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THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE IN THE BIBLE

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• STUDY GUIDE •  
WITH LEADER'S NOTES

# PSALMS

REAL PRAYERS FOR REAL LIFE

BARBARA MILLER JULIANI AND PATRIC KNAAK

# **PSALMS: REAL PRAYERS FOR REAL LIFE**

Barbara Miller Juliani  
and Patric Knaak

**STUDY GUIDE WITH LEADER'S NOTES**



New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404

[newgrowthpress.com](http://newgrowthpress.com)

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Cover Design: Trish Mahoney, [themahoneystudio.com](http://themahoneystudio.com)

Interior Design and Typesetting: Gretchen Logterman

ISBN: 978-1-64507-061-0 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-64507-062-7 (eBook)

Printed in The United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21      1 2 3 4 5

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# INTRODUCTION

Thousands of years ago, people's lives looked on the outside quite different from our lives: no running water, no air conditioning, no cars, no phones. But they had the same struggles we do with faith, fear, guilt, anger, grief, and so much more. We have a record of their prayers in the Psalms. And despite the distance between us and them, these cries of God's people and God's responses make the Psalms perfectly suited to you today—to your real, everyday life.

In the Psalms, you are eavesdropping on conversations between God and his people. The Psalms give you a pattern. You can use them in your own prayers to beg for help, offer thanks, express confidence in who God is, or say exactly what else is in your heart. The Psalms give you the words to say things you didn't know how to say to God, things you might not have known you wanted or needed to say to God, and maybe things you didn't know you *could* say to God.

But sharing how you feel with God is just part of the Psalms. They are also relentless about reminding you who God is and what he has done—and will do—for you. This is what you need in every struggle of everyday life. So, like the other small-group resources in this series, this study guide will point you to the good news of Jesus again and again. Jesus is God's unfailing love come to you in a living, dying, resurrected, and reigning Savior, and he is the “song behind the song” in every psalm.

## HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

This study guide will help you experience the Psalms within a group. We are all living out one psalm or another in front of each other. These psalms were individual prayers, but they were also the songbook of God's people. They sang and recited them as a community—on the way to the temple, during the festivals, in the synagogues, and in their homes. Studying and praying them with others will let you benefit from your own community of God's people.

This study guide assumes that every group member is caught up to some extent in the same struggles found in the Psalms. With this in mind, try to make your group a place where everyone feels free to be open not only before God, but with each other. Expect differences in how quick people are to share. It's okay if some thoughts stirred up by the Psalms don't come out right away. But also expect God to speak through his Word to reveal both himself and the human heart—starting with your own heart. Be especially ready to pray. This study's focus is on using the Psalms for prayer, and you will be doing that, not just talking about it.

Each participant should have one of these study guides in order to join in reading and be able to work through the exercises during that part of the study. The study leader should read through both the lesson and the leader's notes in the back of this book before each lesson begins. No other preparation or homework is required.

There are ten lessons in this study guide. They will lead you through twelve different psalms. These have been selected to show you the many different prayer topics found in the psalms and to give you practice using a psalm for each type of prayer. Each lesson will take about an hour to complete, perhaps a bit more if your group is large, and will include these elements:

**BIG IDEA.** This is a summary of the main point of the lesson.

**BIBLE CONVERSATION.** You will read a psalm (or in a few lessons, two psalms) and discuss it. As the heading suggests, the Bible conversation questions are intended to spark a conversation rather than generate correct answers. The point is for you to think about the psalm and notice that you too are living it out in your life. The leader's notes at the back of this book provide some insights, but don't just turn there for the "right answer." At times you may want to see what the notes say, but always try to answer for yourself first by thinking about what's written in the psalm.

**ARTICLE.** This is the main teaching section of the lesson. Each article is written by one of this book's authors, Barbara or Patric.

**DISCUSSION.** The discussion questions following the article will help you apply the teaching to your life, often to your prayer life.

**EXERCISE.** The exercise is a section you will complete on your own during group time. You can write in the book if that helps you. You will then share some of what you learned with the group. If the group is large, it may help to split up to share the results of the exercise and to pray, so that everyone has a better opportunity to participate.

**WRAP-UP AND PRAYER.** Prayer is both an essential part of the Christian life and central to this study's purpose. It's always fine to stop and pray, and some of the discussion questions and exercises might feel like prayers. But each lesson also ends with a dedicated time for group prayer, letting you practice what you are learning.

The book of Psalms has been called the heart of the Bible. This is not only because it falls in the middle of our printed Bibles, but because it is all about the intimate relationship between God and his people. You will learn to pray these prayers and to remember



God's unfailing love in the chaos and challenges to your faith that you are experiencing right now.

