹ Try and read this classic psalm in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase.

“deliverer”, or the impersonal “rock”, “shield”, etc.; whereas the shepherd lives with his flock and is everything to it: guide, physician and protector. (Kidner, p. 110)

Charles Spurgeon points out that not only is God described as shepherd, but he is “*my*” shepherd.

The sweetest word of the whole is **my**. He does not say, “The Lord is the Shepherd of the world at large, and leadeth forth the multitude as his flock.” If he is shepherd to no one else, he is Shepherd to *me*. The words are in the present tense. Whatever the believer’s position, he is under the pastoral care of Jehovah now. (Spurgeon, p. 88)

As you reflect on your own Christian life can you say with David, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”? Has your experience been similar to that of David? In what ways do you sense of God’s pastoral care of you?

Most of us don’t know a lot about sheep and shepherds. The metaphor, however, is a rich and colorful one. Do the best you can even though you live in suburban America and have never touched a sheep! What is the psalmist trying to picture for us in this image of sheep and shepherd?

Jesus uses this same metaphor of sheep and shepherds and refers to himself as the “good shepherd.” Read John 10:1-21. What does this teaching of Jesus add to your understanding how God is our shepherd?

Psalm 27

In this Davidic psalm of confidence we find numerous metaphors describing God and David’s relationship with him. Make a list of the word pictures used in this psalm. Do you have any favorites?

We might say the opposite of confidence is fear. Psalm 27 begins by addressing the issue of fear. What did David have to fear in his life?

What fears plague you?

Peterson's paraphrase of 27:1-3 captures this tension between fear and confidence in God.

*Light, space, zest—
that's Yahweh"
So, with him on my side I'm fearless,
afraid of no one and nothing.*

*When vandal hordes ride down
ready to eat me alive,
Those bullies and toughs
fall flat on their faces.*

*When besieged,
I'm calm as a baby.
When all hell breaks loose,
I'm collected and cool.*

How has your relationship with God helped you to conquer your fears and find confidence, security and calmness in your life?

Psalm 62

In Psalm 27 we saw that confidence in God has a great deal to do with our fears. In Psalm 62 the issue of personal security is addressed. A believer who finds her confidence in God also finds her security in God. Make a list of the areas of your life that you attempt to find security. How does our quest for security (financial, housing, relationships, work, etc.), relate to our faith in God?

What does Psalm 62 have to say about our desires for security?

Where does your “soul” find rest? Try to describe this “soul rest” to your group.

Respond to Eugene Peterson’s comments on this psalm.

The three nouns—rock, fortress, salvation—make a triangle of God-assertiveness. The assertions furnish the self’s foundation (rock), defense (fortress) and wholeness (salvation). The triangle establishes God as the environment in which the self is affirmed and furnished with the conditions for freedom: stability, integrity, vigor. The consequence of living in these conditions is a stronger-than-ever sense of self: “I shall not be greatly moved.” (Peterson, Earth and Altar, p. 87)

In a few weeks we will again return to this topic of confidence in God. For now, what have you learned from these psalms? What new insights will you apply to living the Christian life?

In Study 1 we looked at how the psalms can be our prayer book, expressing our deepest feelings and longings. Practice praying these psalms of confidence. Allow the words of the psalms to become your words. Be ready to report to your homegroup how praying these psalms helped you to have confidence in God.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY FIVE
FORGIVENESS
PSALMS 32, 38, 51, 103

In this study we will examine four psalms that address the problem of sin, disobedience and God's cleansing forgiveness. Psalms 32, 38, 51 and 103 are usually grouped with other psalms in a category referred to as the "penitential psalms." Begin by reading these four psalms making notes of your thoughts, impressions and questions.

Psalm 32

Psalm 38

Psalm 51

Psalm 103

We are unsure of the exact historical background of most of the psalms. Psalm 32, and especially Psalm 51, are an exception. It is all but certain that the context for these psalms is King David's sexual sin with Bathsheba and the consequent murder of her husband Uriah. To understand the background of David's sin and his need for forgiveness read 2 Samuel 11-12:25. What stands out to you about David's sin in this story?

In Psalms 32, 38 and 51 we find descriptions of how sin affects us. Disobedience and sin take a terrible toll on the individual. Pastor Ray Stedman recounts a story from the life of Billy Graham. "A London psychologist once told Billy Graham that seventy percent of the people in mental hospitals in England could be released if they could find forgiveness. Their problem was a bad conscience and they could gain no relief from the guilt and pressure under which they lived." (Stedman, p. 183) In these three psalms how does David describe the effects of sin in his life?

Psalm 32, 38 and 51 all use numerous physical—body images to describe sin's effect on the individual. For example, ". . . my **bones** have no soundness because of my sin." (38:3). From these psalms make a list of the ways in which the sin affects the body. Do

you think this use of the body metaphor is just a poetic word picture or does sin actually have an effect on our physical well-being?

Before we can understand forgiveness we must understand the depth of our sin. VanGemeran makes this observation.

In his search for forgiveness, the psalmist opens his sinful heart. To this end he uses the three synonyms for sin: “transgressions,” “iniquity,” and “sin.” The variety of the words for sin is for poetic reasons, as they express the seriousness of the sin. The author is fully aware of his condition before God. (VanGemeran, p. 380)

According to Psalm 51:5, when does David say his sin and disobedience began?

In Psalms 32 and 51 there are some clear steps that David takes to procure God’s forgiveness. What are they?

David says that, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord.” (32:5), and “I confess my sin.” (38:18). Psalm 51:3- 4 are also a confession. In the New Testament we are also told to confess our sins. What do these verses add to what we are learning in the Psalms?

1 John 1:9

Romans 10:9

James 5:16

What exactly is confession? What is the role of confession in the Christian life? When do you confess your sin before God?

From the reading of these psalms what did it take to get David to a place where he was ready to confess his sin before God?

What has it taken in your life to bring you to times of confession? Be ready to give a few examples of how confession has worked in your life.

