THE BOOK OF PSALMS

The King Who Hears Our Songs

Psalms, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Hears Our Songs: The Book of Psalms, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” The Psalms are the Bible’s songbook and prayer book, one hundred fifty poems written over about a thousand years by shepherds, kings, musicians, and exiles. Some are shouts of joy. Some are screams of pain. Some are whispered confessions. Some are angry enough to make you uncomfortable.

Most of the Bible is God speaking to people. The Psalms are mostly people speaking to God, and God chose to make their words part of His word. That means the Psalms show you how to talk to Him when you’re happy, scared, lonely, guilty, angry, jealous, grateful, or so sad you can’t get out of bed. There’s a psalm for almost every feeling you’ll ever have.

So why read them? Because at some point you’ll run out of words. When you do, the Psalms will give you some. And you’ll discover that people have felt exactly what you feel for three thousand years, and brought it to God, and found that He was listening.

Let’s go.

How This Book Works

There are 150 psalms, far too many to cover one by one. This book walks through about forty of them in nine chapters, grouped by theme: the doorway (Psalms 1–2), shepherd and shelter (23, 27, 46, 91), honest lament (13, 22, 42–43, 88), guilt and forgiveness (32, 51,

103), anger, envy, and hard psalms (73, 137), wonder and being known (8, 19, 139), God's word and the songs of ascent (119, 121, 126, 133), the King's psalms (22, 110, 118), and the hallelujah finale (100, 145, 146–150).

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains how the Psalms are organized, who wrote them, and how Hebrew poetry works. It ends with a quick-finder called When You Feel, which points you to psalms for specific emotions. Bookmark it.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as how to pray the angry psalms, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. This book quotes the Psalms often, but explains them mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Better yet, read each psalm out loud. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the nineteenth book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Rather than cover all 150 psalms, this book curates about forty from all five books of the Psalter and all the major types: wisdom, royal, trust, lament, penitential, imprecatory, creation, Torah, pilgrimage, messianic, and praise psalms. A quick-finder maps common teen emotions, such as anxiety, anger, loneliness, guilt, doubt, and gratitude, to specific psalms.

The Psalms are emotionally honest, and this book is too. Psalm 88 ends in darkness, and a Real Talk box on depression encourages any reader who is struggling to talk to a trusted adult or counselor and lists 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. A hard-passage box addresses the imprecatory psalms, including Psalm 137:9, explaining how they hand rage over to God rather than taking personal vengeance, and setting them alongside Jesus' command to love our enemies. Psalm 139 includes a gentle note on identity and worth.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how Jesus prayed the Psalms, even from the cross, and how the New Testament sees Him as their fulfillment, while acknowledging that Jewish readers treasure the Psalms as the heart of their own worship and prayer. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will learn to pray the Psalms, and will find in them a voice for every season of life, and the King who hears every song.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

What Kind of Book Is This?

Psalms is a collection of 150 songs and prayers. The Hebrew title is Tehillim, which means praises. The English word psalm comes from a Greek word for a song sung with a stringed instrument. Ancient Israel sang many of these at the temple, and Jews and Christians have prayed and sung them ever since. Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn together on the night before He died, probably from the psalms Jewish families sang at Passover, and the New Testament quotes the Psalms more than almost any other Old Testament book.

Five Books in One

Psalms is actually divided into five smaller books: Book One (Psalms 1–41), Book Two (42–72), Book Three (73–89), Book Four (90–106), and Book Five (107–150). Each book ends with a short burst of praise called a doxology. Many readers think the five-part shape was meant to echo the five books of Moses, as if to say: here is God's instruction, and here is His people's response. Books One and Two are mostly by David. Book Three is darker and wrestles with the fall of Jerusalem. Books Four and Five lift the eyes back up to God as King, and the whole collection ends in a flood of hallelujahs.

Who Wrote Them?

Many psalms have a short heading, called a superscription, telling who wrote them or when. About 73 are linked to David, the

shepherd who became king. Twelve are by Asaph, one of David's chief musicians. Eleven are by the sons of Korah, a family of temple singers. Psalm 90 is a prayer by Moses, probably the oldest psalm. Psalms 72 and 127 are linked to Solomon. Heman and Ethan, two more temple musicians, wrote Psalms 88 and 89. About fifty have no name at all. Scholars debate exactly what some headings mean, since the Hebrew phrase translated by David can also mean for David or in the style of David. Either way, the Psalms were written over roughly a thousand years, from Moses to the return from exile.

How Hebrew Poetry Works

English poems often rhyme. Hebrew poems mostly rhyme ideas instead of sounds. This is called parallelism. A line says something, and the next line echoes it, expands it, or contrasts it. Sometimes the second line repeats the first in different words: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin." Sometimes it gives the opposite: "For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish." Sometimes it builds on the first line and takes it further. When you read a psalm, slow down and notice how the lines talk to each other. Some psalms are also acrostics, where each line or section starts with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

What Does Selah Mean?

The word Selah appears 71 times in the Psalms, often at the end of a line or section. No one knows for sure what it means. It may have been a musical instruction, like a pause, an instrumental break, or a signal to lift the voice. Many readers treat it as an invitation to stop and think about what was just said. That's not a bad way to read the Psalms in general.

Many Kinds of Psalms

Scholars group the psalms into types. Praise psalms celebrate who God is. Thanksgiving psalms thank Him for something He's done. Laments, the most common type, cry out to God in pain. Penitential psalms confess sin. Trust psalms express confidence in God's care. Wisdom psalms teach how to live. Royal psalms are about the king, and many of them came to be read as pointing to the Messiah. Imprecatory psalms ask God to punish enemies. Many psalms mix several types together, often moving from pain to praise.

How to Read a Psalm

Psalms are poems, so read them like poems, not like a textbook. Read slowly, and out loud if you can. Notice the pictures: shepherds, rocks, rivers, storms, birds, and trees. Pay attention to how the psalm moves. Many start in one place and end somewhere very different, often moving from complaint to trust. Look for the turn, the moment where everything shifts. Ask who is speaking and who they're speaking to. Sometimes it's a person talking to God, sometimes God talking to people, sometimes a person talking to their own soul. And then try praying it. The Psalms were written to be prayed and sung, not just studied.

The Psalms Through History

For three thousand years, the Psalms have been at the center of worship. They were sung at the temple in Jerusalem, and later in synagogues all over the world. Jesus quoted them more than almost any other book. The early church sang them, and Paul encouraged believers to speak to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Monks in the Middle Ages prayed through all 150 psalms every week. The Reformers set them to music so ordinary people

could sing them. Enslaved African Americans drew on them in spirituals that cried out for freedom. Today, many worship songs are based on the Psalms. When you pray them, you join a very long line of people who did the same.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Psalms 1–2): The doorway.

Chapter 2 (Psalms 23, 27, 46, 91): Shepherd and shelter.

Chapter 3 (Psalms 13, 22, 42–43, 88): Honest lament.

Chapter 4 (Psalms 32, 51, 103): Guilt and forgiveness.

Chapter 5 (Psalms 73, 137): Anger, envy, and hard psalms.

Chapter 6 (Psalms 8, 19, 139): Wonder and being known.

Chapter 7 (Psalms 119, 121, 126, 133): God's word and the road up.

Chapter 8 (Psalms 22, 110, 118): The King's psalms.

Chapter 9 (Psalms 100, 145–150): The hallelujah finale.

When You Feel...

Anxious or afraid: Psalms 4, 23, 27, 46, 56, 91, 121.

Angry: Psalms 4, 37, 73, 109, 137.

Lonely: Psalms 25, 68, 139, 142.

Guilty: Psalms 32, 51, 103, 130.

Doubting or far from God: Psalms 13, 42–43, 73, 88.

Sad or hopeless: Psalms 30, 34, 40, 42, 88.

Grateful or happy: Psalms 100, 103, 126, 136, 145–150.

Overwhelmed: Psalms 55, 61, 62.

Wondering who you are: Psalms 8, 139.

Tempted: Psalms 1, 119.

If you're feeling hopeless or thinking about hurting yourself, please don't just read a psalm. Talk to a trusted adult today, and call or text 988 any time.

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Where This Points .....

CHAPTER 1

The Doorway

Psalms 1–2

Every building has a front door, and the book of Psalms has one too. Many scholars believe Psalms 1 and 2 were placed at the beginning on purpose, like a doorway into the whole collection. Neither has a title or an author's name. Together, they introduce two big themes that run through all 150 psalms: the way of the righteous person, and the reign of God's chosen King.

Psalm 1 begins with a word that's almost a cheer. "Blessed is the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand on the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers."

Blessed means deeply happy, flourishing, the way life is meant to be. And notice the progression in that verse: walk, stand, sit. First you walk alongside people who don't care about God and listen to their advice. Then you stop and stand with them. Finally you sit down and settle in, and you become a scoffer yourself, someone who mocks what's good. It rarely happens all at once. It happens a step at a time.

> REAL TALK **Walk, Stand, Sit**
>
> Psalm 1 describes how people drift away from God. It usually isn't one dramatic decision. It's a slow slide. You start hanging around people who make fun of faith. You laugh along. You start agreeing. Eventually you're the one doing the mocking. The friends you spend the most time with, the voices

you listen to online, and the content you consume will shape who you become. That doesn't mean you should only have Christian friends. Jesus spent time with all kinds of people. But it does mean you should pay attention to who is influencing whom. Are you walking with people who pull you toward God, or away from Him?

So what does the blessed person do instead? "But his delight is in the LORD's law. On his law he meditates day and night."

The word law here is torah, which means instruction or teaching. It isn't just a list of rules. It's everything God has revealed about how to live. And the blessed person doesn't just follow it. They delight in it. The word meditate pictures someone murmuring the words under their breath, chewing on them, thinking about them over and over.

Then comes one of the most beautiful pictures in the Psalms. "He will be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that produces its fruit in its season, whose leaf also does not wither. Whatever he does shall prosper."

In a dry land like Israel, a tree by a stream was a picture of life. Its roots go deep. It doesn't panic when the heat comes. It produces fruit at the right time. That's what a life rooted in God looks like.

