

God is Love Bible Curriculum

Unit Three: The Songs of Israel

Lesson 16: Blessings for the righteous

Memory Verse: I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies. Psalm 18:3)

I heard that there's a secret chord,
that David played, and it pleased the LORD,
but you don't really care for music do ya?
It goes like this, the fourth, the fifth
the minor fall and the major lift,
the baffled king composing Hallelujah.

That was an agnostic poet's idea of the origin of the Psalms. A lot of the Psalms are listed explicitly as having been written by David, but some were written before him (Psalm 90: Moses) and others clearly after him (Psalm 137 about the captivity in Babylon). The book of Psalms is really just the Hebrew hymnal, a selection of words for songs the Jews sang in worship.

In this unit we will look at some of the themes repeated throughout the book and learn what they have to tell us about the Jewish view of God as well as the truth about God even the Jews didn't always understand. Hopefully in the process you'll learn more about the book and find passages you will find helpful at different stages in your personal experience with God.

I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart;
before the 'gods' I will sing your praise.
I will bow down toward your holy temple
and will praise your name for your love and your kindness,
for you have exalted above all things
your name and your word.
When I called, you answered me;
you made me bold and stouthearted.
May all the kings of the earth praise you, O LORD,
when they hear the words of your mouth.
May they sing of the ways of the LORD,
for the glory of the LORD is great.
Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly
but the proud he knows from afar.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life;
you stretch out your hand against the anger of my foes,
with your right hand you save me.
The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me;
your love O LORD, endures forever—
do not abandon the work of your hands. (Psalm 138)

Like the words for many songs, the Psalms are all written in poetic format. There are several forms of poetry used in Hebrew. Unlike English, rhyming words weren't that important and weren't often used. It's very difficult to translate rhyme, anyway. The most common form of Hebrew poetry is the couplet that repeats an idea in different words.

Examine the Psalm reproduced above. Notice how in most cases the line that is inset repeats the idea of the line before it. It might also expand on an idea expressed in the first line. For example, “you made me bold and stouthearted” isn't really the idea of the line before it. But we can see that David's experience that, “When I called, you answered me,” is what made him bold.

In another case we might see contrasting ideas paired up. For example: “but the proud he knows from afar,” contrasts the closeness of God to the lowly from the previous line with his “distance” from the proud who don't think they need God. We understand, of course, that this distance is not something God wants or has put in place. Rather, those who don't think they need God keep their distance from him.

And let's look at another line in the light of our understanding of God's intention to dispel Satan's lies by revealing the truth about himself. “[F]or you have exalted above all things your name and your word.” Recall that the name represents the character. When God exalts his name he is revealing the truth about his character so that all humans have a chance to see who he really is. His “word” is the truth about him as well. We will see in future lessons that truth can have very different impacts depending on the condition of the one who hears the truth.

Perhaps the most familiar Psalm of them all talks about the blessings of those who seek and follow God. The “Shepherd” Psalm is an expression of David's experience as the family shepherd in which he sees God as the good shepherd and himself as a sheep that receives good things and trusts in the provision God makes for him.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters
he restores my soul.
He guides me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life
and I will dwell in the house of the LORD
forever. (Psalm 23)

This Psalm is also a good place to introduce the concept of figurative language. David is taking something with which people are familiar, the care of a shepherd for the sheep, and using it to illustrate something they may not understand as well, the love and care of God for his people. Seen in that light this Psalm is full of symbols. Green pastures are not just places for the sheep to rest, they are a source of food. Other Bible metaphors liken the word of God to bread, so the green pastures could also stand for God's word.

A shepherd takes the sheep from place to place along paths that are appropriate for them. David chose to liken those to paths of righteousness, or living according to God's plan. God tries to make that easy for us, but sometimes we don't want to follow because we think righteousness is boring. David even used the shepherd's tools, the hooked rod and the walking staff, as symbols for God's protection of his people.

God is our refuge and strength,
an ever present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,
though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.

Selah

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy place where the Most High dwells
God is within her, she will not fall
God will help her at break of day.
Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.
The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

Selah

(Psalm 46:1-7)

This Psalm, as well, speaks of God's protection. But in this case the authors (the sons of Korah) liken God to a strong protective shelter, such as a fortress, where people can hide from trouble.

We will find more places in the Psalms where the language of war is used. This is because the people of those times were very familiar with war. It seems Israel never had real rest from her enemies on all sides. We'll see that this is because of the way the people of Israel wanted to live, not what God wanted for them. But because these things were familiar, the Psalmists use them to discuss the love and protection of God.

Possible thought papers:

1. Psalm 91 is another familiar song about God's protection. How do you think the people of Israel were familiar with some of the threats discussed here?
2. Write a short Psalm of your own. Use something familiar to you as a symbol for what God means to you.
3. Look up the meaning of Hallelujah. How is the Jews' special name for God included? How do some uses of the word seem when you know this?