When the sinner confesses and experiences God's forgiveness how do these psalms describe what happens?

How would you describe your experience of God's forgiveness?

What would you say to the Christian who confesses his sins but doesn't have much of an emotional experience of forgiveness?

God is in the business of forgiving, restoring, and saving broken sinful people. Remind yourselves of this wonderful truth from these New Testament verses.

Colossians 1:14

Ephesians 1:7

Ephesians 2:8-9

Romans 10:9

Titus 3:4-7

What the New Testament states in a clear factual way these psalms speak of in a more poetic fashion. Re-read Psalm 103, especially verses 7-18. According to Psalm 103:12 what is the extent of God's forgiveness of those who love him?

Psalm 103: 1-5 gives us six reasons to praise God. The NIV instructs us to not forget “all his benefits.” List these “benefits.”

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

Summarize these six “benefits” in a short sentence or two.

These are psalms that you can pray to God, voicing your frustration with your own sin and your need for forgiveness. Practice. Pray these psalms of forgiveness and allow them to speak to God on your behalf. Be ready to report to your homegroup how praying these psalms have changed you.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY SIX
THIRST
PSALMS 42, 63, 27

One of the consistent themes in the book of Psalms is the psalmist's hunger, longing, and desire to be with and enjoy God's presence. This theme will often pop up in the middle of a psalm that is primarily devoted to some other topic. As you read the Psalms remind yourself to be on the lookout for this thread—thirst for God. Let's look carefully at three psalms in this study that speak of longing for God.¹

To study God's word is a great practice for the Christian. Western, educated believers tend to do a fairly good job of Bible study. But one of the problems with "studying" the Bible is that we are always looking for the right answer. If we think we have understood a passage correctly, and "gotten it" we are satisfied. This tendency has several problems, but can become especially problematic when reading the Psalms because there usually isn't a "right answer." These are psalms of ejaculatory praise. The psalmist is erupting, emotionally, expressing his desire to be with God!

Read Psalms 42, 63, and 27. As always, read slowly and in several translations. This is poetry and it is to be enjoyed. What do you initially notice about the psalmist's desire for God? How does he express his thirst for God?

C.S. Lewis, calls this the "appetite for God."

I want to stress what I think that we (or at least I) need more; the joy and delight in God which meet us in the Psalms These poets knew far less reason than we for loving God. They did not know that He offered them eternal joy; still less that He would die to win it for them. Yet they express a longing for Him, for His mere presence, which comes only to the best Christians or to Christians in their best moments. They long to live all their days in the Temple so that they may constantly see "the fair beauty of the Lord" (27:4). Their longing to go up to Jerusalem and "appear before the presence of God" is like a physical thirst (42). From Jerusalem His presence flashes out "in perfect beauty" (50:2). Lacking that encounter with Him, their souls are parched like a waterless countryside (63:2). They crave to be "satisfied with the pleasures" of His house (65:4). Only there

¹ We have already looked at Psalm 27 twice in this study (#1 and #4)! It is just too good to not touch on again.

can they be at ease, like a bird in the nest (84:3). One day of those “pleasures” is better than a lifetime spent elsewhere (10). I have rather—though the expression may seem harsh to some—called this the “appetite for God” . . . (Lewis, p. 50-51)

Psalm 42 graphically portrays this longing for God. Think about the word pictures of a “soul” that “pants” and “thirsts” for God. What comes to mind when you read this psalm?

Answer the question that Charles Spurgeon asks in his comments on Psalm 42:1.

As the hart [deer] instinctively seeks the river to bathe its smoking flanks and to escape the dogs, even so my weary, persecuted soul pants after the Lord my God. Debarred from public worship, David was heartsick.¹ Ease he did not seek, honor he did not covet, but the enjoyment of communion with God was an urgent and absolute necessity, like water to a stag. **Have you personally felt the same?** (Spurgeon, p.173, emphasis added)

The psalmist asks the rhetorical question, “Where can I go to meet with God?” (42:2). What would your answer be to this question? **Where** do you go when you are thirsty for God?

Continue to work with this metaphor of “thirst.” **How** do you quench this “thirst” for God in your life?

¹ Spurgeon obviously thinks that David wrote this psalm. That may be the case but the possibilities are not limited to David. VanGemerens comments: Even though the life-situation remains controversial, it is evident that the psalmist was isolated from temple worship. He may have been a refugee, but it is more likely that he had been exiled to Aram, Assyria, or Babylon and was in the hands of taunting captors (vv.3, 10). (VanGemerens, p. 330)

In Psalm 27:4 David makes it abundantly clear that he wants to be with and enjoy God's presence. From your reading of the rest of Psalm 27 **why** does David desire to be with God? According to this psalm, what is attractive to David about God?

Compare Psalm 63 with Psalm 42. What similarities do you see? What figures of speech are shared between these psalms?

In Psalm 63:5 David says that, "My soul will be satisfied [with God] as with the richest of foods." Think about your own life. In what areas of your life do you find "satisfaction?" To what extent do you find satisfaction in your relationship with God?

Commenting on Psalm 63 Derek Kidner observes, "The longing of these verses is not the groping of a stranger, feeling his way toward God, but the eagerness of a friend, almost a lover, to be in touch with the one he holds dear." (Kidner, p. 224) Do you feel like a "stranger" or a "friend" and "lover" to God? How is this manifest in the living of your Christian life?

Many of us who are working through this study and through these psalms are feeling a bit alienated. We may lack a deep emotional longing, desire, passion, hunger, thirst or appetite for God. Some of us may even object to the track of this study asking, "Isn't it enough to just believe in Jesus? Isn't 'faith' trusting in a certain set of truths about God, Jesus and salvation? Maybe David and the other psalmists were just emotional guys!" How would you respond to the Christian who believed the right things about God, Jesus and salvation, who truly had faith, but confessed to lacking a thirst for being with God?

