

LifeChange

A NAVPRESS BIBLE STUDY SERIES

*A life-changing
encounter with God's Word*

PSALMS

*Broaden and deepen your understanding
and experience of prayer by following these
examples from our spiritual ancestors.*

OVER 2.5 MILLION SOLD

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NAVPRESS 

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Psalms

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals.

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book.
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides.
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need so that your only other reference is the Bible.
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole.
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take sixty to ninety minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited, you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: (a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and (b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of the Psalms. The key to interpretation is context (What is the whole passage or book *about?*), and the key to context is purpose (What is the author's *aim* for the whole work?). You will lay the foundation for your study of the Psalms by asking yourself, *Why did the author (and God) write the book? What was the goal? What is the book about?*

In lessons 1 through 10, you will analyze successive passages of the Psalms in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning.

Kinds of Questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clear-cut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don't let your study become an exercise in knowledge alone. Treat the passages as God's Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study Aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 95. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide.

Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. The King James Version (KJV) is also used.

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as *The Living Bible* is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it to yourself, exploring its meaning; then return to your passage as often as you can during your day for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other-sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen’s studies. Both new and experienced Bible students will benefit from the guide.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly, or omit some questions in a lesson if discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything they didn’t understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called “For the group.” These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each “For the group” at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of

the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (pre-formed shower wallboard works well) so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Page 98 lists some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is a book of prayer, every conceivable type of prayer: prayers of worship and praise, confession and acknowledgment, intercession and supplication, protection and deliverance, vindication and forgiveness, renewal and restoration, reward and thanksgiving. There are prayer psalms offered up in times of spiritual darkness and challenge, when God appears to be silent or when all that is left to do is wait on Him. Many prayers in the Psalms look back on God's deliverance and give hope and confidence in God's sovereignty for everything that awaits us.

The prayers of the Psalms are prayers of deep emotion and feeling. The psalmists hold very little back in regard to their joy, sadness, fear, shame, and, in many cases, seemingly inconsolable rage. No matter. The God of heaven awaits on His throne, pleased to receive the prayers of His saints, especially prayers originating from the depths of their souls:

The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand. (Revelation 8:4)

The purpose of this study is to broaden and deepen our understanding and experience of prayer by looking at the prayers of our spiritual ancestors in the Psalms: David, Moses, Asaph, and others. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus showed us *how* to pray. The prayers of the psalmists give us a myriad of examples of what Jesus meant, examples God expects us to follow and emulate:

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. (Hebrews 13:7)

If there's anything we can learn about prayer from the Psalms, it's that God simply wants us to acknowledge what He already knows to be true—about our circumstances, our hopes, our desires—and, most of all, how we *feel* about all of those things.

Authorship of the Psalms

Seventy-three (less than half) of the psalms are attributed to David, with thirteen of those clearly identified with some period or event in David's life (3, 7, 18, 34, 51–52, 54, 56–57, 59–60, 63, and 142). Others include Jeduthan, the Sons of Korah, Asaph, Heman and Ethan the Ezrahites, Moses, and Solomon.

Many of the psalms are not attributed to specific authors but rather have general titles, such as “director of music” (which would indicate the psalm was to be used in temple worship). Or they are given musical or liturgical instructions, such as “for flutes,” “according to sheminith,” or “according to gittith” (indicating the type of instruments that should be used).

Literary Tools

Most of the psalms are poetic prayers that tap into a variety of literary “tools” in order to bring life and vibrancy to the psalmists’ requests of God. Many of these devices are not obvious to us because they are tied to the original Hebrew in which the psalms were written. For example, some of the psalms are acrostics, in that each line starts with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet (4, 25, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145). Other psalms make use of alliteration and assonance, in which certain sounds at the beginning or the middle of the words are repeated.