The wicked, the psalm says, are the opposite. They're like chaff, the dry husks that blow away when farmers toss grain into the air. No roots. No weight. Nothing lasting.

The psalm ends with a promise. "For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked shall perish."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does Psalm 1 Promise Success?**

Psalm 1 says the righteous person will prosper in whatever they do. Does that mean if you follow God, you'll always get good grades, make the team, and never have problems? Not exactly. The rest of the Psalms are full of righteous

people who suffer, and the book of Job is all about it. Psalm 1 is describing the overall direction of a life. A tree by the water still goes through winter. But its roots hold, and in the right season, it bears fruit. The prosperity Psalm 1 describes is deeper than success. It's a life that lasts.

Psalm 2 shifts the camera from one person to the whole world. "Why do the nations rage, and the peoples plot a vain thing?" Kings and rulers are gathering together "against the LORD, and against his Anointed." They want to throw off God's rule. "Let's break their bonds apart, and cast their cords from us."

And God's reaction? "He who sits in the heavens will laugh." It isn't a cruel laugh. It's the laugh of someone who knows how ridiculous it is for tiny human rulers to think they can overthrow the Creator of the universe.

Then God announces that He has installed His King on Zion, His holy hill in Jerusalem. And the King Himself speaks. "I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, 'You are my son. Today I have become your father.'"

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Anointed One**

In ancient Israel, kings were anointed with oil when they were crowned. The Hebrew word for anointed one is mashiach, which gives us the word Messiah. In Greek, it's christos, which gives us Christ. Psalm 2 was probably first sung at the coronation of kings in David's line, when the new king was declared to be God's son, meaning God's chosen representative. But over time, Jewish readers began to see that no ordinary king fully lived up to the psalm's huge promises, like ruling the whole earth. They began to hope for a greater King to come. The New Testament quotes Psalm 2 several times about Jesus, including at His baptism, when a voice from heaven called Him God's beloved Son.

God promises His King an inheritance that covers the whole world. "Ask of me, and I will give the nations for your inheritance, the uttermost parts of the earth for your possession." Then the psalm turns to the rulers of the earth with a warning: be wise. Serve the LORD with fear. Honor the Son.

And then the last line of Psalm 2 echoes the first line of Psalm 1. "Blessed are all those who take refuge in him."

Psalm 1 began with blessed. Psalm 2 ends with blessed. Together they form a frame. The blessed life is a life rooted in God's word, and a life that takes refuge in God's King.

> **REAL TALK** **Who's in Charge?**
>
> Psalm 2 can be encouraging when the world feels out of control. Turn on the news, and it can seem like powerful people are doing whatever they want. Psalm 2 says they're not as powerful as they think. God isn't nervous. He isn't wringing His hands. He has a King, and that King will reign. That doesn't mean we should ignore injustice or stop caring about what happens in the world. But it does mean we don't have to be afraid. Our hope isn't in any human leader or political party. It's in God's King.

These two psalms are the doorway into everything else. In the pages ahead, you'll meet people who are scared, sad, angry, guilty, and overjoyed. You'll hear them pray, complain, confess, and sing. But all of it happens inside the frame of Psalms 1 and 2. There is a way that leads to life. And there is a King who reigns.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Two Psalms, One Person?**
>
> Christians have long noticed that Psalms 1 and 2 describe two figures: the perfectly righteous man who delights in God's law, and the King who is God's Son. Who fully fits both descriptions? Ordinary people fall short of Psalm 1, and ordinary kings fall short of Psalm 2. The New Testament's answer is

Jesus. He alone lived the life of Psalm 1 perfectly, and He alone is the King of Psalm 2. As you read the rest of the Psalms, watch for Him.

REAL TALK **Roots Before Fruit**

Trees don't produce fruit overnight. First they put down roots, and most of that growth happens underground where no one can see it. The same is true of faith. Reading a psalm before school, praying on the bus, memorizing a verse, or showing up at youth group when you don't feel like it might not seem to change much. But those small habits are roots. When a hard season comes, like a drought for a tree, the roots are what keep you standing. Start growing them now, before you need them.

It's also worth noticing that Psalm 1 doesn't say the blessed person never meets wicked people or never hears bad advice. They live in the same world as everyone else. The difference is where they go for direction and where they put down roots. You can't always choose what you hear. But you can choose what you dwell on, what you return to, and whose voice you trust most.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Start Here?**

Ancient editors put real thought into the order of the Psalms. Psalm 1 sets up the contrast between two ways of life that runs through the whole book. Psalm 2 introduces God's anointed King, whose story will rise and fall through the collection. Book Three ends with Psalm 89, a painful cry asking why God's promises to David seem to have failed after Jerusalem fell. Book Four then opens with Psalm 90, a prayer by Moses, reminding exiled readers that God was their home long before there was a king or a temple. The order tells a story of its own.

Here's one more way to think about Psalms 1 and 2. Psalm 1 is personal. It's about the choices you make every day: who you listen to, what you think about, where you put down roots. Psalm 2 is global. It's about nations, rulers, and the King who reigns over all of them. The Psalms hold both together. Your small, ordinary choices

matter, and they happen inside a huge story about God's kingdom. You're not just a random person trying to be good. You're invited to be part of what God is doing in the whole world.

KEY VERSE

He will be like a tree planted by the streams of water, that produces its fruit in its season, whose leaf also does not wither. Whatever he does shall prosper.

Psalm 1:3 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What does the progression of walk, stand, and sit in Psalm 1:1 tell you about how people drift away from God?
2. What do you think it would look like to delight in God's word, not just read it?
3. Why do you think God laughs in Psalm 2? Is that comforting or uncomfortable to you?
4. Who are the biggest influences in your life right now? Are they planting you by the water or blowing you away like chaff?

TRY THIS *Pick one verse from Psalm 1 or 2 and write it on a card. Carry it with you this week and read it at least three times a day, letting the words sink in.*

CHAPTER 2

Shepherd and Shelter

Psalms 23, 27, 46, 91

If you know only one psalm, it's probably this one. "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing."

Psalm 23 was written by David, who spent his teenage years as a shepherd. He knew what sheep needed. They needed food, water, rest, guidance, and protection. Sheep aren't very smart, and they can't defend themselves. Without a shepherd, they wander off, get lost, and get eaten. David knew he was just like them. And he knew who his Shepherd was.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul." Sheep won't lie down unless they feel safe and full. The Shepherd provides both. He leads them to still water, because sheep are afraid of fast-moving streams. He knows what they need before they do.

"He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake." The Shepherd doesn't just keep the sheep alive. He leads them in the right direction.

Then the psalm takes a turn. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Valley of the Shadow**

The Hebrew phrase translated shadow of death can also mean deep darkness. In Israel, shepherds sometimes led their flocks through narrow, shadowy ravines to reach new pastures. Those valleys were dangerous, with steep drops and predators hiding in the rocks. But notice what David says. The Shepherd doesn't take the sheep around the valley. He leads them through it. And notice the shift in the psalm. Up to verse 4, David talks about God: He makes me, He leads me. In the valley, David starts talking to God: you are with me. In the darkest place, God gets closer. The rod was a club for fighting off wild animals. The staff was a long stick with a hook, for guiding and rescuing sheep. Both were signs that the shepherd was there.

Then the picture changes again, from a shepherd to a host. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over." In the ancient world, if someone invited you to their table, they were responsible for protecting you. Your enemies can watch, but they can't touch you.

The psalm ends with confidence. "Surely goodness and loving kindness shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the LORD's house forever." The word follow is really strong in Hebrew. It means pursue or chase. God's goodness and love aren't just behind you. They're chasing you down.

REAL TALK **When You're in the Valley**

Maybe you're walking through a dark valley right now: a family crisis, a scary diagnosis, a loss, depression, or anxiety that won't let go. Psalm 23 doesn't promise you'll never go through valleys. It promises you won't go through them alone. Try reading Psalm 23 slowly, out loud, and putting your own name in it. The LORD is my shepherd. He is with me. And remember that God often shows His presence through people. If you're struggling, let a trusted adult, a counselor, or a friend walk through the valley with you.

Psalm 27, also by David, starts with a question. "The LORD is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid?" David had real enemies. Armies were after him. But he says that if God is his light and strength, there's no one he needs to fear.

Then he says what he wants most. "One thing I have asked of the LORD, that I will seek after: that I may dwell in the LORD's house all the days of my life, to see the LORD's beauty, and to inquire in his temple." If you could ask God for one thing, what would it be? David didn't ask for success, safety, or revenge. He asked to be close to God.

Psalm 27 also contains one of the most tender verses in the Bible. "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up."

> **REAL TALK** **When Parents Let You Down**
>
> Not everyone has parents who are there for them. Some teenagers have a parent who left, a parent who is struggling with addiction or illness, a parent in prison, or a parent who is harsh or unsafe. Psalm 27:10 says that even if your father and mother abandon you, God will take you in. He is the Father who never leaves. If you're living with a parent who is hurting you or making you feel unsafe, please tell a trusted adult like a teacher, school counselor, or pastor. You can also call Childhelp at 1-800-422-4453. You deserve to be safe, and God has not forgotten you.

The psalm ends with advice David probably needed himself. "Wait for the LORD. Be strong, and let your heart take courage. Yes, wait for the LORD."

Psalm 46 was written by the sons of Korah, and it may have been sung when Jerusalem was under attack. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we won't be

afraid, though the earth changes, though the mountains are shaken into the heart of the seas." The psalmist imagines the worst possible disaster, the whole world coming apart, and says, we still won't be afraid.

Why? Because God is in the middle of His city. Nations rage, kingdoms fall, but God speaks, and the earth melts. Then He says, "Be still, and know that I am God." That's not a gentle invitation to relax. It's more like a command to stop fighting. Stop panicking. Drop your weapons. Remember who's God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Martin Luther's Fortress**

Psalm 46 has comforted believers for thousands of years. In the 1500s, Martin Luther, the German reformer, wrote a hymn based on it called A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. Luther went through times of intense fear, depression, and danger, and he is reported to have sung this psalm with friends when things looked bleak. The hymn is still sung in churches all over the world.

