

Worship *in the* Psalms



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Psalms 90:1, 2; 100:1–5; 73; 49; 141:2; 20:3; 54:6; 78:1–8.*

Memory Text: “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God” (*Psalm 84:1, 2, NIV*).

The Hebrew word translated as “Psalms” comes from a root word that means “to sing with instrumental accompaniment.” Thus, the Psalms were songs, songs that were intricately part of the worship of Israel. Though we have the lyrics (the Psalms themselves), we do not have the music. How fascinating it would be to hear these songs, in their original tongue, sung with the music that first accompanied them.

The Psalms themselves are rich and deep, covering a wide range of topics and emotions, dealing with everything from the corporate history of Israel to the songwriter’s most intimate and personal pain. In that sense, they speak to us because, though as a church we are part of the long history that goes back to Israel, we also are individuals with our own private pain. It is doubtful that any of us could not relate at some time or another to some of the agony expressed in the Psalms. At the same time, though, it is crucial that we reach out and grasp the hope expressed in them.

This week we will look at the Psalms and some of the themes found in them and how these themes relate to the question of worship and what it means for us today.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, August 13.*

Worship the Lord, Our Maker

The Psalms of praise describe who God is and why He is worthy of worship. They declare His greatness, and call worshipers to come with joyful adoration to honor Him.

What do the following examples have in common? *Pss. 90:1, 2; 95:1–6; 100:1–5.*

Psalm 19 is another song in praise of God as Creator. What is its essential message, and why is this message especially important for us today, at a time when many argue that we exist only by chance alone as the result of natural and unguided forces?

Notice how the psalmist suddenly shifts from discussing God’s glory revealed in the heavens to His revealed word. This abrupt transition is intentional. Read *John 1:1–3; Col. 1:16, 17; Heb. 1:1–3*. What great truth is the psalmist emphasizing?

The same God who spoke the world into existence also gave the moral, physical, and social laws needed to govern the human family. The Old Testament Scriptures clearly identify God as both the Creator of the world and the Giver of the Written Law. The New Testament writers see Jesus Christ as the Creator and the Giver of the Law, as well as the Word made flesh, who lived among His creatures in order to reveal the Father to them and to die as their Substitute. Thus, He alone is worthy of adoration and worship.

Hence, we see in the Psalms one of the foundational principles of worship as seen in the first angel’s message (*Rev. 14:7*). We worship the Lord because He is our Creator, and directly tied to His role as Creator is His role as our Redeemer (*Rev. 14:6*). Creator and Redeemer—if these are not reasons to praise and worship Him, what are?

How can you seek to get to know the Lord better through His created works?

The Lesson in Brief

▶ **Key Text:** *Psalm 84:1, 2*

▶ **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline the wide variety of emotions and personal, as well as corporate, content of the themes addressed in the Psalms.

Feel: Identify with the passionate laments and soaring praises of these deeply personal worship songs.

Do: Use the sanctuary imagery of the Psalms to connect with the Creator, Judge, Sacrificial Lamb, and King.

▶ **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Hymnal as Heartbeat

A How do the Psalms address the many problems that trouble us personally and as a church?

B What is the value of addressing such varied themes as history, social injustice, personal betrayal, law, Creation, and eternal judgment in corporate worship songs?

II. Feel: From Laments to Celebration

A How do the Psalms help to voice the deepest cries of the heart? Why is it important to connect personally with God in these intimate and stirring ways?

B How do the Psalms provide an important means for group worship? How do the themes in the Psalms help to bring a community together and strengthen it in its search for a communal relationship to God?

III. Do: Sanctuary Imagery

It's not hard to imagine how many of the Psalms were used in the context of sanctuary worship because of the sanctuary imagery that appears throughout them. However, what vital place does sanctuary imagery play today in our daily and church worship services?

▶ **Summary:** The Psalms give voice to the heart cries of seekers after God in a living dialogue of pleas, assurance, blessing, praise, and celebration.

