

**GOOD WORD Schedule**  
**“The Book of Psalms”**  
**January, February, March 2024**

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## Introduction

The book of Psalms could be described as the most eclectic and diverse collection found in the Bible, and this collection has served as a centerpiece in individual and collective worship for thousands of years. The poems and prayers and songs gathered in this scroll commemorate moments of despair and moments of elation, times of national glory and national collapse, tensions between imagined futures and the reality in front of the composers. And through it all, the reader is invited to open themselves to see God's presence in all the twists and turns of life, to name confusion and pain and yet never accept these states as the end of the story.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections, the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. The first book in the Writings section is the book of Psalms, a magnificent collection of 150 poems that have formed the bedrock of communal and personal worship for millennia.

I come to my study of the Psalms as a Hebrew Bible scholar, a musician, and an outdoors enthusiast. As an acknowledgement of how our perspectives and experiences impact our reading of scripture, I want to outline here the main interpretive lenses through which I view the Psalms. And as you embark on your study of the Psalms this quarter, I invite you to take stock of your training, background, experiences, and interests and reflect on what these contribute to your reading of these ancient prayers and songs.

### *The Psalms as Cultural Artifacts of Awe*

Awe is a fundamental part of human experience. For many years now I have thought of the poems and stories collected together in the Bible as memorials to people's encounters with something larger than themselves—encounters that were so significant that they were told to others, written down, and preserved through the generations. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "To be spiritual is to be amazed." William Brown argues that wonder is a productive lens through which to read and engage with the biblical literature. This is his working definition of wonder: "an emotion born of awe that engenders a perpetually attentive, reverently receptive orientation toward the Other by awakening both emotional and cognitive resources for contemplation and conduct" (*Wisdom's Wonder*, p. 24). In a world where writing materials were scarce and time and resources for transcribing poetry were available primarily to the elite, the process of composing, editing, compiling, and passing on the beautiful collection of prayers we find in the Psalms would have been a truly monumental task. Songs and prayers would have been composed and passed from person to person, generation to generation primarily orally. And I would argue that the experience of awe, amazement, awareness of or encounter with transcendence or mystery—this is what compelled people to write and preserve these poems. Dacher Keltner, who researches wonder and awe at the Greater Good Science Center, talks about "cultural artifacts of awe" a phrase I find to be a fitting description for the psalms (*Awe*, 2023). And why should we read these texts with wonder, and carry on this legacy of memorializing moments of awe? "Reading the Bible with wonder inspires passion," William Brown writes, "passion for God, passion for community, passion for life and for all that makes life whole and good" (*Sacred Sense*, p. 13).

### *The Psalms as Apprenticeship in Prayer*

We find in the Psalms examples of the full range of human experience and emotion. And a remarkable assertion is implied throughout the collection—that in the midst of joy and betrayal, defeat and jubilant celebration, sorrow and consolation, God is present. And in contrast to messages of "keep it positive here!" that we may encounter in society or in religious communities, the Psalms

assert again and again that there is no better place to express the full intensity of painful emotions than in direct dialogue with the Creator. As Dragoslava Santrac, author of the adult bible study guide, asserts, “The Psalms bear witness to a spiritual journey that is common to many of God’s children” (Introduction). One of the books I have found to be a helpful companion for the journey of learning to pray the psalms is Eugene Peterson’s book *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*. Peterson clarifies what he means by “tools” when he notes, “Prayers are tools, but with this clarification: Prayers are not tools for doing or getting, but for being and becoming.” The prayers collected in the book(s) of Psalms provide a way for us to connect with other worshippers around the world and remember our relation to the many generations who have come before us. And these poems provide space for us to show up with our full humanity and engage in the life-long process of becoming all that God created us to be.

### *The Psalms as a Fun and Accessible Way to Learn About Hebrew Poetry*

Learning about ancient Hebrew literary devices and poetic structures can be dry and boring, as my students used to point out to me years ago when I started Hebrew Bible courses by asking them to read textbook chapters cataloguing the technicalities of Hebrew poetry. What I have since found is that encountering the Psalms teaches us, and imagining the embodied experience of people through the years who have prayed these same poems increases our understanding of Hebrew poetry and also reinforces our connections with those who have come before us. Imagine joining your voice with a great throng of others calling out the response in Psalm 136. The worship leaders would call out a statement about God and the people’s history with God, and then a great chorus would cry out “His covenant love endures forever!” Recite Psalms 42 and 43 and ask yourself how a refrain functions. When we venture out with tough questions, express vulnerable longings, and request God’s intervention, in what ways might returning to the same chorus again and again offer safety, emphasis, or solidarity? Imagine being a writer or reciter of poetry like the acrostics found in Psalms 25 and 34. What would having each verse start with the next letter of the alphabet do for you? Would it assist in memorization? Allow a sense of wholeness or completeness in the midst of exploring the uncertainty and chaos of human life? Renew your connection to your national and religious identity as the creative process of composition was guided by the structure of the alphabet? We will encounter many rhetorical devices and structural elements as we engage with the Psalms, each ancient poem inviting us to read—both the text and our lives with God—with care and curiosity.

### **How to Use the Guide**

The lesson subjects and accompanying list of scripture texts come from the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* written by Dr. Dragoslava Santrac and published by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The Good Word study guide is not intended to replace the Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide, but rather to accompany it, bringing additional voices to the conversation. Therefore, I invite you to use this guide to the extent that it is helpful to you in your individual or group engagement with the Psalms. The accompanying recordings use this study guide as a jumping off point, and if you enjoy listening to conversations about the Bible, you may enjoy listening to the Good Word recordings and using them as a launch pad for further study and conversation, on your own, or with those around you.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture references are from the New International Version.

Lesson #1—Study for January 6

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** How to Read the Psalms

**Leading Question:** Robert Alter, in his book *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, argues that “poetry is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of imagining the world” (p. 151). What poem, or line from a poem, does this do for you? Capturing your imagination, giving you a way to see God, yourself, others, or the world around you?

**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 25, Psalm 33, Psalm 121

**The Big Idea:** Knowing some basics about biblical poetry can enrich our engagement with scripture and deepen our connection to people now and in centuries past who have prayed these same words.

