



A Journey in Psalms towards Easter

A resource for time with God

Written by Silvia Purdie for Cashmere Presbyterian Church,
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Introducing Psalms

I love the Psalms. They are such a mixed bag: poems that complain, songs that lift the roof with joy, formal prayers and some that make hardly any sense to us. The Psalms are full of word pictures, all sorts of images and metaphors, often piling in on top of each other. Even more, they are packed full of emotion: praise, anger, misery, joy, longing, gratitude, bitterness, fear, injustice, peace, confidence - you name it, it's there.

So what are they and who wrote them?

1. They are songs. Written to be sung, chanted, put to music.
2. Many are attributed to King David, 3,000 years ago. He was creative and musical, so I believe he did write several of them.
3. Some have a specific historical moment, e.g. Psalm 137 which is a cry of anguish after Jerusalem was destroyed in 586BC and the Israelites were taken hostage to Babylon.
4. Most are very personal, written in the 'first person' (i.e. "I", "me"), describing deeply personal experiences and feeling.
5. There are also several that are more public, obviously written for worship, telling history, collective hymns.

Reading Jesus in the Psalms

Jesus loved the Psalms. He knew them all off by heart (as did everyone else in his day) and often quoted them. When the early church tried to understand his death and resurrection, they turned to Psalms. Christians ever since have found Psalms a rich resource for prayer, and they have found Jesus in the Psalms. In my work with Psalms in my ['conversations.net.nz'](http://conversations.net.nz) website I have asked how Jesus might react to the Psalm, and made links between the Gospels and the Psalms. This is controversial, as many theologians feel we should respect the Psalms as purely Jewish; I encourage you to read other books and perspectives than mine.

I offer you this 'Journey in Psalms' and invite you to explore with me. May God bless you on the way. - *Silvia Purdie*

Practical Suggestions

This 'Journey in Psalms to Easter' is a series of 8 studies, each with a 'focus Psalm', which will also be the focus for our worship service that week. You are invited to set aside time during the week to read the Psalm and reflect on it in prayer and journaling. You might also like to read my companion poem online, and the other Psalms mentioned in the studies.

Lent is a marvelous opportunity to make more space for God than we usually do; listen, learn, and you will grow in faith.

Here are six practical things to do:

1) Get a book

as in, a blank book, a notebook, a journal. The studies ask questions, aimed at helping you make connections between your own life and the images and emotions in the Psalms. The process of responding in writing, with words or drawings, pushes us deeper into naming what is true for us, and hearing God's truth in a personal way.

2) Find time.

Every teacher on spiritual disciplines says 'set aside time'. Personally I don't have a strict routine, but many people find this helpful. I do think that solitude is essential, but you can be quiet with God in a cafe or at the beach, in bed or at the dining table. You do have time in your life - but you might have to turn off the TV, internet or radio!

3) Read different translations

Ancient Hebrew is very difficult to translate. Everyone who has a go brings their own style, and each translation of a Psalm brings out different aspects. My own opinion is that the Good News is the least useful translation for Psalms; if this is all you have at home buy yourself a new Bible. Download the Bible onto your phone. Use the *Bible Gateway* website to explore various versions.

4) Memorise bits

When we know scripture off by heart it continues to work in our hearts and minds even when we're not reading the Bible. Choose verses in the Psalm that resonate with you the most strongly; write them out, repeat them, test yourself until you know it off by heart.

5) Ask questions

We normally just skim over bits that don't make sense. For this series, stop and puzzle instead. Argue back at the Psalm. Notice when a Psalm jumps into a different voice or mood. Be stroppy, be curious.

6) Shhh!

Stop thinking, stop trying, stop even trying to pray, and just relax. Notice how you're feeling. Notice how your body is. Breathe slower and deeper. Let God's still small voice speak - it's obvious, it's what is true for you here and now.

Online resources:

Each Psalm used in this study has a companion reflection by Silvia on the *conversations.net.nz* website. There are also printed out copies of these available from the church office.

