



PSALMS

Introduction

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To you, Lord my God, I lift up my soul. PSALM 25:1

SCHEDULE

Psalms of Praise...	HG week: April 22-26...	Teaching Date: April 28
Imprecatory Psalms...	HG week: April 29-May 3...	Teaching Date: May 5
Wisdom Psalms...	HG week: May 6-10...	Teaching Date: May 12
Penitential Psalms...	HG week: May 13-17...	Teaching Date: May 19
Psalms of Lament...	HG week: May 20-24...	Teaching Date: May 26

INTRODUCTION

There is undoubtedly no collection of poetry as influential as the book of Psalms. The 150 poems that reside at the heart of the Bible have been cited and quoted by countless authors, both ancient and modern. Yet, the enduring gift of the book of Psalms to the church is not that it lends itself well to citation, but that in the psalter we encounter a book of prayer and worship offered to us in God's own language. Ben Patterson aptly titled his book on the Psalms, *God's Prayer Book*.

Unlike the poetry most of us learned in elementary school, Hebrew poetry—like that found in the Book of Psalms—does not revolve around rhyme and meter. Instead, Hebrew poetry is built on parallelism in which consecutive lines relate to one another and serve to contrast, expand, or develop a theme. As you consider the words of a specific psalm, look for these parallel relationships and watch these poems come alive in new ways.

Though many of the psalms we will consider in this study were penned by David or reflect the ideals of the house of David, the 150 psalms are credited to an array of authors, from the Sons of Korah to unspecified authors whose work lives on apart from their names.

The Psalms come to us in various forms, providing the Christian a vast treasury to enrich the vocabulary of prayer in any season of one's life. Reading through the pages of this worship book, the reader encounters the soaring and majestic psalms of praise, the desperate and weary psalms of lament, the contented and mindful psalms of thanksgiving, and more. The Psalms are truly a gift in any season of life as they provide language for life's peaks and valleys as well as a constant reminder of the character and work of the God who traverses the trails of life alongside his people.

Comprised of 150 compositions from many different authors, the Psalter more resembles a great choir of witnesses than it does a story, or letter, or collection of visions. The Psalter gives voice to the faith struggles, theological insights, and liturgical witnesses of many different people. For this reason and others, even though more than two thousand years separate us from the days when they were first written, the psalms continue to be central to the life of faith for both Christians and Jews. (NICOT, 2)

The goal of this brief study guide is to explore some of these various types of psalms in an effort to deepen the prayer life of SBCC. Week by week, we will consider a particular category of psalm, provide a basic framework for investigating the psalm and others like it, and then offer some ideas on how to allow God's own templates for prayer to shape our own prayer lives, both individually and corporately.

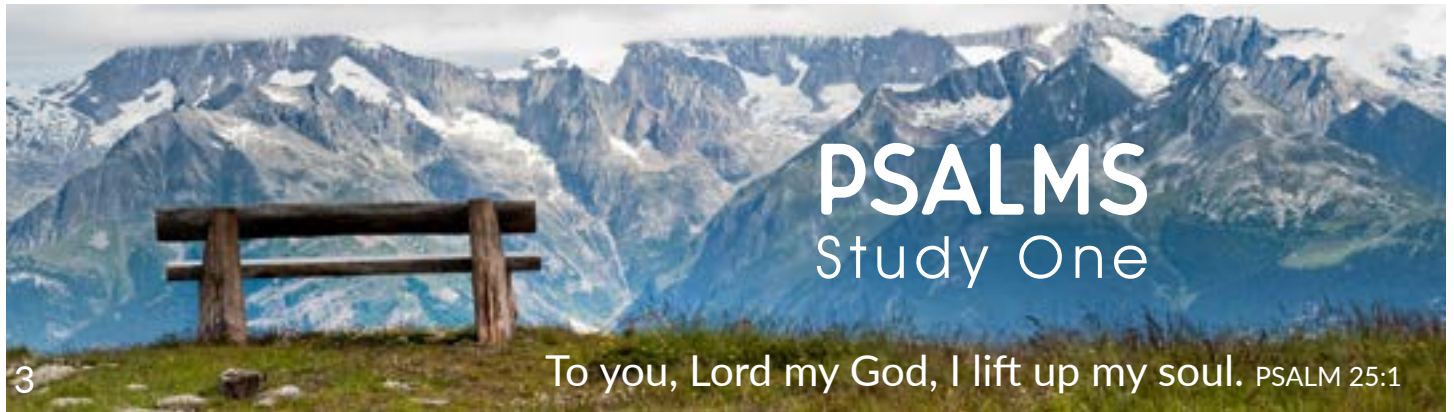
As we dive in and study this beautiful and mysterious book that remains central to the life of our faith, it is our hope that we will encounter the living God anew and that our prayer lives will be invigorated as a result. May God bless us richly as we turn his words back to him in praise, confession, lament, request, and gratitude.