**For Discussion:**

Doubling is a foundational aspect of Hebrew writing, present in most Hebrew poetry, and also found in some prose.

In poetry, the most common form of doubling is parallelism, two (or three) lines or verses that are clearly related in some way—with the second line or verse restating, expanding, narrowing, or contrasting the point made in the first. Here are a few examples from Psalms 25 and 33:

Restating:

Psalm 25:4

Show me your ways, LORD,  
teach me your paths.

Psalm 33:2

Praise the LORD with the harp;  
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.

Expanding or completing:

Psalm 33:5

The LORD loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of his unfailing love.

Psalm 25:8

Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.

Narrowing:

Psalm 33:16

No king is saved by the size of his army;  
no warrior escapes by his great strength.

Contrasting:

Psalm 25:3

No one who hopes in you  
will ever be put to shame,  
but shame will come on those  
who are treacherous without cause.

**Discussion Question:** What do you make of the repetition found throughout the Psalms? How does it function and in what ways does it enrich the text?

Psalm 121 is one of 15 short poems labeled as “songs of ascent,” songs thought to have been sung by people making their way to Jerusalem for worship or to participate in yearly festivals. We will return to this Psalm later in the quarter, but for now, look it over and see what kinds of parallelism you notice.

### Psalm 121

*A song of ascents.*

- <sup>1</sup> I lift up my eyes to the mountains—  
where does my help come from?
- <sup>2</sup> My help comes from the LORD,  
the Maker of heaven and earth.
- <sup>3</sup> He will not let your foot slip—  
he who watches over you will not slumber;
- <sup>4</sup> indeed, he who watches over Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep.
- <sup>5</sup> The LORD watches over you—  
the LORD is your shade at your right hand;
- <sup>6</sup> the sun will not harm you by day,  
nor the moon by night.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD will keep you from all harm—  
he will watch over your life;
- <sup>8</sup> the LORD will watch over your coming and going  
both now and forevermore.

**Discussion Question:** What examples of parallelism stand out to you in this poem? What would have been especially meaningful about reciting this psalm while on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem?

**Discussion Question:** Psalm 25 is an acrostic, meaning that each verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. This form is thought to express completeness (22 verses in this case, one for each letter of the alphabet), and could have served as a useful structure for composition (like following the rules for writing a haiku or sonnet) and even as a mnemonic device, assisting people in memorization and recitation. Have you ever written an acrostic? How did that form work for you?

## GOOD WORD 2024.1

The Book of Psalms

Lesson #2—Study for January 13

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Teach Us to Pray

**Leading Question:** What messages have you received over the course of your life about what prayer is? How did you learn how to pray?

**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 23, Daniel 2:20-23, Psalm 44, Psalm 22, Psalm 60

**The Big Idea:** Prayer is both automatic and also a skill we can learn and cultivate. The Psalms allow us to glimpse many facets of people's journeys with God and each other, and praying the psalms can serve as a kind of apprenticeship in prayer.

### For Discussion:

Most of the Psalms mentioned in this lesson are lament psalms. Before we examine this kind of poem in more detail, consider a feature that is found in a number of model prayers in the Bible: a mixing of pronouns that demonstrate shifts in who the words are directed to. In some cases there is a clear progression, from talking *about* God to talking *to* God, third person (God, he) to second person (you). Consider the following examples:

#### Psalm 23

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,

<sup>3</sup> he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup>Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup>You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup>Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
forever.

### Daniel 2:20-23

“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever;  
wisdom and power are his.

<sup>21</sup> He changes times and seasons;  
he deposes kings and raises up others.

He gives wisdom to the wise  
and knowledge to the discerning.

<sup>22</sup> He reveals deep and hidden things;  
he knows what lies in darkness,  
and light dwells with him.

<sup>23</sup> I thank and praise you, God of my ancestors:  
You have given me wisdom and power,  
you have made known to me what we asked of you,  
you have made known to us the dream of the king.”

In other cases there is not a clear progression. Consider this excerpt from Psalm 44, a lament listed in the lesson for this week. In this prayer, the speaker starts out talking directly *to* God, then moves to third person and speaks *about* God briefly in verses 20-21, and then returns to second person speech directed *to* God.

### Psalm 44:

<sup>17</sup> All this came upon us,  
though we had not forgotten you;  
we had not been false to your covenant.

<sup>18</sup> Our hearts had not turned back;  
our feet had not strayed from your path.

<sup>19</sup> But you crushed us and made us a haunt for jackals;  
you covered us over with deep darkness.

<sup>20</sup> If we had forgotten the name of our God  
or spread out our hands to a foreign god,

<sup>21</sup> would not God have discovered it,  
since he knows the secrets of the heart?

<sup>22</sup> Yet for your sake we face death all day long;  
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.

<sup>23</sup> Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

<sup>24</sup> Why do you hide your face  
and forget our misery and oppression?

<sup>25</sup> We are brought down to the dust;  
our bodies cling to the ground.

<sup>26</sup> Rise up and help us;  
rescue us because of your unfailing love.

**Discussion question: What does this interweaving of second person and third person speech show us about prayer? What might it reveal about divine-human relationship?**

Between a third and a half of the songs and poems collected in the book of Psalms are laments. The lament poems in the Hebrew Bible provide a window into how people in ancient Israel processed experiences that jarred them out of their long-held assumptions about who God is and how life works. Most lament poems contain a standard list of elements, though they are not always in the same order and the number of lines devoted to a certain element varies widely between poems.

**Here is a list of the basic elements of lament in the Hebrew Bible, with examples from Psalm 22:**

*Address:* “My God, My God,”

*Complaint:* “Why have you forsaken me?”

*Request:* “Do not be far from me”

*Motivation:* “In you our ancestors put their trust; they trusted and you delivered them”

“You brought me out of the womb;

you made me trust in you, even at my mother’s breast.”

“You are my strength”

*Confidence/praise:* “I will declare your name to my people; in the assembly I will praise you.”