Judgment From His Sanctuary

While many psalms were written for public worship, many others are prayers of personal distress and suffering. These laments typically contain a description of the problem, the sufferer's plea for help, and an affirmation of, and reasons for, the writer's trust in God.

In Psalm 73, the petitioner is angry that the wicked prosper and are at ease while he suffers injustice.

Read the psalmist's complaint in Psalm 73. What happened that brought about a change in his attitude toward the problem? What message can we take from this for ourselves, as Seventh-day Adventists, with our understanding of Christ's ministry in the heavenly sanctuary and the truths about God and the plan of salvation that this ministry reveals? *See Dan. 7:9, 10, 13, 14, 25, 26.*

Judgment in the Psalms, as in the Bible as a whole, is a double-edged sword: deserved punishment on the wicked and the defense of the oppressed and humble (*Pss. 7:9, 10; 9:7–12; 75:2; 94:1–3, 20–22; 98:9*). In Psalm 68:24, the wicked are pictured as watching God enter the sanctuary in a grand procession. God's throne, representing justice and mercy, is symbolized in the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place of the sanctuary. Thus, the sanctuary, the place of worship, becomes a haven of refuge for the distressed.

Here, too, we see the theme of judgment echoed in the first angel's message: "Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come . . ." (*Rev. 14:7*). One of the things that makes God so worthy of our worship is that we can indeed trust that in the end, not only will judgment come but it will be just and righteous, nothing like the fallible and imperfect justice meted out even in the best human courts. From the death of Abel, whose blood cried out from the ground (*Gen. 4:10*), up through today and on to the last day of fallen human history, the crimes, the unfairness, and the inequities of this world do indeed cry out for justice. The good news is that we can trust that, in His time and way, God will make all things right, however hard it is for us to see and understand now (*see 1 Cor. 4:5*).

Have you seen injustice? Have you been the victim of injustice? In what ways can you learn to trust in God, to trust in the promise of ultimate and righteous justice that is so lacking in the world now?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Psalms help us to dialogue with God through the structures and imagery of poetry, regarding such issues as injustice, betrayal, judgment, and history, as well as praise for His created world and celebration of His Lordship. Poetry and music are especially apt avenues for private and collective worship experiences.

Just for Teachers: Use the following exercise to help your class to explore the value of word imagery and poetry in communicating truths of God.

Opening Activity: William Wordsworth defined poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origins from emotion recollected in tranquility.” Poetry is language compressed into a form that communicates a great deal to our hearts and minds with few words. Much of the power of poetry comes from sensory images that we associate with whole experiences. For example, when Psalm 19:4–6 refers to the sun as a new husband leaping from his honeymoon bed or as a champion joyfully racing to the finish line, we have a picture of the sun as a strong, deeply happy man, full of life and ready to take on the world. When this image is associated with the Word of God, His power, energy, and glory spreading everywhere, warming the earth even in silent majesty, a fresh new picture of God is presented to our senses. When this image is extended to a description of God’s law, we are better able to understand a very abstract concept that in some contexts is scary and threatening.

Consider This: Divide your class into five groups and assign each group several verses from Psalm 19:7–14. (Encourage the use of several versions, if possible. *The Message* is especially good.) Ask each group to draw pictures (or mime an illustration) that demonstrate what the law of God is like, as described in their section of verses. Collect the pictures or ask those who are acting out a demonstration to come up front. Ask the class to discuss these images and how they enrich their understanding of the Creator as lawgiver.

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: One possible means of presenting the following material is to divide it among five groups. Ask each group to discuss the

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“Like the Beasts That Perish”

As we saw yesterday, and as we all know too well, so much unfairness and injustice reign in this world. A relatively small percentage of people live in luxury, in contrast to vast multitudes who struggle to barely eke out an existence. The gap between the rich and poor seems to grow steadily; and what makes it worse is that so often the rich get richer by exploiting the poor. All through the Bible, the Lord has warned about this exploitation and injustice. Those who are guilty of such exploitation, and who do not repent and turn away, will have a lot to answer for on Judgment Day.