STUDY SOURCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

EBC Psalms...	<i>Expositor's Bible Commentary, "Psalms,"</i> VanGemeren
EBP...	<i>Encountering the Book of Psalms;</i> Bullock
GPB...	<i>God's Prayer Book;</i> Patterson
IOT...	<i>Introduction to the Old Testament;</i> Dillard, Longman
NICOT...	<i>Psalms, New International Commentary on the Old Testament;</i> deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson, Tanner

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PSALMS OF PRAISE

What is a topic that excites you so much that you could simply go on and on talking about it?

Giving God the praise that is due to him is a central function of the Book of Psalms. As Bullock has noted, *It is not coincidental that the Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms is tehillim, "praises." ...Praise is the goal toward which the whole book moves* (EBP, 124). Dillard and Longman point out that *the Psalter concludes with a crescendo of praise with the five psalms (146-50) known as the Great Doxology* (IOT, 219). As a result, though one can find psalms of praise throughout the Psalter, they are especially concentrated among Psalms 90-150.

Psalms of praise *testify to the Lord by praising his character and his deeds. The common formal traits of these poems are: A call to praise (Praise the Lord); reasons to praise, usually introduced by "for" or "because"* (NICOT, 20). Noting this structure can help a reader to better understand what prompted the psalmist to overflow with praise.

READ PSALM 103.

If this is already a familiar psalm for you, it may be helpful to read it in a translation of the Bible that you don't normally use or to read through the psalm multiple times in various translations.

What language does David use to call for the Lord to be praised? Who or what does he call to praise the Lord?

Try to capture the various reasons for praise that David mentions. Either list them individually or try to group them into broader categories.

Notice that David makes no requests of the Lord in this psalm. Instead, he simply focuses on the multitude of reasons why the Lord is worthy of praise. What effect might such a prayer have had on his soul?



Now, imagine yourself in the place of David, aware of the Lord's goodness all around you and overflowing with praise. For some, this may be an easy perspective to take, while for others it will certainly be more difficult.

If you were to call yourself and all around you to praise the Lord, who or what might you include? Write it out in poetic language.

David is able to identify seemingly endless reasons for praise. Likewise, we all have many reasons to offer praise to the Lord, even those of us in difficult seasons. Take some time to reflect on your own reasons to praise and write down a few (or as many as you can think of).

If you were to think of the subject matter of your prayers in percentages, what percentage would you say is dedicated to giving the Lord praise?

PRAYER CHALLENGE FOR THIS WEEK:

