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Daily Bible Guide – 40 Days of Faith, 2015

I'm writing on the way back from a short trip to Arizona, where about forty of us from around the country began a year-long learning experience on the integration of faith and our working lives. During our first conference, we had several lectures and discussions that were primarily *informational*. Scholars and experts shared their perspective on the relationships between theology and everyday work. These sessions were sometimes dry, but often illuminating.

Much better was the *experiential* learning, where we were able to come and see people finding meaning and purpose in their work, using their interests and skills for the common good. We toured a housing development that combines innovative urban planning, sustainable agriculture, and aesthetic delight. We listened to young adults discuss a leadership development program that combines spiritual and professional development. We exercised in a studio that brings low cost, accessible yoga to all people. These experiences helped us try on new ideas for size and re-imagine the kind of beautiful integration of values and faith and work and joy that is possible for us all.

My hope is that this Bible guide will bring you the best of both of these types of learning experiences. There will be information each day to teach you a few things about these ancient psalms that you might not have known. But the main goal is to encourage a deep experience with these texts that will reshape how you pray and think about your relationship to yourself, to your world, and even to God.

We'll read these passages as outsiders, analyzing what they teach us about people and God and history. And we'll try to step inside them, making these prayers our prayers, even changing pronouns and names in order to do so. It is one thing to look at clothes on the rack, read the information on their tags, and check out their price. It's far more interesting, though, to go into the dressing room and try them on, maybe even wear them to a party. That's what the clothes are for, after all.

Here's how to proceed.

Each day there will be a passage from the Bible, in this case a single psalm from the New Living Translation. For the busy people in our midst or the families with young children, I've bolded a single verse each day as well. It's like a "tweetable" – a particularly memorable or significant line that might be worth reading and remembering, even if you don't read or understand the whole thing. Start by reading the psalm, or the bolded verse.

This will be followed by two sections you can read:

- **Points of Interest**—a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren't meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself.
- **Taking It Home**—every day, we'll have two suggestions of ways we could integrate this passage into our daily lives. There'll be an invitation to go back and pray the psalm as if it were your own prayer. The psalms have been used as a prayer guide this way for centuries, so you'll get the chance

to try out that experience for yourself. There will also be an experiment we could try out or a topic to pray about. These invitations will focus on one of these areas:

- *For you:* How does this passage apply to you or your family?
- *For your six:* Consider six of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don't seem to have much of a direct connection to God, but for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
- *For our church:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community?
- *For our city:* What does the passage say about or to our entire city?

The Daily Bible Guide, while it can certainly be a standalone product, is designed to be one component of a bigger package called 40 Days of Faith, a six-week faith experiment that includes sermons, small group discussions, further prayer exercises, and more. You can learn more about the full 40 Days of Faith in this year's User's Manual, which is usually available nearby wherever you found this guide. And the guide itself is available in various forms: paper, PDF, and blog. PDFs are available at [www.bostonvineyard.org](http://www.bostonvineyard.org), and it's hosted on line at my blog, [aworldofstories.com](http://aworldofstories.com).

This guide stands in the tradition created by my colleague Brian Acker Housman, who has written several others, wrote parts of the explanation I've included above, and developed the format we're using that has proven so helpful for hundreds of people. Thank you, Brian, for your extraordinary work!

## About the Psalms

The Psalms are a collection of one hundred and fifty poems written in Hebrew between the tenth and fourth centuries B.C. and collected into their current prayer book form around the end of that period. The word "psalm" is from a Greek word for songs accompanied by stringed instruments. This reminds us that these poems weren't written to be studied or read. They were first written to be sung and prayed – both privately by individuals trying to connect with God amidst the ups and downs of their lives, and publicly by faith communities gathering to celebrate or pray or mourn.

The one hundred and fifty Psalms are organized in five books. This season, we'll be reading the first book of Psalms, numbers one through forty-one. The majority of these Psalms are associated with Israel's most celebrated king, King David, who reigned around 1,000 B.C. David is celebrated in epic terms in the Bible, as a great ruler/warrior/poet/musician. We have no idea whether David wrote any of these Psalms or not, but Psalms 3-41, as well as others later in the book, are associated with David and sometimes with particular moments in his life, which we'll highlight on occasion. These connections to David, as well as recommendations for the Psalm's music and use in public worship, are often included in opening inscriptions, which were written after the Psalms themselves and attached to them.

