



LESSON:  
**THE PSALMS**

**PROBLEM STATEMENT**

I don't know what purpose the Psalms serve.

**TAKEAWAY**

The Psalms function like an early hymnal that helps us weep when we suffer and laugh when we celebrate, and that teaches us about the lifelong journey of faith.

**BIBLE PASSAGES**

Psalm 1  
Psalm 150  
Psalm 13  
Psalm 100

**KEY VERSE****Psalm 1:2**

*“But their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.”*

**SUPPLIES NEEDED**

- Handbooks
- Bibles
- DVD
- Markers or pencils
- Butcher paper
- Scissors
- Tape

**Background Information**

The book of Psalms contains 150 prayers and songs and poems (most of them function as all three), but it is so much more than the shape of its content. The Psalms are a collection of different prayers, each evoking different emotions and experiences of what it means to be human. Some express outrageous joy and praise to the God who created and gives us life. Some give shape to ways of being that instruct and form us as people of faith. Some emerge from the darkness of life, honestly grappling with what it means to live faithfully when suffering and sorrow are all around. Some are situational, written down to be used during festivals that marked important moments in the story of God's people. Some appear to be intimately personal, others overwhelmingly communal. Reading the Psalms, we hear the account of the raw humanity of God's people, and the enduring faithfulness of God to this people in their raw humanity. The Psalms take prayer and thrust it right into the middle of our lives.

Many of the psalms are attributed to King David (of David and Goliath fame), but it's likely David only wrote some of those, while others were simply attributed to him because of his fame and stature in Israelite history. Many of the psalms were written for (or out of) particular historical situations. For example, the Psalms of Ascent were written to accompany the community as they made their way to Jerusalem for Passover. Many were written during periods of captivity and exile as a way of offering lament and prayers for restoration. In this way, reading the Psalms is much like listening to the soundtrack of the community's life—they allow us to discern the emotional pulse of the community at various times.

In doing so they give us language for our own emotions and experiences as the people of God. They provide us with a template for incorporating our feelings into our faith and our relationship with God. The book of Psalms gives us words to use in our prayer lives and expands our understanding of prayer: the Psalms both model and evoke in us artistic, creative, and emotionally honest prayers.

In addition to giving us language and models for prayer, the Psalms continue to be used as liturgy in our personal and communal worship. Reading or singing the Psalms (even when the emotions expressed are not our own) helps shape our identity as people of faith—connecting us with those who have gone before us as well as enabling us to bring the whole of who we are before God.

**What Students Need to Know . . .**

- The Psalms are the prayer book or hymnal of the Bible. While we can sometimes discern the historical setting in which a psalm was written, their function is not to tell stories but to give voice to the prayers and songs of individuals and communities.
- The book of Psalms is a resource for our own individual and communal prayer lives. With 150 psalms to choose from, it's almost always possible to find a psalm that expresses our current emotion or mood. Praying the Psalms is one way we can give voice to feelings and emotions that might otherwise feel too big for words or prayer.
- For students who struggle with prayer, the Psalms can provide templates for writing their own. Upset? Happy? Sad? There are time-tested words that can be co-opted anytime.
- Reciting psalms in worship or in prayer helps form us into faithful people. It connects us with those who have gone before us as well as with those in our midst who might be experiencing the feelings expressed in a given psalm.
- The Psalms help us practice bringing our whole selves before God in prayer. They force us to be vulnerable in our joy and our pain—there's not a lot of hidden emotion in these poems and prayers.

## Where They Might Struggle . . .

- We are not always comfortable with psalms (or prayers) that express a desire for God to hurt other people. It's okay to find psalms that use violent language and express violent desires off-putting. Help student realize that the Psalms are expressions of feelings—words, not actions. The Psalms are not historical records, nor guides for how to behave; rather, they are attempts to integrate the whole of life with the life of faith, to bring all of who we are into our relationships with God.
- Because the Psalms might evoke strong personal feelings in us, it's important to let students keep some of their own reactions private. As you talk through the questions in this guide, consider allowing students to write their responses in their handbooks before asking if anyone wants to share out loud.
- Be attuned to any students who might resonate (too) strongly with the Psalms of Lament and make a point of checking in with them privately about their feelings and experiences. Early teenage years are often when feelings of hopelessness and suicide begin to appear, so it's important to watch for signs of those feelings and get students any help they might need.
- Many students will appreciate the psalms that encourage us to make a joyful noise to the Lord. If worship in your church tends to be quiet and serious, these psalms can help us remember that we can worship with dancing, music, and raucous noise as well.