We will put various other resources for spiritual growth on our church website: www.cashmerechurch.org.nz

'Refresh' is a magazine published by Spiritual Growth Ministries, NZ. It has lots of lovely poems and prayers, on various themes.

www.sgm.org.nz/refresh-journal.html

Lynne Baab is writing on praying with Psalms: www.lynnebaab.com

'Pray as you go' gives you a lovely few minutes of scripture, music and prayer: www.pray-as-you-go.org

'Renovare' has many deeply insightful articles and talks on growing in faith: www.renovare.org/articles

Tear Fund daily devotions: www.tearfund.org.nz/living-lent

Quiet Day: Sat 8 April, 10am-3pm, Hornby Community Ministries

Lent 1: Sunday 5 March ... INTIMACY

Focus Psalm: 131

Psalm 131 is short and profoundly simple. It is a description of becoming still and quiet in the presence of God. Verses 1 & 2 are about my heart, my eyes, my soul, turning away from big issues and ideas and just resting in God. Verse 3 is a call to others to hope and trust in God, now and forever.

Word picture: The image is of a young child with his or her mother; "*weaned*", so not hungry for a breast-feed, not needy but full and content. Can you picture a young child, curled up in her mother's arms, perhaps half asleep, perhaps singing? Nothing exists for that child but the safety of being close to Mum.

Make space:

Can you imagine yourself so at peace, so relaxed, not bothered by anything at all?

Set aside some time, get comfortable, and read Psalm 131 slowly, and again, and again. Let any thoughts and worries drift away and keep coming back to the invitation of the Psalm.

Look up Silvia's version on the *conversations.net.nz* website.

How tired are you??

Read Psalm 38; "*My strength fails me*". Can you relate to this? Write down how you experience tiredness and pain.

Where do you feel safe? Read Psalm 91; "*you will find refuge*". Draw your prayer for greater trust and peace in your life and in the world.



Lent 2: Sunday 12 March, Harvest Festival ...

ACHIEVEMENT

Focus Psalm: 126

Psalm 126 is a shout of joy, a celebration of homecoming and restoration. Pain is transformed into happiness, people are reunited, tears and struggle become songs of gratitude.

Word pictures: The scene is of a group of men who had been kidnapped returning home, mothers rushed out to embrace sons they had almost given up for dead. There is weeping, tears of joy. The second image is of bringing in a harvest, everyone returning home carrying bundles of produce.

Make space

When in your life did you "*sow in tears*"? Write about your experience of being separated from someone you loved, or when you yourself felt held captive or exiled in some way. Looking back, how was God with you through that?

What do you consider to be something you have **achieved**? How has "*The Lord done great things!*" for you? Make a list through the week of what you are grateful for, and proud of, in your life.

What has success cost you? The central theme of Psalm 126 is of pain becoming joy, weeping bearing fruit in harvest. What is God working on at the moment, or into the future? Are we willing to "*go out weeping*" if that is required?

Other Psalms to read:

Psalm 24

Psalm 124

Psalm 67



Lent 3: Sunday 19 March ... POWER

Focus Psalm: 2

Psalm 2 is a drama! It sets a scene of a showdown; the rulers of earth are lined up against the Lord God and his "Anointed one". They plot to overthrow God, and in reply God laughs at their rebellion. Then at verse 7 the action changes to a close-up, a conversation between the Lord and his Son, in which the Lord bestows power onto his anointed King. The last 3 verses are the voice of someone crying out to the people and rulers of earth, calling them again to serve and trust in God.

The central question in Psalm 2 is 'who is in charge?' Where does real power lie in our world? Who has ultimate authority in our lives? There is a very modern ring to the leaders in our world wanting freedom and autonomy. Who would choose, these days, to **serve** in fear and trembling??