**Discussion question: When you consider laments as an important part of how the Psalms teach us to pray, what elements of this form of poetry stand out to you? How do you think the practice of lament contributes to human resilience in the face of complexity and crisis?**

Eugene Peterson, in his book *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*, wrote, “Abstraction is an enemy to prayer. Beautiful ideas are an enemy to prayer. Fine thoughts are an enemy to prayer. Authentic prayer begins when we stub our toes on a rock, get drenched in a rainstorm, get slapped in the face by an enemy—or run into the tree that has been in our path for so long that we have ceased to see it, and now stand back, in bruised and wondering awe before it” (pp. 27-28).

Sometimes specific, vivid portrayals of pain, sorrow, betrayal, regret, and grief are conduits of connection and healing. They provide a sense of being seen and known, a sense of solidarity with others in the human experience. All the psalms have vivid lines, stirring imagery that carries the reader or prayer into embodied memory, though the lament poems are particularly vivid.

**Discussion question: What is a line or verse from the Psalms that captures your attention or that effectively puts words to your experience? What makes that line or verse stand out to you?**

Lament psalms don’t focus only on individual experiences of betrayal and pain; there are countless communal laments. And many of these communal laments give voice to questions of national identity and how to make sense of experiencing catastrophe as God’s chosen people. Psalm 60 is one of these psalms, a prayer for God to step in and grant the people victory. The lesson emphasizes the first five verses of this poem, and the closing line of this section offers a space for serious reflection.



**Psalm 60:**

- <sup>1</sup>You have rejected us, God, and burst upon us;  
you have been angry—now restore us!
- <sup>2</sup>You have shaken the land and torn it open;  
mend its fractures, for it is quaking.
- <sup>3</sup>You have shown your people desperate times;  
you have given us wine that makes us stagger.
- <sup>4</sup>But for those who fear you, you have raised a banner  
to be unfurled against the bow.
- <sup>5</sup>Save us and help us with your right hand,  
that those you love may be delivered.

**Discussion question:** What does it mean to be part of the group that God loves? In our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our global community, how do we pray when what is “good” for others hurts us, and when what is “good” for us hurts others?

The Psalms invite (through example) us to bring our full selves, including our many experiences and the full range of emotions, to God in prayer, both alone and in the presence of others.

Eugene Peterson writes, “It is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions (unless, neurotically, we advertise them). Or, when we do express them, we do it far from the presence, or what we think is the presence, of God, ashamed and embarrassed to be seen in these curse-stained bib overalls. But when we pray the psalms, these classic prayers of God’s people, we find that will not do. We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be. In prayer, all is not sweetness and light. The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom” (*Answering God*, p. 100).

**Discussion question:** What are some prayer practices that provide space and time for you to connect with God in healing ways? It is easy to feel pressure to pray a certain way. What has helped you customize your prayer practices to fit your needs?

Lesson #3—Study for January 20

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** The Lord Reigns**Leading Question:** In the Bible, God is depicted in a variety of ways, with imagery from kingship, priesthood, motherhood, and many more arenas. What messages about God and God's relationship with humanity are communicated by the metaphor "God is king"?**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 93, Psalm 8**The Big Idea:** The Bible is replete with metaphors for God and how God engages with humans and the earth. Recognizing that each metaphor is both significant and partial allows us to mine the depths of that metaphor without emphasizing its messages so much that it eclipses other depictions of God in the Bible.**For Discussion:**

Order and predictability are important elements of human life and experience. Indeed, humans are actually quite uncomfortable with uncertainty (some studies even show people prefer a certain (known) negative consequence over uncertainty). And some people go so far as to describe certainty as our number one basic need as humans. Our brains automatically look for patterns and adjust our behavior accordingly. And the fact that we don't have to consciously initiate every action throughout our day frees up our limited attention for new or complex situations.

Discussion question: What roles do you see order and predictability playing in human life and flourishing? And in what ways might the various portrayals of God as king touch into the human need for order and predictability?

We think in pictures. And the parts of our brains that process sensory-motor experience are crucial to our understanding of abstract concepts. For example, because we have grasped an object, we can understand more easily what it means to "grasp" a concept. Because we have had things taken from us, we can understand more easily what it means to say that "time is a thief." The Bible is filled with metaphors for God, for what it means to be human, and for various aspects of divine-human relationship. I like to think of the plethora of metaphors as a mosaic, each providing a tile, shedding light on a facet of a much larger "picture". Consider the variety of imagery used in Psalms 8 and 93.

**Psalm 8:**

<sup>1</sup>LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory  
in the heavens.

<sup>2</sup>Through the praise of children and infants

you have established a stronghold against your enemies,  
to silence the foe and the avenger.

<sup>3</sup>When I consider your heavens,  
the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars,  
which you have set in place,

<sup>4</sup>what is mankind that you are mindful of them,  
human beings that you care for them?

<sup>5</sup>You have made them a little lower than the angels  
and crowned them with glory and honor.

<sup>6</sup>You made them rulers over the works of your hands;  
you put everything under their feet:

<sup>7</sup>all flocks and herds,  
and the animals of the wild,

<sup>8</sup>the birds in the sky,  
and the fish in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas.

<sup>9</sup>LORD, our Lord,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

#### **Psalm 93:**

<sup>1</sup>The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty;  
the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength;  
indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.

<sup>2</sup>Your throne was established long ago;  
you are from all eternity.

<sup>3</sup>The seas have lifted up, LORD,  
the seas have lifted up their voice;  
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.

<sup>4</sup>Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,  
mightier than the breakers of the sea—  
the LORD on high is mighty.

<sup>5</sup>Your statutes, LORD, stand firm;  
holiness adorns your house  
for endless days.

**Discussion question:** What image or picture-driven language catches your attention in these poems? What do you think makes it stand out to you? And what points are being made?

**Discussion question:** In what ways does this imagery complement the image of God as king? In what ways does this imagery reveal the limitations of the God is king metaphor?

Lesson #4—Study for January 27

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** The Lord Hears and Delivers**Leading Question:** What is it like to be truly and deeply heard?**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 34, Exodus 2:23-25, Exodus 3:7-8, Psalm 17:8, Psalm 44, Psalm 80

**The Big Idea:** Throughout the Bible, God is described in anthropomorphic terms. God has ears that hear and eyes that see and a brain that knows and hands that act. These depictions of God in terms of human body parts and actions are used to show God's deliverance and also the pain of not experiencing expected deliverance.

