

August 3, 2025

Group Study: The Heart of the Matter (Psalm 90)

1. Why do you think Psalm 90 is placed immediately after the lament of Psalm 89 in the Psalter's structure?
2. What does it mean for God to be our "dwelling place" (v. 1) even in exile? What other sources of identity are you tempted to find your "home" in other than God? How does this psalm challenge those false sources of security?
3. How does Psalm 90 help us re-center our identity when earthly symbols (land, temple, monarchy) fail?
4. What comfort is found in remembering that our mortality is known and acknowledged by God?
5. How is Psalm 90 a theological "reset" for God's people?
6. What does this psalm teach us about repentance and orientation to God?
7. How do the images of "dust," "grass," and "morning" help us reflect on our own lives?
8. Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses, linking it to Israel's wilderness wanderings long before the establishment of the monarchy or temple. What does it look like for the church today to find its true home "on the move" with God?
9. What would it mean for our communities to live out the truth that "the Lord is King"?

Good Faith Bible Study

Kathy and Nathan Maxwell

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"The Heart of the Matter"

Psalm 90

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Alright, so—what’s the greatest movie of all time? Or, how about this one: What’s your favorite song—and sorry, you only get to pick one? We could debate these questions at length—probably even with someone we’ve just met. Some of us might even protest that such questions are absurd, because there’s simply too much to consider.

But what about your favorite poem? While we might wring our hands deciding between Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash or Taylor Swift, many of us would struggle to name our favorite poet—or really any poet besides maybe Shakespeare. For a million dollars could you name a single living American poet? Ask the person next to you.

Reading poetry isn’t commonplace in the circles of our everyday lives, broadly speaking. While there’s nothing really wrong with us ruminating over an episode of Ted Lasso, it does mean that we don’t have a built-in, familiar context for engaging the sort of thing poetry is. Given that the Psalms have the extra complication of being ancient lyrical poetry, it’s no wonder they’re an enigma to so many. “I’ve tried, but I just can’t get into them,” it’s been confessed to me more times than I can recall. “I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do with them.”

What are we supposed to do with them? It’s not a bad question. You might think of this podcast as a kind of quick-start guide on what to do with a Psalm. We want to consider the essentials that make the sort of thing they are, and to consider their intended purpose as scripture, and why it’s worth figuring out how to involve them in our everyday lives.

To get how the Psalms work, it’s worth thinking about where they come from. But I’m not really talking about matters of authorship or inspiration. Instead, imagine a worship service in an old Baptist church. The congregants are standing together, holding the hymnbooks they’ve retrieved from the backs of pews, and they’re singing “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Now focus your attention on the hymnbook. That book is as good an analogy as any for the origin of the Psalms. The Book of Psalms is a collection of lyrical compositions written in the tradition of Israel’s temple worship liturgy.

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The full history is more complicated, as you might expect. Maybe some Psalms began as something more like individual meditations than corporate songs. And they all continued to play a meaningful role in the life of believers long after the temple itself was gone, eventually becoming the prayers one reads rather than the hymns we might sing together. But it remains that the Psalms were born from the impulse to express something—to sing from the heart—about what it's like to be on the pilgrimage of faith.

So while we normally think of scripture as God's word to us, the Psalms are by nature our words to God. Our most fundamental understanding of how scripture works is that it reveals to us God's character and work in the world. And while it certainly does that, the Psalms also have the unique property of surfacing what resides in the deepest parts of our souls—maybe even what's beyond the reach of our everyday language. That's a pretty remarkable thing to have in scripture, if you think about it. When we consider the Psalms as scripture, it's as if they're God's way of saying, "Here's a way you can tell me what's on your heart, even when—or maybe especially when—you can't find the words on your own."

This way of thinking about the Psalms goes back to the very beginnings of Christian practice. I want to share with you an excerpt from a letter written over 16 centuries ago by Athanasius, an incredibly influential theologian and church leader whose writings and teachings really helped formulate the Christian doctrine of the trinity.

"There is a command to give thanks in all circumstances," he wrote to another church official, "but the Psalms also teach what one must say when giving thanks. Then hearing from others that as many as wish to live a godly life will be persecuted, from these we are taught how one must call out while fleeing, and what words must be offered to God while being persecuted and after being delivered subsequent to persecution. We are asked to bless the Lord, and to acknowledge him. But in the Psalms we are instructed how one must praise the Lord and by speaking what words we properly confess our faith in him. And in the case of each person one would find the divine hymns appointed for us and our emotions and equanimity."

