

Lying down in green pastures



A series of five studies
in Psalms

Many Christians find Psalms, which is the largest book in the Bible, a difficult book to read. Most of us tend to dip into it only to read a favourite psalm or two, such as Ps 23 and Ps 100, and the remainder of the collection is a closed book (both literally and metaphorically!).

“Psalms” is from a Greek word meaning “songs”; their Hebrew name means “praises”. The Psalms occupy a central role in the Jewish Bible, and they have played a significant part in the communal worship and private devotions of the church from its very beginning. All church lectionaries are arranged to ensure that the Psalms are read in their entirety over a number of months or years. Most monastic orders have long required their members to recite the Psalms daily, and to know them by heart. For many Protestant churches, psalms have been a major—and sometimes the only—form of communal singing.

Yet today a lot of Christians are not very familiar with these ancient works, apart from a few favourites, such as Ps 23. They were written long ago in a land and culture very alien to ours, and the sentiments they express may appear strange, old-fashioned, obscure, and, in places, thoroughly objectionable. Many people encounter psalms only when they hear them read in church, and are uncertain of their relevance or spiritual value.

The aim of these sessions is to explore some ways of approaching all of the 150 psalms in our Bibles. We will recognise the difficulties they present, but strive to learn how to appreciate their qualities that can enrich our lives as

followers of Our Lord. We will also acknowledge and face up to the challenges they present: can they truly speak to us in today's world? If these studies are successful, we will be well equipped discover their riches and to continue to explore the psalms for ourselves in future.

Note: I refer to the book as Psalms; the contents, individually or collectively, as 'psalms'.

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The five weekly study sessions are:

- PART A** **LYING DOWN:** *Settling into the Psalms*
- Week 1 A light unto my feet: approaching Psalms
- Week 2 Sing to the Lord a new song: engaging with
the psalms
- Week 3 Singing the Lord's song in a strange land:
what did the world look like to a psalmist?
- PART B** **IN GREEN PASTURES:** *Feasting on the Psalms*
- Week 4 For God alone my soul in silence waits: the
Psalms and devotions
- Week 5 He leads me beside still waters: reflections
on what we have learned

We will end each session with a short compline, which can be found on page 47.

About these notes

The notes are not intended as pre-reading; they are designed to be read after each week's session, as a reminder of the main points covered. I have tried to keep the notes as brief and succinct as possible. The first session, however, draws on some additional background information, which you will find on pages 15 & 17.

At the end of the notes for each of the first four weeks you will find suggested activities for the week ahead. The purpose of these is to encourage you both to revise what has been covered in the session and to find points to raise in the next session. The activities are:

- a psalm for each day's reading;
- questions for you to answer;
- a practical exercise.

Week 1

A LIGHT UNTO MY FEET Approaching Psalms

Reading Psalms

A number of challenges confront us when we read Psalms. It is unlike any other book in the Bible. It doesn't have a clear beginning and end or a storyline, nor does it focus on a single theme. By contrast with modern church hymn-books, there is no obvious system by which the collection is organised: it is a series of self-standing compositions, put together apparently at random. For example, a communal lament that God has abandoned his people (Ps 44) is immediately followed by a sort of personal running commentary on a royal wedding (Ps 45). Some psalms are repeated, in whole or part: e.g., Ps 14 and Ps 53 are almost identical.

But, you may be thinking, didn't King David write the Psalms? Well, no: they were written by lots of different people, most of whom are unidentifiable. (See Further Background 1, page 15.)

In fact, if you read through Psalms, you will find that some of them are organised into short groups (see Further Background 2, page 17). Nevertheless, even these groups are not all continuous, nor is one group related to another. The whole

'book' is an unorganised compilation of works by a large number of anonymous authors, writing in different historical times and places, and for a variety of purposes. It makes sense, then, to treat each psalm separately, on its own merits, rather than trying to fit it into the larger whole.

We can, however, create our own groups of psalms, according to a number of characteristics that they have in common. The next section considers several of these shared characteristics; others may occur to you, too.

Speaking for me or for us all?

Many of the best-known and loved psalms are deeply personal (for example, Ps 23 and Ps 51). Reading them is like eavesdropping on an intimate conversation in which the psalmist speaks to God about things very close to his heart. In Ps 23 we hear the writer rejoicing in his loving, one-to-one relationship with God; and in Ps 51 the writer confessing his serious sins, for which he throws himself on God's mercy. Such psalms arise from carefully and prayerfully reflecting on the nature of life itself. This is what we Christians strive to practise today, and the psalmists are able, often much better than we are, to voice our innermost joys and sorrows, failures and triumphs, doubts and certainties, weaknesses and strengths. These are psalms which Christians throughout the ages have treasured in their devotional lives, and which still speak powerfully to us today. We will discuss this further in the third session.