Other non-Hebrew-dependent literary devices include: *apostrophe*, in which certain aspects of nature are addressed as if they were persons (see Psalm 68:15-16); *hyperbole*, used to exaggerate a concept in the mind of the reader in order to call attention to its underlying core truth (see Psalm 40:12); and *inclusion*, a form of repetition in which the psalmist will begin and end a section of the psalm, or the entire psalm, with similar or contrasting statements in order to form verbal bookends for the prayer (see Psalm 70:1,5).¹

Literary “genres” in the Psalms include prayers of praise, lament, worship, wisdom, and hymns.

What do we do with the psalms of cursing?

The “psalms of cursing” are known as the imprecatory psalms. Here are excerpts from a few:

Destroy thou them, O God. (5:10, KJV)

May their path be dark and slippery. . . . May ruin overtake them by surprise. . . . May they fall into the pit, to their ruin. (35:6,8)

In your faithfulness destroy them. (54:5)

Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell. (55:15, KJV)

Consume them in wrath, consume them, that they may not be. (59:13, KJV)

Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. (69:24, KJV)

Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. (69:27, KJV)

Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee. (79:6, KJV)

Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more. (104:35, KJV)

The following psalms have some sort of imprecatory feature or appeal for vindication: 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 17, 23, 25, 28, 31, 35, 40, 41, 54, 56, 58, 59, 63, 68, 70, 71, 73, 74, 79, 83, 94, 97, 104, 109, 119, 120, 129, 137, 139, 140, 141, 143, and 149.

These expressions of rage and demands for justice are so prevalent and harshly worded that they cannot be easily ignored or dismissed. And they're not limited to the Psalms; we also see these types of prayers in the laments of Jeremiah and Habakkuk.

There are a few different ways that Christians have tried to come to terms with these types of prayers in the Psalms. Some have said that they are sinful expressions of inconsolable rage and that we should avoid these types of prayers at all costs. Others have said that David and the other psalmists are just exaggerating or that these prayers are simply describing what will *eventually* happen to these evildoers sometime in the eternal state. Others have argued that because these prayers were offered "under law," they are no longer relevant to those of us who are now "under grace." In light of Jesus' teaching about praying for our enemies, these arguments may seem compelling until we read this type of prayer in the book of Revelation, prayed by the *glorified* saints under the altar:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, "*How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?*" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been. (Revelation 6:9-11, emphasis added)

Are these saints just exaggerating? No, they really want God to act on their behalf. Are they sinning in their prayer? No, because they've been glorified. Can we say they're under law but not under grace? Certainly not, for the same reason.

So what do we, as believers, *do* with these prayers?

It's best to view the imprecatory psalms as we do the rest of the psalms: as deep, heartfelt expressions that we offer to the throne of heaven, confident that God will not only comfort us (as He did the martyred saints in Revelation 6) but also give us the confidence that He will have the final word

in all matters of injustice. Then we will be free to forgive our enemies and eventually be able to ask God to be merciful to them, even if they remain hard-hearted and remorseless.²

You will learn more about these prayers in lesson 5.

Can Prayer Really Make a Difference?

As you will discover in this study, the book of Psalms is a collection of prayers offered to us as examples to follow. But even so, some people struggle with the concept of prayer. If God determines everything, they reason, why bother? No one has answered this question better than the great statesman of the church C. S. Lewis:

Can we believe that God ever really modifies His action in response to the suggestions of man? For infinite wisdom does not need telling what is best, and infinite goodness needs no urging to do it. But neither does God need any of those things that are done by finite agents, whether living or inanimate. He could, if He chose, repair our bodies miraculously without food; or give us food without the aid of farmers, bakers, and butchers; or knowledge without the aid of learned men; or convert the heathen without missionaries. Instead, He allows soils and weather and animals and the muscles, minds, and wills of men to cooperate in the execution of His will. "God," says Pascal, "instituted prayer in order to lend to His creatures the dignity of causality." But it is not only prayer; whenever we act at all, He lends us that dignity. It is not really stranger, nor less strange, that my prayers should affect the course of events than that my other actions should do so.

C. S. Lewis, *The Efficacy of Prayer*

May the Lord richly bless your study of the Psalms as you and those in your small group learn to pray in a way that touches the heart of God.

1. Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991).
2. Doug Schmidt, *The Prayer of Revenge: Forgiveness in the Face of Injustice* (Colorado Springs, CO: Cook, 2003).

Lesson One

PRAYERS OF WORSHIP AND PRAISE

Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name. (Psalm 29:1-2)

Lesson Objective: That participants will understand how worship and praise is foundational to effective and satisfying times of prayer.

Desired Action: That participants would approach times of prayer with an attitude of reverence and awe for God.

Psalms for This Lesson: 19, 24, 29, 33, 34, 47, 48, 65, 66, 67, 76, 89, 92, 93, 96, 97, 98, 100, 104, 108, 117, 122, 134, 147, 148, 149, 150

Psalms are typically associated with praise and worship. Many contemporary praise choruses are simply the psalms set to modern music. In fact, this reflects the original purpose of many of the psalms: to be sung in order to prepare people's hearts for worship in the temple. In this sense, they can also prepare our hearts for prayer, for it is only in the context of worship that prayers of confession, intercession, and thanksgiving have any meaning at all. When we focus on the power, greatness, and majesty of God, everything else is placed in its proper perspective.

For Thought and Discussion: What effect has nature had on your perception of God? Are you moved by a beautiful sunset or a majestic animal in the wild? Does your view of God change when nature becomes violent and seemingly out of control? What is the weather like right now? Of which part of God's character does today's climate remind you?

Psalm 19:1-6

For the director of music. A psalm of David.

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.
In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun.
It is like a bridegroom coming out of his
chamber,
like a champion rejoicing to run his course.
It rises at one end of the heavens
and makes its circuit to the other;
nothing is deprived of its warmth.

1. *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands (19:1).* What are some ways that nature provokes you to worship the Creator? What are some of your favorite outdoor places to pray?

2. *They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. (19:3-4).* Imagine people in different countries seeing the same beautiful night sky and being moved to prayer in different languages. What is it about praying with brothers and sisters around the world that is so exciting even though we might not speak the same language?

3. Why should prayer be at the heart of worship? Is it possible to worship without prayer? Explain.

Pavilion. The bridegroom’s pavilion would have been a covered place, such as a booth or small tent, where the groom would have been kept in waiting for the bride. The purpose was to make his entrance into the wedding that much more spectacular.

Psalm 19:7-8

The law of the LORD is perfect,
refreshing the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right,
giving joy to the heart.
The commands of the LORD are radiant,
giving light to the eyes.

4. *The law of the LORD is perfect (19:7).* What role should the Bible play in our worship? How is studying the Bible in depth different from using the Scriptures during a time of worship?

Optional

Application: Take a hike along a nature trail. Use the things you see along the path as prompts for your prayers. If you see a sparrow, thank God for His provision. If you see a tree along a stream, thank God for His Living Water that replenishes your soul. If you swat a mosquito, thank God for the patience to endure and forgive difficult people. Praise God for the warmth of the sun or the coolness of the breeze.

For Further Study:

Do a quick online study of astronomy. What do the exact and consistent orbits of the galaxies tell us about the levels and depths of God’s intelligence and power as the Creator of the literal universe?

For Thought and Discussion:

How has your view of the Bible changed over the years? Why is it important to view it as the authoritative Word of God rather than simply another famous book?

Optional

Application: Write a letter to your pastor, thanking him or her for faithfully proclaiming the Word of God every week so that your soul is fed.

For Further

Study: Look up *general revelation* in a theological dictionary. How does this differ from *special revelation*? Do you think there's enough "general revelation" out there so that every person can be held accountable by God even if he or she has never been exposed to "special revelation"? Explain.

5. *Refreshing the soul . . . making wise the simple . . . giving joy to the heart . . . giving light to the eyes (19:7-8).* What have the practical manifestations of these benefits from God's Word looked like in your life?