In my reflection on Psalm 2 I place the drama into the temptation of Jesus by satan. In the wilderness, Jesus chose the way of humble service and rejected all the power and control offered to him. The key is that Jesus knew himself fully to be Son, and out of his knowledge of the Father he gave his life. So our obedience to Jesus as Lord is not out of fear of his wrath and vengeance, but as we share in the love of the Father for the Son and Son for Father.

How about you?

- How do you understand the Lordship and Kingship of God?
 - If God is 'omnipotent', all-powerful, what kind of power is it?
 - Write a 'deal' between you and God: what aspects of your life does he have authority over, and what do you control?
- ... what if you ripped it up and let Jesus be fully in charge??

Also read:

Psalm 82, God's longing for justice

Psalm 94

Lent 4: Sunday 26 March ... HELP!

Focus Psalm: 121

Psalm 121 is a favourite of many. It is a powerful statement of God's protection. The word picture in verse 1 of a rescuing saviour rushing down from the hills when we are in dire trouble was dramatically illustrated in The Lord of the Rings when Gandalf charges down, with his army, with the first light of dawn, to save the battle for Helm's Deep.

In my reflection on Psalm 121 (on the conversations.net.nz website) I argue back at the idea that God protects us from all harm. It sounds to me like 'Helicopter parenting', where parents 'hover' around their kids making sure they never hurt themselves. Does God really run round after us with an umbrella stopping us getting sunburned?

A life of faith, according to Jesus, will get us hurt and abused; it is certainly no guarantee of a 'harm-free' life! How have you been hurt in your life? When have you cried out to God 'If you're there, help me!'? Have you felt abandoned, or protected?

However, there is deep truth to the claim that our God *'watches over us'*, keeping us safe. The question is, what kind of safety? For me, God provides an inner security that comes from knowing I am held in love. Jesus describes this in John 14:27: *"My peace I give you ... do not be afraid"*. This enables brave people of faith to step into harm's way, even to their own death, like Steve Askin, the helicopter pilot killed in the fires.

Write your own version of Psalm 121, expressing what is true for you about how God gives you help, safety and peace, through all that life brings.

Related Psalms: Psalm 59

Psalm 62

Lent 5: Sunday 2 April ... OWNING UP

Focus Psalm: 51

Psalm 51 is the Bible's great prayer of confession; very appropriate for Lent. The Bible tags it to David's sense of guilt after he is confronted with his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband.

Word pictures: 1) getting washed. Being scrubbed '*whiter than snow*', but on the inside, our hearts. Try describing in detail how God might 'wash' you? What would this feel like?

2) '*blot out*' our sins. This image is of a ledger book recording all our wrong-doings, and God taking 'white-out' to it. Or, in modern terms, God deleting our criminal record from the hard drive! What have you said or done that you'd like to be deleted?

Psalms tend to blame others; like Psalm 9, which complains about "*the wicked man*". But what if we discover we are holding a mirror, and glimpse wickedness in ourselves? My version of Psalm 9 says "*Freedom only comes as we stand under judgment.*" Jesus liked to undermine people's confidence that they were righteous, with stories such as Lazarus and Dives (Luke 16:19-31); he called all to repent.

Although our sinful actions hurt other people the primary offence is against God, and we need to be put right with him. Psalm 51 places the responsibility firmly on us, to offer up to God our very selves, heart and soul, as 'broken'. We never like feeling broken, but the moments when we come to the end of ourselves, there Christ meets us.

Psalm 51 leads through brokenness to joy. "*Open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise!*"

Question: What do you think of verse 5, the old theological idea of 'original sin'. Are we born bad?

Lent 6: Palm Sunday, 9 April ... BETRAYAL

Focus Psalm: 149

Psalm 149 is very much a 'game of two halves'. The first is all joy, song and dance. Then in the midst of praise, half way through verse 6, comes violence, a sword, lust for revenge. It is disorientating. The harshness of the shift echoes the events of Palm Sunday, as the crowd cries 'Hosanna!' in the morning and 'Crucify him!' in the afternoon.