As poems first written in another language, for public and private worship in a very different context, these psalms often befuddle me. I find their language and attitudes sometimes delightful and inspiring and at other times shocking or just confusing. I'll try to give you some cross-cultural tips along the way to engage these poems in your own time and place. But notice whatever reaction you have as you read or even try to pray these psalms. If you're so inclined, I'd encourage you to tell God the reaction you're having and to ask God to teach you what to make of it. We never learn and grow as much as when we're fruitfully troubled!

But as foreign as these psalms can sometimes feel, they can also be remarkably timeless and powerful too. My first graduate school teacher in the Bible was a remarkable man named Steve Hayner, who just this year

died after a battle with pancreatic cancer. Dr. Hayner said two things about the Psalms that have stayed with me for nearly twenty years and have proven true in my experience with these poems over that same period.

He said that the Psalms teach us that worship is much broader than what we imagine that word to imply. Worship isn't just singing or participating in public religious services. Worship is living our whole lives with our face, rather than our back, turned toward God. The Psalms take several literary forms, but one of the most common – more than half of the psalms we'll examine – is called lament or complaint. Something is wrong in a person's life or community, and people vent about said wrong to God and see where that takes them. Nothing is prettied up for these prayers. They show us all of life lived out while looking at and talking to God, rather than walking away. That's the "worship" the Psalms lead us into.

Secondly, my teacher said that people who read the Psalms over a life time find that two things happen to them over time. They become at home with themselves and at home with God. They become comfortable in their own skin and circumstances, the good and bad and everything in between. And they become comfortable with a living God who is eager to interact with us around all aspects of our experience.

My hope is that as you read these Psalms and this guide, and try on these prayers and insights for yourself, that you'll find just this happening. That you'll become more at home with yourself and more at home with God.

So cue up your string quartet or banjo, and let's begin.

## Monday, February 23 – Psalm 1

Oh, the joys of those who do not  
follow the advice of the wicked,  
or stand around with sinners,  
or join in with mockers.

<sup>2</sup> But they delight in the law of the LORD,  
meditating on it day and night.

<sup>3</sup> **They are like trees planted along the riverbank,  
bearing fruit each season.**

**Their leaves never wither,  
and they prosper in all they do.**

<sup>4</sup> But not the wicked!  
They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.

<sup>5</sup> They will be condemned at the time of judgment.  
Sinners will have no place among the godly.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD watches over the path of the godly,  
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.

### Points of Interest:

#### **Poetic Note of the Day** – *Sinners and mockers, meditation and delight*

Rhyme and rhythm are a big part of what makes English poetry work. Less so in Hebrew. Instead, authors use repetition and interesting structures to make their words poetic. When the psalmist says something more than once, we're invited to linger on the thought for a bit longer than we might have and also explore the meaning of what's being said from more than one angle. So when we hear about the wicked and the sinners and the mockers, it's not three different categories of people but a way of fleshing out this one description of folks we might not want to lean on for advice and join in their sarcasm and insults. The same holds true for meditation and delight. When I think of meditating on what God has to say day and night, I think of quiet and serious prayer. Hearing that second word *delight* makes me think of things like eating and like play. Can I listen to God and read the Bible in that spirit?

#### **Bible Reference of the Day** – *“the law of the lord”*

What am I invited to meditate and delight in that will bring me such joy? The law of the Lord. At first, this is surprising to me. Thinking about God's rules is supposed to make me so satisfied? A couple of things might help here. The law of the Lord is *torah* in Hebrew, which can refer to Old Testament commands, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, or all of God's teaching and guidance. (Bellinger and Brueggemann, *Psalms*) It's this last meaning that makes the most sense to me here. I can fill my ears with the sarcasm and rudeness of my least favorite news commentators and bloggers and

acquaintances, or I can listen to and enjoy everything that God has to teach me – from the Bible and from any other source. It’s the latter that will bring me joy, again and again. At least, that’s been my experience.

### **Image of the Day** – *trees planted by the river*

This image in our verse of the day inspires me. Prospering or withering, health and un-health, vibrancy and fruit or not – these are the range of possibilities for our life as a metaphorical tree. While the stakes seem high, I like that it’s not a result of who I am but where I’m planted in and what I’m soaking in. Scholars think this psalm is meant to serve as an introduction to the entire 150-psalm collection. The invitation is that if we read and pray these psalms as an opportunity to listen to and soak in what God has to say, life will go well for us. We’ll grow spiritually healthy and strong, with something useful to offer in all times and season.