Whether it is the desire for power, wealth, food, or fun our appetites dictate the direction of our lives. Is it possible for the Christian who believes, but confesses no great hunger for God to cultivate such a hunger? How? What have you done to cultivate your appetite for God?

Respond to this statement from pastor John Piper.

If we don't feel strong desires for the manifestation of the glory of God, it is not because we have drunk deeply and are satisfied. It is because we have nibbled so long at the table of the world. Our soul is stuffed with small things, and there is no room for the great. God did not create you for this. There is an appetite for God. And it can be awakened. (Piper, *A Hunger For God*, p. 23)

Try praying these psalms. Allow the psalmist's longings and thirst for God to inform your desires. Be ready to report back to your homegroup how praying these psalms affected your relationship with God.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY SEVEN
CONFIDENCE (PART 2)
PSALMS 91, 121, 125, 146

In this study we again turn to the theme of spiritual confidence. Confidence in God's power, goodness and sovereignty plays a huge role in many psalms and is one of the major themes, if not the predominant theme, in the Psalms as a whole. Because the Psalms are poetry, the psalmist's confidence in God is expressed in rich language that is intended to bring into our mind word-pictures of God. These images of God are meant to illicit feelings or emotions of security, firmness, steadfastness, and confidence in God.

Read Psalms 91, 121, 125, and 146. These psalms are not long and will not take a great deal of time. Slow down. Find a quiet place, read and enjoy. Read them aloud if possible. While there will be questions to answer in this study, the point is not so much to find the correct answer as it is to provoke the correct experience of God. Spiritual confidence is our goal.

How is God described in these psalms? What names or synonyms are employed to refer to God?

The context of psalm 91 is danger. The psalmist needs the confidence that comes from a God who protects in the midst of evil and uncertainty. The vivid pictures of God's protection that we find in the psalm may be foreign to modern readers. Think about each of these pictures. What would someone living during the time they were written envision? How do they help you have confidence in the God who protects?

“shelter” (v. 1)

“shadow” (v. 1)

“fortress” (v. 2)

“save you from fowler's snare” (v. 3)

“cover you with his feathers” “under his wings” (v. 4)

“shield and rampart” (v. 4)

The opposite of confidence may be fear. In these and other psalms it appears that the psalmist has good reasons to be afraid. Nevertheless, the psalmist says, “*You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by the day, nor the pestilence that stalks the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday.*” (v. 5-6) What are you afraid of in your life? What are the “fears” that plague you?

What new perspective do these psalms give you on your fears?

God’s sovereign protection requires our participation. Look at these four verses. What does God require of us to be confident in him?

91:1

91:9

91:14

91:15

Does confidence in God’s protection mean that nothing bad will ever happen to God’s people? Obviously not. God’s people do suffer. Read Matthew 4:1-11. In an ironic twist of Scripture we find the devil quoting Psalm 91:11, 12! How does Jesus’ response to the devil help you to have confidence in God’s protection?

Spiritual confidence is rooted in the sovereignty of God. It is this sovereign God who has commanded angels to “guard” his people. “*For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.*” (v. 11) The teaching on angels in the Bible and their protective role is not always clear. Read Hebrews 1:14. Here we find another affirmation of angelic protection for believers. Charles Spurgeon comments on Psalm 91:11.

How angels thus keep us we cannot tell. Whether they repel demons, counteract spiritual plots, or even ward off the subtler physical forces of disease, we do not know. Perhaps we shall one day stand amazed at the multiplied services which the unseen bands have rendered to us. (Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 28)

In Psalm 121, the psalmist declares that his help (confidence) comes from the Lord (v.2).¹ He goes on in the second half of the verse to give a statement of fact about God. What is it? How does this fact inspire confidence?

How many times does psalm 121 use the word “watch”? The Hebrew word (somar) that the NIV translates as “watch,” is translated by the NASB Bible as “keeper” and in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase as “guardian.” What is the psalmist attempting to communicate about God and his care for us? How does this inspire spiritual confidence in your life?

The author is speaking in a context in which pagan gods were everywhere. These pagan deities were thought to be fallible and often to be asleep! The contrast is stark. What does the psalmist say about the true God and his vigilance as our guardian in vs. 3, 4?

Many psalms that express spiritual confidence in God use images from nature. What is the graphic image from nature that we see in Psalm 125:1- 2?

The “scepter” is a symbol of foreign, anti-God rule. Isaiah 14:5 says, “*The Lord has broken the rod of the wicked, the scepter of rulers.*” How would Psalm 125:3 inspire confidence in God’s people?

All humans have a need for security. We look for ways to “cover our bases.” We long for stability, safety and to live life in a secure context. This desire can create in God’s

¹ Psalm 121 is from a sub-category of the Psalms known as “Songs of Ascents.” The “Songs of Ascents” (psalms 120-134) form the major part of what is known as the Hallel psalms (psalms 120-136). The exact meaning of this phrase “Songs of Ascents” is not clear. VanGemeren comments. “The Mishnah links the collection of fifteen songs with the fifteen steps of the temple where the Levites sang these songs. It is more likely that these songs were sung in the three annual festival processions, as the pilgrims “ascended” to Jerusalem, hence the designation “Songs of Ascents”. (VanGemeren, p.769)

people the tendency to attempt to find our security, our confidence, in the wrong places. Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Psalm 146:3-5 shows the futility of trusting in things other than God.

*Don't put your life in the hands of experts
who know nothing of life, of salvation life.
Mere humans don't have what it takes;
when they die, their projects die with them.
Instead, get help from the god of Jacob.
put your hope in Yahweh and know real blessing!*

Where do you tend to find your security and confidence outside of God?

We have now looked at eight psalms over the course of two studies that have focused on the psalmist's confidence in God. Try to summarize what you have learned. How has the prayer of the psalmists become your prayer? What roadblocks remain in finding your spiritual confidence in God?