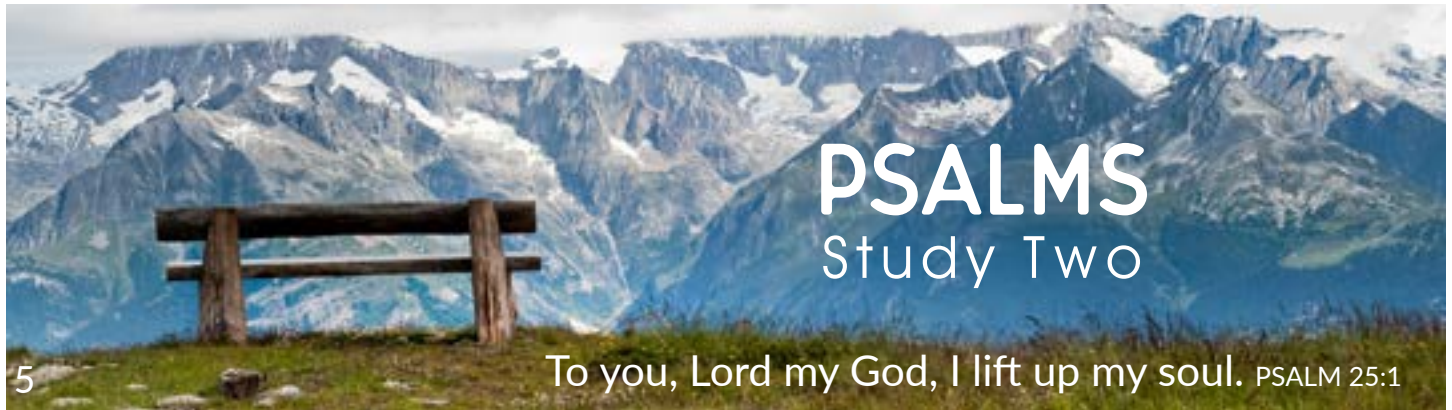
With your homegroup, spend time simply expressing praise to the Lord. Include things from the seemingly mundane to the profound. Practice calling other people and things to express praise to the Lord.

In your personal prayer life, commit to spending 5 minutes each day this week exclusively in the praise of God. Use your 5 minutes to praise and thank the Lord for his goodness, his character, his work, and his blessings. Try to take note of how this affects your soul and your prayer life. If you're willing, share with your homegroup next week.

DIGGING DEEPER:

If you would like to read or investigate additional psalms of praise, a partial list is included below. As you read these psalms, be on the lookout for the calls to praise and the reasons for praise—not all of these psalms have them, but many do. Pay attention, as well, to the impact on your own heart and soul as you read these diaries of praise. Are there any phrases or approaches that might help inform your own prayer life?

Additional psalms of praise: Psalm 8, 19, 29, 33, 47, 96, 100, 113, 145, 150



IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Describe a time when you let something minor and insignificant bother you more than it should. How did you react?

On the other hand, there are things in a fallen world that ought to greatly unsettle God's people. Every culture features manifestations of sin so evil that those living for God's kingdom must take notice and beg for the God of the universe to act in holiness. Such is the occasion for the Hebrew poetry known as the imprecatory psalms.

The word "imprecation" is defined as a curse and, as the name suggests, the imprecatory psalms feature the psalmist pronouncing a curse on enemies. Though this genre of literature challenges Christian readers, we must not rush to dismiss or cast aside such prayers. VanGemeren comments,

The psalmists wrote under the inspiration of God regarding the nature of evil. They were intoxicated with God's character and name and were concerned with the manifestation of God's righteousness and holiness on earth. Since evil contrasts in every way with God's nature and plan, the psalmists prayed for divine retribution, by which God's order would be reestablished (109:6-21) and God's people would be reassured of his love (10:21, 26). (EBC Psalms, 831).

Though we may be caught off guard by the strong language of the imprecatory psalms, the longing to see an end to seemingly unchecked wickedness will certainly resonate with modern readers. The psalmists who penned these strong prayers envision a world of greater holiness and justice and are quick to call on God to bring that world to pass.

READ PSALM 35.

In very strong terms, David calls for God to rise up and respond to the injustice David has experienced. How does David describe what has happened to him? Find as many reasons as you can that prompt David to pray in this way.

Look again at verses 1-3 and 22-24. What language does David use to urge God to act?



What does that tell you about how David understood his relationship with God?

In what specific ways does David call on God to respond to these enemies?

In the midst of a prayer marked by profound confidence in God's character, verse 17 opens words of desperate longing: *How long, O Lord, will you look on?* Describe a time when David's question was your question as you faced a difficulty or trial in life.

