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LIFE LESSONS *from*

PSALMS



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LIFE LESSONS *from*
PSALMS
A Praise Book for God's People

PREPARED BY THE LIVINGSTONE CORPORATION



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

Life Lessons from Psalms

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HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

The Bible is a peculiar book. Words crafted in another language. Deeds done in a distant era. Events recorded in a far-off land. Counsel offered to a foreign people. It is a peculiar book.

It's surprising that anyone reads it. It's too old. Some of its writings date back 5,000 years. It's too bizarre. The book speaks of incredible floods, fires, earthquakes, and people with supernatural abilities. It's too radical. The Bible calls for undying devotion to a carpenter who called himself God's Son.

Logic says this book shouldn't survive. Too old, too bizarre, too radical.

The Bible has been banned, burned, scoffed, and ridiculed. Scholars have mocked it as foolish. Kings have branded it as illegal. A thousand times over the grave has been dug and the dirge has begun, but somehow the Bible never stays in the grave. Not only has it survived, but it has also thrived. It is the single most popular book in all of history. It has been the bestselling book in the world for years!

There is no way on earth to explain it. Which perhaps is the only explanation. For the Bible's durability is not found on *earth* but in *heaven*. The millions who have tested its claims and claimed its promises know there is but one answer: the Bible is God's book and God's voice.

As you read it, you would be wise to give some thought to two questions: *What is the purpose of the Bible?* and *How do I study the Bible?* Time spent reflecting on these two issues will greatly enhance your Bible study.

What is the purpose of the Bible?

Let the Bible itself answer that question: *“From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”* (2 Timothy 3:15).

The purpose of the Bible? Salvation. God’s highest passion is to get his children home. His book, the Bible, describes his plan of salvation. The purpose of the Bible is to proclaim God’s plan and passion to save his children.

This is the reason why this book has endured through the centuries. It dares to tackle the toughest questions about life: *Where do I go after I die? Is there a God? What do I do with my fears?* The Bible is the treasure map that leads to God’s highest treasure—eternal life.

But how do you study the Bible? Countless copies of Scripture sit unread on bookshelves and nightstands simply because people don’t know how to read it. What can you do to make the Bible real in your life?

The clearest answer is found in the words of Jesus: *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you”* (Matthew 7:7).

The first step in understanding the Bible is asking God to help you. You should read it prayerfully. If anyone understands God’s Word, it is because of God and not the reader.

“The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:26).

Before reading the Bible, pray and invite God to speak to you. Don’t go to Scripture looking for your idea, but go searching for his.

Not only should you read the Bible prayerfully, but you should also read it carefully. *“Seek and you will find”* is the pledge. The Bible is not

a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be quarried. *“If you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God”* (Proverbs 2:4–5).

Any worthy find requires effort. The Bible is no exception. To understand the Bible, you don’t have to be brilliant, but you must be willing to roll up your sleeves and search.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Here’s a practical point. Study the Bible a bit at a time. Hunger is not satisfied by eating twenty-one meals in one sitting once a week. The body needs a steady diet to remain strong. So does the soul. When God sent food to his people in the wilderness, he didn’t provide loaves already made. Instead, he sent them manna in the shape of *“thin flakes like frost on the ground”* (Exodus 16:14).

God gave manna in limited portions.

God sends spiritual food the same way. He opens the heavens with just enough nutrients for today’s hunger. He provides *“a rule for this, a rule for that; a little here, a little there”* (Isaiah 28:10).

Don’t be discouraged if your reading reaps a small harvest. Some days a lesser portion is all that is needed. What is important is to search every day for that day’s message. A steady diet of God’s Word over a lifetime builds a healthy soul and mind.

It’s much like the little girl who returned from her first day at school feeling a bit dejected. Her mom asked, “Did you learn anything?”

“Apparently not enough,” the girl responded. “I have to go back tomorrow, and the next day, and the next . . .”

Such is the case with learning. And such is the case with Bible study. Understanding comes little by little over a lifetime.

There is a third step in understanding the Bible. After the asking and seeking comes the knocking. After you ask and search, *“knock and the door will be opened to you”* (Matthew 7:7).

To knock is to stand at God's door. To make yourself available. To climb the steps, cross the porch, stand at the doorway, and volunteer. Knocking goes beyond the realm of thinking and into the realm of acting.