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY EIGHT
DELIVERANCE
PSALMS 3, 13, 59, 69, 109, 137, 140

By this time in our study of Psalms we have seen that these prayers express a wide variety of human emotions and the deepest longings of our souls. With even a cursory reading of the Psalms it becomes clear that everything is not always positive. The psalms that we will look at in this study are full of sadness, anger, frustration, and portray a mood that could be described as depressing. These are poems of lament. We have already studied psalms which praise God, thank God, thirst and find confidence in God's goodness, power and presence. The lament psalms help to round out the Psalms as a prayer book. Christians need to have a way to cry out to God, "HELP!" It is here that we find a voice to our fears, frustrations, and at times, our sense that God has abandoned us.

All the laments are not the same. These psalms, however, all have a complaint. Tremper Longman explains.

The **complaint** is the focal point of the lament psalm because it is here that we learn what has motivated the psalmist to prayer. . . The lament is the psalmist's cry when in distress he has nowhere to turn but to God. We discover three types of complaints as we read through the laments.

1. The psalmist may be troubled by his own thoughts and actions.
2. He may complain about the actions of others against him ("the enemies")
3. He may be frustrated by God himself. (Longman, p.26)

A sub-category of the psalms of lament is what is known as imprecatory psalms. These are psalms where the psalmist invokes a curse on his enemies. These psalms are very difficult to grasp for many Christians because they seem to contradict what we already know about God. Prepare to be shocked! Eugene Peterson reminds us about the nature of these psalms.

The Psalms in Hebrew are earthy and rough. They are not genteel. They are not the prayers of nice people, couched in cultured language. (Peterson, p. 6)

Read Psalms 3, 13, 59, 69, 109, 137, 140. Try to understand the complaints in each psalm. Following Tremper Longman's outline of the laments, make notes as to who the psalmist is complaining about. Is he complaining about himself, his "enemies," or God?¹

The psalms of lament describe what we call "low moments" in life. In Psalm 3 the author is so upset that he asks God to "Strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked." (3:7) All of the psalms in this study are rugged, realistic and at times revolting. They are also comforting in that we find even our anger and fears can be expressed to God. Where do you find comfort and encouragement in these sometimes depressing psalms? How does it help you to know that the Bible writers expressed these types of emotions to God?

In Psalm 13 how many times does the psalmist cry out, "How long?"

What does the author "wrestle" with in this psalm (vs. 2)?

Personalize the prayer of this psalm for your own life. Where have you "wrestled" with God? Where are you currently "wrestling" with God?

In Psalm 59:5, as the author is pleading for God's deliverance, he asks God to "rouse yourself." Eugene Peterson paraphrases this verse, "Wake up and see for yourself!" Does this strike you as an appropriate way to address God? How do we balance honestly crying out to God with respect for his majesty?

¹ One of the more difficult aspects of the psalms of lament is attempting to identify the "enemies." Tremper Longman points out that, "Some scholars have taken them as the national enemies of Israel, others as 'sorcerers' and still others as accusers in a legal case. In most cases the references are vague, and we have every reason to believe they are so intentionally. The psalms are purposefully vague in reference to historical events so that they can be used in a variety of situations." (Longman, p. 27)

Parts of Psalm 69 will sound familiar to many of us. The New Testament quotes it more than any other psalm.¹ David feels that he is suffering unfairly. He is perplexed and angry because his obedience to God doesn't seem to be paying off! He seems to be at the end of his ability to endure. Compare your translation of verses 1-3 with Eugene Peterson's paraphrase.

*God, God, save me!
I'm in over my head,*

*Quicksand under me, swamp water over me;
I'm going down for the third time.*

*I'm hoarse from calling for help,
Bleary-eyed from the searching the sky for God.*

Tremper Longman makes this comment on Psalm 69.

We can learn about prayer from the psalmist. As we study the laments, we are continually reminded of the frank way in which the psalmist speaks to God. He tells God how he is feeling and what he is thinking in no uncertain terms. Some Christians tend to pray to God as if we can hide from him what's really on our minds. We should be honest with God if we are impatient with him or angry with him or disappointed in him. We certainly won't fool him if we bottle it up inside of ourselves. (Longman, p. 135)

Be ready to describe for your homegroup the last time you were honest with God in prayer.

Psalms 109 and 137 are two examples of imprecatory psalms that can trouble the Christian. In Psalm 109:6-15 we get a lengthy list of curses that the author is asking God to bring upon his enemies. List these curses. What is the psalmist asking God to do?

Psalm 137 reflects on the bitter fall of Judah to Babylon and the resulting exile of the nation to a foreign land. How do Israel's captors torment them?

If you are not shocked you are not reading them carefully enough. What do we do with psalms like 137:8-9, where the author says;

¹ Psalm 22, another lament, is the second most quoted psalm in the New Testament.

*happy is he who repays you
for what you have done to us—*

*he who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks.*

C.S. Lewis ponders this question.

One way of dealing with these terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible Psalms is simply to leave them alone. But unfortunately the bad parts will not “come away clean”; they may, as we have noticed, be intertwined with the most exquisite things. And if we still believe that all Holy Scripture is “written for our learning” or that the age old use of the Psalms in Christian worship was not entirely contrary to the will of God, and if we remember that Our Lord’s mind and language were clearly steeped in the Psalter, we shall prefer, if possible, to make some use of them. What use can be made? (Lewis, p. 22)

How would you answer Lewis’ question, “What use can be made?”

The answer must lie somewhere between the biblical requirement of love for our neighbor and the hatred of evil and sin. Respond to these two statements on Psalm 137. Do they help you understand this and other psalms that invoke a curse?