### **Disturbingly Strong Judgment of the Day** – *“the wicked” versus the godly...*

The overall structure of this poem is a parallel contrast between two groups, summed up in the final verse as the “wicked” and the “godly.” Breaking people up into these two groups, and being so bold as to identify with the better of the two, feels a little jarring to me, smacking of some of the worst tendencies of the religious. That said, if it is God – and not you or me or anyone else – doing the judging, there are a couple of things I find reassuring. One, it’s good to know that God sees and knows us all, that he’s aware of all the goodness and badness that me and everyone else on earth thinks and does. And it’s good to know that as I push toward goodness, toward God’s paths for me, that God watches over me. And to be honest, the idea of a time when all human nastiness – my own included – will be disappeared, scattered like the wind, is pretty comforting as well.

### **Taking It Home:**

*Pray this psalm* – As we’ll invite you to each day, try praying this psalm out loud as your own prayer. I’ve heard rabbis comment that with these psalms of “the godly,” we can pray them aspirationally as well. “I will delight...” or even “I would like to delight on the law of the Lord.” And “Lord, please watch over my path and make it godly.”

*For you* – As you start the 40 Days of Faith, invite God to give you joy and growth and vibrancy in this season of soaking in everything God has to say to you.

## **Tuesday, February 24 – Psalm 2**

### <sup>1</sup> **Why are the nations so angry?**

#### **Why do they waste their time with futile plans?**

<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth prepare for battle;  
the rulers plot together  
against the LORD  
and against his anointed one.

<sup>3</sup> “Let us break their chains,” they cry,  
“and free ourselves from slavery to God.”

- <sup>4</sup> But the one who rules in heaven laughs.  
The Lord scoffs at them.
- <sup>5</sup> Then in anger he rebukes them,  
terrifying them with his fierce fury.
- <sup>6</sup> For the Lord declares, "I have placed my chosen king on the throne  
in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain."
- <sup>7</sup> The king proclaims the LORD's decree:  
"The LORD said to me, 'You are my son.  
Today I have become your Father.
- <sup>8</sup> Only ask, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,  
the whole earth as your possession.
- <sup>9</sup> You will break them with an iron rod  
and smash them like clay pots.'"
- <sup>10</sup> Now then, you kings, act wisely!  
Be warned, you rulers of the earth!
- <sup>11</sup> Serve the LORD with reverent fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.
- <sup>12</sup> Submit to God's royal son, or he will become angry,  
and you will be destroyed in the midst of all your activities—  
for his anger flares up in an instant.  
But what joy for all who take refuge in him!

## Points of Interest:

### **Question of the Day** – *Why is everyone so violent?*

This psalm was likely written for an ancient Israeli coronation, a bit like a presidential inauguration in our context. The pressing question in our verse of the day is why in the world all the peoples of the world and their governments are so angry, violent and wasteful. I think of bridges to nowhere, bloated government budgets, and the fact that our world has basically been ceaselessly at war. It's a good question. Presumably God's ruler would be different.

### **Confusion of the Day** – *slavery or refuge?*

All of this group energy for anger and violence is considered here as a battle against God. At a literal level, this is understandable. Ancient Israel was located at a strategic crossroads and was regularly under attack by outsiders. But it seems that there is a broader statement being made, that human ambition and violence is at some level always a fight against God, and whatever limits we were meant to live under, individually and collectively. People want more than they have, and that eventually moves toward aggression.

There's a basic confusion underlying this, our poet thinks. To accept our limits, to see them as a way of submitting to God as the earth's ruler rather than ourselves, can feel like slavery – imposed bonds we'd like to break. The psalmist says that if we position ourselves against God, we're likely to experience a hostile God. But if we cool on our aggression and let God be in charge, not us, then we'll get the joy of experiencing God as a refuge – a hiding place and a person who looks after us.

### **Image of the Day – a laughing God**

I think imagining that God can laugh in the face of this world's chaos and violence is comforting. Perhaps God isn't so troubled. God laughing with a scoffing kind of laugh, getting ready to break people into pieces, is a little more troubling thought for most of us. I think the idea here, though, is that as strong and terrifying as angry, violent human rulers can appear, God isn't perturbed and in the end maintains control, and good humor.