## About the Video . . .

When most of us think of Christian music, it brings to mind Jesus-is-my-boyfriend worship songs or happy-clappy praise music. But many of the original songs of the church—the Psalms—were downright depressing. The video pushes back at the assumption that music, especially music for people of faith, has to be upbeat and celebratory. Instead, the Psalms remind us that songs can help us express the full range of human emotion—from the happy to the sappy all the way to the crappy—in a way that little else can.

## Lesson Notes . . .

### Icebreaker

#### NAME THAT SONG

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1. Split your group into two (boys/girls, randomly, older/younger, etc.).
2. Call out a word that is commonly found in songs (*love, road, river, girl*, etc.).
3. The first team to sing a song in unison that includes that word wins a point.
4. Play for as long as you'd like, or until one team has seven points.
5. As a bonus round, use words found in the Psalms and see if students can come up with songs.

### Into the Story

Turn to Psalm 1 and have a volunteer read it aloud. Discuss:

- God's law refers to the whole of the Bible. What are some of the most important teachings we learn in the Bible? How might following God's law make someone prosper?
- Why does the psalmist compare those who follow God's laws with trees planted by streams of water? What do they have in common?
- Can you think of any laws in our society that help people live happily?
- The psalm talks about those who are happy versus those who are wicked. How are those opposites? Is it possible that both those types of people live in each of us? When have you struggled between those two options?

Turn to Psalm 150 and have a volunteer read it aloud. Discuss:

- Where is God's sanctuary?
- What modern-day instruments would you use to praise God?

Turn to Psalm 13 and have a volunteer read it aloud. Discuss:

- Why do you think such a sad psalm is included in the Bible?
- Why does the psalm end with the psalmist saying he will sing to the Lord?

### Questions to Get the Conversation Going

- If you had a soundtrack for your life, what would be the first song?
- Can a collection of ancient poetry really explain modern emotions?
- What is the easiest emotion to express? What's the most difficult?

For as long as people have been alive, we have used poetry and music to express our deepest feelings and to connect our experiences with those of others. The Psalms, a book of songs and poetry from ancient Israel, is like the Bible's playlist for life, giving us a soundtrack for the full range of human emotion, from deep sorrow to incredible joy.

When was the last time you and a bunch of friends gathered around a piano to sing your favorite song? Wait, never? Weird. Why is it sometimes awkward to sing in front of other people?

Can you and your parents recite the lyrics to the same song? Can you recite the lyrics to a song written before you were born?

**The Psalms**  
*Our spiritual songbook*

Just as people have been alive, we have used poetry and music to express our deepest feelings and to connect our experiences with those of others. The Psalms, a book of songs and poetry from ancient Israel, is like the Bible's playlist for life, giving us a soundtrack for the full range of human emotion, from deep sorrow to incredible joy.

**Psalm 1:2**  
"But their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."

**THE ESSENTIAL SONGBOOK**

**The Psalms**

**150 GREATEST HITS!**

**A FAVORITE WITH TEENS!!!**

Come up with two song titles you'd include in a book of songs about God, one about God's power or love and another about the difficulties of life. Write your titles on the cover of the songbook.

Guaranteed to leave you wanting more! Loved by every generation!  
You've never heard the lyre, harp, and dulcimer like this!

**Choose That Song!**  
What makes you connect with a song?  
(Circle all that apply)

**Psalm-Off**  
How much of this psalm do you know by heart? As a group, start reciting it. See who gets the furthest. Bonus points if you know which psalm it is!