To knock is to ask, *What can I do? How can I obey? Where can I go?*

It's one thing to know what to do. It's another to do it. But for those who do it—those who choose to obey—a special reward awaits them.

“Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:25).

What a promise. Blessings come to those who do what they read in God's Word! It's the same with medicine. If you only read the label but ignore the pills, it won't help. It's the same with food. If you only read the recipe but never cook, you won't be fed. And it's the same with the Bible. If you only read the words but never obey, you'll never know the joy God has promised.

Ask. Search. Knock. Simple, isn't it? So why don't you give it a try? If you do, you'll see why the Bible is the most remarkable book in history.

INTRODUCTION TO *The Book of Psalms*

Worship. In two thousand years we haven't worked out the kinks. We still struggle for the right words in prayer. We still fumble over Scripture. We don't know when to kneel. We don't know when to stand. We don't know how to pray.

Worship is a daunting task.

For that reason, God gave us the Psalms—a praise book for God's people. The Psalms could be titled *God's Book of Common Prayer*. This collection of hymns and petitions are strung together by one thread—a heart hungry for God.

Some are defiant. Others are reverent. Some are to be sung. Others are to be prayed. Some are intensely personal. Others are written as if the whole world would use them. Some were penned in caves, others in temples.

But all have one purpose—to give us the words to say when we stand before God.

The very variety should remind us that worship is personal. No secret formula exists. What moves you may stymie another. Each worships differently. But each should worship.

This book will help you do just that.

LIFE LESSONS

Here is a hint. Don't just read the prayers of these saints, pray them. Experience their energy. Imitate their honesty. Enjoy their creativity. Let these souls lead you in worship.

And let's remember. The language of worship is not polished, perfect, or advanced. It's just honest.

AUTHOR AND DATE

The book of Psalms consists of 150 individual “psalms” or “hymns” that were written over the span of a century (c. 1440–430 BC) before being compiled into the form we have today sometime during the third century BC. Most of the psalms contain a “superscription” that likely indicates the author (though, in some cases, the name might also refer to a dedication or a collection). King David is listed as the author of 73 psalms, thirteen of which are closely associated with events in his life (3; 7; 18; 34; 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; 60; 63; 142). Asaph, one of David's choir-masters, is the author of twelve psalms (50; 73–83). The sons of Korah, who served in the Temple as musicians, authored ten (42–43; 45–49; 84–85; 87), with one psalm (88) being attributed to Heman the Ezrahite, who was a leading figure in their family. King Solomon composed two psalms (72; 127), and his counselor Ethan the Ezrahite wrote one (89). The oldest psalm (90) was written by Moses. The remaining “orphan” psalms list no author.

SITUATION

The psalms were originally hymns meant to be sung or recited during Temple worship or on other specific occasions. They were often set to music, and many of the superscriptions contain musical notations or instructions on how they were intended to be used in worship. The psalms can generally be divided into several types: (1) *psalms of praise*, which express worship and admiration of God; (2) *psalms of enthronement*, which celebrate God's sovereign rule; (3) *psalms of Zion*,

which exalt Mount Zion, God’s dwelling place in Jerusalem; (4) *psalms of lament*, in which the author (or nation as a whole) cries out to God for deliverance from distress; (5) *psalms of thanksgiving*, in which the author (or nation) praises God for his acts of deliverance; (6) *psalms of royalty*, which deal with matters relating to earthly kings and the divine kingship of God; (7) *psalms of pilgrimage*, or “songs of ascent,” which the Jewish people sang when “going up” to Jerusalem for the annual festivals; (8) *psalms of wisdom*, which uphold the virtues of godliness and proclaim God’s rewards for righteous living; (9) *psalms of the law*, which extol the virtues contained in God’s law (the Torah); and (10) *psalms of restoration*, which look forward to the future restoration of God’s people.

KEY THEMES

- God is worthy of all worship.
- God will defend his people against their enemies.
- Being in relationship with God is the key to all joy and security.

KEY VERSES

I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds (Psalm 9:1).

CONTENTS

- I. Book One (1:1–41:13)
- II. Book Two (42:1–72:20)
- III. Book Three (73:1–89:52)
- IV. Book Four (90:1–106:48)
- V. Book Five (107:1–150:6)



LESSON ONE

THE PATH OF
RIGHTEOUSNESS

*The LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the ungodly shall perish.*

PSALM 1:6 NKJV

REFLECTION

The phrase “a fork in the road” refers to a crucial time in life where you must make a major decision that you know will impact your future. What are some of these decisions that you have made in your life? How did you ultimately decide what was the correct course to take?