Most of us will never face the kind of literal enemies that David describes in Psalm 35. Yet, as the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us, followers of Jesus can expect constant opposition from our three spiritual enemies: the devil, the world, and our own flesh. Name some specific spiritual enemies in your life right now from which you'd like to pray for deliverance.

What are some examples of injustice or wickedness in the world that prompt you to cry out for God's justice to be revealed?

PRAYER CHALLENGE FOR THIS WEEK:

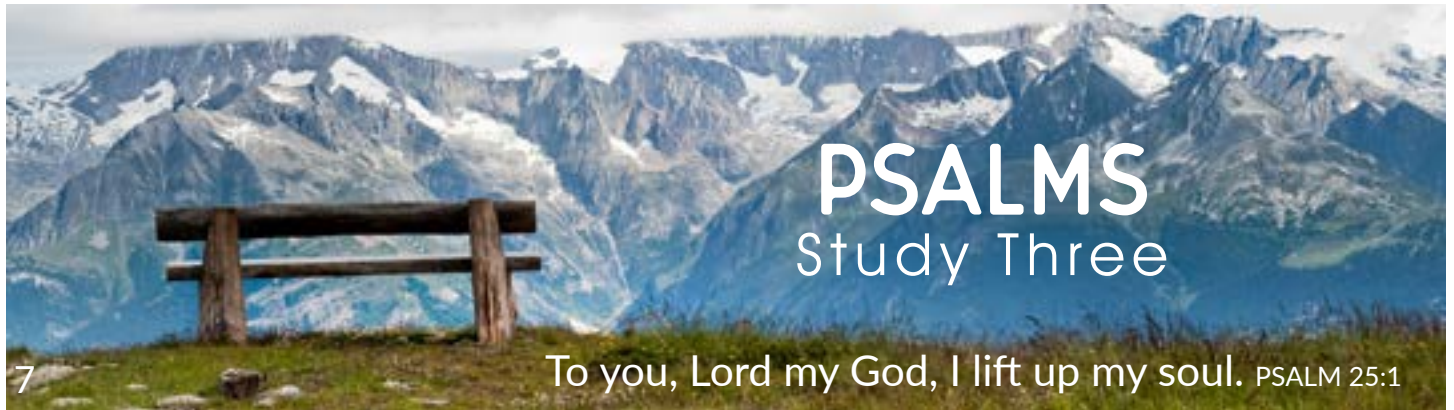
Spend time as a homegroup praying for God's justice and holiness to be evident in places where it currently seems far off. Use the language of Psalm 35 and other imprecatory psalms to beg God for wickedness to be cut off. This would be a great time to remember our brothers and sisters around the world that are persecuted for their faith in Jesus.

In your personal prayer life this week, choose a specific expression of sin and brokenness in the world or in your own life and ask our Almighty God to intervene.

DIGGING DEEPER:

If you would like to read or investigate additional imprecatory psalms, a partial list is included below. As you read these psalms, try to imagine what prompted such intense emotions in the author. How do the imprecatory psalms help foster vision for a more just and holy world?

Additional imprecatory psalms: Psalm 5, 10, 17, 59, 69, 79, 109, 129, 140



WISDOM PSALMS

Whom do you trust for input when you are facing a big decision? Why do you trust their advice?

The psalms are not “just” poetry. Rather, a number of the psalms function more like mini sermons on how life should be lived by God’s people. These are known as wisdom psalms. If you’re familiar with the book of Proverbs, wisdom psalms will sound some similar notes, focusing on devout living, choosing righteousness, and the blessings that come from living life in step with God and his kingdom.

These psalms often include a dualistic comparison between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the fool, or God’s way and the world’s way. Some formal traits that occur in these psalms are happy are... phrases and a tone of instruction (NICOT, 20).

Without being overly prescriptive, the wisdom psalms hold out a compelling vision for a better life and invite the reader to take inventory.

READ PSALM 1.