There is also another, quite different, type of psalm. These were written for a body of people, probably a congregation in the temple, to sing or possibly recite. Like the personal psalms, they express thanksgiving, lament, confession, and more, but on the part of the gathered community, not an individual believer. This collectiveness is typically expressed in the opening verse(s); for example:

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
(Ps 95)

Praise the LORD!
Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD. (Ps 113)

Some of these communal psalms, particularly those praising God, have been reworked as Christian hymns and are widely used in church services. Examples include:

All creatures that on earth do dwell
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell;
Come ye before him and rejoice. (Ps 100, William
Kethe)

Let us, with a gladsome mind,
Praise the Lord, for He is kind:
For His mercies aye endure,
Ever faithful, ever sure. (Ps 136, John Milton)

In a few cases, it is not clear whether a psalm is an expression of personal or communal feelings. For example, Ps 93:

The LORD is king, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed, he is girded with strength.
He has established the world; it shall never be moved.
(Ps 93)

These communal psalms are important to us because we are not isolated individuals. We are part of the church—the Body of Christ—and we are utterly dependent on one another for support and encouragement in our journey of faith. These psalms are, naturally, favourites for congregational singing, but they can really come to life if, when you are reading them on your own, you do so aloud and imagine a lot of others joining in. It is a lovely reminder of the deep significance of Christian fellowship.

These two kinds of psalms—the personal and the communal—typically speak to us in quite different ways. It is therefore helpful, before you start reading any psalm, to decide which kind it is, as a guide to entering as fully as possible into what the psalmist has to say.

Psalms as conversations

Our spiritual lives could be thought of as a continuous series of conversations involving each of us, God, and other people. The psalms reflect and contribute to these life conversations. Through their writings the psalmists express profound human emotions to God, to other people, and to themselves. They write of their hopes, fears, questions, doubts, and gratitude; they reflect, argue, complain, apologise, and so on. Their

thoughts are occasionally expressed in ways that are unfamiliar and at times unacceptable to our modern minds, but to a large extent we can identify with them: we feel the writer is speaking for us. The psalms have an important role to play for us all in our developing relationship with God, as individuals and as a community of faith, by putting into carefully crafted words:

- i. Praise and worship (Ps 63; 149)
- ii. Thanks (Ps 30)
- iii. Lament (Ps 74)
- iv. Confession (Ps 51)
- v. Pleas for help (Ps 70)
- vi. Complaints (Ps 88)
- vii. Wisdom—teaching life truths (Ps 62: 9-10; Ps 119: 1-8)
- viii. Curses on the wicked (Ps 12)

Who is speaking to (and about) whom?

We are perhaps most familiar with psalms consisting of an address by the psalmist to God, but there are several variations in who is speaking to (or about) whom. To take Ps 23 for an example, the whole is spoken by the psalmist, but in two contrasting roles. In the first three verses he is speaking **about** God to an unspecified audience; in the next two he talks directly **to** God; in the last verse it is not clear who is being spoken to. In Ps 74, the writer is speaking to God not on his own behalf, but on behalf of the whole community:

O God, why do you cast us off forever?
Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your
pasture? (Ps 74: 1)

Occasionally, the psalmist records what he imagines are words
spoken by God:

I will instruct you and teach you the way you should
go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you. (Ps 32: 8)

This changing of speaker can occur several times within one
psalm, which makes it, in effect, a little drama in which with
the actors—the writer, God, and/or other people—play
various roles. Ps 12 is a good example; here, in the space of
eight verses:

- a. The psalmist appeals to God to save him from
godless people;
- b. The godless ones speak, boasting of their
strength;
- c. God speaks, saying he will save those oppressed by
the godless
- d. The psalmist speaks to God of his confidence in
God's actions.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

Daily readings

As you read each psalm, bear in mind what we have explored in this week's session. In the next session we will have an opportunity to share our experiences in reading them.

Tues 13th Ps 63

Wed 14th Ps 74

Thurs 15th Ps 51

Fri 16th Ps 70

Sat 17th Ps 119: 1-8

Sun 18th Ps 89: 21-38 (*read or sung in church*)

Mon 19th (*Revisit 89: 21-38*)

Questions for reflection

1. What is your attitude towards the book of Psalms? Are there individual psalms that you particularly treasure? Are there any that you dislike or simply can't understand?
2. Does the fact that there are many different authors of Psalms affect the way you think about this book of the Bible? In what way?
3. When the speaker in a psalm changes without warning (e.g., in Ps 12), do you find it enhances your response, or is it a distraction?
4. Have you learned something this week that could affect the way you read psalms in future?

Exercise

Select a series of 10 consecutive psalms (e.g., 1—10; 61—70; etc.):

1. What is the main theme of each one?
2. Which of them are personal and which communal?
3. Who is speaking at the beginning of each? To whom?
Does the speaker and/or person addressed change?
4. Could these psalms, or some of them, be seen as a sort of group? If so, what connects them?
5. Which one (or more) of these psalms appeals to you?
Why?

FURTHER BACKGROUND NOTES

You may find it helpful to read these extra notes, which provide more detailed information for some of the points raised in this week's study notes.