Psalm 137 is the most celebrated outbreak of hate in Psalms (and the most tampered with) but by no means an exception. There is hardly a page of the Psalms that isn’t left smoking by a pungent curse. The psalmists are angry people. In the presence of God they have realized that the world is not a benign place where everyone is doing their best to get along with others and that if we just try a little harder things are going to turn out all right. Their prayers have brought them to an awareness in their souls and in society of the prophesied consequences of the “enmity between you [Satan] and the woman” (Gen. 3:15). (Peterson, Answering God, p. 101)

This is not a psalm which reflects a calamity which has just happened, but one which represents the voice of people who have learned the anguish that things would not immediately be put right. This is a psalm for the long haul, for those not able to see the change. It’s hope must necessarily be visceral, perhaps an embarrassment to bourgeois folk who have never lost that much, been abused that much, or hoped that much. It is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously. (Brueggemann, p. 74-77)

Try to summarize what you have learned from these psalms of lament. How will you use them in your prayer life?

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY NINE
MEMORY (PART ONE)
PSALM 136

Psalm 136 is the last of a group of psalms known as the “Songs of Ascents” (Psalms 120-134). The “Songs of Ascents” were then a part of a larger group known as the Hallel (praise) psalms (Psalms 113-118, 120-136, 146-150). These psalms were used during the great annual feasts and festivals that were an essential part of Israel’s worship. Psalm 136 was primarily associated with the Feast of Passover.

Many psalms fall under the category of psalms of remembrance. These poems focus on the great redemptive acts of the past and call to memory God’s goodness and faithfulness to his people.¹ How God has acted in Israel’s history is remembered so that he can be worshiped and thanked.

These psalms are united in their subject matter, the “wonderful acts” of God (105:2). Nowhere in the Bible is history reported only to impart historical information, but this is especially true in the Psalms. Rather, God’s acts are recounted so that Israel might praise him: *Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name; make known among the nations what he has done.* (105:1) Psalm 136 is unique in the Bible due to its recurrent refrain, “*His love endures forever.*” Each verse brings a past act of God’s redemption to remembrance. (Longman, p. 32)

Read Psalm 136. What do you notice about this prayer? Make notes as to what is clear and what is perplexing in the psalm.

What divisions or groupings of the various points of remembrance do you find? What are the categories the author is bringing to mind for the reader?

¹ Other psalms of remembrance would include: 66, 78, 105, 106, 135 and 145. We will look at these psalms in study 12.

This psalm of remembrance begins with the command to “give thanks.” The command is repeated 3 times for emphasis. What is the relationship between giving thanks and remembering? Is it possible to do one without the other?

Which comes first in your Christian life, giving thanks or remembering?

This psalm reminds us that memory is crucial to the worship of God. Describe how spiritual memories help you in your worship of God. These may be memories from the Bible and how God has acted on your behalf. They could also be memories of how God has intervened in your life personally.

Respond to this statement by Eugene Peterson.

It becomes evident as we do this that memory is not nostalgia. Memory is not an orientation to the past; it is vigorously present tense, selecting out of the storehouse of the past, retrieving and arranging images and insights, and then hammering them together for use in the present moment. St. Augustine found that the best model for developing the integrating experience of past, present, and future was the audible praying of a psalm. The psalmists exercise their and our memories vigorously. Prayer is an act of memory. If we thus confine ourselves to one-generational knowledge here, or even worse, to our own conversion experience knowledge, we are impoverished beyond reason. (Peterson, Answering God, p. 117)

Write a psalm using the refrain, “His love endures forever.” Recount biblical themes and events that remind you of the abiding love of God for his people. Share your psalm with your homegroup.

We are to remember because we tend to forget. Describe times in your life that you have been spiritually forgetful. How have the disciplines of the Christian life helped you to remember God's faithfulness?

The theme of the book of Deuteronomy is "remember." The word "remember" (*Zakar* in Hebrew) is used at least 16 times, but the value of remembering is extolled on every page. The emphasis on remembering goes hand-in-hand with the plea to "not forget." Read Deuteronomy 6: 1-12. Moses is concerned that the people will "forget the Lord" (Dt. 6:12). Why does he think they will forget God?

How does Deuteronomy 6:11 speak to us in Santa Barbara Community Church?

Practice praying Psalm 136. As you pray this psalm try to think like a Jew. What is difficult for you? How does the poem cause you to remember that, "*His love endures forever*"?

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY TEN
TORAH
PSALMS 1, 19, 119

Psalm 1 ¹

*How well God must like you—
 you don't hang out at Sin Saloon,
 you don't slink along Dead-End Road,
 you don't go to Smart-Mouth College.*

*Instead you thrill to Yahweh's Word,
 you chew on Scripture day and night.
 You're a tree planted in Eden,
 bearing fresh fruit every month,
 Never dropping a leaf,
 always in blossom.*

*You're not at all like the wicked,
 who are mere windblown dust—
 Without defense in court,
 unfit company for innocent people.*

*Yahweh charts the road you take.
 The road they take is Skid Row.*

In this study we come to a group of psalms that reflect on God's law—*torah*. God's laws, words, commands are considered as the psalmist thinks about what orders his life.

What we find in these psalms is a description of a God-centered life. Psalm 1, the best known of the torah psalms, is no doubt placed at the beginning of the Psalter to set the tone for all that follows.

For some there is an immediate visceral reaction to the words "law" and "commandment." They are interpreted as sounding negative, frightful, dry, lifeless and static. But look at the conviction of the psalmist. The opposite is the case. In all of the three psalms we will look at in this study you will notice that God's law is a good and beautiful gift to his people. The authors love God's law.

The torah is understood not simply as Israelite moral values, but as God's will and purpose, ordained in the very structure of life. . . . But for Israel, torah is Israel's way to

¹ From The Message.

respond to and fully honor God's well-oriented world. That response in obedience is undertaken gladly and in a posture of gratitude, without calculation or grudging. (Brueggemann, p. 38)

Begin by reading and pondering Psalm 1. Enjoy Eugene Peterson's paraphrase above. Would you describe yourself as someone whose "delight is in the law of the Lord"? Do you "chew on scripture day and night"? Why or why not?

Respond to Eugene Peterson's comments on psalm 1. How do you understand God's words, his law?