**"THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD..."**

Some of the psalms are about how great God is. Others are about how awful life is. How am I supposed to make up my mind about God when this part of the Bible can't do it either?

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The emotions in the song \_\_\_\_\_ It fits a situation in my life \_\_\_\_\_  
Easy to dance to \_\_\_\_\_

Artist \_\_\_\_\_ Beat \_\_\_\_\_ Lyrics \_\_\_\_\_ My mood \_\_\_\_\_

Not only is the book of Psalms old, it's poetic and sometimes hard to understand. It doesn't help that every psalm seems to tell us something different about God. Why pay attention to it?

Have a student read the pivot statement located at the bottom of the page, and gauge the group's thoughts on where the lesson might go. Remember: You want tension! Allow your students to live with the questions posed on the first page until after the video has played and you begin exploring the infographic.



Like a great song, the Psalms represent our emotions, both high and low. But no ordinary music can give us such an intimate picture of God and how God relates to us. In this infographic, follow the instruments as you introduce your students to the many ways the Psalms express what it means to live our lives with God in every situation.

What kinds of songs do you listen to when you're happy? How have your choices changed over the years?

Based on your experience with God, what other types of psalms could there be? Jealousy? Fear? Exhaustion? Write your ideas on the neck of the guitar.

**Mood Music**  
The book of Psalms connects us to people before us, reminding us that no matter how hard or great life gets, God is always there.

**PRAISE**  
Have you ever seen something so beautiful you couldn't even find the words to talk about it? It's like all of creation comes alive with harps and trumpets and angel choirs! Psalms of praise put words to our moments of awe and wonder at God's goodness, love, and power no matter where we find them (example: Psalm 8).  
Somewhere on this page, sketch a picture of something God created that amazes you.

**MISCELLANEOUS**  
Like a huge pipe organ that has bright, twinkling, high tones alongside deep, dark, low tones, the book of Psalms covers all of life's ups and downs. Some of these poems were written for special occasions like the arrival of a king (Psalm 20) or a specific religious celebration (Psalm 68). Others were written to pass on wisdom (Psalm 73) or to encourage the people to trust God even in the midst of their struggles (Psalm 91).  
Write a short haiku poem about a special event you've been a part of in the last six months. Remember, in a haiku, the first line has five syllables, the second line has seven, and the third line has five. Go!

**THERE ARE 150 PSALMS**  
and most of them fit into one of these four categories. Take a look and see if you can start to see the differences in the 'lyrics' to these songs.

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What events in our society today could inspire a psalm? What are some ways your family or faith community commemorates meaningful events in your lives together?



### Want More?

- There are a lot of psalms—so many that it can be hard to know where to begin, let alone which ones to turn to when you're looking for a psalm of praise or psalm of lament. As a group, or on your own, spend some time reading the Psalms. Place sticky notes in your own Bible to mark those that particularly resonate with you so you can find them later.
- As a group, create a soundtrack that represents your time together thus far. What songs would you include? Why?
- Gather up some Bibles from your sanctuary and mark some of the praise or thanksgiving psalms with sticky notes. Add a greeting from your group, then return the Bibles to their places in the sanctuary. Boom! Psalm bombed!
- Find a psalm of comfort and copy it onto a notecard to send to a homebound or sick congregation member. Include a brief note to let them know the group is thinking of them and hoping they find peace and comfort.

Psalms of lament often end with a statement of hope or trust in God. What are some ways you express feelings of sorrow or hopelessness? How do you let people know you still have hope or trust even in your pain?

**LAMENT**  
Sometimes life feels like a constant struggle, and God seems far away. The psalms of lament felt that way too. They wrote what are called "psalms of lament," which echo our longing to see God. When we are gripped by doubt, remorse, and loss, these psalms are like a familiar record we can play. They encourage us to find hope in the midst of our pain, reminding us that God is still speaking and acting in the world (example: Psalm 13).  
**Read Psalm 13. Choose one word or phrase that you think best expresses how you feel when life is hard. Write it on the record player.**