**For Discussion:**

In Psalm 34, God hears the cry of the righteous and delivers them. This progression harkens back to one of ancient Israel's foundation stories—the story of the exodus. God heard the cries of the Israelites and saw their misery and “came down to rescue them” (Exodus 2:23-25; 3:7-8).

When God sees, God acts. The tight interplay between these two things is depicted memorably in the phrase “keep me as the apple of your eye” in Psalm 17:8. In Hebrew, this phrase reads “the little human in your eye.” I still remember the first time my daughter said, “Mama, I see myself in your eyes.” The writer of Psalm 17 seems to be drawing on the experience of being face to face and seeing a tiny version of oneself in the pupil of another person's eye.

Discussion question: As humans, we long to be fully seen and known, and fully loved; yet we often have the sense that if someone really knew us, they would not love us. What do you think is made possible by the experience of being seen, being heard, and being fully known without that leading to a rupture in relationship?

The relationship between God hearing the people's cries and delivering them is so foundational to the collective identity of the people that many of the communal laments found in the book of Psalms (see for example, Psalms 44, 74, 79, 80, 90) put into words the agony felt when God's deliverance seems far off, when it seems like God does not see them, does not hear them, is no longer concerned about what they are going through.

**Psalm 44**

<sup>1</sup>We have heard it with our ears, O God;

our ancestors have told us

what you did in their days,

in days long ago.

<sup>2</sup>With your hand you drove out the nations

and planted our ancestors;  
you crushed the peoples  
and made our ancestors flourish.

<sup>9</sup> But now you have rejected and humbled us;  
you no longer go out with our armies.

<sup>10</sup> You made us retreat before the enemy,  
and our adversaries have plundered us.

<sup>11</sup> You gave us up to be devoured like sheep  
and have scattered us among the nations.

<sup>23</sup> Awake, Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

<sup>24</sup> Why do you hide your face  
and forget our misery and oppression?

<sup>25</sup> We are brought down to the dust;  
our bodies cling to the ground.

<sup>26</sup> Rise up and help us;  
rescue us because of your unfailing love.

#### Psalm 80

<sup>14</sup> Return to us, God Almighty!  
Look down from heaven and see!

Watch over this vine,

<sup>15</sup> the root your right hand has planted,  
the son you have raised up for yourself.

<sup>16</sup> Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;  
at your rebuke your people perish.

<sup>17</sup> Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,  
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.

<sup>18</sup> Then we will not turn away from you;  
revive us, and we will call on your name.

<sup>19</sup> Restore us, LORD God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us,  
that we may be saved.

Sometimes the people interpret their experiences and situate themselves within a larger storyline by describing themselves in relation to God's face (For example, is God's face turned toward them or away from them? Is punishment or deliverance flowing from God's face?).

**Discussion question:** How is the imagery of the face of God used in these psalms? In what ways have you heard people in your communities draw on the imagery of God's face?

The way the biblical texts describe human experience in terms of God's hearing and acting seems to align with what psychologists say about how we make sense of our experience by telling stories about

it or by weaving it into an existing story. For example, if someone cuts us off in traffic, we may say, “what a mean person, intentionally making my life miserable” or “that person must be going through something so tough that it’s hard for them to pay attention while driving.”

Eugene Peterson, in his discussion of story in the Psalms, writes: “Story making is creative work—demanding intense and personal involvement. . . the story maker enlists our imagination, the interiorization and integration of body and mind, which puts us on the threshold of prayer. God works with words. He uses them to make a story of salvation. He pulls us into the story. When we believe, we become willing participants in the plot. We can do this reluctantly and minimally, going through the motions; or we can do it recklessly and robustly, throwing ourselves into the relationships and actions. When we do this, we pray. We practice the words and phrases that make us fluent in the conversation that is at the center of the story. We develop the free responses that answer to the creating word of God in and around us that is making a salvation story” (*Answering God*, p. 56).

**Discussion question:** Does the storytelling in the Psalms “put you on the threshold of prayer”? If so, in what ways? And does it make a difference if you are engaging with the psalms alone or in the company of others?

Lesson #5—Study for February 3

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land**Leading Question:** Have you ever had something asked of you that felt like an insult, a misunderstanding of who you are and what matters most to you? What was this like for you?**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 137, Psalm 22, Psalm 73**The Big Idea:** Exile is a thread that runs throughout the biblical text. Exile is event, and exile is a metaphor for the human condition.**For Discussion:**

How people understood God's presence and what they believed about how to access it changed significantly over the centuries in which the biblical literature was written and edited. In Exodus 25:8, the Lord says to Moses, "Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them." This tent was movable, meaning that the symbol of God's presence among the people went with them as they moved from place to place. Eventually the ark of the covenant, the seat of God, was settled by David in Jerusalem, and a magnificent temple was built on the highest place in the city, during the short time that Jerusalem served as the capital city for all the tribes of Israel. This permanent structure and the longstanding practice of going up to Jerusalem to worship connected the idea of God's presence with this particular hill, which came to be known as Mount Zion. When the Babylonians burned down the temple and many people were exiled to other areas, a lively debate took place regarding where God "lived." Did God live with the people who had been resettled in other places? Or did God live with those who remained in Judah? In the book of Ezekiel, we find the prophet recording messages and visions directly confronting the idea that the exiled people were far away from God (Ezekiel 11:15). Instead, Ezekiel saw in vision the presence of God lifting up from Jerusalem and traveling east in the direction of Mesopotamia (Ezekiel 10:18-19; 11:22-24). In the book of Daniel, when Daniel is described as opening his window and praying toward Jerusalem, we see an example of another way of thinking about God's presence—God could be accessed from anywhere but that access was facilitated by facing toward Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God. In Ezekiel's visions of restoration, the presence of God returns, traveling from the east back toward Jerusalem, and settling in a larger-than-life rebuilt temple, again on the highest hill in the city, from which flowed water that brought life to all it touched (Ezekiel 43:1-5; 47:1-12).