**NOTE ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS:** Readers of English have many excellent Bible translations to choose from. This study guide uses the English Standard Version (ESV). The study guide's authors also recommend the New International Version (NIV) for the way it handles the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms. Your group may want to consider picking a single translation to use together so that you each have the same words in front of you for your time in the Psalms. The chief value of the Psalms is not in the intellectual exercise of comparing translations, but in the unity of coming to God together using the shared words of the songs and prayers he has given his people. Much as you would prefer to have matching songbooks if you were singing together, you might appreciate matching Bibles for the Psalms.

Lesson

# 1

## PRAYING FOR BLESSEDNESS

PSALM 1

### BIG IDEA

The book of Psalms opens with a picture of what a life blessed by God, rooted in Christ, looks like.

### BIBLE CONVERSATION *20 MINUTES*

The Psalms come to us as poetry. Don't be put off by that. The poetry doesn't make their meaning obscure or their beauty hard to translate. In fact, Hebrew poetry retains its power when translated because it does not rely on the sounds of the language, like meter and rhyme, but rather on *pictures* and *parallelism*.

- **Pictures:** Psalms will teach you truths about God by using unexpected images that help you think differently and more deeply about your spiritual life.
- **Parallelism:** There will often be a first phrase that states a thought followed by a second phrase that expands on the thought or restates it from a new perspective, adding richness.

With pictures and parallelism in mind, have someone read **Psalm 1** aloud. Then discuss the questions below as a group.

Psalm 1 is an introduction to the whole book of Psalms. What truths in this psalm feel foundational for your entire Christian life? Explain why.

Consider the psalm's pictures: a well-watered tree versus wind-blown chaff (discarded husks of grain). What further insights about life with God come to mind as you take in this imagery?

Overall, does this psalm encourage you or worry you? Explain why.

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Now read the following article written by Patric. Take turns reading it aloud, switching readers at each paragraph break. Then discuss the questions that follow the article.

*Lesson*

# 1

ARTICLE

## TWO PATHS

*5 MINUTES*

Some friends and I were hiking in the mountains when the path we were on split in two. One fork eased downhill and looked wide and well-groomed, but there was a chain across it with a sign that said, “Keep Off. Dangerous Path Ahead.” The other fork went steeply uphill, through rocks and brush. It certainly wasn’t going to be as easy as the downhill fork, and in fact looked far more dangerous.

Reluctantly, we obeyed the sign and took the harder, uphill path. After a few hundred yards we came to a small overlook and could see from above that what had looked like the wide, easy path was severely washed out in several places with sheer drops at the edge. Though our route had been steeper and more arduous, the sign was right—it was the much safer path.

Psalm 1 points out that in our lives there are also two paths. They lead to very different journeys and very different outcomes. The first is the path of those who choose to ignore God, follow their own desires, and adhere to the false wisdom of the world. This path looks easier at the outset, not revealing its ultimate destination—judgment and death—until it is too late.

The psalmist points out that we rarely choose this path of destruction wholesale. It starts with small things that eventually grow to take over our entire way of thinking and living. What begins with simply walking alongside the wicked eventually deepens into standing with them and finally embracing their ways as we sit in their company, adopting their attitudes and desires as our own.

The result for those who choose this path is painted in vivid language: Their lives become meaningless like chaff, the empty husks that are left once the life-giving kernel of grain is removed. They cut themselves off from God's people and his protective blessings, and are blown away by circumstances and struggles. Their lives become hollow. And because they have turned from God, they will face his judgment and eventually their destruction.

The path of wisdom is very different. It begins with a deep delight for God and his Word. This love for God—for his ways, his instructions, his warnings, his desires, his plans, and the unfolding story of his love for us as his children—is the foundation for the life of blessing God intends.

Those who delight in God's truth, think about him regularly, and take his teachings to heart will live stable lives of meaning and significance. Like a tree planted near a constant source of water, where it doesn't have to rely on the uncertainties of rainfall, they remain rooted in God's presence. This nourishes their souls and sustains them in times of trial and loss, producing spiritual fruit in every season of life. Even when circumstances are difficult, their relationship with God flourishes. God ensures that all things in their lives work together for their good and to display his glory.

But there is more to Psalm 1 than a simple description of two paths for our lives. While the Psalms are written as poetry, there is also a "storiedness" about them. They form part of the one unfolding story of Genesis to Revelation—the story of steadfast love that a

holy God has for his sinful creatures, and the unheard-of things he will do to redeem them and restore their broken world.

This Old Testament longing for the Messiah is ultimately fulfilled in the coming, living, dying, and rising again of Jesus. That good news—the gospel—lets us understand the Psalms as part of God’s plan of redemption. Without it, Psalm 1 would read very differently indeed.