There is also this astonishing thing in the Psalms. In the other books, those who read what the holy ones say, and what they might say concerning certain people, are reading the things that were written about those earlier people. And likewise, those who listen consider themselves to be other than those about whom the passage speaks, so that they only come to the imitation of the deeds that are told to the extent that they marvel at them and desire to emulate them. By contrast, however, he who takes up this book—the Psalter—goes through the prophecies about the Savior, as is customary in the other Scriptures, with admiration and adoration, but the other Psalms he recognizes as being his own words. And the one who hears is deeply moved, as though he himself were speaking, and is affected by the words of the songs, as if they were his own songs."

Okay, so maybe Athanasius does sound 1,600 years old, but he gets what we're supposed to do with the Psalms. If your walk in Christian faith could be made into a musical, the Psalms would be your lines. They are your lines, in any case. It's less a matter of you getting poetry, and more a recognition that the Psalms can facilitate expressing yourself more deeply—more truthfully—than you could otherwise manage of your own accord.

There's another characteristic of the Psalms that suggests this intended purpose. Have you ever noticed that the Psalms are not usually very specific about the particular circumstances surrounding the psalmist? So, for example, rather than a Psalm about, say, Rachel, who battled breast cancer and was giving thanks to God for being a cancer survivor and for the faith that sustained her through her treatment, instead we would find the thanksgiving of a faithful servant who cried out from her sickbed and who was healed. Biblical interpreters find this characteristic so conspicuous throughout the Psalms, that most consider it to be an intentional editorial design. In other words, the Psalms were collected together and shaped in such a way that they could be adaptable to life and open to use by many. You're not Rachel, exactly, but you may find yourself walking through the valley of sickness and disease. The Psalms are formed in such a way to adapt to your particular circumstances, and that makes them open for you to use.

Okay, so the Psalms were born as expressions to God, and they are designed for us to take on as our own words. And here's where we run into the challenge for most of us. Why does it have to be poetry, then? I don't talk like this—it kind of seems like nobody does—so why should we do it in this case?

A practical step at this point would be to discuss the essential mechanics of biblical poetry—to try and describe why the Psalms sound the way they do. We'd focus in on things like parallelism, imagery and metaphor. And we've even done some of that already in a previous lesson and podcast—the “Word of the Lord” study from July 6. But here the more crucial consideration is why poetry is the best, and really the only, vehicle for what the Psalms are designed to achieve as scripture—even if the language of the Psalms feels awkward or unfamiliar to us.

The thing to point out is that waxing poetic with someone else's words is maybe not quite as foreign as it seems. Think about the last time you were listening to a song and you were really, really into it. Maybe you were driving, or going for a walk or jogging. Remember that moment as fully as you can, and try to dwell on what was going on inside of you. Whose words were you singing, exactly? The story those lyrics told—the world they imagined—who was in it? Was it the performing artist, or did you find yourself somehow mixed up in there as well? Maybe you're not the sort to think or talk like Shakespeare. Fair enough. But somehow, that song provoked you, moved you, and elevated you into a place where those lyrics were the only words that could really explain what was happening inside you at that moment. This is just a peculiar thing that we humans tend to do, and Psalms work in a similar way.

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One of my favorite authors and thinkers on this subject is Robert Alter. He was a literature professor at UC Berkeley for many years, but he's famous among Bible nerds for his incredible aptitude for Old Testament poetry. In his classic work, The Art of Biblical Poetry, he writes that "poetry ... is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of imagining the world."

And that really is the heart of the matter. The Psalms imagine a world in which you can express yourself to God in the native tongue of the human heart. Inside a Psalm, you are the psalmist; you take on those words as your own. And when we inhabit the world of the Psalm, it moves us, elevates us, draws our being closer to God's, and ultimately shapes us into the people God created us to be. When we pop out on the other side of a Psalm, so to speak, we're a little different, formed and disciplined by the experience. In this sense, the Psalms work toward the same end as all scripture, even if they go about it in a unique way.

So that's what you do with a Psalm. Put more directly, that's what the Psalms do to us. They are purpose-built for us to adopt as our own meditations. If you make a habit of using the Psalms in this way, the awkwardness of the poetry will gradually subside, the voice within the inner recesses of your being will gradually grow louder and clearer, and your relationship with God will flourish in new ways.