1. The 'book' of Psalms is in fact five separate books, which apparently existed independently for a long time before being edited into one large collection, probably after Israel returned from exile. The editors seem to have had in mind a sort of hymn-book for regular use in temple worship, for occasional public use on festival days, and possibly for private devotions. The original five books are labelled in some modern versions of the Bible. The last psalm in each book rounds it off with a brief doxology:

Book 1: Ps 1—41 (the doxology is 41: 13)

Book 2: Ps 42—72 (72: 18—19; followed by 'End of the prayers of David, son of Jesse')

Book 3: Ps 73—89 (89: 51b)

Book 4: Ps 90—106 (106: 48)

Book 5 (Ps 107—150) does not end with a doxology, but Ps 150 seems to have been composed specifically to serve as a triumphant conclusion to the whole newly-formed collection.

Why, then, is the book often known as ‘The Psalms of David’?

The answer lies in the brief preambles which open a large number (well over two-thirds) of psalms. These consist of notes, ranging from a single word to a dozen or more, and were probably written by the original authors, but may have been added later by the editors. The preambles include one or more of the following:

- i. the intended recipient and/or the one to whom it is dedicated (‘the choirmaster’, ‘Ethan the native-born’, etc.);
- ii. a link with a particular historical event or experience
- iii. what sort of composition it is (e.g., ‘psalm’, ‘song’, ‘poem’, ‘thanksgiving’, ‘prayer of the downtrodden’, etc.);
- iv. instructions to the performers: the appropriate instrument and/or the tune to use.

These last two are sometimes expressed by Hebrew musical terms: the meanings of virtually all of these is unknown. Some modern versions of the Bible simply reproduce the unknown Hebrew word, e.g., *shiggaion*; others make an educated guess at the meaning, e.g., ‘lamentation’.

Back to David: over half of the psalms mention his name in the preamble. The Hebrew word before the name has traditionally been translated as **of**, taken to mean **by**: thus, ‘a psalm of David’ has been understood as ‘a psalm

written by David'. That is why David has for long been assumed to be the main psalmist, but in fact the wording can equally well be translated as 'in the style of David' or 'dedicated to David'. There is some evidence that one or two of them may have actually been written by David, but the large majority were certainly not.

Solomon (Ps 72) and Moses (Ps 90) are also mentioned in two preambles.

2. An example of a small group of psalms is Ps 120—134, which seem to have been written to be sung on pilgrimages to Jerusalem.

Another group (Ps 42 - 49, 84 & 85, 87 & 88) was written by, or perhaps dedicated to, the 'Sons of Korah'. Korah was the leader of a rebellion against Moses. Some of his descendants were given responsibility for making music in David's court, perhaps as a means to atone for their ancestor's misbehaviour. The psalms in another group (Ps 50, 73—83) are associated with (in this case, probably written by) a man called Asaph. We know from elsewhere in the Bible that he was the leader of the Sons of Korah, and apparently their chief composer.

Week 2

SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG

Engaging with psalms

Taking them one at a time

Because there were many authors of the psalms, living in widely diverse times and places, it is not surprising that their works differ in a number of ways. Apart from a few repetitions across the collection as a whole, each psalm has its own distinctive character. Last week we noted:

- The intimate and personal contrasted with the communal and collective;
- What the psalmist is doing: giving thanks, confessing, complaining, and so on;
- Who is speaking to and/or about whom.

In order to increase our understanding of psalms, and the pleasure and spiritual benefit they can bring, it makes sense not to attempt to read Psalms as a book, but to treat each psalm in it as an independent item, so as to appreciate its own particular character. We will treasure some, for example, those that express in a profound way what it means to be human and to seek a relationship with God. Others will be less

exciting, but give a glimpse of something important. Some we will not appreciate much at all, for various reasons.

Psalms as poetry

A key to appreciating any psalm is always to remember that it is a work of poetry.

What is poetry?

In essence, it is concise, carefully crafted language that strains to express truths which are so profound that they cannot be adequately expressed in language at all. One poet wrote, 'Just beyond the edges of my language are words that explain everything.' We Christians need good poetry as much as (neither more nor less than) good teaching, for it reminds us that our faith transcends human experience. Rediscovering this through the poetry of Psalms can help to revitalise our faith and how we live it.

Poetic forms vary widely from language to language, and what is common in the poetry of one culture may be totally absent from another. To give a simple example, limericks ('There was a young lady from Dorking ...') are unique to English. One needs to know a language well to recognise and appreciate the way the poet has worked on the words and phrases. In English poetry, we are aware of the rhymes and rhythms, the clever choice of words, and so on. When reading the Psalms, translated from the original Hebrew, of course, these aspects of the language are almost completely lost to us.

Probably much more important than these language details, however, is the meaning, the effect that the poem has on you,

the reader or listener. Poetry works by first of all seizing our emotions. We then realise, at times immediately, but more often gradually, the truths underlying what has so stirred us. Poetry stirs us in the depths before it breaks the surface. It has been likened to a painting spattered on canvas—the canvas is you.