The gospel shows us that the blessed life in Psalm 1 is a gift from God, not something we earn through our hard work and good behavior. This is the essence of grace: God giving and us receiving. It upends typical religion: us earning and God rewarding. Because Psalms and Proverbs so often point out the difference between wisdom’s blessing and folly’s judgment, it’s doubly important to read these parts of Scripture through the lens of the gospel. It doesn’t take much for our self-effort to kick in so that we begin assuming we can earn God’s favor by showing him what wise choices we make. But in fact, it is God, our generous Father, who gives us wisdom.

This doesn’t mean we have no choices to make. Psalm 1 clearly points out that we have opportunities every day to walk further down one path or the other. But Jesus is the true Blessed One, the only traveler through this world to choose the right path at every step, in every moment, perfectly living out Psalm 1. Our godly choices are only possible because of what he has first done for us. In fact, we only desire to follow God because of what he has done in our hearts to draw us to himself.

If we lose sight of this, it’s all too easy to read Psalm 1 as a list of things we must achieve for God, a prescription for shaping up our spiritual lives. Actually, it’s a description of God’s gifts to us through Christ’s finished work. It’s a portrait of a Father’s love for his children. And it’s a display of God’s grace, revealing a blessed



life that would be impossible on our own. It is only available in Christ. There is no “blessed is the man” unless we are first blessed by the man who has laid down his life so that we may be raised again with him.

### DISCUSSION *10 MINUTES*

Have you tended to approach life with God by receiving wisdom from him, or has it been more about trying to prove to God how wise and good you already are? Explain.

How does the picture of the tree fit a person who receives gifts and growth from God? What are some specific ways you could be more like a tree in this regard?

Lesson

# 1

EXERCISE

## PRAYING THE PSALMS

20 MINUTES

Remember that each psalm is a prayer. Rather than worry about how to make yourself more like a tree, your response to Psalm 1 should be to pray it. For this exercise, you'll identify a few items to pray about based on the psalm. For this psalm, you will include three elements of prayer: confession, request, and thanksgiving.

Begin by working on your own. Use the prompts below to identify items to pray about, filling in the blanks with a word or two to make it personal. It is not necessary to fill in each item, but try to pick at least one from each category. When everyone in your group is ready, you'll have a chance to share some of your prayer items if you wish to do so.

CONFESSION: I admit to my Father that sometimes . . .

**I walk with the wicked (v. 1).** I have become comfortable cozying up to shady influences, especially when I am \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

**I sit with mockers (v. 1).** I have made a habit of indulging certain sins, effectively mocking God, especially when I am \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

**I am wind-blown (v. 4).** Like chaff, I have failed to stay near to the God who loves me, rooted in him and his Word, especially in how I \_\_\_\_\_.

**Other confession:** \_\_\_\_\_

REQUEST: I ask my Father to give me . . .

**Delight (v. 2).** I desire for God to give me joy for him and the gospel, especially making me glad for how he \_\_\_\_\_.

**Day-and-night mindfulness (v. 2).** I desire for God to help me keep my mind and desires on his guidance and love, especially when I am \_\_\_\_\_.

**Water from the stream (v. 3).** Like a fruitful tree, I desire for God to nurture and grow me, especially by providing \_\_\_\_\_.

**Other request:** \_\_\_\_\_

THANKGIVING: I thank my Father for . . .

**Fruitfulness (v. 3).** I see evidence of spiritual growth in my life, especially in how God has helped me to \_\_\_\_\_.

**His watchful care (v. 6).** God's fatherly goodness has been especially evident to me in how he has \_\_\_\_\_.

**My hope in Jesus.** Although it may not feel true at the moment, I am excited and grateful that because I belong to Jesus this psalm's picture of a righteous person describes me (both my life today and

my future), especially how I \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_.

**Other thanksgiving:** \_\_\_\_\_

When the group is ready, share some of your prayer items. What marks of a blessed life can you boldly ask for, and hope to receive, because of Jesus?

What did you like about using Psalm 1 to inform your prayer list? What might be some advantages to using a psalm as a guide to prayer?

## WRAP-UP AND PRAYER *10 MINUTES*

Conclude your time together by praying for each other using items from the exercise. If your group is large, you might want to divide into smaller groups so there's plenty of time to pray for everyone.

Now that you've practiced using a psalm to guide your prayers, a good ongoing exercise would be for you to try it again a few times before the next meeting. Pick a psalm and pray through it. The point of this lesson was not just to pray once, but to give you an approach to prayer that you can continue to use—letting God

help you pray by drawing on the prayers he has given you in the Psalms. The rest of this study will help you learn to do that, but you can also practice on your own.