Read Psalm 49. How does this tie in with what we read yesterday? What is the basic message of this psalm? Where do we find the gospel here? What ultimate and final hope is presented?

It is so easy to get caught up in the things of this world, especially if you have many things in this world as do the rich. Yet, as the psalm says, and as we all should know by now, the things of this world are so fleeting, so temporary, so easily lost. Overnight, everything for which you have worked, everything you have struggled to attain, everything that is important to you, can be taken away, lost, destroyed. We all live on the edge of a precipice, at least in this life. Fortunately, as this psalm shows, and as so much of the rest of the Bible attests, this life is not all that there is.

Focus on verses 7–9 of this psalm. Given the immediate context, what is it saying? How does it show how all of us, rich or poor, are ultimately dependent upon Christ for salvation?

Do you ever find yourself jealous of those who have more than you do? If so, why is it so important to surrender those feelings to the Lord? How do such emotions interfere with your spiritual life, with your relationship to God, and your faith in general? How can focusing on Jesus, the Cross, and salvation help to free you from the tyranny of jealousy?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

theme assigned to them and then find a piece of music in the hymnal that will illustrate their theme. Be sure to reserve enough class time for each group to present their findings to the class. You may choose to use concrete representations for what may seem like a list of abstract concepts dealt with in Psalms to help your class members identify with these concepts. For example, a leaf or rock can illustrate the theme of nature, and a simple musical instrument can illustrate praise and celebration.

Bible Commentary

I. Creator of the Natural World *(Review Psalms 65, 104, and 139:13–18 with your class.)*

The natural world is a place where we often go to see God’s presence and power. Paul, in Romans 1:20, acknowledges that everyone can see God’s invisible attributes in creation, and that this leaves no one with the excuse that they couldn’t know God and give Him glory. Dwelling on what God has done, as reflected in the beautiful surroundings of His creation, awakens awe and amazement in God’s creative power, appreciation of His sense of beauty and perfection, and joy in His generous gifts.

According to Ellen White, Christ, even as a boy, loved to take His few hours of leisure and spend them in nature, communing with His Father, praying, studying Scripture, and singing praises. He was happy, surrounded by nature’s beauty and blessings. “How lovely is Your tabernacle,” we can almost hear Him sing. “My soul longs, yes, even faints for the courts of the Lord. . . . Even the sparrow has found a home and the swallow a nest for herself, . . . even Your altars, O Lord of hosts, My King and my God” (*Ps. 84:1–3, NKJV*).

Consider This: What aspects of the natural world are most impressive to you and inspire you to sing? How does recounting our appreciation for God’s creation inspire communal faith?

II. Justice and Judgment *(Review Psalms 49, 73, 120, and 139 with your class.)*

At times, a beautiful praising hymn, such as Psalm 139, is interrupted with passionate outbursts against the wicked. Arresting is the image of David singing beautiful lyrical verse about God’s goodness and presence at every turn, even on the “wings of the morning,” and then suddenly erupting into

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Worship and the Sanctuary

“Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice” (Ps. 141:2). What imagery is being used here? To what is this verse pointing?

The entire Old Testament sanctuary service centered around the concept of sacrifice. However much the enemy of souls perverted it, even to the point where people were sacrificing their own children in order (they believed) to appease an angry god (or gods), the sacrificial system was intended to point to the death of Jesus on behalf of all humanity. It was to show the futility of using our own works to save us; it was to show that the cost of sin was the life of an innocent victim; it was to show that the Lord had a plan whereby sinners could be forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by the Lord through His grace.