SITUATION

Psalms 1 and 2, composed by an unknown author, serve as a type of prologue or introduction to the entire book of Psalms. The author invites his readers to take delight in the Lord, follow his ways, and continually strive to have a pure heart before him. Leading such a life leads to fruitfulness, joy, and blessings from God. But the way of the wicked leads to another end: futility, sorrow, and judgment. The author’s message is clear: seek the path of righteousness!

OBSERVATION

Read Psalm 1:1–6 from the New International Version or the New King James Version.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

¹Blessed is the one

 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take

 or sit in the company of mockers,

²but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,

and who meditates on his law day and night.

³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.

⁴ Not so the wicked!

They are like chaff
that the wind blows away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION

¹ Blessed is the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

² But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.

³ He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.

⁴ The ungodly are not so,
But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

⁶ For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

EXPLORATION

1. What is the difference between a good person and a wicked person?

2. What does it mean to “delight” in the law of the Lord?

3. How can righteous people remain pure?

4. What are the kinds of fruit that God’s people produce?

5. What future awaits unrighteous people?

6. What are the end results of righteous living and selfish living?

INSPIRATION

Jesus once said, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of” (Luke 6:45). . . .

The heart is the center of the spiritual life. If the fruit of a tree is bad, you don’t try to fix the fruit; you treat the roots. And if a person’s actions are evil, it’s not enough to change habits; you have to go deeper. You have to go to the heart of the problem, which is the problem of the heart. That is why the state of the heart is so critical. What is the state of yours?

When someone barks at you, do you bark back or bite your tongue? That depends on the state of your heart.

When your schedule is too tight or your to-do list too long, do you lose your cool or keep it? That depends on the state of your heart.

When you are offered a morsel of gossip marinated in slander, do you turn it down or pass it on? That depends on the state of your heart.

Do you see the bag lady on the street as a burden on society or as an opportunity for God? That, too, depends on the state of your heart.

The state of your heart dictates whether you harbor a grudge or give grace, seek self-pity or seek Christ, drink human misery or taste God’s mercy. No wonder, then, the wise man begs, “Above all else, guard your heart” (Proverbs 4:23).

David’s prayer should be ours: “Create in me a pure heart, O God” (Psalm 51:10).

And Jesus’ statement rings true: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

LIFE LESSONS

Note the order of this beatitude: first purify the heart, then you will see God. Clean the refinery, and the result will be a pure product. (From *The Applause of Heaven* by Max Lucado.)

REACTION

7. Why is it important for you to guard your heart?

8. How can you evaluate the condition of your heart?

9. How can you protect yourself from evil influences?

10. What habits or actions do you want to work on eliminating from your life?

11. What fruit would you like God to produce in your life?

12. When is it difficult for you to guard your heart?

LIFE LESSONS

Psalm 1 presents us with two paths that we can take in life. We can take the way of the righteous, or we can go the way of the wicked. Righteous people are blessed, God-centered, Word-saturated, grounded, and prosperous. The wicked are empty, wind-blown, and vulnerable to judgment. The way of the righteous is lived under God’s watchful care. The other way is self-centered and self-directed. Jesus also spoke of only two ways to go through life. We can either go through the “narrow gate,” which leads to life, or through the “broad gate,” which leads to destruction (see Matthew 7:13–14). The simplicity of the two ways compels each of us to make the crucial choice: *which way will we choose?* Will we follow our own agenda, or will we completely and wholeheartedly submit to Christ? Two paths . . . but only one choice.

DEVOTION

Father, we know that selfishness doesn’t belong in our hearts. May your Word enlighten us and lead us to the path of righteousness. Open our eyes to our weaknesses and give us the courage to change what needs to be changed. Help us to bear lasting fruit for your kingdom.

JOURNALING

In what area of your life do you need to more completely pursue God's path of righteousness?

FOR FURTHER READING

To complete the book of Psalms during this twelve-part study, read Psalms 1–14. For more Bible passages about righteousness, read Proverbs 11:18; Hosea 10:12; Matthew 5:6; Romans 1:17; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Philippians 1:9–11; 1 Timothy 6:11; and James 3:17–18.