This psalm revolves around a contrast concerning blessing. Who is blessed in this psalm? What kind of person or group of people is on the opposite side of that contrast?

What are the choices that lead to the blessing?

What are the benefits of the blessing?



What are the consequences that await the wicked?

Verse 1 presents a three-fold warning against forsaking the Lord's wisdom. Can you describe an instance when you were tempted to walk, stand or sit in counsel other than that which comes from the Lord?

Describe one situation in your life when you consciously chose to act according to God's wisdom and were able to see the benefits.

Many of us remember to ask God for his wisdom when we are facing a challenge or even a crisis. Yet, as verse 2 reminds us, the wisdom of God is available and pertinent to our lives day and night, whether or not we are weighing heavy decisions. List some of the events you have coming up this week—whether large or small—and pray for God's wisdom as you walk through each one.

PRAYER CHALLENGE FOR THIS WEEK:

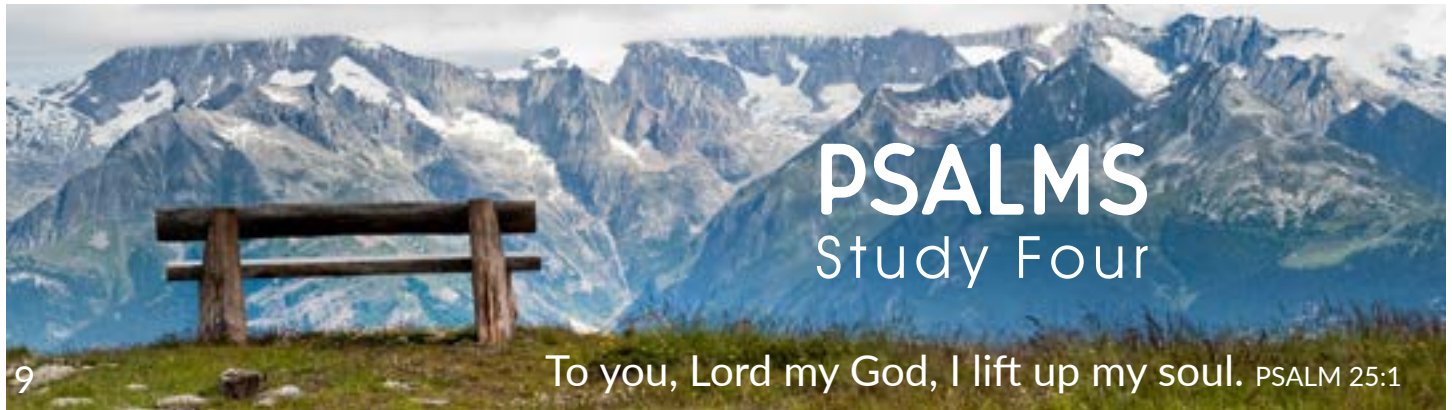
In your homegroup this week, come prepared to share one area of life in which you desire to walk in the wisdom and ways of the Lord. We all need God's wisdom and direction, whether we face a major decision or are navigating the seemingly mundane realities of life. Pray for one another in your group and ask God to make clear his path in these various situations.

In your personal prayer life this week, each time you pray be sure to spend time both asking and listening. Ask God to reveal his path, to give guidance for living your life as one who belongs to him, and then pause to listen. See how God responds through his Spirit, his Word, or his people.

DIGGING DEEPER:

If you would like to read or investigate additional wisdom psalms, a partial list is included below. In each of these psalms, the psalmist will extol the virtues of living according to God's plan and for his kingdom. As you read, pay attention to the happy or blessed statements and use these descriptions to take inventory of your own life. Where is your life like that described here? Where might God be calling you to growth?

Additional wisdom psalms: Psalm 49, 112, 128, 139



PENITENTIAL PSALMS

Think of a time when you sought out and received forgiveness from someone. How did you feel afterwards?