This is how the psalms work

In every psalm, the writer's aim is not simply to tell us about history, nature, people's behaviour, etc., but to confront us, wake us up, and so lead us to ponder on the mind-blowing things we can learn about God **from** history, nature, and so on. There is also a lot of theology in psalms: not scholarly statements about God, but lived theology, theology on the hoof. The psalmists are writing about the ups and downs in their relationships with God, and what they write is itself part of that relationship.

When we read psalms (or hear them read or sung), we are being challenged by those ancient poets not to analyse but to respond. It is as though they were offering us a lens through which to view the world in a new way: the appropriate response is not to study, analyse, and measure the lens, but to look through the lens at God, human beings, and the creation.

He's just said that: repetition in psalms

There is, however, one interesting aspect of Hebrew poetry that we can appreciate even in translation. That is the practice of stating something and then straight away repeating it in slightly different words. Look at how much repetition (underlined) there is in the opening of Ps 2:

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
'Let us burst their bonds asunder,
and cast their cords from us.'

He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD holds them in derision ...

This sort of thing is very rare in English poetry, but it was common in Hebrew. And not just in poetry: the quote below is from Jesus' public teaching.

For with the judgement you make you will be judged,
and the measure you give will be the measure you get.
(Matt 7:2)

When you come across repetition in a psalm, pause for a moment and think about your response: does it reinforce the writer's point; give you a second insight into what he's saying; add a sing-song quality to the whole; or simply annoy you?

Psalms as performance

The psalmists created their poems to be performed. We easily overlook this, because we are so used to reading them silently, but in the ancient world they would always have been spoken or sung to an audience. Until only a few centuries ago, reading anything was never done silently. Even somebody entirely alone would read the words out loud. Performance is very important to appreciating the psalms: although we have noted some are intensely personal, the large majority were clearly communal events of one kind or another. Even the intimate psalms would have been spoken aloud to an audience, or sung in the manner of a modern folk singer. Try declaiming a well-known psalm such as Ps 23 aloud to an audience (real or imagined): you will find it takes on a new level of meaning.

Approaching the psalms as performance poetry gives us a wonderful freedom in our interpretation of them. They aren't containers of fixed meanings that we have to work out; there are no right or wrong interpretations. Just as a great piece of music or painting can arouse quite varied emotions in different listeners or viewers, a psalm actively *means* different things for different people, and may mean quite differently for you from one reading to the next, as your life circumstances change. That is one of the great delights of these rich works of religious art.

Solving some puzzles

That is not to say we should ignore the additional insights that can be gained from knowing a little more of the cultural and religious context within which the psalmists wrote. There is a temptation, when we come across some obscure or confusing comment, simply to ignore it. More often than not, however, if we can find an explanation of the difficult part we can appreciate the psalm more fully. Some versions of the Bible include brief footnotes that can help; Bible commentaries—there are many available online—are another useful source. Even comparing two different translations occasionally sheds light on problematic words and phrases.

A good example of a puzzle that can distract our reading occurs in Ps 95. It starts as a glorious congregational hymn led by the psalmist:

O come, let us sing to the LORD;
Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving ...

Then, a bit over halfway through, God speaks. He mentions two places we modern readers have almost certainly never heard of, and he condemns what happened there. At this point our eyes are likely to glaze over: we suddenly seem to be in another, utterly disconnected, psalm. The stirring hymn of praise to God ends in complaints and accusations by God: ‘in my anger I swore they shall not enter my rest’. It is rather an anticlimax.

The trouble is that we, unlike the original audience of the psalm, have no idea what is being referred to. If, however, we can find a reference to the relevant parts of the Old Testament (Exodus 17 and Numbers 14) where the people made God angry by refusing to obey his commands, it will become clear what the point is. There is a link between the beginning and the end of the psalm. The psalmist is reminding the congregation as they sing along with him that it is not enough just to sing to God: we give him true praise by living a life of faith and obedience to his will.

So, although we do not have to study the psalms in great depth before we can gain a lot from them, it is worth the effort to seek an explanation of those parts that we simply cannot make head or tail of. If we cannot find an explanation that enhances our appreciation of any particular psalm, or part of it, we simply have to put it for the moment in the 'too hard basket', and revisit those psalms which really mean something for us.

Even when we do understand enough, however, the poetic nature of the psalms means that there may well be some aspects we simply cannot engage with. There will be things in their cultural context that we can never really grasp or identify with, some values that we reject out of hand. We will be looking at our responses to some of these problems next week; for now, it is enough to reemphasise that not all psalms will be equally meaningful, enjoyable, and instructive for us.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

Daily readings

As you read each psalm, bear in mind what we have explored in this week's session. In the next session we will have an opportunity to share our experiences in reading them.