Discussion question: Throughout the Bible, we find an ongoing wrestling with questions of who God is, where God dwells, and how one accesses divine presence and care. In what ways do you see this biblical dialogue applying to people's lives in today's world?

One of the most vivid lament songs, Psalm 137 depicts the very real agony of being asked by your captors to sing a “song of Zion” when you have been torn from your homeland and from the place where you understand God to dwell.

**Discussion question:** What do you think would be most difficult about this? What makes this poem so poignant?

Another vivid lament poem, Psalm 22, begins with the famous line, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The New Testament authors describe Jesus reciting this lament from the cross. And in this way, God incarnate is depicted as identifying with the common human experience of feeling forsaken, abandoned, left alone in a painful and heartbreaking existence.

**Discussion question:** Besides the experience of being carried off and resettled by empire powers (like Assyria or Babylon), what other stories in the Bible illustrate the feeling of being forsaken? What circumstances did people interpret as evidence that God was far away? And what did they interpret as evidence that God had responded to them?

Psalm 73 depicts vividly such wrestling with understanding God’s engagement, or lack thereof, with groups of people and with individuals. One of the literary devices commonly used in the Hebrew Bible is a chiasm. This term is sometimes used to describe an ABB’A’ pattern (for example, Psalm 73:27). It is also used to describe a larger nesting structure in which the center is considered especially important and specifically highlighted by the composer. Many people interpret verse 17 as the centerpiece or turning point of Psalm 73: “until I entered the sanctuary of God.”

**Discussion question:** When you read over this poem, what seems to be accomplished for the writer when they enter the sanctuary? What changes? Their reality? Their interpretation of their situation or experiences? Their interpretation of other people’s situations or experiences?



Lesson #6—Study for February 10

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** I Will Arise**Leading Question:** What does it mean when God stands up?**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 12:5, Psalm 18, Deuteronomy 15:7-11, Psalm 96, Psalm 99**The Big Idea:** The writers of the Psalms understood God as a divine being who intervenes in the human realm, standing up for justice and righteousness and advocating for the oppressed.**For Discussion:**

Along with the metaphor of God as king, discussed earlier in the quarter, the Psalms also depict God as a mighty warrior and a just judge. Psalm 18 is filled with vivid imagery. The most famous metaphor in Psalm 18 is probably “God is my rock.” But the poet also uses memorable analogies with living things to paint pictures of what it looks like or feels like when God intervenes on behalf of his people.

Discussion question: What are some of the images in Psalm 18 that stand out to you? What makes them catch your attention?

The *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* notes that theologically the word *qûm* “anthropomorphically indicates Yahweh’s personal intervention.” For example, the lesson cites Psalm 12:5 “Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan, *I will now arise*,” says the Lord. “I will protect them from those who malign them.” Other examples of this use of the word are found in Psalm 3:7, 7:6, 9:19, and 10:12, in which the call for God to rise up is equivalent to a request for deliverance, justice, or intervention on behalf of the helpless.

The lesson points out how this depiction of God’s intervention builds upon the instructions found in Deuteronomy 15:7-11 regarding how the poor and needy are to be treated.

#### Deuteronomy 15

<sup>7</sup> If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. <sup>8</sup> Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. <sup>9</sup> Be careful not to harbor this wicked thought: “The seventh year, the year for canceling debts, is near,” so that you do not show ill will toward the needy among your fellow Israelites and give them nothing. They may then appeal to the LORD against you, and you will be found guilty of sin. <sup>10</sup> Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. <sup>11</sup> There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

There is sometimes a tendency among people who all claim to follow the same God, for some to emphasize human responsibility for standing up for those who are poor and needy and others to emphasize God's role in stepping in and caring for people in need.

**Discussion question: What are some ways we might discern when to step in directly and when to trust people into God's care without personally intervening?**

Many poetic lines in the Hebrew Bible depict the created world praising God.

#### **Psalm 96**

<sup>11</sup> Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;  
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

<sup>12</sup> Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;  
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

<sup>13</sup> Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,  
he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness  
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

#### **Psalm 99**

<sup>7</sup> Let the sea resound, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it.

<sup>8</sup> Let the rivers clap their hands,  
let the mountains sing together for joy;

<sup>9</sup> let them sing before the LORD,  
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness  
and the peoples with equity.

**Discussion question: What differences does it make to remember we as humans are just one part of the created world? That care for God's creatures and praise of God as Creator are not left to us alone?**

Lesson #7—Study for February 17

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Your Mercy Reaches Unto the Heavens**Leading Question:** When do we as humans need God's mercy?**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 57:9, 10, Psalm 136, Psalm 51**The Big Idea:** The covenant loyalty of God is a theme that runs throughout the Bible, and God invites his people to not only see how his covenant love continues forever as the bedrock of existence but also how the invitation remains for humans to partner with God and embody covenant love.**For Discussion:**

Discussion question: Psalm 51 is a well-known poem, memorized by many, some of its lines being used as lyrics in modern songs. What is your most vivid memory of this prayer? Are there mental pictures you associate with it? Why do you think it is such a popular and oft-quoted poem?

In Psalm 136 we find an extended recounting of God as creator and as deliverer of his people, every line of which is followed by a short yet powerful refrain "His love endures forever." The word translated "love" here in the New International Version is the Hebrew word *hesed*, a word that can also be translated "lovingkindness," "mercy," or "covenant loyalty." This word occurs hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible, and around half of the occurrences are in the book of Psalms.

This word describes covenant relationship, and captures the unchangeable state—God's *hesed* never fails. This word is also an invitation. Humans are invited to emulate covenant love, to embody it in their relationships not only with God, but also with themselves, with others, and with the created world.

Yitz Greenberg talks about *hesed* this way:

"The word *hesed* describes more than lovingkindness; *hesed* really means covenantal love, i.e., love that becomes committed and obligated to the other. Judaism teaches that all humans are related and bound to each other. To perfect the world and to become fully human, individuals enter into a covenantal community. As partners, they are obligated to serve, nurture and sustain each other and thereby to **bring out the image of God** (infinite worth, equality, and uniqueness) of the other."