Psalm 91 is a psalm about shelter. "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, 'He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in whom I trust.'" Then it uses a beautiful picture of a mother bird. "He will cover you with his feathers. Under his wings you will take refuge."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Does Psalm 91 Promise You'll Never Get Hurt?**

Psalm 91 makes big promises: no plague will come near you, no disaster will touch your home, angels will guard you. Some people read it as a guarantee that faithful Christians will never get sick or hurt. But the rest of the Bible shows faithful people suffering all the time. In fact, Satan quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus when he tempted Him to jump off the temple, and Jesus refused to test God that way. Many Christians understand Psalm 91 as describing ultimate protection: nothing can destroy those who belong to God, and in the end, He will bring them safely home. Others see it as a general pattern of God's care. Either way, it's a psalm to pray with trust, not to use as a magic charm.

Four psalms, four pictures: a shepherd, a light, a fortress, and a mother bird. They all say the same thing. You're not alone. God is near, and He's strong enough to protect you.

Notice something about all four of these psalms. None of them promises that life will be easy. Psalm 23 includes a dark valley and enemies. Psalm 27 mentions armies and false witnesses. Psalm 46 imagines mountains falling into the sea. Psalm 91 talks about plagues, arrows, and terrors in the night. The writers weren't naive. They knew the world was dangerous. Their confidence wasn't that bad things would never happen. It was that God would be with them when they did.

That's a more honest kind of comfort, and a stronger one. If your faith depends on nothing ever going wrong, it will crack the first time something does. But if your faith rests on God's presence, it can survive anything. The shepherd doesn't promise a valley-free life. He promises to walk through every valley with you.

> **REAL TALK** **Anxiety and the Psalms**
>
> Many teenagers struggle with anxiety: racing thoughts, a tight chest, trouble sleeping, or constant worry about school, friends, family, or the future. The psalms in this chapter can help. Some people find it calming to breathe slowly while repeating a short line, like The LORD is my shepherd, or Be still, and know. But anxiety can also be a real health condition, and prayer and Bible reading aren't meant to replace getting help. If anxiety is interfering with your life, talk to a parent, a school counselor, or a doctor. Using the help God provides through people is part of trusting Him.

These psalms have also been some of the most loved words in history during times of crisis. People have prayed Psalm 23 at funerals, in hospitals, and on battlefields. Psalm 46 has been read after earthquakes, wars, and national tragedies. Psalm 91 has been

carried by soldiers in their pockets. When people face the worst, these are often the words they reach for. Learning them now means they'll be there when you need them.

REAL TALK **Learning to Wait**

Psalm 27 ends with a command repeated twice: wait for the LORD. Waiting is hard, especially in a world where you can get almost anything instantly: food, videos, messages, answers. But some of the most important things in life can't be rushed, like healing, growing up, a broken friendship being mended, or a prayer being answered. In the Bible, waiting isn't passive. It means trusting God while you keep doing what's right. If you're waiting for something right now, you're in good company. David waited years between being anointed king and actually becoming king.

KEY VERSE

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall lack nothing.

Psalm 23:1 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which picture of God in this chapter means the most to you right now: shepherd, light, fortress, or mother bird? Why?
2. Why do you think David switches from talking about God to talking to God in the valley?
3. If you could ask God for one thing, like David did in Psalm 27:4, what would it be?
4. What do you think it means to "be still, and know" that God is God?

TRY THIS *Memorize Psalm 23 this week. Say it out loud every night before you go to sleep, and notice which line speaks to you most.*

CHAPTER 3

Honest Lament

Psalms 13, 22, 42–43, 88

Here's something that surprises a lot of people: the most common kind of psalm isn't praise. It's lament. About a third of the Psalms are cries of pain, confusion, and complaint. They ask God hard questions. They say things that might get you in trouble at church. And God put them in His book.

Psalm 13 is short, and it begins with a question repeated four times. "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long shall I take counsel in my soul, having sorrow in my heart every day? How long shall my enemy triumph over me?"

That's what a lament sounds like. David isn't polite. He's desperate. He feels forgotten by God. He's stuck in his own head, sad every day.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Shape of a Lament**
>
> Most lament psalms follow a pattern. First comes the cry: the psalmist addresses God directly. Then the complaint: describing honestly what's wrong. Then the request: asking God to act. Then the turn: a statement of trust, often starting with but. Finally, many end with praise or a promise to praise. Psalm 13 has all five parts in just six verses. Not every lament follows the pattern perfectly, and some, like Psalm 88, never make the turn at all. But

> the pattern is a helpful guide when you want to pray honestly and don't know how.

After the complaint comes the request. "Behold, and answer me, LORD, my God. Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep in death." And then, suddenly, the turn. "But I trust in your loving kindness. My heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the LORD, because he has been good to me."

Nothing has changed in David's circumstances. But he remembers who God is. The word but is one of the most important words in the Psalms. It's the hinge between pain and hope.

Psalm 22 is one of the darkest psalms, and also one of the most important for Christians. It begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, and from the words of my groaning?" David cries day and night, and God doesn't seem to answer. People mock him. His body is falling apart. "I am poured out like water. All my bones are out of joint. My heart is like wax." Then it gets stranger. "They have pierced my hands and feet. I can count all of my bones. They look and stare at me. They divide my garments among them. They cast lots for my clothing."

We'll come back to Psalm 22 in chapter 8, because centuries later, those words came true in an astonishing way. For now, notice that even this psalm turns. By the end, the psalmist is praising God in front of everyone, and declaring that God "has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted."

> **REAL TALK** **You're Allowed to Ask Why**
>
> Some people think it's wrong to question God or tell Him you're angry or disappointed. The lament psalms say otherwise. They show that faith isn't pretending everything is fine. Faith is bringing your real feelings to God, because you believe He's real enough to hear them. Asking why isn't the

> opposite of trust. Often it's how trust starts. You can't have an honest relationship with someone if you're always pretending. That's true with God too.

Psalms 42 and 43 were probably once a single psalm. They share a chorus, repeated three times. The writer is one of the sons of Korah, a temple singer who seems to be stuck far from Jerusalem, maybe in exile. He begins with a famous image. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants after you, God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

He remembers how he used to lead crowds to the temple, singing and celebrating. Now he's far away, and people keep asking him, "Where is your God?" He feels overwhelmed, like he's drowning. "All your waves and your billows have swept over me."

And then he talks to himself. "Why are you in despair, my soul? Why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God! For I shall still praise him, the saving help of my countenance, and my God."

> **REAL TALK** **Talking Back to Your Feelings**
>
> Notice what the psalmist does in Psalms 42 and 43. He doesn't ignore his feelings, and he doesn't let them have the last word either. He talks back to them. He asks his own soul, why are you so down? Then he reminds himself of the truth: hope in God. Counselors sometimes teach something similar. When your thoughts spiral, it can help to notice them, name them, and then answer them with what's true. That doesn't make sad feelings disappear instantly. The psalmist had to repeat his chorus three times. But it can help you keep going.

Psalm 88 is different from every other lament. It never makes the turn. It begins, "LORD, the God of my salvation, I have cried day and night before you." Then it goes down and down. "For my soul is full of troubles. My life draws near to Sheol." Sheol is the Hebrew word

for the grave, the place of the dead. "You have laid me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths." The writer, Heman, has been sick and close to death since his youth. He feels rejected by God and abandoned by everyone. "LORD, why do you reject my soul? Why do you hide your face from me?"

And then the psalm ends. The last line, in the WEB, reads: "You have put lover and friend far from me, and my friends into darkness." In Hebrew, the very last word of the psalm is darkness.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why Is Psalm 88 in the Bible?**

Psalm 88 is the darkest psalm in the Bible. There's no turn, no hope, no praise at the end. Why would God include it? Many readers believe it's there precisely for people who are in that kind of darkness, so they know they're not alone, and that even their darkest prayers are welcome. Notice too that Heman is still praying. He addresses God as the God of my salvation in the first line. Even in total darkness, he keeps talking to God. That itself is an act of faith.

REAL TALK **When the Darkness Won't Lift**

If Psalm 88 sounds like your life right now, please hear this. Depression is real, and it's not a sign that you're weak or that your faith has failed. Many faithful people throughout history, including Bible writers, have experienced long seasons of darkness. But you don't have to go through it alone, and you shouldn't. Please talk to a trusted adult, like a parent, a pastor, or a school counselor. A counselor or therapist can help, and sometimes a doctor can too. Getting help is not a lack of faith. It's wisdom. If you're having thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time, day or night. If you're in immediate danger, call 911. Psalm 88 isn't the end of the book. And your darkest chapter isn't the end of your story.

The laments teach us something we badly need: you can be completely honest with God. You don't have to clean up your

prayers. And even when you can't feel Him, He's still the God of your salvation.

One more thing about lament. In many churches today, most of the songs are upbeat and happy. That's not bad. But some Christians have pointed out that if all we ever sing is happy songs, people who are hurting may feel like they don't belong. The Psalms model something different. They give space for joy and for grief, for celebration and for tears, often in the same service. A church that knows how to lament together is a church where hurting people can stay.

The same is true for friendships. Good friends can laugh together. But great friends can also cry together, sit in silence together, and be honest about hard things. If you want to be that kind of friend, learn to lament. Don't rush people out of their sadness. Let them be honest, and be honest yourself.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Sons of Korah**
>
> The sons of Korah, who wrote Psalms 42 and 88 and several others, have a surprising family history. Their ancestor Korah led a rebellion against Moses in the wilderness, and the ground opened up and swallowed the rebels. But Numbers 26 notes that Korah's sons did not die. Generations later, their descendants became gatekeepers and singers at God's temple. A family that began with rebellion ended up leading worship. Some of the most honest and beautiful psalms in the Bible came from a family with a broken past. God loves to write new stories.

It may help to know that some of the most respected Christians in history struggled with deep sadness. Charles Spurgeon, a famous preacher in the 1800s, battled depression for much of his life and spoke openly about it. He found comfort in psalms like 42 and 88. Struggling doesn't disqualify you from being used by God.