6. How does the faithful preaching of God's Word affect how you pray or what you pray about?

Laws, statutes, precepts, and commands. In contrast to the general revelation of God in nature, the special revelation of God through His Word is focused and far less prone to subjective interpretation. Whereas the general revelation of God points to His intelligence and existence, the specific revelation of God tells us how He wants us to live.

Psalm 19:9-11

The fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever.
The decrees of the LORD are firm,
and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold,
than much pure gold;
they are sweeter than honey,
than honey from the honeycomb.
By them your servant is warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

7. *The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever (19:9).* How do we express our “fear of God” in prayer? Is this more than reverence? Explain.

8. *By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward (19:11).* What does God’s Word command of us in regard to prayer? What are the consequences of ignoring these commands? What are the great benefits of faithful and consistent prayer?

9. Who were some of the great pray-ers in the Bible whose examples we can follow?

For Thought and Discussion: Which motivates you more: the fear of loss or the anticipation of reward? How do you see both of these motivations at work in your life?

Optional Application: List some of the great ways your life has benefited because you respect what the Word of God says and you’ve obeyed it. How would your life be different if you didn’t take the Bible seriously?

For Further Study: How often is the prospect of reward mentioned in the Bible? Is it mentioned enough for us to think that it’s okay for the Christian to be motivated by reward? What is the better motivator: the anticipation of reward or the fear of loss?

Honey from the honeycomb. The *tsuph* was made up of the cells of a honeycomb that were filled with honey; although the cells were not edible, you could put the *tsuph* in your mouth as a utensil for the honey. These types of combs occurred naturally, usually in forested areas, and were considered a delicacy for the weary traveler.

For Thought and Discussion: Why is it important to realize that God is never “contributing to the problem” when it comes to aspects of our relationship with Him that need work?

Psalm 19:12-14

But who can discern their own errors?
Forgive my hidden faults.
Keep your servant also from willful sins;
may they not rule over me.
Then will I be blameless,
innocent of great transgression.

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of
my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

10. *Keep your servant also from willful sins (19:13).* What is the difference between willful sin and sin done in ignorance? How should we confess them differently in prayer?

11. *May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight (19:14).* What is it about our thoughts and prayers during worship that delights the heart of God?

12. Why is a clean heart and conscience necessary for effective worship?

Rule over me. The compelling, addictive power of sin was no less intense during the time of David than it is today. Whether our sin is an addiction to a substance or destructive behavior, the psalmist reminds us that only the power of God can set us free from the entanglement of our sin

For the group

Warm-up. Ask your group members about some of their expectations for this particular study. Is there anything in particular they want to learn about prayer? Do they simply want to become more consistent in their prayer life? Do they have questions about whether prayer really makes a difference? Do they understand that most of the psalms are prayers themselves and that there is much we can learn from them? Be sure to write down their responses and find the part in the study where those questions will be addressed.

Questions. Psalm 19 is representative of a host of psalms that focus on the worship and praise of God. While the questions in this lesson are derived from Psalm 19, they illustrate the biblical principles that are part of any expression of worship to God. This psalm focuses on the value of the Word in worship and why God's revelation is such an intricate part of the biblical experience of praise. Some of the questions will help you better understand the views of the Bible held by your group. Those members who do not see the Bible as a reliable and authoritative source of God's truth are going to have a hard time with the rest of the study. If they need special attention in this area, be sure they get it—either through you, a pastor, or perhaps a special class at church.

Prayer. Set the tone for the entire study by offering nothing but expressions of praise and worship of God during the closing time of prayer. Everything else you're going to study is based on this. So much of prayer involves acknowledging different attributes of

Optional Application:

Describe a possible ongoing grievance between yourself and a friend or family member and assign "percentages" of blame to each person. How is the other person contributing to the problem? How much are you? What can you do this week to take care of your percentage?

For Further Study:

Study the concept of "redeemer" in the book of Ruth. How does the example of Boaz help us understand God as Redeemer?

God. If we focus on these attributes during times of worship, our times spent in the types of prayer you'll study in the coming weeks will be far richer and more colorful.