### **Creative, Time Travelling Reading of the Day – the king**

This psalm belongs to a smaller collection of poems mixed throughout the book called royal psalms. They were written about or for or by Israel's kings, including King David. These kings were anointed – oil poured over their head by priests – when they were first crowned. This one clearly celebrates the unique strength and goodness of one of Israel's kings, as the king God put in place. The king gets the promise of protection and prosperity, and other nations' kings are warned that they better leave him alone. This nationalism is optimistic and cheery but doesn't very well reflect the historical reality of Israel's kings, who lost more important battles than they won over time.

For this reason, and as a way of finding a deeper meaning in these royal psalms, Jesus' early followers, and likely Jesus himself, understood these royal psalms as more deeply speaking to his eternal, not so bounded or nationalistic, kingdom. Read this way, God puts Jesus in charge of the whole earth and invites people to find joy and safety by following Jesus and letting Jesus be in charge of our big plans. Saying yes to this setup is likely to yield joy. Battling it out with one another to be in charge ourselves, as if Jesus hasn't already been given that privilege, is likely to yield a lot of anger and violence all around.

### **Taking It Home:**

*Pray this psalm* – Try praying this psalm, substituting Jesus for the king in each reference. Some moments may still be confusing, but pay attention to any moments that either seem encouraging or troubling. What do they say to you?

*For your city* – Pray for peace on earth. Seriously. Pray for any civic leaders, locally or worldwide, that come to mind, that they would accept their limits and live peacefully within them, rather than stirring up conflict and violence. If you feel so inspired, write to one of them, urging them to choose humility and peace over ambition and violence.

## **Wednesday, February 25 – Psalm 3**

A psalm of David, regarding the time David fled from his son Absalom.

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, I have so many enemies;  
so many are against me.

<sup>2</sup> So many are saying,  
“God will never rescue him!” *Interlude*

<sup>3</sup> **But you, O LORD, are a shield around me;  
you are my glory, the one who holds my head high.**

<sup>4</sup> I cried out to the LORD,  
and he answered me from his holy mountain. *Interlude*

<sup>5</sup> I lay down and slept,  
yet I woke up in safety,  
for the LORD was watching over me.

<sup>6</sup> I am not afraid of ten thousand enemies  
who surround me on every side.

<sup>7</sup> Arise, O LORD!  
Rescue me, my God!  
Slap all my enemies in the face!  
Shatter the teeth of the wicked!

<sup>8</sup> Victory comes from you, O LORD.  
May you bless your people. *Interlude*

## Points of Interest:

### **Historical Note – David and Absalom**

A majority of the psalms have some kind of title, like this one does. These titles were added later, and aren't necessarily historical. Sometimes they provide musical instructions for the ancient temple musicians who first sang them. Other times, like this, they provide a historical backdrop that give us some clue to the meaning that the original readers found in these psalms.

Absalom was one of King David's oldest sons, who early in the 10<sup>th</sup> century B.C. led a rebellion against his father. As the story is told, David abandons his capital for a while until the rebellion is crushed. Unlike most kings who put down an attempted coup, David eventually grieves in the midst of his restoration, because his son is the one who deposed him in the first place, and that same son has now been killed to restore him to power. Personally, I have never been in such a vexing and horribly sad situation. But this title is meant as a clue that this prayer is meant to be useful even in such a moment.

### **Musical and Poetic Note of the Day – Interlude**

Sometimes the musical notes are in the title, sometimes in the poem itself. The most common one is this Hebrew word *selah* that is translated as “interlude.” No one knows exactly what this word means, but scholars think it’s either an invitation to stop and think for a moment about what you just prayed, or a cue for the musicians to play a brief instrumental. Let’s imagine it’s both of those and pause for a brilliant riff on your instrument of choice each time you see this word.

### **Image of the Day** – *a shield around me*

In the midst of both danger and turmoil, the psalmist finds comfort in imagining God as an enormous shield – like a force-field, we might say – and that helps him hold his head high again, put aside his fear, and sleep easy again. God as shield didn’t exactly create invincibility or anything; the troubles are still real and present. But there’s an emotional and psychic safety here – if God’s in charge, what’s the worst that can happen? – that creates a pause in this poet’s stress.

### **Vent of the Day** – *Slap all my enemies in the face!*

Apparently that good night’s sleep hasn’t changed everything. Our poet wakes up and in asking God for help and rescue, adds that it would be great if God could slap the enemies in the face so hard that all their teeth are shattered. Bless your people, God, Amen! Well, that’s quite an outburst! Here we find part of the point of the psalms, though, and of using them in our own prayers. Whatever we think about these outbursts we read, and whether they seem like suitable emotions for these authors or for us to feel or not, there they are. Raw and human, the psalms give us permission to voice our sadness and our rage up to God and let God do with it what he will. That seems more constructive than turning that rage against other people, as we saw in Psalm 2.