Sometimes it makes you more able to comfort others who are hurting.

KEY VERSE

Why are you in despair, my soul? Why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God! For I shall still praise him, the saving help of my countenance, and my God.

Psalm 42:11 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think so many of the Psalms are laments?
2. What do you think about Psalm 88 ending in darkness? Is that comforting or troubling to you?
3. Have you ever felt like God was far away? What did you do?
4. What would it look like for you to talk back to your feelings the way the writer of Psalm 42 did?

TRY THIS *Write your own lament using the five-part pattern: cry, complaint, request, turn, and praise. Be completely honest. If writing it brings up feelings that scare you, share it with a trusted adult.*

CHAPTER 4

Guilt and Forgiveness

Psalms 32, 51, 103

Some of the most powerful psalms aren't about what other people did to the psalmist. They're about what the psalmist did wrong. The early church identified seven penitential psalms, psalms of repentance and confession. Two of the most famous were written by David, and they come from the worst season of his life.

You may remember the story from 2 Samuel. King David saw a woman named Bathsheba bathing, abused his power as king to take her, and then, when she became pregnant, arranged for her husband Uriah to be killed in battle. For about a year, David covered it up and acted like nothing had happened. Then the prophet Nathan confronted him, and David finally admitted, I have sinned against the LORD.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Story Behind Psalm 51**

The heading of Psalm 51 connects it directly to this story. It was written "when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." Some scholars think headings like this were added later, but many believe it fits the psalm perfectly. Bathsheba is not the one confessing here. David is. In the 2 Samuel account, the guilt is placed squarely on David, the man with all the power. That's important. Psalm 51 isn't about a love affair. It's about a powerful man confessing that he abused his power and destroyed lives.

Psalm 32 may describe what that year of hiding felt like. It begins with a blessing. "Blessed is he whose disobedience is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD doesn't impute iniquity, in whose spirit there is no deceit."

Then David describes what happened when he tried to hide his sin. "When I kept silence, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me. My strength was sapped in the heat of summer."

Guilt that's buried doesn't stay buried. It eats away at you. David felt it in his body. He couldn't sleep, couldn't eat, and felt drained, like a plant wilting in the summer sun.

> **REAL TALK** **The Weight of a Secret**
>
> Have you ever carried a secret you were ashamed of? Maybe you lied about something, cheated, hurt someone, or did something you knew was wrong, and you've been hiding it ever since. Psalm 32 describes exactly what that feels like. Hidden guilt is exhausting. It affects your sleep, your mood, your relationships, and even your body. The good news is that you don't have to carry it forever. Confession, first to God and often to a trusted person, can lift a weight you didn't even realize was crushing you. And if your secret involves someone hurting you, that's not your guilt to carry. Please tell a trusted adult.

And then comes the turn. "I acknowledged my sin to you. I didn't hide my iniquity. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the LORD, and you forgave the iniquity of my sin."

Notice how fast it happens. David hides for a long time, groaning and wasting away. Then he confesses, and God forgives. No waiting period. No probation. Just forgiveness.

Later in the psalm, God Himself speaks. "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you shall go. I will counsel you with my

eye on you." The forgiven person isn't just let off the hook. They're welcomed into a relationship where God guides them personally.

Psalm 51 is David's actual confession, and it's one of the most honest prayers ever written. It starts not with David's sin but with God's character. "Have mercy on me, God, according to your loving kindness. According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin."

David doesn't make excuses. He doesn't blame Bathsheba, or Uriah, or the pressures of being king. "For I know my transgressions. My sin is constantly before me." He takes full responsibility.

Then he says something that sounds strange at first. "Against you, and you only, I have sinned." Of course David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah too. But he realizes that all sin is ultimately against God, because it breaks His law, rejects His goodness, and harms people He made and loves.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Three Words for Sin**
>
> Psalm 51 uses three different Hebrew words for sin in its first few verses. One means rebellion, deliberately crossing a line. One means iniquity, something twisted or bent out of shape. One means missing the mark, like an arrow that falls short of the target. David uses all three. He's not minimizing anything. And he uses three words for forgiveness too: blot out, like erasing a record; wash, like scrubbing a stained garment; and cleanse, like the ceremonial cleansing of something unclean. Whatever kind of sin it is, God has a way to deal with it.

"Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." Hyssop was a small plant used in ancient Israel to sprinkle blood or water in cleansing ceremonies. David is asking God to do what no ritual could do: make him completely clean.

Then he asks for something deeper. “Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me. Don’t throw me from your presence, and don’t take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation.”

The word create is the same word used in Genesis 1, when God created the heavens and the earth. David knows he can’t fix himself. He needs God to make something brand new.

> **REAL TALK** **Guilt vs. Shame**
>
> Guilt says, I did something bad. Shame says, I am bad. Healthy guilt can lead you to confess and change. Shame tends to make you hide, give up, or hate yourself. Psalm 51 shows healthy guilt. David is honest about what he did, but he runs toward God, not away from Him, because he trusts God’s mercy. If you struggle with shame, hearing a voice in your head that says you’re worthless or unforgivable, that voice isn’t from God. God offers a clean heart, not a life sentence. And if shame is making you feel hopeless or like you want to hurt yourself, please talk to a trusted adult or counselor, or call or text 988.

Near the end, David says what God really wants. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. O God, you will not despise a broken and contrite heart.” God isn’t looking for perfect people. He’s looking for honest ones.

Psalm 103 is what forgiveness sounds like afterward. It’s one of the most joyful psalms in the Bible, and it’s also by David. “Praise the LORD, my soul! All that is within me, praise his holy name! Praise the LORD, my soul, and don’t forget all his benefits, who forgives all your sins, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from destruction, who crowns you with loving kindness and tender mercies.”

Notice that forgiveness is first on the list.

Then David describes God's character, echoing what God told Moses on Mount Sinai. "The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abundant in loving kindness. He will not always accuse; neither will he stay angry forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor repaid us for our iniquities."

And then come some of the most beautiful images of forgiveness in Scripture. "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his loving kindness toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **East from West**
>
> Why does David say east from west instead of north from south? Some readers point out that if you travel north, eventually you reach the North Pole and start heading south. But if you travel east, you can keep going east forever. You never start heading west. Whether or not David had that in mind, the image is clear. God doesn't just move your sin a little way off. He removes it completely, beyond any distance you could measure.

Then David uses a family picture. "Like a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we are made. He remembers that we are dust." God isn't surprised by your weakness. He made you. He knows how fragile you are. And His response is compassion.

These three psalms tell a story. Psalm 32 shows the misery of hiding sin and the relief of confessing it. Psalm 51 shows what honest confession sounds like. Psalm 103 shows the joy of being forgiven. Hiding, confessing, rejoicing. That's the path from guilt to freedom.

> **REAL TALK** **Confessing to a Person**
>
> The Bible encourages us to confess our sins to God, and sometimes to other people too. James wrote that believers should confess their sins to one another and pray for each other. Telling a trusted, mature Christian about

something you've done can be scary, but it often brings freedom. Secrets lose their power when they're brought into the light. Choose someone safe, who will keep your confidence, pray for you, and help you move forward, like a parent, pastor, or youth leader. And if what you've done has hurt someone else, part of repentance may be apologizing and trying to make it right.

Notice too that David didn't stop at feeling bad. Psalm 51 ends with David looking forward. He promises to teach other sinners God's ways, so that they will turn back to Him. Forgiveness didn't just clean up David's past. It gave him a new purpose. The same can be true for you. The things you've been forgiven for can become the very things that help you understand and help others who are struggling.

It's important to say something else about David's story. Psalm 51 shows that God forgave David. But forgiveness didn't erase the consequences. Uriah was still dead. Bathsheba had still been wronged. The child born from that union died, and David's family was torn apart by violence in the years that followed. God's forgiveness is complete, but it doesn't mean the damage of sin magically disappears. That's one reason it's so much better to turn from sin early. And it's a reason to take seriously the harm our choices can do to others, even when God forgives us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Seven Penitential Psalms**

Early Christians grouped seven psalms together as the penitential psalms, psalms of repentance: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143. For centuries, believers prayed them especially during Lent, the weeks before Easter, as a way of honestly facing their sin and turning back to God. Psalm 130 is especially loved. It begins from the depths and asks who could stand if God kept a record of every sin, then answers that there is forgiveness with Him. If you ever need words for confession, these seven psalms are a great place to start.

KEY VERSE

Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.

Psalm 51:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think hiding sin felt so heavy to David in Psalm 32?
2. What stands out to you about the way David confesses in Psalm 51?
3. What's the difference between guilt and shame? Which one do you struggle with more?
4. Which image of forgiveness in Psalm 103 means the most to you?

TRY THIS *If there's something you've been hiding, confess it to God honestly this week, using Psalm 51 as a guide. If it involves someone else, ask a trusted adult to help you think through how to make it right.*

CHAPTER 5

Anger, Envy, and Hard Psalms

Psalms 73, 137

Some psalms are uncomfortable. They express jealousy, bitterness, and even rage. They say things you might not expect to find in the Bible. But they're there for a reason, and they can teach us what to do with our darkest emotions.

Psalm 73 is written by Asaph, one of David's chief musicians, and it begins Book Three of the Psalms. It starts with a statement of faith, and then immediately admits a problem. "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone. My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

Asaph looked around and saw people who didn't care about God living great lives. They were healthy, rich, and popular. They mocked God and got away with it. Everyone admired them.

And Asaph, who had been trying to live right, felt like a fool. "Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence," he says. All day long he feels plagued and punished. What's the point of being good, he wondered, if bad people have it better?

REAL TALK **The Comparison Trap**

Asaph didn't have social media, but he would have understood it. Scroll for five minutes and you'll see people who seem to have it all: perfect bodies, perfect vacations, perfect relationships, and endless likes. Many of them don't seem to care about God at all. It's easy to start thinking, why bother? Psalm 73 is honest about that feeling. Envy is a slippery slope, and Asaph says his feet almost slipped. Remember that what you see online is a highlight reel, not real life. And comparison almost always leaves you feeling worse. If scrolling makes you feel jealous, inadequate, or down on yourself, it might be time to take a break.