Tues 20th Ps 137

Wed 21st Ps 62

Thurs 22nd Ps 124

Fri 23rd Ps 96

Sat 24th Ps 136

Sun 25th (*in church*) Ps 95

Mon 26th (*Revisit Ps 95*)

Questions for reflection

1. We have commented on the great freedom we have in interpreting psalms. Nevertheless, we can't simply make them mean whatever we want them to: what are the constraints that guide our interpretations?
2. In your experience of psalms, do some seem more poetic than others? What is the difference?
3. In the daily readings for last week and this week:
 - a. What poetic images and/or words and phrases have you noticed? How would you explain them to someone using non-poetic language?
 - b. Are there any parts that you find it very difficult to understand? How might you go about finding an explanation that would help you to make sense of the psalm?

Exercise

Find a psalm which particularly appeals to you, for whatever reason. Keeping as closely as you can to spirit of the original, rewrite it using language and images that would make clear sense to contemporary readers.

Note that this may require very substantial changes. For example, if you were reworking Ps 23, you would have to find another image than a sheep (of which few people these days have any real knowledge) and shepherd (virtually non-existent in our society).

WEEK 3

SINGING THE LORD'S SONG IN A STRANGE LAND

What did the world look like to a psalmist?

The cultural setting—or upsetting?

Through these studies, we are seeking to find a way of approaching the psalms that will unlock for us some of their spiritual treasures. In order to achieve this, one thing we need to do is to enter, as far as we can, the world in which they were written.

This is not easy: we are constantly reminded as we read that the psalmists created their artistic works in a cultural context that was unlike ours in many, many ways. Because that context was shared with the audience, the psalmists assumed a lot of common understandings and values that are completely foreign to us. We touched last week on a particular example in Ps 95, in which the writer mentions, without any explanation, events in Jewish religious history which are utterly unknown to most non-Jewish readers.

We can't, of course, hope to understand the culture in any great depth. We don't have the time—and probably most of us haven't got the inclination, either—to treat it in any detail. In any case, there is a lot that remains unknown even to Old Testament scholars. In this session we will limit ourselves to a few pointers that may help to clarify some of the significant obscurities that can hinder our enjoyment in reading.

All of a piece with nature

The communities in which the psalms were composed consisted very largely of peasant farmers, making a living as best they could from agriculture and hunting. They lived entirely in and through nature. For us there is a clear distinction between city and country; for them the entire world was 'country'. The only city of any size was Jerusalem, which represented the heart and soul of their nation: a distant focus of pilgrimage, if you were blessed, once or twice in a lifetime.

For the majority in our society, it is the country that is the focus of pilgrimage: we are encouraged to 'rediscover' and 'immerse ourselves in' what we call the 'environment'. This would have made no sense to the communities for whom the psalms were written. They lived in the natural world as fish live in water.

That is why the psalmists often remind their audience to look at features of nature, not as we do as an escape from the pressures of everyday life, but in order to learn from it. The entire physical world—their home—was an embodiment of the spiritual world. It consisted of two kinds of phenomena.

Those which are majestic and awe-inspiring— mountains and valleys, deserts and forests, sun, moon, and stars—revealed God’s character and how we should respond to it. Like a mountain, he is immovable, reliable, and strong. We humans must worship him, singing with raised hands just as the trees of the forest raise their branches to heaven in praise. Those which are frightening and dreadful—wild seas; dark places like caves; earthquakes; floods—reveal the demonic, life-threatening elements of an underworld.

This dual nature of the created world also reflected a deep division in human beings. That which is beautiful is at one with the good, honest, reliable, and compassionate people, who are on God’s side. The evil, treacherous, and hard-hearted people are part of the sinister side of creation, at constant war with God. These are the enemies of God, of the psalmists, and of all right-minded folk.

Surrounded by enemies

It is astonishing how frequently enemies crop up in the psalms, being mentioned in about two-thirds of them. They appear even in what is most people’s favourite psalm, the pastoral and intimate Ps 23, where the writer praises God for his generosity: ‘you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies’. Enemies refuse to obey God; they hate the writer personally and seek to do him harm in every imaginable way. Enemies were clearly a significant part of how the psalmists viewed the world.

This is strange to us modern readers. If we talk in terms of enemies at all, it usually refers to political or ideological differences, not extreme personal hatred. What can we make of their constant presence in the psalms? How can we integrate them into our reading of Psalms? There is no simple answer; the following three possibilities are worth considering.

It is possible that bitter personal confrontations were a normal part of life in those days. Living in a harsh environment, in which wild animals and natural forces were a constant threat, everyone needed an intimate group of people who could be completely depended on in any circumstances. In order to make this group as close-knit as possible, I treated those outside it as 'over against' me: my enemies. If this was the case, the 'enemy' psalms are genuine prayers for delivery from real-life opponents.