**THANKSGIVING**  
Like the psalms of praise, the thanksgiving psalms burst with excitement and a desire for the whole world to praise God. Tucked into these songs is a longing for all of God's people to come together to live out the kingdom of God. This is a song you want to share—to upload for everyone in the world to hear (example: Psalm 100!)  
**Choose someone in the group to thank for something they've done for you—it could be as simple as lending you a pencil that one time. Always being kind when you see them at school. When you're done, say a little prayer thanking God for this person.**

**Songwriters Hall of Fame**  
David (80)  
Soleman (2)  
Moses (1)  
sons of Korah (11)  
sons of Asaph (11)  
Ethan the Ezrahite (1)  
Anonymous (44)

**Psalms Phacts**  
• Psalms aren't the only songs in the Bible. The book of Lamentations is made up of songs of pain and suffering.  
• The longest psalm is 732 words (Psalm 119).  
• The first song in the Bible is sung by the Israelites, led by Moses and Miriam, in Exodus 15:1-21.  
• The psalms were written over thousands of years. They were likely collected sometime after the end of the Babylonian Captivity.

**Five in One**  
The 150 psalms aren't just one book of poems. There are actually five different sections to Psalms. No one really knows why, but one common belief is that the five sections reflect different periods in ancient Israel's history. Another belief is that they are a way to honor the five "books of Moses" (known as the Pentateuch) at the beginning of the Bible.

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If you had to divide your life up to this point into three to five sections or chapters, what would they be? What would you name each section? Which type of psalm would fit with each section?

Given that most of us are not songwriters or composers, what are some other tangible ways we can give thanks to God? Would you be comfortable doing one of those things in front of other people? Why or why not?

- Go outside and take turns finding parts of God's creation to praise God about. Go over the top as you shout or sing your praises out loud: For example, "Oh, wondrous tree! God, you outdid yourself when you created it!" See how many unique things you can find to praise God about, and see who can come up with the most creative or over-the-top praise.
- Choose a psalm of praise and write it on a large sheet of butcher paper. Decorate it and hang it on your pastor's door.
- Take a psalm and rewrite it in contemporary language. How would it sound as a rap song? A country song?

**LEADER TIP**

**Name That Genre!** If students are struggling to identify or name themes in the Psalms, have them note the tone of the psalm (happy, sad, confused, etc.) and any prominent or recurring images that the psalm uses. If you have a small group or are short on time, split up the list of psalms and share your thoughts as a large group.

Many students won't know anything about the book of Psalms. This is an opportunity to introduce them to the book's depth.

**LEADER TIP**

**Would You Sing 'Em?** If your group is small—or you only have a few artistic students—design one cover and allow students to work in the areas where they are most comfortable.

**Sing Along with the Psalms!**  
 We still have a need for the Psalms. They give us language to talk about the full range of human experience.

**Option 1: Name That Genre!**  
 Pick three of the psalms from the list below to see if you can tell what the psalmist is trying to say.

1. Read the psalm.
2. Write down the theme you see.
3. Come up with a title for the psalm, and label it with the genre you think fits it best: lament, praise, thanksgiving, or miscellaneous.

PSALM1  
 PSALM22  
 PSALM23  
 PSALM46  
 PSALM62  
 PSALM69  
 PSALM84  
 PSALM121  
 PSALM127  
 PSALM138



Share your thoughts in groups of three or four. Talk about why you might have picked different genres for the same psalm.

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**Option 2: Would You Sing 'Em?**  
 Supplies: butcher paper, scissors, tape, markers

1. Divide into groups of two or three.
2. Look at the first page of this lesson again. Now design a new cover for the "Psalms Songbook." Be sure to add three or four taglines so people will want to check out your songbook!
3. Share your cover with the full group and hang it up in the room.

1. Think      2. Share      3. Discuss

What kinds of psalms speak to you at this point in your life?



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How would your students describe the book of Psalms to their friends? How would they make it appealing? Of course, the Psalms are interesting and powerful on their own, but don't get hung up on that. This is about letting the students make that connection for themselves.

What kinds of psalms speak to you at this point in your life?

**Into the World**

How might the Psalms help you give voice to your emotions and bring them before God?