Asaph says that when he tried to figure it out, it was too painful for him. And then everything changed. "When I tried to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I entered God's sanctuary, and considered their latter end."

He went to worship. And there, in God's presence, he saw things differently. He saw where the wicked were heading. Their success was like a dream that vanishes when you wake up. They were standing on slippery ground.

Then he saw himself clearly too. "For my soul was grieved. I was embittered in my heart. I was so senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you." Envy had made him bitter and foolish.

But here's the most beautiful part. "Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You have held my right hand." Even while Asaph was bitter and confused, God never let go of him.

And then he says some of the most famous words in the Psalms. "Whom do I have in heaven? There is no one on earth whom I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fails, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

BACKGROUND CHECK **My Portion**

When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, each tribe received a portion of land, except for the priestly tribe of Levi. God told the Levites that He Himself would be their portion. Asaph was a Levite. When he says God is his portion, he means that God is his inheritance, his share, his treasure. The wicked may have money and fame. Asaph has God, and that's better. It's the cure for envy: not getting what others have, but realizing what you already have in God.

Psalm 137 is much harder. It was written during the Babylonian exile, after Jerusalem had been destroyed in 586 BC. It begins with one of the saddest scenes in the Bible. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows in that land, we hung up our harps."

The Babylonians had burned the temple, killed thousands, and dragged the survivors hundreds of miles from home. And then their captors mocked them. "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" Sing us one of your happy temple songs.

"How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?"

The psalmist vows never to forget Jerusalem. And then the psalm takes a terrifying turn. He asks God to remember what the Edomites did when Jerusalem fell, cheering on its destruction. And he speaks to Babylon directly. "Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, he will be happy who repays you, as you have done to us. Happy shall he be, who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Hard Passage: The Angry Psalms**

Psalm 137:9 may be the most disturbing verse in the Psalms. How can it be in the Bible? Psalms like this are called imprecatory psalms, from a word meaning to call down a curse. Others include Psalms 35, 58, 69, and 109. Christians have understood them in several ways. First, they're honest. The

person writing Psalm 137 had probably watched Babylonian soldiers do exactly this to Israelite children. The psalm doesn't pretend that grief and rage don't exist. Second, notice what the psalmist does with his rage. He doesn't grab a weapon. He brings it to God. He hands his desire for justice over to the only One who can judge fairly. Paul later wrote, "Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath." The angry psalms are a way of doing that. Third, the Bible doesn't present this verse as a command or a model for how to treat our enemies. It records a real cry from real pain. Some Christians have read it as reflecting the Old Testament principle of just repayment, the idea that Babylon would suffer what it had done to others. Others have felt it reflects a human cry that God hears but doesn't endorse. Many land somewhere in between. Finally, Christians read these psalms alongside Jesus, who said, "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you." On the cross, He prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." The angry psalms teach us to be honest about our rage. Jesus teaches us where it ultimately leads: to forgiveness, because God's justice was poured out on the cross.

REAL TALK **What to Do With Rage**

Maybe someone has hurt you so badly that you want them to suffer. That feeling is human. The angry psalms say you can bring even that to God. Tell Him exactly how you feel. Ask Him to bring justice. Then let Him handle it, instead of taking revenge yourself. That doesn't mean pretending what happened was okay, or that you have to stay in a situation where you're being hurt. If someone is abusing or threatening you, tell a trusted adult right away, or call 911 if you're in danger. Bringing your anger to God is often the first step toward the freedom of forgiveness, even if that takes a long time.

Psalm 73 and Psalm 137 show two very different kinds of hard emotions. One is envy, the slow poison of comparison. The other is rage, the explosion of grief and injustice. In both, the writer brings the feeling to God instead of acting on it. That's the lesson. Your hardest feelings belong in prayer.

It's worth pointing out that Asaph's turning point happened in a specific place: God's sanctuary. He didn't figure things out alone in his room, endlessly thinking about how unfair life was. He went to worship, among God's people. Sometimes the best thing you can do when you're stuck in envy, bitterness, or anger is to go where God's people gather, sing truth even when you don't feel it, and listen to God's word. Your feelings may not change instantly. But your perspective often does.

This is one reason church matters, even when it feels boring or you'd rather sleep in. Worship resets your vision. It reminds you that the world isn't just what you see on a screen. There's a bigger story, a better King, and a future that makes today's unfairness look different.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Asaph's Choir**

Asaph was one of the three chief musicians David appointed to lead worship in Jerusalem, along with Heman and Ethan, also called Jeduthun. According to 1 Chronicles, Asaph played cymbals, and his descendants continued to serve as temple singers for centuries. Some of the Asaph psalms may have been written by his descendants, members of what we might call the Asaph choir. Twelve psalms carry his name, Psalm 50 and Psalms 73 through 83. Many of them wrestle with hard questions, like why the wicked prosper and why God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed. Asaph was a worship leader who wasn't afraid to be honest.

Psalm 73 also teaches that envy usually comes from a narrow view. Asaph was looking at a small slice of life, the part where the wicked seemed to win. When he stepped back and saw the bigger picture, including eternity, everything looked different. The next time you're jealous of someone, remember that you're seeing only part of their story, and only part of yours.

REAL TALK **Singing in a Strange Land**

Psalm 137 asks, how can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? Followers of Jesus can sometimes feel like that too. Maybe you're the only Christian on your team, in your friend group, or in your family. Maybe people mock what you believe. The exiles eventually learned that God was with them even in Babylon. Daniel, Esther, and others lived faithfully far from home. You can too. You don't have to fit in perfectly to belong to God. And you can look for other believers who can sing with you.

KEY VERSE

My flesh and my heart fails, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Psalm 73:26 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. When have you been envious of someone else's life? What did it do to you?
2. What changed for Asaph when he "entered God's sanctuary"?
3. How do you feel about Psalm 137:9 being in the Bible? Which explanation makes the most sense to you?
4. What's the difference between bringing your anger to God and acting on it yourself?

TRY THIS *If you're angry at someone, write a completely honest prayer about it, then ask God to handle the justice. If envy is your struggle, take a three-day break from social media and notice how you feel.*

CHAPTER 6

Wonder and Being Known

Psalms 8, 19, 139

Some psalms make you want to go outside and look up.

Psalm 8 begins and ends with the same line. "LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" Then David, who spent many nights under the stars as a shepherd, looks up. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained, what is man, that you think of him? What is the son of man, that you care for him?"

Notice the phrase the work of your fingers. To David, the whole night sky looked like something God made with His fingertips, the way a craftsman makes delicate embroidery.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **How Big Is the Universe?**
>
> David could see a few thousand stars with his naked eye. Today, astronomers estimate that our galaxy alone has hundreds of billions of stars, and that there may be trillions of galaxies. The light from some of them has been traveling for billions of years to reach us. If David felt small looking at the night sky, imagine how he would feel seeing images from a modern space telescope. And yet the more we learn about the size of the universe, the more astonishing David's question becomes. Why would the God who made all that care about us?

But the psalm doesn't end with people feeling insignificant. It goes the other way. "For you have made him a little lower than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor." God made humans to rule over His creation: sheep, oxen, wild animals, birds, and fish. We're tiny, and yet we're crowned with glory. That's the paradox of being human.

Psalm 19 also starts with the sky. "The heavens declare the glory of God. The expanse shows his handiwork. Day after day they pour out speech, and night after night they display knowledge." The sky is always preaching a sermon, and it doesn't need words. "There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard."

Then David describes the sun, racing across the sky like a bridegroom coming out of his wedding tent, or a runner sprinting a race. Nothing is hidden from its heat.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Two Books**
>
> Psalm 19 has two halves. The first half is about creation. The second half is about God's word. Many Christians through history have talked about God's two books: the book of nature and the book of Scripture. Creation shows us that God is powerful, wise, and glorious. Scripture shows us who He is personally, what He has done, and how to know Him. Many scientists throughout history have been people of faith who saw studying nature as a way to discover more about the Creator. The two books don't compete. They work together.

Then David switches from the sky to Scripture. "The LORD's law is perfect, restoring the soul. The LORD's covenant is sure, making wise the simple. The LORD's precepts are right, rejoicing the heart. The LORD's commandment is pure, enlightening the eyes." God's word restores, makes wise, brings joy, and gives light. "They are

more to be desired than gold, yes, than much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and the extract of the honeycomb."

And David ends with a prayer that many people still pray before preaching or teaching. "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, LORD, my rock, and my redeemer."

Psalm 139 takes wonder in a different direction. Instead of looking up at the stars, David looks inward, and realizes that God knows him completely.

"LORD, you have searched me, and you know me. You know my sitting down and my rising up. You perceive my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, LORD, you know it altogether."

God knows when you sit and when you stand. He knows your thoughts before you think them. He knows what you're going to say before you say it.

That could be terrifying. But to David, it's wonderful. "This knowledge is beyond me. It's lofty. I can't attain it."

> **REAL TALK** **Fully Known, Fully Loved**
>
> Most of us are afraid of being completely known. We think, if people really knew everything about me, my thoughts, my past, my secrets, they wouldn't like me. So we hide parts of ourselves. Psalm 139 says that God already knows everything about you, including the parts you hide. And He hasn't left. He's still there, holding you. That's what makes the gospel such good news. You don't have to perform for God. You're already fully known and fully loved.

Then David asks a question. "Where could I go from your Spirit? Or where could I flee from your presence? If I ascend up into heaven,

you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there!" Whether he goes to the highest heaven or the deepest grave, God is there. If he flies on the wings of the dawn to the farthest ocean, "even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me." Even darkness can't hide him from God. "The darkness is like light to you."

Then David goes back to the very beginning of his life. "For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well."