Psalm 136 is a call and response liturgy that recounts the history of God with the people. As you read over it, imagine being part of a group of people re-affirming rhythmically "His lovingkindness endures forever."

Discussion question: What is covenant loyalty/mercy/lovingkindness? Is there a particular story from the Bible that puts "skin" on this concept for you? If so, which story?

Discussion question: And what is the impact of reciting “his lovingkindness endures forever” in the presence of a throng of others? How is our experience of liturgy different in collective contexts versus reading a song silently in our heads while alone in our rooms?

Lesson #8—Study for February 24

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Wisdom for Righteous Living**Leading Question:** What is wisdom?**Scripture Focus:** Deuteronomy 28, Psalm 128, Psalm 90, Psalm 137 and 138

**The Big Idea:** It is usually books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes that are described as “wisdom literature.” But the Psalms also include collected wisdom and even the way the songs and poems are organized invites us as readers into a journey of discernment.

**For Discussion:**

William Brown describes the book of Psalms as a hymnbook, a prayer book, and a textbook, and argues that the wisdom psalms reveal “points of dialogical contact between Psalms and the wisdom corpus, snapshots of a larger dialogue over what it means to life with understanding” (*Deep Calls to Deep*, pp. 342-343). Psalm 1 is one of the poems in the book of Psalms often classified as a wisdom psalm because it asks the reader to carefully study the LORD’s instruction (*torah*) and the poem does not address God directly. Other wisdom psalms include Psalms 14, 37, 73, 91, 112, 119, and 128.

Psalm 128 provides a succinct example of how a poem in the Psalms, like many other texts in the Hebrew Bible, can be in conversation with other parts of the Bible. This psalm sums up the retributive theology framework that is outlined in Deuteronomy 28—blessings (in the form of fertility in every domain) for obedience, curses (in the form of lack of fertility in every domain) for not obeying. There are many texts in the Bible that accept this framework for making sense of life. And there are many texts in the Bible that do not accept this framework for making sense of life.

**Psalm 128**

<sup>1</sup>Blessed are all who fear the LORD,  
who walk in obedience to him.

<sup>2</sup>You will eat the fruit of your labor;  
blessings and prosperity will be yours.

<sup>3</sup>Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  
within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.

<sup>4</sup>Yes, this will be the blessing  
for the man who fears the LORD.

<sup>5</sup>May the LORD bless you from Zion;  
may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem  
all the days of your life.

<sup>6</sup> May you live to see your children's children—  
peace be on Israel.

In her book *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again*, the late writer and speaker Rachel Held Evans shared a quote from her college psychology professor: “Wisdom isn’t about sticking to a set of rules or hitting some imaginary bull’s-eye representing ‘God’s will.’ Wisdom is a way of life, a journey of humility and faithfulness we take together, one step at a time.” Part of that journey is learning to discern when it is appropriate or helpful to interpret a situation through the lens of blessings and curses and when it is not.

**Discussion question:** What do you find supportive or helpful in this process of discernment?

Socrates is said to have asserted: “Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.” Psalm 90 mentions numerous aspects of human life that induce wonder, with some of the examples drawing forth wonder in the sense of amazement and curiosity, and some drawing forth wonder in the sense of fear—not the kind of fear that sends us away but the kind that draws us nearer or invites us to pay closer attention.

**Discussion question:** What wonder-inducing facet of life mentioned in Psalm 90 do you most easily identify with?

William Brown, in his recent study of the Psalms, points out that the Psalms are in dialogue with other parts of the Bible and also in dialogue with themselves (sometimes within one poem, and sometimes between poems). In a chapter titled “Psalms at the Table: Talking Two by Two,” Brown examines pairs of psalms that are placed side by side and thereby invite dialogue. One example is Psalm 137, a vivid lament poem we looked at earlier in the quarter, and Psalm 138, a Psalm of unbridled praise. Brown notes that together these psalms ask, “to sing or not to sing?” Psalm 137, with its heartbreaking depiction of empire brutality and the understandably angry retaliatory impulses of those suffering, is followed by a thanksgiving psalm that “presupposes deliverance from Babylon’s brutality and the temple’s restoration” (*Deep Calls to Deep*, p. 406). “Far from being twins,” Brown argues, “these two psalms share little in common. Yet they are bound together by their adjacency, forcing a dialogue that is as uncomfortable as it is profound” (p. 400).

**Discussion question:** What uncomfortable yet profound dialogues do you find in the psalms? And how does your awareness of these enrich your spiritual life or support you on your journey of discernment?

Lesson #9—Study for March 2

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Blessed is He Who Comes in the Name of the Lord**Leading Question:** Covenant relationship is a thread that winds throughout the biblical literature, conceptualized in a variety of ways. What does it mean to say humans are in covenant relationship with God?**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 89, 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 23, John 10:11-15, Psalm 22, Colossians 1:16, Hebrews 7:20-28**The Big Idea:** Covenant is renegotiated and reimagined many times in the biblical narrative, the constant being that God initiates and sustains relationship with humans.**For Discussion:**

Psalm 89 begins with the phrase, “I will sing of the Lord’s great love forever.” God’s covenant love (*hesed*) is then expounded on by telling the story of the promise to David (recorded in 2 Samuel 7, and running like a thread through a variety of biblical texts).

Discussion question: What can we learn about covenant relationship from Psalm 89?

Discussion question: Among the various covenant relationships described in the Hebrew Bible, including the covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abraham, the covenant with Moses, the covenant with David, and the New Covenant, what makes the covenant with David stand out?

Psalm 22, a lament poem we looked at earlier this quarter, captures beautifully the experience of remaining in relationship while simultaneously feeling forsaken by God. The address, “my God, my God,” introduces a desperate cry, “why have you forsaken me?”

Discussion question: What does such a weaving together of forsakenness and connection reveal about covenant relationship? What is accomplished by this feature of lament, naming agony explicitly in a prayer directed to the very God who seems to have let you down?