### **Taking it home:**

*Pray this psalm* – We’ll talk more about praying these “enemy” psalms as we go along, but as you pray this psalm, think of whatever forces you’re up against as you pray about these enemies. Perhaps your enemies are other people who are aligned against you, or perhaps they’re spiritual forces or even things in you that are discouraging you. Use this psalm to pray for God’s help and victory.

*For your six* – Are any of your six discouraged, even suffering from sleepless nights? Whether you know or not, pray they would find help and peace from God. If it feels appropriate, send someone an encouraging note or text, letting them know you’re praying for them.

## **Thursday, February 26 – Psalm 4**

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by stringed instruments.

<sup>1</sup> Answer me when I call to you,  
O God who declares me innocent.  
Free me from my troubles.  
Have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

<sup>2</sup> How long will you people ruin my reputation?  
How long will you make groundless accusations?

How long will you continue your lies? *Interlude*

<sup>3</sup> You can be sure of this:

The LORD set apart the godly for himself.

The LORD will answer when I call to him.

<sup>4</sup> Don't sin by letting anger control you.

Think about it overnight and remain silent. *Interlude*

<sup>5</sup> Offer sacrifices in the right spirit,  
and trust the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> Many people say, "Who will show us better times?"

Let your face smile on us, LORD.

<sup>7</sup> **You have given me greater joy  
than those who have abundant harvests of grain and new wine.**

<sup>8</sup> In peace I will lie down and sleep,  
for you alone, O LORD, will keep me safe.

#### Points of Interest

##### **Pronoun Confusion of the Day** – *you, you, and you!*

The troubles continue, and our poet here doesn't get into the details but is so worked up that the voice gets out of control a bit. First, there's a prayer, talking directly to God. Then in verse two, the "you" becomes the people behind all these problems – y'all knock it off, alright! Then in verse three, the psalmist gets some perspective and gives everyone else some advice for how to deal with our own difficult times.

##### **Emotions of the Day** – *frustration and helplessness*

While we don't know the situation that first provoked this psalm, the emotions involved are clear. There's frustration with a hot mess of trouble. There's frustration with the shameless folks who are creating, or taking advantage of, or gossiping about said troubles. And there's the sense of helplessness, wondering if better times will ever come along.

##### **Image of the Day** – *The smiling face of God*

In the midst of this, there's a favor asked. God, could you smile on us? This is the same God that the poet is confident is in our court. "The Lord will answer when I call to him." On the other end of the line is the same "God who declares me innocent." Notice that the request isn't to *make us* innocent. Our own ethical improvements don't feel so urgent when our backs are against the wall. A God who will jump in with us in that situation is.

And after that request, it seems the smile comes and is felt. Our poet doesn't get every tough circumstance changed. Instead, there's something better – even greater joy than "those who have abundant harvests." Greater joy than people have in even the most perfect of circumstances.

The smile of God here may or may not change the troubles of the moment, but absolutely changes the experience of those troubles.

**Good Advice of the Day** – *Think about it overnight and remain silent.*

In the midst of this prayer, we get a word of advice, presumably advice the psalmist is personally applying as well. When people make trouble for us, we're going to get ticked off. Fair enough! But don't mess up and let our anger control us, becoming like one of the scoffers we met in Psalm 1. Call a timeout for ourselves and take a break before we start venting. Seems like a perfect time for an interlude.

In a recent episode of the podcast *Invisibilia*, the host was discussing our collective bad behavior over social media and talked with a psychologist about venting our anger. Venting helps us manage our anger more successfully, right? Wrong, the psychologist says. Venting just creates an emotionally addictive payoff that makes it more likely we'll get angry again. Apparently, pausing and releasing our anger more peacefully is a healthier way to go.

### Taking it home:

*Pray this psalm* – Pray this prayer as your own. If particular troubles or people behind those troubles come to mind, name them as you go. Be free, no one's listening. (Right? You're not praying these aloud on the subway, are you?)

*For yourself* – In addition to praying this whole psalm, repeat the request to God to smile on you. You can ask that for your six too, if you like, but start with you. And think about it as often today as you can. Ask God to smile on you, and then consider that God is in fact doing just that. How does it feel?