> **REAL TALK** **Fearfully and Wonderfully Made**
>
> You live in a world that constantly tells you you're not enough. Not pretty enough, thin enough, strong enough, smart enough, popular enough. Ads, filters, and comparison shout it every day. Psalm 139 says something different. God knit you together on purpose. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Your worth doesn't come from your looks, your grades, your followers, your abilities, or anyone's opinion of you. It comes from the One who made you and loves you. If you're struggling with how you see yourself, with eating, with self-harm, or with feeling worthless, please talk to a trusted adult or counselor. You can also call or text 988 any time. You are not a mistake.

"Your eyes saw my body. In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there were none of them." Before you were born, God knew you. He planned your days. "How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is their sum! If I would count them, they are more in number than the sand."

Psalm 139 does have a hard section, verses 19 through 22, where David asks God to kill the wicked and says he hates God's enemies with perfect hatred. Like the other angry psalms, it reflects David's honest feelings and his desire to be on God's side. But then he

immediately turns the spotlight back on himself. “Search me, God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.”

That’s a brave prayer. David doesn’t just want God to deal with other people’s sin. He invites God to examine his own heart.

Put Psalms 8, 19, and 139 together, and they paint a remarkable picture. The God who flung the stars across space, who wrote His glory into the sky, who gave His perfect word, is the same God who knit you together and knows your every thought. He’s not a distant force. He’s not too busy running galaxies to notice you. The bigger you realize God is, the more amazing it becomes that He knows your name.

Wonder is good for the soul. In a world of screens, schedules, and constant noise, it’s easy to lose the ability to be amazed. Try to make room for it. Go for a walk without your phone. Look closely at a flower, a bug, or a sunset. Lie on the grass at night. Read about how a cell works, or how big the universe is. Then do what David did. Turn your wonder into praise.

BACKGROUND CHECK **C. S. Lewis on Psalm 19**

The writer C. S. Lewis, author of the Narnia books, called Psalm 19 the greatest poem in the Psalms and one of the greatest lyrics in the world. He was struck by how naturally it moves from the blazing sun in the sky to the bright, searching light of God’s law. Just as nothing is hidden from the sun’s heat, nothing is hidden from God’s word. Lewis also wrote a whole book called Reflections on the Psalms, in which he honestly wrestled with the hard psalms and the beautiful ones alike.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Psalm 8 and Jesus**

The book of Hebrews quotes Psalm 8 and applies it to Jesus. It points out that humans were meant to rule over creation, but we don’t yet see everything

> under human control. The world is still broken. But Hebrews says we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, and now is crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death for everyone. In other words, Jesus is the true human, the One who fulfills what Psalm 8 says people were made to be.

It's also worth noticing that Psalm 139 doesn't say you're perfect. David ends by asking God to search out any wicked way in him. Being fearfully and wonderfully made doesn't mean you have nothing to work on. It means your value comes first, before your performance. God loves you as you are, and He loves you too much to leave you that way. Both things are true, and you need both.

KEY VERSE

I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well.

Psalm 139:14 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. When was the last time you looked up at the stars? How did it make you feel?
2. How do you feel about God knowing everything about you, even your thoughts?
3. What messages do you hear every day about your worth? How does Psalm 139 answer them?
4. Why do you think David ends Psalm 139 by asking God to search his own heart?

TRY THIS *Go outside on a clear night and spend ten minutes looking at the sky. Then read Psalm 8 or Psalm 139 out loud, and thank God for one specific thing about the way He made you.*

CHAPTER 7

God's Word and the Road Up

Psalms 119, 121, 126, 133

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible. It has 176 verses, more than some entire books. And it's all about one subject: God's word.

That might sound boring. A whole psalm about the Bible? But Psalm 119 is actually one of the most creative poems ever written. It's an acrostic. The Hebrew alphabet has twenty-two letters, and Psalm 119 has twenty-two sections of eight verses each. In the first section, every verse begins with the first letter, aleph. In the second, every verse begins with the second letter, beth. And so on, all the way through the alphabet. Many English Bibles, including the WEB, print the Hebrew letter names as headings for each section.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Why an Alphabet Poem?**
>
> Why would someone write a poem this way? Acrostics were a kind of artistic challenge, and they may also have helped people memorize long passages. But many readers think there's a deeper point. By working through every letter of the alphabet, the psalmist is saying that God's word covers everything, from A to Z. It's complete. Several other psalms, like Psalms 25, 34, 111, 112, and 145, are acrostics too, as is most of the book of Lamentations. They're almost impossible to reproduce in translation, so you have to look closely to see them.

The psalmist uses eight different words for God's word, and almost every verse includes one of them: law, testimonies, precepts,

statutes, commandments, ordinances, word, and promise. Each word highlights something different: God's instruction, His witness, His guidance, His decrees, His commands, His judgments, His speech, and His faithfulness.

But Psalm 119 isn't a dry list of rules. It's a love poem. "How I love your law! It is my meditation all day." The writer isn't just obeying God's word. He's delighting in it, longing for it, treasuring it.

Psalm 119 also has a verse written almost directly to teenagers. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word." And two verses later: "I have hidden your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you."

> **REAL TALK** **Hiding God's Word in Your Heart**
>
> To hide something in your heart means to memorize it, think about it, and let it shape you from the inside. That's one of the best ways to fight temptation. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, He answered every temptation by quoting Scripture from memory. When you're tempted to lie, cheat, gossip, look at something you shouldn't, or give up, a verse you've memorized can come to mind at exactly the right moment. Start small. Pick one verse a week. Write it on your phone's lock screen or a sticky note on your mirror. In a year, you'll have more than fifty verses hidden in your heart.

The writer also asks God to help him understand. "Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things out of your law." Reading the Bible isn't just a matter of intelligence. You need God to open your eyes. That's a great prayer to pray every time you open your Bible.

And then comes one of the most famous verses in Psalm 119. "Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path."

In the ancient world, people walking at night carried small oil lamps. These lamps didn't light up the whole road. They showed you just enough to see the next step. That's often how God's word

works. It doesn't always show you your whole future. It shows you the next step to take.

Psalm 119 ends in a surprising way. After 175 verses about loving God's word, the writer admits, "I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I don't forget your commandments." Even after all of that, he knows he still needs God to come find him.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Songs of Ascents**

Psalms 120 through 134 each have the same heading: A Song of Ascents. Most scholars believe these were songs pilgrims sang as they traveled up to Jerusalem for the three great yearly festivals. Jerusalem was built on a hill, so from almost anywhere in Israel, you had to go up to get there. These fifteen short psalms may have been the road-trip songs of ancient Israel, sung by families walking together for days. They cover the whole journey, from leaving home in a foreign place to arriving at the temple and worshiping together.

Psalm 121 may have been sung at the start of the journey. "I will lift up my eyes to the hills. Where does my help come from?" The hills around Jerusalem could be dangerous. Robbers hid there. Some hills had shrines to false gods. The pilgrim looks up at the hills and asks, where will my help come from? Then answers: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."

The rest of the psalm repeats one word over and over: keep. "He will not allow your foot to be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep." God is like a guard who never falls asleep on duty. "The LORD will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time forward, and forever more."

REAL TALK **A Psalm for Leaving Home**

Many families pray Psalm 121 when someone leaves on a trip, starts at a new school, moves away, or heads off to college. If you're facing a transition, whether a move, a new school, a new job, or a family change, Psalm 121 is a great psalm to pray. You can't control everything that happens on the road ahead. But the God who made heaven and earth goes with you, and He never takes a nap.

Psalm 126 is a song about joy after a long sorrow. It probably remembers the return from exile in Babylon. "When the LORD brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing." It was so good it felt unreal. Even the surrounding nations noticed. "The LORD has done great things for them."

But the second half of the psalm turns into a prayer, because not everything was restored yet. "Restore our fortunes again, LORD, like the streams in the Negev." The Negev is a desert in southern Israel where the streambeds are dry most of the year. But when the rains come, they suddenly flood with water. The psalmist asks God to do that again, to bring sudden life to dry places.

Then comes a promise. "Those who sow in tears will reap in joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed for sowing, will certainly come again with joy, carrying his sheaves."

REAL TALK **Sowing in Tears**

Planting seed in the ancient world could be a heartbreaking act. In a famine, farmers had to take grain their families could have eaten and bury it in the ground, trusting that it would grow. Psalm 126 says that the tears you sow now can grow into joy later. Maybe you're in a season of sowing in tears, doing the right thing even though it hurts, waiting for something to change, praying without seeing answers. God sees. The harvest may take time. But the promise is that joy is coming.

Psalm 133 is one of the shortest psalms, and it's about something every family, team, and church needs. "See how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to live together in unity!" The pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem came from different tribes, towns, and backgrounds. When they arrived and worshiped together, it was a picture of God's people united.

The psalm uses two odd but beautiful images. Unity is like the precious oil poured on the head of Aaron, the high priest, running down his beard and onto his robes. And it's like the dew of Mount Hermon, the tallest mountain in the region, falling on the hills of Zion. Both images are about something good flowing down and spreading, refreshing everything it touches. That's what unity does. "For there the LORD gives the blessing, even life forever more."

REAL TALK **Getting Along**

Unity doesn't mean everyone is the same or agrees about everything. It means people who are different choosing to love each other, forgive each other, and work together. That's hard in families, friend groups, teams, and churches. It's especially hard in a world that loves to divide people into camps. Psalm 133 says unity is so precious that God commands His blessing there. Is there someone in your family, school, or church you need to make peace with? Taking the first step toward them might be one of the most powerful things you do.

REAL TALK **When the Bible Feels Boring**

Let's be honest. Sometimes reading the Bible feels boring, confusing, or like homework. That's normal, and it doesn't mean something is wrong with you. A few things can help. Try a readable translation. Read with a friend or a group. Use a Bible reading plan, or start with shorter books like the Gospels or the Psalms. Ask questions as you read: What does this say about God? About people? What should I do? Pray the psalmist's prayer from Psalm 119, asking God to open your eyes. And remember that love for God's word often grows

over time, like any relationship. The writer of Psalm 119 didn't love it on day one either.