As we prepare to pray, to answer the words God addresses to us, we learn that all of God's words have this characteristic: they are *torah* and we are the target. God's word is not a reference book in a library that we pull off the shelf when we want information. There is nothing inert or bookish in these words. God's words, creating and saving words every one, hit us where we live. (Peterson, Answering God, p. 25)

Notice the structure of this psalm. How is the person whose "delight in the law of the Lord" described? How is the "wicked" person described?

Enjoy Walter Brueggemann's comment on this psalm.

Psalm 1 does not bargain or allow for ambiguity. It is the voice of a community that is familiar with risks, dangers, costs, and boundaries. It fully appreciates the givenness of God's world and has the confidence that torah is the only thinkable response to the givenness of creation. (Brueggemann p. 39)

Speaking of Psalm 19, C.S. Lewis says, "I take this to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world." (Lewis, p. 63) Read Psalm 19. Enjoy the beauty of the poetry in the King James Version below. As you read try to picture in your mind the vivid metaphors that are employed. Which of the word pictures is your favorite?

Psalm 1:1-6 Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the

congregation of the righteous. For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.

The psalm begins by considering how God has revealed himself in the created world through nature. Many of the psalms do this, although none were as eloquently written as Psalm 19.¹ The apostle Paul seems to make much the same argument in Romans 1:20. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Essentially what Psalm 19 and Romans 1:20 are saying is, “Look around! God’s character is there for everyone to see in nature!” How have you seen the beauty of God in our world? Does Psalm 19 have anything to say about the Christians responsibility toward the environment?

It is an easy transition for the author to jump quickly from nature to God’s law. VanGemeran makes an important point concerning this transition.

The revelation of God’s law is clearer than the revelation in nature. Nature “declares,” “proclaims,” “pours forth,” and “displays” the revelation of God’s majesty , wisdom and power. However, the revelation of the law is greater. . . Although the benefits of natural revelation are with us on a daily basis, how much greater are the comprehensive benefits of God’s revelation in the law!
(VanGemeran, p. 181)

List the benefits of possessing God’s law as found in verses 7-11. Which of these benefits have you experienced recently?

In Psalm 19 and 119 we find 8 different Hebrew words used to describe God’s revelation. Here in Psalm 19 we have 4 of these words. What are they? How do these synonyms help you to understand the intent of the psalm?

If you have not already done so read psalm 119. This is the longest of all the psalms. It is a thrilling psalm! Martin Lloyd-Jones, a famous twentieth-century London preacher, memorized this psalm and recited it every day as he walked to his church. What do you notice about the structure of the psalm? What stands out to you concerning its content?

¹ Some other psalms that focus on God as seen in nature are: 8, 33, 90, 104 and 124.

Derek Kidner brings together our three psalms we are looking at in this study.

This giant among the Psalms [119] shows the full flowering of that “delight . . . in the law of the Lord” which is described in Psalm 1, and gives its personal witness to the many-sided qualities of Scripture praised in Psalm 19:7ff. (Kidner, p. 416)

Psalm 119 is an alphabetic acrostic psalm where each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is used to begin a new stanza of the poem.¹ In a sense each Hebrew letter gets its turn to introduce 8 successive verses on the subject.² A great deal of the beauty of the poem is lost in translation.

The psalm uses eight words for God’s law. We have already seen four of these words in psalm 19. List all eight of them here. Asking the same question, but now with four more synonyms to work with, how do these eight words enhance your understanding of the message of the psalm?³

In working your way through this psalm take notes as to how the author describes the qualities of God’s law and the benefits of following God’s law.

Qualities of God’s Law

Benefits of God’s Law

Read Walter Brueggemann once again as he comments on psalm 119.

¹ But the remarkable feature here is that each letter of the alphabet receives eight successive entries before the poem moves to the next letter. In terms of crafting, it is as though we have eight acrostic poems all at once. That is what makes the psalm so long and so stylized. It is a pity that such an achievement is inevitably lost in translation. (Brueggemann, p. 39)

² Several psalms use this acrostic method. They are Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112 and 145.

³ “. . . the synonyms belong together, and we should probably not look for each to show its distinct character at each occurrence, but rather to contribute, by its frequent arrival, to our total understanding of what Scripture is.” (Kidner, p. 417)

First, the torah is not a dead letter, but an active agent which gives life. That is, torah is not just a set of rules, but it is a mode of God's life-giving presence. The torah is no burden, but a mode of joyous existence. The teachers of this psalm are not worried or seduced by legalism. They do not find the commandments restrictive or burdensome. (Brueggemann, p. 40)

How do you relate to God's law? In what ways have you experienced the law as a burden? In what ways has the law been joyous and life giving?

Think through your habits with the Bible. When do you read your Bible? How do you go about making the commands of God a part of your life?

What would it be like to try and live the Christian life without the Bible?

Summarize the three psalms that we have looked at in this study. Write one sentence that captures the intent of each of these psalms and be ready to read it to your homegroup.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY ELEVEN
WISDOM
PSALM 139

At times the psalms tell us about the worshiper, as he praises, thirsts, laments, thanks, or cry's out for deliverance from God. At other times the psalms will instruct us about the nature of God. He is a "rock," a "shelter," or as we saw in Psalm 136, that his "love endures forever." In Psalm 139 both happens. We encounter the all-wise God and in the process come to understand how this wisdom affects those who worship this God.

Read Psalm 139. It is one of the most sublime psalms in our prayer book. Take your time. Read these 24 verses slowly. Meditate upon the all-knowing wisdom of God. Allow your thoughts about God to be shaped by the poetry.

Commentator Derek Kidner makes this preliminary observation about the psalm.