Another interpretation is that the enemies were artistic creations intended to personify all the bad things that happen, including but not limited to unkind acts by other people, and/or the dark side of the writer's own character (the enemy within). This means the enemy is a poetic device through which to express negative feelings towards the outside world and/or the inner self that the psalmists (like all of us) experienced. Perhaps psalms like Ps 12 could be paraphrased as:

Lord, I feel depressed, worried, angry, hurt, etc. Such emotions damage my relationship with you. Will you help me to overcome them, so that our relationship will be restored?

Related to this idea is the possibility that the enemies are a mere abstract concept, intended to provide a contrast to, and highlight, all that is wonderful and good. The greater and more noble the good being talked about, the more vile the enemies, to sharpen the focus. If this is the most accurate explanation, we could paraphrase psalms like Ps 26 and Ps 52 along these lines:

Just how great and holy God is, and how glorious the world he created, can be seen in comparison with the works of evil people. Let us pray that God will restore the world so that, as in the Garden of Eden, such contrasts are no longer relevant.

It is possible that all three interpretations may be relevant. Some psalmists may be using 'enemies' in one of these ways, and others in another way. Or an individual psalmist may use 'enemies' in different ways: for example, by writing about his real-life enemies, he is personifying his darker side, against which he emphasises God's greatness.

Some psalmists speak of 'the wicked' or 'ungodly', at times to refer their own personal enemies, and at other times specifically to enemies of God. As well as the 'wicked', we also meet righteous and good people, but less frequently. When they are mentioned, it is most commonly in contrast to the evil ones.

Revenge is sweet

A related problem, and one that is very difficult for the modern reader to cope with, is that there are few psychological subtleties in the psalms. None of the psalmists—or the people they write about—is lukewarm, undecided, or open-minded enough try to understand what drives other people. It is true that a few psalms attempt to explore the writers' own motives:

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. (Ps 51:
6)

But nowhere is this attempt made for others: those who think differently from me are fools, the wicked, enemies. They are to be opposed; in many cases the psalmist calls for them to be annihilated, describing in ghoulish detail the revenge that God, or the writer acting on God's behalf, will take on them. For example, in Ps 109, the writer seems to take horrible delight in spelling out in great detail what God should do to his enemies.

Among all the many beautiful and deeply moving psalms, there are also bloodthirsty ones like this. They are occasionally quoted by opponents of Christianity (our enemies, perhaps?) to discredit the Bible, and, even if we interpret them as artistic exaggeration, they are clearly unacceptable to contemporary ways of thinking. What should be our approach to them, in the light of Jesus' command to love our enemies? Various responses are possible, each of which raises some difficulties.

We can accept them as an ancient way of thought, which was understandable in people who had to survive in a harsh, unforgiving environment, where savage warfare was part of life. It is hardly fair for us, who live in a safe and comfortable world, to condemn them for having more elemental desires. The psalmists wrote long before Christ, and had never heard his message of endless forgiveness and love. With hindsight, we can see they were in error, but these passages are no longer relevant, and should be omitted, especially from public worship.

Or we might accept them at face value. We shouldn't be squeamish about the fact that God does punish people for their wickedness. We might think these passages are a corrective to our excessively soft, liberal ideas: they remind us that sin is under his judgement, and that as long as people remain unrepentant they are condemned.

Or we can be humble, and admit that these passages are a problem to which we have no satisfactory answer. We shouldn't allow what is, after all, a rather small part of the totality of Holy Scripture, to spoil our reverence for the Bible or the faith. In our private reading, there is nothing wrong with, as it were, placing brackets round them, and passing over them. If we don't allow them to spill over into the surrounding text, they won't spoil our appreciation of the spiritual feast we find there. Let us leave the problem in God's hands and get on with what we do understand.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

Daily readings

As you read each psalm, bear in mind what we have explored in this week's session. In the next session we will have an opportunity to share our experiences in reading them.

Tues 27th Ps 7

Wed 28th Ps 140

Thurs 29th Ps 17

Fri 30th Ps 148

Sat 31st Ps 1

Sun 1st Ps 51: 1—12 (*in church*)

Mon 2nd (*Revisit Ps 51: 1—12*)

Questions for reflection

1. Who has the right to decide who should, and should not, be punished? The psalmists seem to be very ready to pass judgement; are we entitled to do so, too?
2. If we pass over some aspects of Psalms that we think we can never properly understand:
 - a. Could we be reasonably accused of laziness in failing to tackle the serious issues?
 - b. Can we simply leave out any bits of the scripture that we don't like, or which aren't 'culturally relevant'? If not, how do we decide what to pass over?
3. Which of the suggested interpretations of the ever-present 'enemies' do you find most helpful?
4. Why do you think that 'the wicked' (ungodly, enemies of God, etc.) occur much more frequently in psalms than 'the righteous' (humble, honest, faithful, friends of God, etc.)?

Exercise

Carefully read a 'revenge' psalm, such as Ps 109. Rewrite a few of the most vengeful verses to reflect Jesus' command to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5: 44). What do you think of the new version?