### Friday, February 27 – Psalm 5

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by the flute.

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, hear me as I pray;

pay attention to my groaning.

<sup>2</sup> Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God,

for I pray to no one but you.

<sup>3</sup> Listen to my voice in the morning, LORD.

Each morning I bring my requests to you and wait expectantly.

<sup>4</sup> O God, you take no pleasure in wickedness;

you cannot tolerate the sins of the wicked.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the proud may not stand in your presence,

for you hate all who do evil.

<sup>6</sup> You will destroy those who tell lies.

The LORD detests murderers and deceivers.

<sup>7</sup> Because of your unfailing love, I can enter your house;  
I will worship at your Temple with deepest awe.

<sup>8</sup> Lead me in the right path, O LORD,  
or my enemies will conquer me.  
Make your way plain for me to follow.

<sup>9</sup> My enemies cannot speak a truthful word.  
Their deepest desire is to destroy others.  
Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave.  
Their tongues are filled with flattery.

<sup>10</sup> O God, declare them guilty.  
Let them be caught in their own traps.  
Drive them away because of their many sins,  
for they have rebelled against you.

<sup>11</sup> **But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;  
let them sing joyful praises forever.  
Spread your protection over them,  
that all who love your name may be filled with joy.**

<sup>12</sup> For you bless the godly, O LORD;  
you surround them with your shield of love.

## Points of Interest:

### **Prayers of the Day** – *groans, requests, and direction*

This psalm reminds us that prayer is a wider form than most of us practice. Before there any words here, there are simply groans – their own mode of praying. Then there are requests sent God’s way while we wait for an answer. There’s also a request for direction. “Lead me in the right path,” a path of safety that I can’t see right now. If you’re praying about a decision during this season, this is a great prayer, that God would make God’s best way plain to see and follow. All of this is prayer.

I said in the introduction that worship is when we live all of our lives with our face, and not our backs, turned toward God. In that same vein, prayer seems to be any words or even wordless communication we can send God’s way, hoping for and expecting a response.

### **Theological Reflection of the Day** – *God’s Zero Tolerance Policy*

As a former high school principal, I can say I’ve expelled drug dealers and knife wielders. I’ve suspended kids and reported families to the state or the police for all kinds of outrageously bad behavior. So I know a thing or two about zero tolerance policies. To me, that seems like what the psalmist sees in God. When others’ bad behavior comes to mind, the poet says God hates evil, destroys liars, and detests murderers. Now with any zero tolerance policy, it all turns sour in the

hands of an overzealous or unscrupulous administrator. None of us want to live in a world where people get zapped for small mistakes. But for the most part, we don't. The bigger fear I have is living in a world where it doesn't matter what anyone does, where open graves can stink, so to speak, and no one ever lifts a finger to change things. Despite the troubling language, I'm grateful for a God who notices when we harm one another and, at least some times that we can see, causes wrongdoers and oppressors to be caught in their own traps.

### **Difficult Verses of the Day** – *Praying for our enemies*

You may have noticed by now that enemies come up a fair bit in the psalms. At least to me, it can seem a bit much. Until I think about all the forces that stand in the way of my welfare. There are the people – those who overlook me, mistreat me, gossip about me, and do me wrong in ways small and large. There are the forces within me – my own bad character and habits and limitations that do me wrong as well. And then, at least according to the Bible's worldview, there are the enemies I cannot see – spiritual forces that capitalize on vulnerability and conflict and seek to stir up and magnify despair and folly and pain.

One thing the psalms never do is encourage us to put on a cheery face and ignore or resign ourselves to all this. Sure, they get right aggressive about these enemies, but they remind us that we deserve better, that we were meant to flourish. And we're free to name and ask God to deal with all the things that block our flourishing. God doesn't have to do all the things we wish he would do to our enemies – slap them in the face and break their teeth and turn their traps back on themselves and all that. But we're free to say those things to God, not to our enemies, and leave it up to God to do whatever he would like, which – given what I know about God – is likely both more forceful and more merciful than anything I'd come up with.

### **Happy Ending of the Day** – *Something from vs. 11-12*

In the end, we just want a safe space, a place where we're free from our troubles, and free to be happy and protected and experience being loved. The psalm ends with just that prayer, and with an invitation to experience it as being so, today.