Any small thoughts that we may have of God are magnificently transcended by this psalm; yet for all its height and depth it remains intensely personal from first to last. (Kidner, p. 463)

As you read and ponder Psalm 139 take some notes. It may help you to follow Derek Kidner's outline of this psalm. (Kidner, p. 463-468)

The All-Seeing 139:1-6

The All-Present 139:7-12

The All-Creative 139:13-18

The All-Holy 139:19-24

Psalm 139:1-6 describes, beautifully poetic language, a God who is “omniscient.” This is theological jargon for the truth that God is all knowing.¹ Nothing takes God by surprise. Why does the author find this truth, the omniscience of God, “wonderful”? Do you find serving an all-knowing God wonderful? Why?

If you are having trouble comprehending the fact that God is all-knowing don't feel alone. At the end of verse 6 the psalmist admits that this is, “too lofty for me to attain.” How can you identify with what Spurgeon says about this verse.

I cannot grasp it. I can hardly endure to think of it. The theme overwhelms me. I am amazed and astounded at it. Such knowledge not only surpasses my comprehension, but even my imagination. This truth seems to be always above me, even when I soar in spiritual thoughts. Is it not so with every attribute of God? Can we attain any idea of his power, his wisdom, his holiness? Our minds have no line with which to measure the Infinite. (Spurgeon, p. 327)

We live in an era when many people are having an “identity crisis.” “Who am I,” is one of the questions modern men and women ask most often. What we find in Psalm 139 is a man who is asking this question as he thinks about his relationship with God. According to verses 1-6, how well does God know us? Does this mean that God understands our hopes and fears? What practical difference does this make in your Christian life?

In verses 7-12 we come face to face with another stunning truth about God and his relationship with us. Not only does he know everything about us, he is present wherever we are. We cannot get lost from God. The word for this is “omnipresence.” To put it in contemporary parlance, “You can run, but you can not hide.” Think about this tremendous truth about God and again ask the personal and relational question. What difference does this make in your spiritual journey?

¹ There is a current theological debate raging in scholarly circles concerning the all-knowing foreknowledge of God. Commenting on Psalm 139, theologian Bruce Ware says this. “For God to know all the days of our lives before there was yet one of them (139:16), God must know about and be in command of all future contingencies and future free will choices that will happen in regard to our lives. . . God knows our future days, all of them, from before there was one of them. No wonder the psalmist marvels and places unfailing confidence in this genuinely omniscient God.” (Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, p. 124)

One of the more comical episodes in the Bible is Jonah's attempt to run away from God. If you have the time read the story of Jonah (It is only four chapters long.). What did Jonah discover about fleeing from God's presence?

All of us tend to keep secrets. We do and say things that we think nobody knows about. What do verses 7-12 say about our ability to live a secret life?

It is one thing to say that God created the world and sustains it. Here, however, the psalmist is not pondering the creation of the world, but the creation of himself! What does the author say about God's sovereign creative power in his life?

Personalize this truth for your life. What practical difference should this make in your daily Christian life?

The psalms never retreat to abstract impersonal theology. If you are given to marking your Bible circle all the personal pronouns "I" in this psalm. Re-read the psalm (out loud if you can) and insert **your name** every time the pronoun "I" comes up. How does this make you feel?

Some of us are 6' 6" tall and some barely break 5'. We are made with black hair, brown hair, blond hair and a few lucky ones get red hair. It may be curly or straight, thick or thin. We may be stocky or skinny. Some are blessed with exceptional health while others suffer consistent physical problems. What do verses 13-16 say about our physical bodies? How was God involved in the process of creating each of us?

After 18 beautiful and poetic verses we find a rather abrupt turn in the poem starting in verse 19. The psalmist asks God to slay the wicked! We ask, "Where did this come from?" The comments of Willem VanGemen are helpful.

The tone changes from thanksgiving and an overpowering gratitude to imprecation [invoking a curse]. The wicked have caused the psalmist great anguish. Though the Lord has been good to him, he prays that the Lord will remove the cause of evil in the world. Overwhelmed as he was with gratitude for God's purpose in him (vv. 13-18), the psalmist sees no purpose for the existence of the wicked (v. 19). (VanGemeren, p. 839)

The psalm ends with the author asking that God examine him. Enjoy Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of verses 23-24.

*Investigate my life, O God,
find out everything about me;
Cross-examine and test me,
get a clear picture of what I'm about;
See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—
then guide me on the road to eternal life.*

When is the last time you invited God to "search" you and "test" you? How would you go about doing this?

Think back over Psalm 139. How does having a relationship with this God who is all-knowing, all-present, who created you in your mother's womb, and who has "ordained" (v. 16) your days, cause you to worship him?

STUDY TWELVE
MEMORY (PART 2)
PSALMS 78, 105, 106, 135, 145

In Study 9 we looked at Psalm 136, a poem of remembrance. Do you remember what you learned in that study? Have you already forgotten? We are like the nation Israel, we are people who tend to forget quickly. Throughout the Psalms God's people are encouraged to remember his goodness and his "mighty acts." It is impossible to praise and worship God if we don't remember who he is and what he has done for us.

Read the five psalms listed above. In these psalms you will notice many references to events in the history of Israel. While you may not be familiar with all of historical situations referred to, don't let this discourage you from interacting with these psalms. As you read make notes as to what is clear and what is confusing. Be ready to ask your homegroup for help in understanding the confusing sections.

Psalm 78

Psalm 105

Psalm 106

Psalm 135

Psalm 145

These psalms are repetitive. What themes and historical references do you see being frequently repeated?

Certainly one of the defining moments in Israel's history was their captivity in Egypt and subsequent wandering in the wilderness. Miraculously God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt and then sustained and cared for them during their time in the desert wilderness. If you are unfamiliar with or have forgotten these events you can refresh

your memory by reading the book of Exodus. According to these psalms, did Israel have a short term or a long-term memory loss? Explain.

The best summary verse of all of these psalms may be Psalm 78:11, "*They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.*" (see also Psalm 106:13, 21) How do you find this tendency to forget God's goodness in your Christian life? What, when and how do you tend to forget?