WEEK 4

FOR GOD ALONE MY SOUL IN SILENCE WAITS

The psalms and devotions

Devotion to devotions

It is an ancient Christian tradition, most powerfully demonstrated in monasteries and nunneries, to set some time aside each day for prayer and meditation so as to align one's life more and more closely with God's will. Such 'devotions' involve either the individual believer or a group, and psalms have always had a central role to play in both forms. There are two general approaches to using psalms in personal and communal devotions that have stood the test of a very long time: what we might express as 'words to God' and 'words from God'.

Words to God

By far the more common approach is to take the psalmist's words as speaking my (or the group's) inner thoughts and feelings. This practice of 'praying the Psalms' has a long tradition that started in monasteries, but throughout the years it has also been used in many churches. It involves reading through the book of Psalms, systematically but usually

selectively, using each psalm as a prayer. As we have seen, there are many that are written from a deeply personal and intimate perspective, and they easily lend themselves to being prayed in this way. We bring an unknown psalmist into our minds and hearts and allow him, as it were, to speak for us. The psalms are like a gallery in which the whole range of human weaknesses and emotions are on display, and their beautifully crafted poetry can focus and express what is in our hearts, so much better than we can in our own words. When we pray in this way, we are viewing the psalms as words to God, and we feel drawn closer to him.

We can also learn more about ourselves. We can experience a mysterious fellowship with the psalmists, across the vast distances and time that separate us from them. For all their different concerns, these were clearly passionately high-minded yet flawed human beings: we can recognise so much of ourselves in them. The great reformer, John Calvin, found the psalms invaluable for his own spiritual growth. In his *Commentary on Psalms*, he wrote:

There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. ... The Holy Spirit has here drawn ... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. ... The [psalmists] are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections; [they] draw each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to

which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy.

Words from God

The other approach to using psalms as devotional materials is to view them as ultimately coming from God, and open ourselves to hear what he has to say to us. These days, we tend to think of psalms purely as expressive works, not as teaching materials. But, as St Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy 3:

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

Treating Psalms as a theological resource from which we can learn has a long history. There are many passages in the New Testament in which Psalms is quoted in support of a significant statement. For example, in commenting on Jesus' teaching, Matthew (13: 35) quotes Ps 72:

Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet:

'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world'.

(Notice also the poetic repetition, both in the first sentence and in the quotation.)

In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul expounds the theology of salvation in considerable detail. He quotes from Psalms on a number of occasions; e.g., in chapter 3:

All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

‘There is no one who is righteous, not even one;
there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.’ (Ps 14; also Ps 53)

It is not quite clear what we can conclude from such examples. Are these writers basing their argument on the words from Psalms (‘The psalmist said this: it is the word of God and hence true’)? This would have seemed legitimate to the original readers and listeners, as all Scripture was presumed to express God’s truth. Or are they quoting the psalmists as a summary of the point they are making (‘Here is a quote from a psalm that nicely sums up the point I am making’)? In a similar way, we today sometimes use quotes from well-known poems in this way. I have quite often heard a line of poetry quoted in an appropriate context (the speaker may not even have known it was a quote), such as

‘Theirs not to reason why; theirs but to do and die.’
(Tennyson, *Charge of the Light Brigade*); ‘Water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink.’ (Coleridge, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*)

Either of these reasons for citing extracts from psalms would have been effective for the original audience, because as faithful Jews steeped in Scripture, they would have been entirely familiar with the words quoted.

Psalms and devotions: old hat, or the way ahead?

We looked in the first week at the conversational nature of most psalms: there are different speakers and listeners, often within the one psalm. In what way can psalms form part of our own life conversation? In any good conversation, we learn from what others say and also from what we say: can we similarly learn from the psalms by using them as a means of addressing God and, at the same time, hearing him speak to us through them?

Martin Luther certainly thought so. He wrote:

No devotional book has ever appeared that is superior to the Psalms. They clearly and prophetically detail the death and resurrection of Christ. The Psalms, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are the songs of his people, his Church, with hearts laid open, praising and lamenting. They are the words of our devotion.

Most of us, however, are much less steeped in Psalms than earlier generations of believers, and probably find it less natural than they did to express ourselves through their words.

FOR THE COMING WEEK

Daily readings

Tues 3rd Ps 42

Wed 4th Ps 46

Thurs 5th Ps 19

Fri 6th Ps 113

Sat 7th Ps 26

Sun 8th Ps 130 (*in church*)

Mon 9th (*Revisit Ps 130*)

Questions for reflection

1. Is there a psalm which, in whole or part, you have used (and perhaps still use) as a form of prayer directly addressing God?
2. Is there anything in a psalm that you feel reveals a truth about God, the world, other people, etc.?
3. Can the words of psalms carry the same weight for us as those of other books of the Bible which are more obviously prophecy or teaching?
4. Do you think we can rediscover the psalms as 'words to God' and 'words from God', or are they no longer able to express our contemporary concerns in an appropriate manner?

Exercise (1)

In preparation for next week, read and think about the following poem, which has been likened to a modern psalm. In next week's session, we will consider whether it has any characteristics of a psalm.