Sadly we are all too familiar with this abrupt change in the mood of the mob. Twitter and the 'fake news' media drag the whole world up into adulation and crash down into hatred. No public figures are immune. Opinion rules. Truth and integrity are the price we pay.

Jesus walked willingly the path into Jerusalem, knowing the fickle swings of his people and the forces of death before him. He walked directly into path of the '*double edged sword*'. The vengeance his people cried for was executed on him. The punishment we deserved, he swallowed.

Read Revelation 1:12-16. In John's vision Jesus appears, and pulls from his mouth the double-edged sword. Death has been swallowed by life (1 Corinthians 15:54-57)!

Imagine yourself into the events of Palm Sunday. Write a story of a person caught up in it. What would make someone cry "*Crucify him!*"?

How do you respond personally to these themes of hope betrayed, and the clash of praise and violence?

How does the death and resurrection of Jesus transform us?

Also read: Psalm 64



Good Friday, 14 April ... ABANDONED

Focus Psalm: 22

"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me??"

In Matthew and Mark's accounts of the crucifixion, Jesus cries out these heart-wrenching words (Mark 15:34, Matt 27:46). In John's account, the last words Jesus cries are *"It is finished!"* (John 19:30), which echo the final words of Psalm 22. In the extremity of pain Jesus cries out not in swearwords or cursing, but in Psalm. So any understanding we might have of Jesus's death on the cross had better get to grips with Psalm 22, if it was that important to Jesus himself.

Psalm 22 is another 'game of two halves'. The first part is a cry of utter agony, physical and emotional *"groaning"*.

Physically, the Psalm puts words to the experience of terrible illness. What can you relate to? Write your own description of being in pain.

Emotionally, the pain is of terrible loneliness. All his people have rejected him. Some people are viciously attacking him. Even God has abandoned him. When in your life were you cut off? How might you express the loneliness you feel in your life now?

For Jesus, this was the first time in his whole life that he felt cut off from God. If we believe that Jesus was with God from the very beginning, this moment of abandonment cut right to the heart of the universe. The Trinity was split. I wonder, how did God feel?

Psalm 22 hinges at verse 19 with a *"but"*. And in a sense Jesus was quoting the whole Psalm from the cross. Incredibly, life bursts up, unlimited life, with praise and awe and worship. Draw a picture expressing your longing for our world.

It ends with an ending. *"He has done it"*; God's action, God's initiative. It is fulfilled, once for all (Romans 6:10).

Easter Sunday, 16 April ... VICTORY

Focus Psalm: 18

Of all the Psalms, 18 is most dramatically a 'double vision'. It rings with the personality of young David, full of brash self-confidence after he won his first big battle. It is also, for Christians, very much a Psalm of Jesus, a Psalm of resurrection. Can you hear through it both the victory song of the young warrior AND the voice of the risen Christ echoing through all time and space?

The fascinating things about Psalm 18, to me, are:

a) the opening line. This is the only place in the Bible where we find the words *"I love you Lord"*. Wow. What a start! Write this in your diary, as a screen saver, as a post-it on your mirror ...

b) the language and imagery is as vivid and dramatic as any ever written, to describe how God saves. It is all about the action of God to rescue. On a page jot down all that God does in Psalm 18, from the earth-shattering v7, to the lamp-lighting v28. If it was a movie, what special effects would you need?? (maybe a dragon even!) How might this be a description of God's power in raising Christ from the dead?

c) God's salvation is linked with the Psalmist's righteousness: *"I was blameless before him"*. But I'm not blameless, none of us are, let alone David. Only Jesus can say this. This Easter Day, you are invited to enter into Christ's righteousness, won for us by what Christ has done for us (Romans 3). What if you fully knew you were forgiven? What if Christ was truly alive in you every day?!

d) The last verse is a prophetic 'zip line' thrown between David and his descendent, 1,000 years into the future, a prophecy of victory of the 'anointed one', the Messiah. How is this true in our time?

As you complete this study series, what verses, questions and insights were significant for you?

What would you like to continue to explore this year?