It is no wonder, then, that many of the psalms, so central to Israel’s worship, would use images and examples from the sanctuary service. *See Pss. 20:3, 43:4, 51:19, 54:6, 118:27, 134:2, 141:2.*

Dwell on the sanctuary service: the sacrifice of the animals, the ministry of the priests, the furniture in the courtyard, and the Holy and Most Holy Places. What sacred truths can we draw from this earthly and temporary system about the work of Jesus on our behalf? Why should these truths be so central to our worship of the Lord?

Read Psalm 40:6–8 and Hebrews 10:1–13. How does Paul connect Psalm 40:8 with the sacrificial system?

The author’s point is that it is through Christ, not through the death of animals, that we have salvation. Only through Christ is there true forgiveness of sin. The whole earthly system was merely a precursor to what Jesus would do on behalf of all humanity. He was telling his audience, most likely Jewish believers in Jesus, that they needed to look away from the earthly system and instead focus their attention and worship on Jesus. In other words, though the whole sanctuary service was to point to Christ, as believers they needed to move away from the symbols toward the reality, which was Jesus and His ministry for them in the heavenly sanctuary after His atoning death.

How can we be sure that we do not make worship and the things of worship ends in themselves? How can we make sure that every aspect of our worship points us toward Jesus and His work on our behalf?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

passionate outcries against evildoers. “Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God!” he declares. “Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You?” (*Ps. 139:19, 21, NKJV*). Then, in another swift turn of thought, David ends his hymn with a fervent plea for God to search His heart and eradicate any evil that might be lurking there.

It seems that David is just as fervent in his hatred of the wicked as he is in his love of God. While this may jar our sensibilities at first, there is great assurance in God’s determination to deal justly with evil. David found not only beauty and peace in the wilderness but protection and security from evil. He not only longed for peace and safety but did what he could to bring about God’s style of justice and security for everyone in his kingdom. David and the other psalmists recognized that, as God’s servants, we must identify with Him and assist in His work of healing oppression, rather than identify with wicked men and their work of destruction.

Consider This: What is intended by the assurances that justice and judgment will be dealt to the wicked? Why is this theme an important one for corporate worship?

III. History (*Review Psalms 78, 106, and 114 with your class.*)

God gave Moses a song to teach the people just before he died. It was a lengthy recitation of how God had delivered Israel, their many rebellions, and the lessons they had learned about God’s character during their years of wandering in the desert. (*See Deuteronomy 31:15–32:47.*) On another occasion, after the return of the exiles to Jerusalem, Ezra organized a fast for repentance, and the Levites sang a similar recitation of God’s dealings with His people (*Nehemiah 9*). In both circumstances Israel had come to the end of a bitter exile from their land and were poised at the crossroads that promised a new beginning. It was a critical time to review their history.

These recitations were not the stories of individuals; they were the stories of how a people had come to be in the place where they were. They were shared histories. There was great danger in forgetting what God had done and the lessons that had been learned at such great cost. There would be no new beginning, unless these lessons were fresh in their minds and hearts.

Consider This: Why is it important that God’s people today recite the history they have shared with God’s people throughout the ages? What important threshold do we stand upon today that makes it critical for us to keep God’s history lessons fresh in our minds?

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Lest We Forget!

Three of the longer psalms, Psalms 78, 105, and 106, are great hymns that were to be sung or recited to remind Israel of God’s leading in the past.

Read Psalm 78:1–8. According to this passage, why does God want the people to remember their history? Read also Deut. 6:6–9, 1 Cor. 10:11. How can we take that same principle and apply it to ourselves in our own context and experience, which is so different from theirs?

One of the ways God reveals Himself is through history. Yet, each generation must experience Him anew based on that history. For that reason, not only music but the proclamation of the Word of God in worship is vital to both old and new generations so that they may keep before them His past leading. Psalm 78 is a warning that history must not repeat itself, but at the same time it is a heartwarming reminder of God’s gracious dealings with His wayward people. There seems to be an urgency in the imperative promise, “Telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength” (*vs. 4, NKJV*). Psalm 105:2 calls us to “Sing psalms to Him” and “Talk of all His wondrous works” (*NKJV; emphasis added*).