### **Taking it Home:**

*Pray this psalm* – Is your flute tuned up? Great. Let's sing! Seriously, praying these psalms with their dramatic and stark language, with their super-high confidence in God acting and God seeing us as people he'd like to help and get behind, is hard for most of us at first, but it's worth trying, at least for a few more weeks.

*For your six* – Pray for each of their flourishing, and that God would deal on their behalf with each person and force that is blocking it.

## **Saturday, February 28 – Psalm 6**

For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by an eight-stringed instrument.

<sup>1</sup> O LORD, don't rebuke me in your anger  
or discipline me in your rage.

<sup>2</sup> **Have compassion on me, LORD, for I am weak.  
Heal me, LORD, for my bones are in agony.**

<sup>3</sup> I am sick at heart.  
How long, O LORD, until you restore me?

<sup>4</sup> Return, O LORD, and rescue me.  
Save me because of your unfailing love.

<sup>5</sup> For the dead do not remember you.  
Who can praise you from the grave?

<sup>6</sup> I am worn out from sobbing.  
All night I flood my bed with weeping,  
drenching it with my tears.

<sup>7</sup> My vision is blurred by grief;  
my eyes are worn out because of all my enemies.

<sup>8</sup> Go away, all you who do evil,  
for the LORD has heard my weeping.

<sup>9</sup> The LORD has heard my plea;  
the LORD will answer my prayer.

<sup>10</sup> May all my enemies be disgraced and terrified.  
May they suddenly turn back in shame.

## Points of Interest:

### **Vivid Image of the Day** – *my bones are in agony*

The enemies make an appearance again in this psalm, but it's not clear if they're the source of the problem or if they're just rivals or obnoxious lookers-on who are utterly unhelpful at this time. Or maybe I'm interpreting "enemies" too narrowly, given how often they come up in the psalms. Our writer may have a disease or illness – let's call that an enemy of physical health. Or perhaps there's been a tremendous loss or tragedy – enemies of happiness. Or even a really poor choice by the psalmist, who's worried about being rebuked after all – the enemy within coming back to bite. Regardless of cause, we have a prayer here flowing from deep distress. The repetition is powerful here – "bones in agony" communicates so much more than just "sick at heart."

### **Place of the day** – *the grave*

Whether the writer is deeply ill, or whether this is simply a bit of dramatic metaphor, there's a fear of death expressed here. The grave here is literally *Sheol*, this shadowy, undefined underworld where dead people go. For much of the Old Testament, there are occasional expressions of hope but largely no defined sense of the afterlife. The grave is about as scary a place these poets can imagine.

## **Deal of the day** – *the dead don't praise you...*

Given what we know about *Sheol*, we can understand why the psalmist doesn't think the dead are going to be any use to God. So we get this creative idea of a win/win deal – “Okay, God, you rescue me, and then I'll keep telling you how wonderful you are; won't that feel great?” Funny as this may sound, it's part of a long tradition of people appealing to God's own best interests and qualities in prayer. “God, you have so much unfailing love, and it'd be nice if I could experience a bit of that today.”

## **Confident attitude of the day** – *“the Lord has heard”*

The psalm began with a plea – “don't be angry!” – and a question – “how long until you restore me?” But after a good cry, it ends in a different space. “The Lord has heard. The Lord will answer.” I'm struck by the enormous confidence in those statements. Before any circumstances have changed, before the writer has seen any answer, we get this assurance that God is on the case.

### **Taking it home:**

*Pray this psalm* – As you pray this psalm, recalling any fears or difficulties that are yours at the moment, see if you can also tell God and tell yourself that you know God is listening, that you know God will act.

*For you* – Are you sick at heart or worn out? Ask God to remember how much he loves you and to help you out. If you aren't at the moment but can remember a time when God has helped you, praise God for that, telling God directly or even telling someone else what God has done for you.

## **Sunday, March 1 – Psalm 7**

A psalm of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning Cush of the tribe of Benjamin.

<sup>1</sup> I come to you for protection, O LORD my God.

Save me from my persecutors—rescue me!

<sup>2</sup> If you don't, they will maul me like a lion,  
tearing me to pieces with no one to rescue me.

<sup>3</sup> O LORD my God, if I have done wrong  
or am guilty of injustice,

<sup>4</sup> if I have betrayed a friend  
or plundered my enemy without cause,

<sup>5</sup> then let my enemies capture me.

Let them trample me into the ground  
and drag my honor in the dust.     *Interlude*

<sup>6</sup> **Arise, O LORD, in anger!**

**Stand up against the fury of my enemies!**

**Wake up, my God, and bring justice!**

<sup>7</sup> Gather the nations before you.  
Rule over them from on high.