Re-read Psalms 78:4-6 and 145:4-11. One of the ways that the author encourages Israel to remember who God is by talking about God. It seems especially important that we talk about God to our children, but certainly to one another as adults. Do you talk about God's faithfulness and goodness with your family and friends? How can you develop a pattern in your life of talking more often about God as a way to remember him? Give specific ideas.

Think outside of these psalms of a moment. What other techniques, besides the Psalms, did Israel employ to remember God's "mighty acts"?

One of the activities that we participate in at Santa Barbara Community Church almost every week is the Lord's Supper. We do this to remind us of the sacrifice of Christ. Jesus said, "do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19) Unfortunately it is easy for the taking of the Lord's Supper to become rote, mechanical, simply done out of habit. In other words, it is possible to do something intended to help us remember, and actually forget why we are doing it! What strategy do you have for not allowing this to happen? How can the Eucharist remain a fresh memory builder for you?

What other activities, besides the Lord's Supper, do we do at Santa Barbara Community Church to help us remember God?

Prayer, and in particular praying the psalms, is one of the best ways to remember God. Respond to this statement by Eugene Peterson. Have you found this to be true in your life?

Prayer develops our memory with God . . . Memory is the capacity of the human spirit to connect the experience of last year with one of yesterday, and at the same time to anticipate next week, and next year. The Psalms by training our memories, establish connections with the deepest experiences of which we are capable . . . (Peterson, Answering God, p. 117)

With the exception of Psalm 78, each of these poems for this study begins with worship and praise of God. Look again at the first few verses of each of these psalms. What is the relationship between praising God and remembering what God has done?

If Israel had could call to memory God's goodness, think what a Christian can do. We have the New Testament and can reflect on God's ultimate act of grace in the sacrifice of Christ! Write a list of some of the God's action on behalf of his people. Leave the Old Testament for awhile and remember God's acts in the New Testament.

Sermon Notes. . .

STUDY THIRTEEN
PRAISE
PSALMS 148, 149, 150

“Praise the Lord!” From the beginning to the end the Psalms are best known for their invitation to give God praise. Fittingly, we will end our 13-week study of the Psalter with the last three psalms, all of which invite us to praise God. In these three psalms the command to “praise” is issued 31 times!

The end of prayer is praise. The Psalms show praise as the end of prayer in both meanings of the word: the terminus, the last word in the final Psalm 150; and the goal at which all the psalm-prayers arrive after their long travels through the unmapped back countries of pain, doubt, and trouble, with only the occasional vistas of sunlit lands, along the way. (Peterson, *Answering God*, p. 121)

Read Psalms 148, 149, and 150. You have come to the end. Read slowly allowing the poetry to penetrate your soul. Record what you have learned about praising God, from these psalms and our entire study in Psalms.

Psalm 148 presents what Derek Kidner has called a “Choir of Creation” (Kidner, p. 487) Who is in this choir?

Notice the poetic license in Psalm 148. How do the members of the choir mentioned in verses 7-10 actually praise God?

According to Psalm 148:13, why should we praise God?

The psalm ends with God’s people being brought “close to his heart.” We are reminded of the statement at the end of the book of Revelation, “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people.” (Rev. 21:3) Ponder Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of verse 14.

Praise from all who love Yahweh!
Israel’s children, intimate friends with Yahweh.
Hallelujah!

Do you have a sense of being “close to his heart”? Do you feel that you are an “intimate friend” of Yahweh?

Psalm 149 is a corporate call for God’s people to praise him. It is in the “assembly of the saints” (v. 1) that our praises are to be heard. Think about corporate worship and praise in light of Psalm 149. How is corporate praise different than an individual who praises God in the privacy of her living room? How is your experience of praising God different in a corporate setting, say a Sunday afternoon Santa Barbara Community Church service, and the worship you offer to God in privacy?

Psalm 150 is brief, but packed with exuberant praise. Derek Kidner points out that “Its brevity is stimulating.” (Kidner, p. 490) Think through the psalm. You may want to use this outline to help you organize and understand it. (from Kidner, p. 491)

The ‘**where**’ of praise 150:1

The ‘**why**’ of praise 150:2

The ‘**how**’ of praise 150:3-5

The ‘**who**’ of praise 150:6

In Psalms 149-150 we find lots of musical instruments, dancing and the singing of a “new song.” Describe the picture that comes to your mind when you read these psalms.

Compare the picture of praising God in these three psalms with the description of worship and praise we find in Revelation 5:1-14 and 19:1-10. What is similar? What is different?

Give a careful reading to this statement by Walter Bruggemann. It is powerful and worth taking a few minutes to work through. How do these paragraphs help wrap up our study of the Psalms?

The conclusion of the Psalter is this extravagant summons to praise, which seeks to mobilize all of creation with a spontaneous and unreserved act of adoration, praise, gratitude, and awe. There are no “bases” given; no reason needs to be given.

As a poem for the conclusion of the collection, this psalm is a good match for Psalm 1. We have suggested that Psalm 1 is a formal and intentional introduction to the Psalter. It asserts in a decisive way that life under torah is the precondition of all these psalms. In relation to that, Psalm 150 states the outcome of such a life under torah. Torah-keeping does arrive at obedience, yet obedience is not the goal of torah-keeping. Finally such a life arrives at *unencumbered praise*. As Israel (and the world) is obedient to torah, it becomes free to praise, which is its proper vocation, destiny, and purpose. In this light the expectation of the Old Testament is not finally *obedience*, but *adoration*. The Psalter intends to lead and nurture people to such freedom that finds its proper life in happy communion that knows no restraint of convention or propriety. That is the hope for Israel and for all creation. (Bruggemann, p. 167)

The praise, worship and enjoyment of God is the goal of the Christian life. What holds you back the worship and praise of God?

We have spent 13 weeks in this study looking at a variety of psalms. Try to summarize what you have learned and how the reading of these psalms has affected you.

What is your plan to develop a life long pattern of praying the Psalms?

Sermon Notes. . .

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