The longest poem in the psalter, Psalm 119, contains the frequent refrain, “Teach me thy statutes,” indicating the importance of Scripture as the basis for teaching godly living and righteousness. Paul echoes this thought when he instructs the young preacher, Timothy, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction” (*2 Tim. 3:16, NKJV*).

Paul charges Timothy to “preach the word” (*2 Tim. 4:2, NKJV*). To neglect to proclaim the Word in worship is to dilute the power of the gospel to reach hearts, to change lives, and to enrich the worship experience of believers.

How often have you had the experience of the Lord doing something wonderful and miraculous in your life, only to quickly forget it and show fear and lack of faith when a new crisis arose? Whether in corporate worship or in your own private worship, how can you learn to keep fresh in your mind God’s leading in your life? Why is this so important to do?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Use the following activities to help to bring the practical applications of the themes of the Psalms home to your class members.

- 1 Listen to the songs that were written by class members during the past week.
- 2 What deliverance experiences does your community share? Discuss these experiences and then divide your class in two, to read responsively no. 728 in *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*, “Let the Redeemed Thank the Lord,” derived from Psalm 107. How does it feel to read from the Scriptures together? Why is coming together as a community to rejoice in deliverance such a valuable worship experience?
- 3 How often do you experience a variety of the themes presented in the Psalms in your worship services today? How often do you use responsive readings (present in the back of *The Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal*) in your church? Discuss together how you as a class might increase the opportunities available in your church services to use the Psalms, poetry, and music drawn from Scriptures or from your own experiences.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Suggest the following ideas to help your class to put the class discussion into practice during the following weeks or months.

- 1 Write your own version of Psalm 136 using major events in your life as milestones that illustrate how “His love endures forever.” Share this psalm with a family member who has a similar life history and who needs an extra boost toward faith this week.
- 2 Choose five psalms that deal with nature. Read one of these psalms before you go on a walk each day, and meditate on these scriptures as you take your daily exercise in the week ahead.
- 3 What special deliverances has your family experienced? Plan a few activities to celebrate God’s deliverance in your life, such as a meal of remembrance or the creation of a family album or wall hanging commemorating God’s goodness to you.
- 4 Rewrite a few portions of some of the sanctuary imagery in Psalms in light of the “new and living way” that has been opened for us to approach God. Share them with the rest of the class.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Creation,” pp. 44–51, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*; “Poetry and Song,” pp. 159–168, in *Education*; “Forgetfulness,” pp. 107–115, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8.

“The Book of Psalms fulfills a unique role in the Bible. . . . [The Psalms] function in the Scriptures as the heartbeat of Israel’s religion. In this book of prayers the covenant people found their stairway to heaven. It reaches from the lowest depths of human agony and suffering to the highest joys of communion with God. Laments and cries of despair exchange with hymns of thanksgiving and praise. . . . This living interchange between man and God is perhaps the deeper reason why the Book of Psalms has been cherished as the invaluable jewel in the Hebrew Bible by seekers after God in all ages.” Further, they are a “disclosure of God’s own heart. . . . They stand as inspired examples of how God desires us all to respond by faith to the authentic revelations of Himself and of His deeds in the books of Moses.”—Hans K. LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: First Impressions, 1983), pp. 3, 4.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ It is one thing to trust in the justice of God’s ultimate judgment at the end of time—we have to trust in that hope and promise. At the same time, does this mean that we do not need to work for justice and judgment now because we know that it will ultimately come by God? How do we strike a right balance between seeking justice now and knowing that one day it will come?
- ❷ Further discuss the question at the end of Wednesday’s lesson regarding worship and the forms of worship in church. How is it possible that things such as music, preaching, liturgy, and so forth could become ends in themselves as opposed to being the means of pointing us toward the Lord? So often we can mistake the symbols for the reality behind the symbols. How can we protect ourselves against this danger in our own worship services?