The group of psalms known as the penitential psalms are closely related to the wisdom psalms and, in fact, some scholars consider them a subcategory of the wisdom psalms. The penitential psalms paint a picture of the repentance necessary—and restoration available—when one has not kept to God’s path of wisdom and righteousness. Rather than following a structural pattern, the penitential psalms are instead characterized by the psalmist’s expressions of sorrow over sin and requests for forgiveness and mercy.

A repentant heart, as demonstrated in these psalms, is completely in keeping with life as a citizen of God’s kingdom. As Bullock notes, *The more we see of God and his glory, the more we become aware of indwelling sin, and therefore the more we find repentance to be a way of life* (EBP, 207). The penitential psalms help us explore that way of life more fully and provide helpful language to express our common need for forgiveness.

READ PSALM 32.

Search through all eleven verses of the psalm and make two lists: one of the various words that David uses for sin; another of the terms that David uses to speak of God’s response to a repentant heart.

The psalm begins and ends with a celebration of the Lord’s forgiveness of sin. Can you describe a time when you have experienced that same sense of joy and relief from the weight of sin?

In contrast to the liberation of forgiveness, verses 3-4 describe the horrors of living with unconfessed sin. Tanner adds, *The burden of sin actually hurts and can feel like a heavy pressing hand* (NICOT, 308). When, if ever, have you felt that way?



Can you identify a “turning point” in the psalm, when the tone changes? How did David find relief from the terrors of his soul described in verses 3-4?

Verse 7 reads like a statement of confidence for one facing oppression. How does this verse relate to the theme of repentance and forgiveness in the rest of this psalm?

Consider verse 9 and rephrase it in your own words. What kind of relationship with his children is God asking for in this verse?

Patterson writes, *Regrets are not the same as genuine repentance. Anyone can feel bad for what he or she has done. The repentant resolves to learn from it. Better, the repentant sinner hears God’s call to become a disciple and be taught by God.* (GPB, 106). Read verses 8 and 9 again. Describe a time when God used your own sin and restoration to *instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.*

Is confession already a regular part of your prayer life? If not, how do the words of Psalm 32 help provide encouragement for you in that endeavor? In your homegroup, share creative ideas for how to incorporate the practices of confession, repentance and reconciliation into our everyday lives.

PRAYER CHALLENGE FOR THIS WEEK:

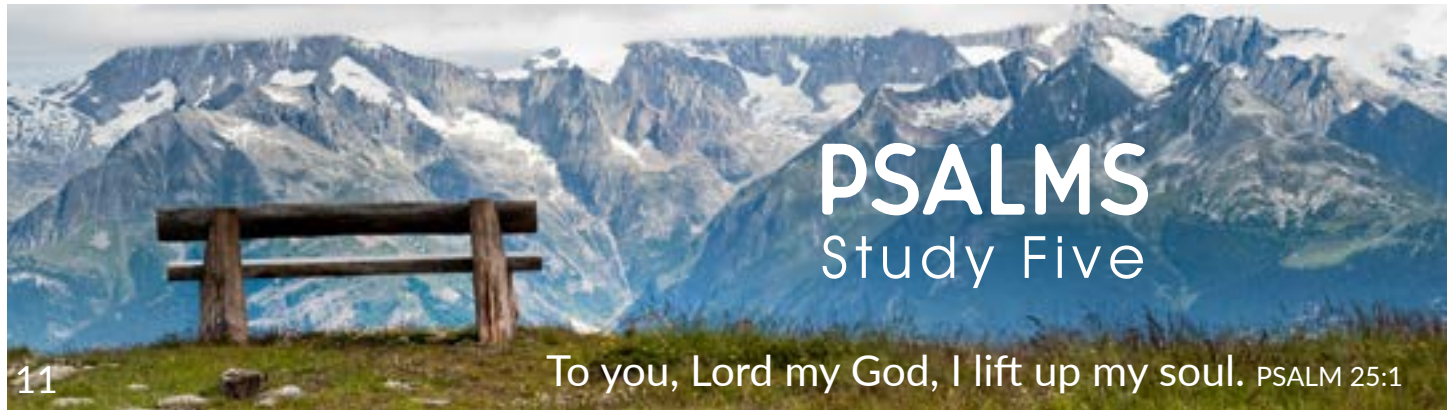
Scripture passages like James 5:16 make clear the beauty and appropriateness of corporate confession. In your homegroup this week, practice confessing together. Create space to name ways in which members have not kept to the Lord’s ways. Consider repeating 1 John 1:9 in response to each confession. End by praying verses 10-11 of this psalm!