The New Testament depicts Jesus as embodying and carrying forward the legacies of all the major institutions that served as mediators of God’s presence in the Hebrew Bible. Jesus is depicted as a prophet, carrying forward the legacy of Moses and Elijah. Jesus is depicted as a king in the line of David. Jesus is depicted as the ultimate sage, the embodiment of wisdom. And Jesus is depicted as a priest, but one who holds the role permanently since he is not subject to death.

The New Testament authors connect Jesus and his ministry to many other threads from the Hebrew Bible as well. John 10, for instance, describes Jesus as the good shepherd, a metaphor for God's engagement with his people that is found multiple times in the book of Psalms.

Discussion question: What does the metaphor of God as shepherd add to the other metaphors (such as God as king, God as warrior, etc.)? And what specific facets of this metaphor does the author of the book of John emphasize?



## GOOD WORD 2024.1

The Book of Psalms

Lesson #10—Study for March 9

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Lessons of the Past

**Leading Question:** What role do stories about the past play in equipping people to navigate life with all its twists and turns?

**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 78, Psalm 105

**The Big Idea:** Knowing where we come from is an important part of knowing who we are. Many of the psalms contain recitations of the long history of the people with God, and these recitations then form the foundation for discernment in the people's continued journey with God.

**For Discussion:**

In our ongoing quest to make sense of life's big questions and situate ourselves within some kind of larger narrative, the ways we remember and recount the past matter a great deal. Our remembering and our re-telling shape our identity and impact our way of being in the world. Eugene Peterson refers to memory as "the mysterious capacity we have for gathering the fragments of experience into a large context that is comprehensive and coherent."

**Discussion question:** In what ways do the poems collected together in the book of Psalms function to provide a larger context within which to make sense of life experiences?

Psalm 78 highlights many parts of the history of God with the people of Israel. It is one of the instructional psalms. Reflecting on this poem, William Brown writes: "It is in history, the psalmist claims, that Israel learns of God's salvific power, compassionate forbearance, and punishing judgment. It is also in history that Israel is given the law and the commandments to follow. History matters to the psalmist; it too is a source of wisdom" (*Deep Calls to Deep*, 358-359). Psalm 105 also recounts the long history of God's faithfulness to the people, focusing specifically on God's deliverance of the people from bondage in Egypt.

Storytelling can be incredibly healing. And one of the positive impacts of storytelling documented by researchers is that depending on how stories are told, stories can move us toward integration and a deeper sense of being part of something bigger than ourselves.

**Discussion question:** At what points in the history of Israel would it have been especially crucial for the people to tell and retell their stories?

**Discussion question:** What are some ways we can recognize when we are experiencing the kind of healing that brings fragments of experience together into something more coherent or allows us to see our lives as part of a "zoomed out" bigger picture?

## GOOD WORD 2024.1

The Book of Psalms

Lesson #11—Study for March 16

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Longing for God in Zion

**Leading Question:** For you or people close to you, what is a place that is tied to spiritual experiences or memories of connection with God?

**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 84, Psalm 125, Psalm 122, Psalm 46

**The Big Idea:** For many of the biblical writers, Zion, or Jerusalem, was the place where God dwelt and from which God blessed the people.

### For Discussion:

The author of Psalm 84 speaks with jubilation and longing about the dwelling place of the LORD. Perhaps most famous is the line in verse 10: “Better is one day in your courts, than a thousand elsewhere.” The subtitle of this psalm attributes the poem to the sons of Korah, people responsible for leading worship in the temple. Other psalms attributed to the sons of Korah include Psalms 42-29, 85, 87, and 88. These poems depict beautifully the joy of receiving sustenance and embracing a sense of purpose as servants in the house of God.

Discussion Question: In what ways do you think the first-hand experience of the writers contributed to vividness and urgency in these psalms?

Discussion Question: Psalm 125 likens “those to trust in the LORD” to Mount Zion, which “cannot be shaken.” What does this simile communicate about God? What does this simile illustrate about what trust is?

Psalm 122, another of the Psalms of Ascent, expresses joy in the collective action of going to the house of the Lord.

- <sup>1</sup> I rejoiced with those who said to me,  
“Let us go to the house of the LORD.”
- <sup>2</sup> Our feet are standing  
in your gates, Jerusalem.
- <sup>3</sup> Jerusalem is built like a city  
that is closely compacted together.
- <sup>4</sup> That is where the tribes go up—  
the tribes of the LORD—  
to praise the name of the LORD  
according to the statute given to Israel.

- <sup>5</sup> There stand the thrones for judgment,  
the thrones of the house of David.
- <sup>6</sup> Pray for the *peace* of Jerusalem:  
“May those who love you be secure.
- <sup>7</sup> May there be *peace* within your walls  
and security within your citadels.”
- <sup>8</sup> For the sake of my family and friends,  
I will say, “*Peace* be within you.”
- <sup>9</sup> For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,  
I will seek your prosperity.

Discussion Question: The Hebrew word for peace (italicized above) also means wholeness, wellbeing, and sometimes to repay a debt or repair something that has been damaged. What does this prayer for peace reveal about what *shalom* or peace is? And what aspects of this prayer could translate or be applied to places we gather to work and worship?

Discussion Question: God’s promises are powerful and comforting; they can also be confusing, especially when they seem so far from being fulfilled. What does Psalm 46 (below) offer to us who are aware of ongoing wars? What does it look like to be still when aware of ongoing desolations?

- <sup>1</sup> God is our refuge and strength,  
an ever-present help in trouble.
- <sup>2</sup> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
- <sup>3</sup> though its waters roar and foam  
and the mountains quake with their surging.
- <sup>4</sup> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
the holy place where the Most High dwells.
- <sup>5</sup> God is within her, she will not fall;  
God will help her at break of day.
- <sup>6</sup> Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
- <sup>7</sup> The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.
- <sup>8</sup> Come and see what the LORD has done,  
the desolations he has brought on the earth.
- <sup>9</sup> He makes wars cease  
to the ends of the earth.  
He breaks the bow and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire.
- <sup>10</sup> He says, “Be still, and know that I am God;  
I will be exalted among the nations,  
I will be exalted in the earth.”
- <sup>11</sup> The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

## GOOD WORD 2024.1

The Book of Psalms

Lesson #12—Study for March 23

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Worship That Never Ends

**Leading Question:** What does it mean to bless God? What does it mean to receive a blessing?

**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 104, Psalm 103, Deuteronomy 6:13, Psalm 96, Psalm 98

**The Big Idea:** Praise is the beginning, the end, and everything in between in the book of Psalms, absolutely fundamental to the life of God’s people both individually and in community.