The Songs of Ascents also remind us that following God is a journey, not a single moment. The pilgrims didn't teleport to Jerusalem. They walked, step by step, day after day, singing as they went. They got tired. Their feet hurt. Some days were harder than others. But they kept going, together, toward the place where God's presence was. That's a good picture of the Christian life. You don't have to have it all figured out. You just have to keep walking, with God's people, in the right direction.

Taken together, these four psalms give a picture of a healthy spiritual life. Psalm 119 roots you in God's word. Psalm 121 reminds you that God keeps you on the journey. Psalm 126 holds joy and sorrow together and keeps you hoping. Psalm 133 reminds you that you're not meant to travel alone. Word, trust, hope, and community: that's what carried pilgrims up the hill to Jerusalem, and it's what will carry you too.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Shorter Is Not Lesser**

Right next to the longest psalm is one of the shortest. Psalm 117 has only two verses, calling every nation to praise God for His love and faithfulness. It's actually the middle chapter of many English Bibles. Psalm 119 shows that God's word is worth endless reflection. Psalm 117 shows that the heart of praise can be said in a single breath. You don't need long prayers to reach God. Sometimes a sentence is enough.

KEY VERSE

Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path.

Psalm 119:105 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the writer of Psalm 119 wrote it as an acrostic?
2. What's one verse you could hide in your heart this week? Why that one?
3. What transition or journey are you facing where you need Psalm 121's promise?
4. Where do you see division in your life? What would it take to bring unity there?

TRY THIS *Choose one verse from this chapter to memorize. Put it somewhere you'll see it every day, and practice saying it until you can say it without looking.*

CHAPTER 8

The King's Psalms

Psalms 22, 110, 118

Back in chapter 3, we read Psalm 22 as a lament. Now it's time to read it again, because Christians have long seen in it something astonishing.

Psalm 22 was written by David, about a thousand years before Jesus. It describes someone suffering terribly. He feels abandoned by God. He's surrounded by enemies who mock him and shake their heads. They say, he trusts in the LORD, let the LORD rescue him. His bones are out of joint. His strength is dried up. His tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth from thirst. "They have pierced my hands and feet." He can count his bones while people stare at him. And "They divide my garments among them. They cast lots for my clothing."

Now compare that to the crucifixion of Jesus. The Gospels tell us that Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" the first line of Psalm 22. The crowds mocked Him and shook their heads. The religious leaders said He trusted in God, so let God rescue Him. He was thirsty. His hands and feet were nailed to a cross. And the soldiers divided His clothes and cast lots for them. The Gospel of John says this happened "that the Scripture might be fulfilled."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Crucifixion Before It Was Invented**

Crucifixion as a method of execution was developed by the Persians and later used widely by the Romans, centuries after David lived. In David's time, it was unknown in Israel. Yet Psalm 22 describes a death that sounds strikingly like crucifixion: pierced hands and feet, bones pulled out of joint, extreme thirst, public exposure. Scholars debate the exact meaning of the Hebrew word translated pierced, since ancient manuscripts differ slightly, and some Jewish translations render the line differently. But the Septuagint, a Greek translation made by Jewish scholars about two hundred years before Jesus, has they pierced. Either way, the overall picture of the psalm fits the crucifixion remarkably well.

But Psalm 22 doesn't end in death. The second half turns to praise. The sufferer is rescued, and he declares God's name to his brothers. Then the vision gets bigger and bigger. "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD. All the relatives of the nations shall worship before you." Even future generations will hear what God has done, people "that shall be born," because "he has done it."

Many Christians believe that when Jesus quoted the first line of Psalm 22 on the cross, He was pointing to the whole psalm, the way you might quote the first line of a song and everyone knows the rest. The psalm moves from abandonment to rescue to worldwide worship. That's the story of the cross and the resurrection.

REAL TALK **Jesus Knows How You Feel**

When Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was experiencing the worst pain anyone has ever known. He wasn't just in physical agony. He was bearing the weight of the world's sin, and for that moment, He felt cut off from His Father. That means there's no darkness you can go through that Jesus doesn't understand. If you've ever felt abandoned by God, He's been there. And He went there for you.

Psalm 110 is the psalm the New Testament quotes more than any other. It's short, only seven verses, and it begins with a mysterious line. "The LORD says to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool for your feet.'"

Notice the two different words. The first, written in small capitals, is God's personal name. The second, Lord, means master. David, the king, is writing about someone he calls my Lord. But who could be David's master? David was the king. No one in Israel was above him except God.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Jesus' Riddle**
>
> Jesus Himself asked this question. In Matthew 22, He asked the religious leaders whose son the Messiah would be. They answered, the son of David. Then Jesus quoted Psalm 110 and asked, "How then does David in the Spirit call him Lord?" If the Messiah is just David's descendant, why would David call him Lord? The leaders couldn't answer. Jesus was hinting that the Messiah would be more than just a human king. He would be David's son and David's Lord at the same time. Later, Peter quoted Psalm 110 in the first Christian sermon, saying that Jesus had been raised and exalted to God's right hand.

Psalm 110 also says something unusual about this King. "The LORD has sworn, and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.'" In Israel, kings and priests came from different tribes. Kings came from Judah. Priests came from Levi. No one could be both. But Melchizedek, a mysterious figure in Genesis 14, was both king of Salem and priest of God Most High, long before Levi was born. The book of Hebrews spends several chapters explaining how Jesus is this kind of priest-king: one who rules as King and who also offers Himself as the sacrifice for His people.

Psalm 118 is a song of thanksgiving, and it was one of the psalms Jewish families sang at Passover. It may well have been part of the

hymn Jesus sang with His disciples on the night He was betrayed. It begins and ends with a refrain: "Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his loving kindness endures forever."

The psalmist describes being surrounded by enemies on every side and about to fall. But God helped him. "The LORD is on my side. I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" And he declares, "I will not die, but live, and declare the LORD's works."

Then comes the line that the New Testament quotes again and again. "The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing. It is marvelous in our eyes."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Rejected Stone**
>
> Imagine builders examining stones for a building and tossing one aside as useless. Later, it turns out to be the most important stone of all, the cornerstone that holds the whole building together. Jesus quoted this verse about Himself, warning the religious leaders that they were rejecting the very One God had chosen. Peter quoted it too, and so did Paul. The leaders rejected Jesus and had Him crucified. But God raised Him from the dead and made Him the foundation of a new people.

Psalm 118 also includes the words the crowds shouted when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, the week before His death. "Blessed is he who comes in the LORD's name!" They also shouted Hosanna, which means save us now, a word that comes from verse 25. And right after the rejected stone, the psalm says, "This is the day that the LORD has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it!" Christians often sing that verse on Easter Sunday.

These three psalms trace the whole story of Jesus: His suffering on the cross in Psalm 22, His rejection and resurrection in Psalm 118, and His exaltation as King and Priest in Psalm 110. The King the Psalms were waiting for has come.

These psalms also show something important about how to read the Old Testament. The first readers of Psalms 22, 110, and 118 probably didn't fully understand how they would be fulfilled. David wrote out of his own experience as a suffering and victorious king. But the words reached far beyond David. After the resurrection, Jesus opened His disciples' minds to understand how all the Scriptures, including the Psalms, pointed to Him. Reading the Psalms is a bit like watching a movie a second time. Once you know the ending, you notice clues you missed the first time.

That doesn't mean every verse in every psalm is a direct prediction of Jesus. Most psalms are first of all real prayers of real people. But the whole collection is part of a bigger story that leads to Him. As you read, try asking two questions: What did this mean for the original writer? And how does it point to Jesus?

> **REAL TALK** **Jesus Prayed These Too**
>
> It's amazing to think that Jesus grew up singing these psalms. As a boy in Nazareth, He would have learned them by heart. As a twelve-year-old, traveling to Jerusalem for Passover with His family, He probably sang the Songs of Ascents along the road. As an adult, He quoted them in His teaching and prayed them in His suffering. When you pray the Psalms, you're praying the same words Jesus prayed. You're joining His prayers.

For Christians, this is the heart of why the Psalms matter so much. They're not just a collection of nice religious poems. They are part of the story that leads to Jesus. The shepherd psalms point to the Good Shepherd. The lament psalms find their deepest voice in His cry from the cross. The penitential psalms find their answer in His forgiveness. The royal psalms find their King in Him. When you read the Psalms with Jesus in mind, they come alive in a whole new way.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who Was Melchizedek?**

Melchizedek appears only briefly in Genesis 14. After Abraham rescued his nephew Lot, Melchizedek, the king of Salem, which may be an early name for Jerusalem, came out to meet him with bread and wine and blessed him. Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. Then Melchizedek disappears from the story. His name means king of righteousness, and Salem means peace. Hebrews sees him as a preview of Jesus: a king of righteousness and peace who is also a priest, whose priesthood doesn't depend on belonging to the tribe of Levi. Psalm 110 is what made the connection.

It's worth noticing that the apostles used these psalms in their very first sermons. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached from Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 to explain the resurrection. When he was arrested and questioned by the religious leaders, he quoted Psalm 118 about the rejected stone. The first Christians didn't think the Psalms were old, dusty poems. They thought the Psalms explained what God had just done in Jesus.

KEY VERSE

The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.

Psalm 118:22 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which details of Psalm 22 match the crucifixion of Jesus most closely?
2. Why do you think Jesus quoted Psalm 22 on the cross?
3. What's the point of Jesus' riddle about Psalm 110?
4. Have you ever felt rejected? How does it help to know that Jesus was the rejected stone?

TRY THIS *Read Psalm 22 and then Matthew 27 side by side. Make a list of every connection you can find, and talk about it with a friend or family member.*

CHAPTER 9

The Hallelujah Finale

Psalms 100, 145–150

If the Psalms were a concert, the last few songs would be the big finish, with every instrument playing and the whole crowd on its feet.

But first, a short song that's been sung in worship for thousands of years. Psalm 100 is titled simply "A Psalm of thanksgiving." It's only five verses long, and it's full of action. "Shout for joy to the LORD, all you lands! Serve the LORD with gladness. Come before his presence with singing."

Then it tells us why. "Know that the LORD, he is God. It is he who has made us, and we are his. We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." We belong to Him. He made us. He shepherds us.

"Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise." This was probably sung by worshipers as they walked through the temple gates. Thanksgiving is how you come in.

And the final verse gives three reasons to praise Him that never change. "For the LORD is good. His loving kindness endures forever, his faithfulness to all generations."

> **REAL TALK** **Thankful Even When You Don't Feel Like It**
>
> Some days, praise comes naturally. Other days, it feels impossible. Psalm 100 gives you reasons to praise God that don't depend on how your day is going.

> God is good. His love lasts forever. His faithfulness doesn't run out. Those things are true on your worst days too. Researchers have found that people who regularly practice gratitude tend to sleep better, feel less stressed, and have more hope. You don't have to fake happiness. But you can choose to name what's good, even in hard times.

Psalm 145 is the last psalm with David's name on it, and it's another acrostic, working through the Hebrew alphabet. It's a song of praise for God's greatness and goodness. "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised! His greatness is unsearchable." You could spend your whole life exploring how great God is and never reach the end.

Then it repeats the description of God we've seen in several psalms already, the one God gave Moses on Mount Sinai. "The LORD is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and of great loving kindness. The LORD is good to all. His tender mercies are over all his works."

And it includes a promise for anyone who feels far from God. "The LORD is near to all those who call on him, to all who call on him in truth." You don't have to find the perfect words. You just have to call on Him honestly.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **One Generation to Another**
>
> Psalm 145 says that one generation will praise God's works to another. Faith has always been passed down this way, from parents to children, from older believers to younger ones. The Psalms themselves are a gift from generations past. For three thousand years, people have sung these words in temples, synagogues, churches, monasteries, prisons, hospitals, and bedrooms. When you pray a psalm, you're joining a song that started long before you were born and will continue long after. And someday, you might be the one passing it on.

Then comes the grand finale. Psalms 146 through 150 all begin and end with the same Hebrew word: hallelujah. It combines two words,

hallelu, meaning praise, and Yah, a short form of God's name. In the WEB, it's translated "Praise the LORD!"

Psalm 146 is a warning and a promise. "Don't put your trust in princes, in a son of man in whom there is no help." Human leaders, no matter how powerful, will die, and their plans die with them. "Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the LORD, his God." Then the psalm describes what kind of God He is. He made heaven and earth. He keeps His promises forever. He brings justice for the oppressed and food for the hungry. He frees prisoners, opens the eyes of the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, protects foreigners, and cares for orphans and widows.

> **REAL TALK** **Praise That Gets Its Hands Dirty**
>
> Psalm 146 shows that praising God isn't just about singing. It's about understanding what God cares about. He cares about the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, the disabled, immigrants, orphans, and widows. If those are the people God cares about, those should be the people His followers care about too. Real worship includes both singing and serving. You might volunteer at a food bank, sit with a lonely kid at lunch, visit someone in a nursing home, or welcome a new student who doesn't speak English well. That's praise too.

Psalm 147 celebrates God's power and His tenderness side by side. "He heals the broken in heart, and binds up their wounds. He counts the number of the stars. He calls them all by their names." The same God who names every star in the universe bandages broken hearts. He's not too big to care about you, and He's not too small to handle your problems.

Psalm 148 calls on everything in creation to praise God. It starts in the heavens, with angels, armies of heaven, the sun, the moon, and the shining stars. Then it moves down to the earth: sea creatures,

the deep oceans, fire and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and livestock, creeping things and flying birds. Then kings and nations, rulers and judges, "both young men and maidens, old men and children." Everything and everyone, from galaxies to grandparents to teenagers, is invited to praise God.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Creation's Choir**

Saint Francis of Assisi, who lived in the 1200s, loved Psalm 148. He wrote a famous song inspired by it, called the Canticle of the Sun, in which he praised God for Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, and Sister Water. It later became the hymn All Creatures of Our God and King, still sung in many churches today. The idea that all of creation praises God, simply by being what God made it to be, appears throughout the Bible.

Psalm 149 calls God's people to "Sing to the LORD a new song." It invites dancing, tambourines, and harps. It celebrates that God takes pleasure in His people. The LORD delights in you.

And then comes Psalm 150, the final psalm. It's six verses of pure praise. Every line begins with praise. Where should we praise God? In His sanctuary and in His mighty heavens. Why? For His mighty acts and His surpassing greatness. How? With the trumpet, the harp and lyre, the tambourine and dancing, stringed instruments and flute, and loud, crashing cymbals.

REAL TALK **Loud Cymbals Allowed**

Psalm 150 isn't quiet. It calls for trumpets, drums, dancing, and loud cymbals. Some people think worship has to be solemn and silent. Sometimes it is, and that's good. But the Bible also celebrates loud, joyful, energetic praise. Whatever your personality, there's a way for you to praise God. You might sing, play an instrument, dance, write, paint, run, or shout. You might whisper a prayer in the quiet of your room. God made you, and He delights in your praise, whatever it sounds like.

And then, the very last verse of the very last psalm. "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!"

Think about where the Psalms began. Psalm 1 described the blessed person delighting in God's word. Psalm 2 announced God's King. Then came 148 psalms full of every human emotion: fear, grief, guilt, anger, envy, wonder, longing, joy. The Psalms went down into the valley of the shadow of death and into the darkness of Psalm 88. They wept by the rivers of Babylon. But they don't end there. They end with everything that has breath praising God.

That's the direction of the whole Bible, and the direction of every life that belongs to God. The story doesn't end in darkness. It ends in praise.

> **REAL TALK** **Make the Psalms Your Own**
>
> You don't have to wait until you're an expert to start praying the Psalms. Here are a few ideas. Read one psalm a day, and you'll finish all 150 in about five months. Use the When You Feel quick-finder at the front of this book when you're going through something specific. Read a psalm out loud, slowly, and stop at any line that stands out to you. Put your own name or situation into it. Write your own psalm, following the pattern of a lament or a praise psalm. Find songs based on the Psalms and listen to them on the way to school. Over time, the words of the Psalms will become your words.

The Psalms are a school of prayer. They teach you to talk to God about everything. Over a lifetime of reading them, you'll find that the Psalms have a word for almost every season. When you're thrilled, there's a psalm for that. When you're crushed, there's a psalm for that. When you've blown it, when you're scared, when you're angry, when you're amazed, there's a psalm for that too. God gave His people a songbook big enough for the whole of human life, and then He promised to listen to every song.

As you finish this book, remember that the Psalms aren't just something to read once and put away. They're meant to be lived with, over a whole lifetime. The psalm that means nothing to you now might be the one that carries you through a hard year in the future. The psalm that seems too happy today might be exactly what you need to sing when something wonderful happens. Keep reading them. Keep praying them. Let them teach you how to talk to God about everything.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **Hallelujah Around the World**
>
> The word hallelujah is one of the few Hebrew words that has been carried into almost every language on earth. Christians in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and everywhere else sing it in worship, often without translating it. It also appears in the New Testament, in Revelation 19, where a great multitude in heaven shouts hallelujah as they celebrate God's victory. The Psalms end with hallelujah, and so does the story of the whole Bible. One day, people from every nation, tribe, and language will sing it together.

Finally, notice who gets the last word in the Psalms. Not the enemies, not the doubters, not the darkness. The last word belongs to praise. That doesn't mean we skip over lament to get there. The road to Psalm 150 runs straight through Psalms 22, 88, and 137. But it does mean we know where the road ends. Every tear in the Psalms is headed toward a hallelujah.

KEY VERSE

The LORD is near to all those who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Psalm 145:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which reason to praise God in Psalm 100 means the most to you today?
2. What does Psalm 146 say God cares about? How could you care about those things too?
3. How does it feel to know that the God who names the stars also heals broken hearts?
4. Why do you think the Psalms end with praise rather than lament?

TRY THIS *Write your own Psalm 150. List at least ten reasons to praise God and ten ways you could praise Him. Then read it out loud, as loudly as you dare.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Jesus grew up praying the Psalms. They were His prayer book. He quoted them when He taught, and He sang with His disciples on the night He was betrayed. And when He hung on the cross, He prayed them. He cried out the opening line of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And with His last breath, He prayed from Psalm 31: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” When Jesus had no words left, the Psalms gave Him words.

Jewish readers treasure the Psalms as the heart of their worship and prayer, and pray them daily. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, came to believe that the Psalms are ultimately about Jesus. After His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples that “all things which are written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms concerning me must be fulfilled.” He is the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23: “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” He is the truly righteous Man of Psalm 1, the only one who ever perfectly delighted in God’s law. He is the suffering One of Psalm 22, whose hands and feet were pierced. He is the rejected stone of Psalm 118 who became the cornerstone. And He is the risen King of Psalms 2 and 110, now seated at God’s right hand. The Psalms pray toward Him, and through Him, we can pray them too.

Here’s what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He loves you. He hears every prayer and every song, even the ones that come out as tears.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We've all sinned.

David confessed that his sin was constantly before him. The Bible says all of us have sinned.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. The Bible says its result is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the King the Psalms were waiting for.

Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again. Jesus prayed Psalm 22 on the cross, suffering in our place.

> *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.* **1 John 4:10 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

Psalm 130 asks who could stand if God kept a record of sins. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Take refuge in Him.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. The Psalms show that God welcomes honest ones. You can talk to God right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

God, You know me better than I know myself. You've searched me and You know my heart. I've sinned against You, and I can't fix that myself. Have mercy on me, according to Your loving kindness. Thank You that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, laid down His life for me, and that You raised Him from the dead. Create in me a clean heart. Be my shepherd, my refuge, and my King. Teach me to bring You every feeling, and to praise You all my life. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want Him to be my King. In Jesus' name, amen.

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read one psalm a day. Start with Psalms 1, 23, 51, 139, and 150, then keep going.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Sing. The Psalms were meant to be sung. Find worship music based on the Psalms and sing along, even badly.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. The Psalms are full of doubts, complaints, and hard questions, and God put them in His book anyway. Keep asking. Keep reading. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if the Psalms are right, there is a God who hears every cry and every song, and He's listening to yours.

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

Psalm 150:6 (WEB)