In your personal prayer life this week, ask the Holy Spirit to help you search your own heart and soul. Ask him to reveal places where you might be tolerating or accommodating sin. After these become clear, ask the Lord for his gracious pardon and revel in the freedom that brings. Consider repeating Psalm 32:1 at the end of each prayer time.

DIGGING DEEPER:

If you would like to read or investigate additional penitential psalms, a partial list is included below. As you read, give special attention to how the psalmist describes his sin as well as how he asks for the Lord’s mercy. What language from these psalms can you adopt to help form a heart that is both quick to repent of sin and confident of the Lord’s grace for the repentant?

Additional penitential psalms: Psalm 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143



PSALMS OF LAMENT

When life gets difficult, what habits—either good or bad—do you cling tightly to?

The most frequent psalm form in the Bible is the lament, in which the writer pours out a complaint to the Lord. Unlike other more flexible forms, the lament follows a very distinct structure that typically includes some of the following elements: address or plea to God for help; complaint; petition; expression of confidence or trust in God; vow of praise. Though not all laments will feature every element, this is the common framework for a lament.

If the psalm of praise deals with life from the heights of ecstasy, the lament cries out from life's depths. Dillard and Longman write, *The lament is, accordingly, easily recognized by the mood of the psalm. It is a song of disorientation, of abandonment, distress, pain, and suffering* (IOT, 221). The lament seems to be common parlance for the man or woman of God who experiences the difficulties of life in a sin-soaked world.

READ PSALM 71.

Though we don't know the specifics of the situation that prompted the author to write Psalm 71, the general sense of trouble is clear. What language does the psalmist use to describe his predicament throughout this psalm?

When you think of God, what images and qualities most readily come to mind?

If Psalm 71 were all the information you had about God, what would you be able to learn from it about what God is like?



What vows or promises does the psalmist offer in response to God's longed-for deliverance?

When have you prayed—or witnessed someone else pray—desperate prayers? Recall some of your language and emotion toward God and share with your homegroup if appropriate.

Bullock explores this topic a little further:

While the boldness and naked honesty of the psalmists may shock us, this attitude is nevertheless instructive for our own spiritual lives. We sometimes hold back too much from God, conceal our true feelings in prayer, and create a false image of ourselves at the heavenly throne of grace. What would happen to us and to our relationship to God if we were truly honest with him and ourselves? Thankfully there is a place in the biblical faith for this kind of boldness before God. The psalms of lament carve out a spiritual niche for us where we can use the colloquial language of life's hurts and still stay within the vocabulary of faith (EBP, 138)

How do you feel your prayer life would change if you prayed with the kind of “boldness and naked honesty” seen in the lament psalms?

PRAYER CHALLENGE FOR THIS WEEK:

In your homegroup this week, make time for lament. Chances are good that someone in your group is going through a challenging season and would welcome space to express themselves in an unfiltered way. Be sure to simply sit with others in their difficulties rather than try to “solve” them. Consider responding to each lament with the promise of Psalm 34:18, *The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.*

Try praying one of the psalms of lament this week, on your own behalf or for someone you know who is suffering. Come to your homegroup ready to share with your group what effect it had on your prayer life.

DIGGING DEEPER:

If you would like to read or investigate additional lament psalms, a partial list is included below. Look for signs of hope even in the midst of challenges. How do the psalmists who authored these laments view God? How do they express their confidence in his deliverance? How do they intend to respond when he delivers them?

Additional lament psalms: Psalm 5, 13, 28, 31, 57, 69, 142