The poem is by Minnie Louise Haskins; it was made famous when it was quoted by King George VI in his New Year address to the Empire in 1939:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”

And he replied:

“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.

And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

Exercise (2)

Compose your own psalm of at least 6—8 **pairs** of lines. Include more than one speaker and more than one person addressed (and/or spoken about). You may find it helpful to answer these questions before you start:

1. What is my main concern? (E.g., to praise God, thank God, complain, express my fears or doubts, etc.)
2. Will I illustrate my concern by writing about one or more personal experience(s)?
3. Are there any features of my world (natural or built environment, etc.) that support my main point(s)?
4. Are there any relationships (positive or negative) with other people that support my main point(s)?
5. How will I finish off?

WEEK 5

HE LEADS ME BESIDE STILL WATERS

Reflections on what we have learned

The book of Psalms is a rich field for study, and is the subject of a vast literature (commentaries, studies, reworking as hymns, etc.) which stretches at least as far back as the fourth century AD. Many eminent figures in church history have written about Psalms, including St Augustine of Hippo and, as we noted last week, Luther and Calvin. More recently, in the middle of the last century, CS Lewis wrote his thought-provoking *Reflections on Psalms*, and works continue to be published today at an astonishing rate. If you have been inspired by our little series of workshops to delve more deeply into this remarkable book of the Bible, you will find no shortage of reading materials!

Despite this continuous outpouring of thoughtful and stimulating materials, however, it is arguable that we contemporary Christians feel less at home with Psalms than previous generations. It is impossible to be certain, but I suspect not many of us are in the habit of using psalms in our private devotions. We do, of course, encounter them in

church: it is usual for every Anglican Eucharistic service to include a responsorial psalm, either read or sung, but nevertheless one rarely hears the psalm being discussed afterwards.

If psalms have indeed become more marginal to our spiritual lives, one factor may be the psalmists' black-and-white worldview that we discussed in the third session, and in particular those bloodthirsty passages that are so repugnant to modern sensibility. In the light of such cultural difficulties, there may be a general uncertainty about how to interpret psalms and apply their lessons in our lives. This is not helped by the fact that Psalms is so unlike any other book in the Bible. It is a collection of works that are often historically unconnected; uneven in style and content, and there is a temptation simply to hold on to our few favourite psalms, and simply ignore the rest.

The aim of our sessions has been to address this unease. We have explored some ways of approaching the psalms that can make them more accessible. Of course, in such a short time we can only touch upon a few points. Nonetheless, I hope that we may have felt a growing desire to explore the potential riches of Bible's longest book, and a little more confidence in doing so.

This final session is an opportunity for us to reflect on and to share with one another what we have learned in the previous weeks, as well as to raise questions and difficulties that remain. Overpage are some questions to start the discussion; please feel free to raise anything else that you would like to.

Questions for group discussion

1. Has your understanding of the book of Psalms changed as a result of these study sessions?
2. If it has, was there a particular point that stands out, or was it the result of a number of points that we covered?
3. Is there a psalm (or are there more than one) that you have come to appreciate in a new way?
4. Are there any matters that were not covered, or were inadequately covered, in our studies that you would like to know more about?
5. Often, studies like these seem to raise more questions than they answer. Have you questions you would like to raise with the group?
6. How will you use psalms in your private devotions and Bible reading in future?
7. Are there ways in which we can enhance the role of psalms in our church services?

SHORT COMPLINE

The Lord almighty grant us a quiet night and a perfect end.
Amen.

Our help is in the name of the Lord
who made heaven and earth.
O God, make speed to save us.
O Lord, make haste to help us.

**Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and for ever shall be.**
Amen.

From Psalm 91

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High and abides
under the shadow of the Almighty,
**Shall say to the Lord, 'My refuge and my stronghold,
my God, in whom I put my trust.'**

He shall cover you with his wings
And you shall be safe; his faithfulness shall be your shield.
Because you have made the Lord your refuge and the Most
High your stronghold,

There shall no evil happen to you.
For he will give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all
your ways.

**They shall bear you in their hands,
lest you dash your foot against a stone.**
Because they have set their love upon me,
therefore will I deliver them;

I will lift them up, because they know my name.

They will call upon me and I will answer them;

With long life will I satisfy them

and show them my salvation.

Glory to the Father ...

As it was in the beginning ...

They will see the Lord face to face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever. (Rev 22: 4-5)

Thanks be to God.

Brief silence

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit

For you have redeemed me, Lord God of truth.

I commend my spirit

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit

Save us, O Lord, while waking,

and guard us while sleeping,

that awake we may watch with Christ

and asleep we may rest in peace.

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been fulfilled.

My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people;

A light to reveal you to the nations

and the glory of your people Israel.

Lighten our darkness, Lord, we pray, and in your great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night, for the love of your only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

The Lord be with you

And also with you

Let us bless the Lord

Thanks be to God.

May the almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless us and keep us. **Amen**