<sup>8</sup> The LORD judges the nations.

Declare me righteous, O LORD,  
for I am innocent, O Most High!

<sup>9</sup> End the evil of those who are wicked,  
and defend the righteous.

For you look deep within the mind and heart,  
O righteous God.

<sup>10</sup> God is my shield,  
saving those whose hearts are true and right.

<sup>11</sup> God is an honest judge.  
He is angry with the wicked every day.

<sup>12</sup> If a person does not repent,  
God will sharpen his sword;  
he will bend and string his bow.

<sup>13</sup> He will prepare his deadly weapons  
and shoot his flaming arrows.

<sup>14</sup> The wicked conceive evil;  
they are pregnant with trouble  
and give birth to lies.

<sup>15</sup> They dig a deep pit to trap others,  
then fall into it themselves.

<sup>16</sup> The trouble they make for others backfires on them.  
The violence they plan falls on their own heads.

<sup>17</sup> I will thank the LORD because he is just;  
I will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High.

### Points of Interest:

#### **Historical Mystery of the Day** – *Cush of the tribe of Benjamin*

There are theories, but nobody knows who exactly this title refers to. David was the second king of Israel, and his predecessor Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin. Saul had been David's boss and mentor but over time became threatened by David to the point that Saul tried to kill him. So perhaps this Cush is one of Saul's assistants.

## **Awkward Singing of the Day** – *Maul me like a lion... and trample me into the ground....*

Remembering that these psalms were written to be sung, there are two types of lyrics here that I don't really know how to sing. There's the degree of danger and urgency – do something, God, before I'm mauled like a lion. And there's the confidence the psalmist has in the rightness of his own cause. "If I've done wrong in any way, then let my enemies trample me. But I haven't, so help me out, God."

I find these sections a little awkward and strange to pray, let alone sing. Two thoughts. One, there's maybe a first world problem perspective at work for me. I think of people in absolute and urgent physical distress and danger and realize that many people would find this language immediately relevant for their prayers. Two, these psalms kind of toggle back and forth between two reasons why God should be good and answer prayers – the psalmist's deserving character, and God's own goodness. And maybe those two can be more closely linked than I usually think of them. Perhaps it's less true that we get to have God as a shield because we are good and right, and more true that having God as a shield makes us – in some way – good and right. Like the *Ranger's Apprentice* books I read with my boys, where a knight kind of takes on the character and identity of the shield you carry, perhaps just associating with a good God gives us the right to ask God to treat us the way God would treat someone as good as himself.

## **Bold Prayer of the Day** – *Arise, O Lord!*

Have you ever told God to get up off his tail and get to work on your behalf? Seems a little presumptuous, doesn't it? But it's basically what's happening here. Many Hebrew believers, when they had a temple, believed that God lived in that building. But now and then, the psalmist gets impatient with God ruling from the temple and tells God to go outside the doors and get to work.

## **God's Quality of the Day** – *An honest judge*

This psalm adds to the image of a shield of protection by calling God an honest judge, one who sees and reads situations accurately and fairly. This judge doesn't just pronounce rulings, though, but straps on armor and weapons and gets out there enforcing them. The psalmist appeals to God the Warrior Judge to read his situation accurately and get going on his defense.

## **Payback of the day** – *A sharpened sword and flaming arrows*

Verses 12-13 envision this Warrior Judge God equipped with a pretty powerful set of weapons. In the next stanza (14-16), we get a picture of how these metaphorical weapons might more commonly work themselves out. Bad-meaning people give birth to their evil plans, only to see them grow up and turn on themselves. Often enough, this seems to be the case. Of course, sometimes people do harm to others and never seem to suffer any consequences to themselves. Crime does on occasion pay. After venting, though, the psalmist is content to trust that God is just and one way or another will work things out fairly.

## **Taking it home:**

*Pray this psalm* – If you have a hard time praying this psalm for yourself, try praying it on behalf of victims of injustice or oppression that you most sympathize with. When I pray this psalm, for

instance, for children who are the victims of sex trafficking and forced prostitution, I have no problem asking God to get up, to defend them, and to catch their oppressors in their own trap.

*For our church* – How great it would be if our church was known for getting up outside of our walls and doing compassion and justice in the broader world! Are there any innocent victims that you or your small group can pray for or help together?