**For Discussion:**

In Hebrew poetry, when a line is used to start and end a poem, it is called an inclusion. This creates something like a sandwich, holding the meat of the poem inside. Psalm 104, like Psalm 103, begins and ends with the phrase “Praise the Lord, O my soul.” The word translated “praise” here in the NIV is the Hebrew word *brk*, which means “to bless,” or “to praise.” This word is used most often in the Hebrew Bible in Genesis and in Psalms.

**Discussion Question:** Thinking of the narratives in Genesis and looking at poems like Psalm 104, what do you see as connections between praising and blessing? In what ways do these English words overlap? And how do the stories and poems of the Hebrew Bible deepen our understanding of this?

When my Hebrew language students study the book of Deuteronomy, they often note the multiple meanings of the word *ʿvd*, a word that occurs in Deuteronomy more than in any other book of the Bible. As a verb, it means “to work, to serve, to worship.” The noun form translates as “servant” or “slave.”

### Deuteronomy 6:13 (NASB)

You shall fear only the LORD your God;  
And you shall *worship* Him and swear by His name.

### Psalm 96

- <sup>1</sup> Praise the LORD, all you *servants* of the LORD  
*who minister* by night in the house of the LORD.
- <sup>2</sup> Lift up your hands in the sanctuary  
and praise the LORD.
- <sup>3</sup> May the LORD bless you from Zion,  
he who is the Maker of heaven and earth.

**Discussion Question:** What does the overlap between service and worship reveal about what worship is, and how it fits into a life of faith?

In his book about discipleship based largely on a study of the Psalms of Ascent, Eugene Peterson writes, "Worship is an act that develops feelings for God, not a feeling for God that is expressed in an act of worship" (*A Long Obedience In the Same Direction*, p. 54). In his characteristic way, Peterson is careful point out that worship, including praying the Psalms, is not the end, but rather a starting point. "Worship does not satisfy our hunger for God," he writes, "it whets our appetite" (*A Long Obedience*, p. 56).

Discussion Question: Have you experienced worship as a starting point or launching pad for what comes next? If so, how?

Discussion Question: The most common line in the Psalms is "Praise the Lord!" This is the word *hll*, and is familiar to most English speaking worshippers through the word *hallelujah* (a combination of the second common plural imperative, "you all praise," and an abbreviate form of Yahweh, the personal name of Judah's God). What is praise? What role does praise play in worship, both individual and collective?

Discussion Question: What does it mean to "sing to the Lord a new song" (see, for instance, Psalm 96 and Psalm 98)?

## GOOD WORD 2024.1

The Book of Psalms

Lesson #13—Study for March 30

Prepared by Jody Washburn, School of Theology, WWU

**Theme:** Wait on the Lord

**Leading Question:** Stories often have an arc. There is tension, and the story draws us along because in the unfolding of each story, we see a bit of ourselves and what it means to be human. When you think of stories that have been powerful in your life, where does waiting fit in the storyline?

**Scripture Focus:** Psalm 27:14, Psalm 131, Psalm 126, Matthew 18:3

**The Big Idea:** Waiting in the Bible is active, not passive. Active waiting can involve silence and sound, calm and activity. And while waiting is depicted primarily as a human activity, God also waits.

**For Discussion:**

In translations from Hebrew to English, the same Hebrew word is translated as both “wait” and “hope.” Consider the following examples.

Psalm 131:3 (Hebrew word *yhl*)

“Israel, *wait* for the LORD  
from this time on and forever.” (NASB)

“Israel, *put your hope* in the LORD  
both now and forevermore.” (NIV)

Psalm 27:14 (Hebrew word *qvh*)

“*Wait patiently* for the LORD.  
Be brave and courageous.  
Yes, *wait patiently* for the LORD.” (NLT)

“*Hope* in Yahweh;  
Be strong and let your heart take courage;  
*Hope* in Yahweh.” (Legacy Standard Bible)

“*Trust* in the LORD.  
Have faith, do not despair.  
*Trust* in the LORD.” (Good News Translation)

**Discussion question:** How are hoping and waiting related? How does the experience of waiting fit in the process of developing a trusting relationship with God?

The lesson draws on some of the Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120-134) to help us reflect together on waiting in our individual and collective journeys with God. Both of these poems include rich imagery that brings to life various facets of relationship with God. Look over Psalm 126 and Psalm 131 and see how many kinds of imagery you can find. In what ways might these images deepen our understanding of hope and waiting?

**Psalm 126:**

- <sup>1</sup> When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dreamed.  
<sup>2</sup> Our mouths were filled with laughter,  
our tongues with songs of joy.  
Then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”  
<sup>3</sup> The LORD has done great things for us,  
and we are filled with joy.  
<sup>4</sup> Restore our fortunes, LORD,  
like streams in the Negev.  
<sup>5</sup> Those who sow with tears  
will reap with songs of joy.  
<sup>6</sup> Those who go out weeping,  
carrying seed to sow,  
will return with songs of joy,  
carrying sheaves with them.

**Psalm 131:**

- <sup>1</sup> My heart is not proud, LORD,  
my eyes are not haughty;  
I do not concern myself with great matters  
or things too wonderful for me.  
<sup>2</sup> But I have calmed and quieted myself,  
I am like a weaned child with its mother;  
like a weaned child I am content.  
<sup>3</sup> Israel, put your hope in the LORD  
both now and forevermore.

**Discussion question:** What imagery in these poems do you find particularly compelling? Why?

The lesson cites Matthew 18:1-3, where we find a description of Jesus standing a child among the people and telling the people gathered around that the key to the kingdom was becoming like little children.

**Discussion question:** What aspects of childhood could be instructive as we look for analogies for the place of hope and waiting in our faith life?