



A LENTEN STUDY OF PSALMS

EVEN SO
GOD IS WITH US



Huntsville First
United Methodist Church

120 Greene Street SE
Huntsville, Alabama 35801
256-539-5738
www.huntsvillefirst.org

Blessings to you this Lent, Huntsville First!

As we journey together to the cross this season, we are going to spend some time with some familiar stories in the Old Testament that remind us how God is present in the lives of God's people through all sorts of circumstances. Despite our fears, despite our uncertainty, despite our doubt, despite our sin and our shortcomings, "Even so, God is with us."

To help us bring this truth into our own lives, we are inviting our Sunday School classes and small groups to participate in this Lenten study of the psalms that also remind us of this truth. Each week, your class will encounter a new psalm and be given the opportunity to reflect on how these ancient words might serve as a reminder of God's work and presence in your life, too. Each lesson contains that day's scripture passage, a short reflection, some discussion questions for the class, and a breath prayer taken from the psalm for you to pray throughout the week. You can also find a "How to Pray Breath Prayers" guide at the beginning of this curriculum.

It is our hope that these lessons will give you the time and space for self-reflection, reconciliation with God, and recentering your walk of faith.

Be well,
Rev. Byron Vance, Senior Pastor
Rev. Rachel McKelvy Boggs, Associate Pastor

HOW TO PRAY



BREATH PRAYERS

1. FOCUS ON YOUR BREATHING

1. Inhale: Breathe in deeply and slowly. Fill your lungs completely.
2. Exhale: Breathe out slowly. Empty your lungs fully.
3. Repeat a few times as you bring your breathing into a slow and steady rhythm.

2. BEGIN PRAYING

1. Inhale: As you fill your lungs, pray the “inhale” part of the prayer.

“BE STILL”

2. Exhale: As you empty your lungs, pray the “exhale” part of the prayer.

“AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD”

3. Meditate on the words as you breathe to the rhythm of the prayer.

3. REPEAT

Repeat for one minute.

Try to work up to five minutes!

THE JOY OF FORGIVENESS

Of David. A Maskil.

- ¹ Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
- ² Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.
- ³ While I kept silent, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
- ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. *Selah*
- ⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin. *Selah*
- ⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;
at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.
- ⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. *Selah*
- ⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.
- ⁹ Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.
- ¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.
- ¹¹ Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Reflection:

The Book of Psalms is one of the most beloved books of the Bible, offering prayers of thanksgiving, lamentation, and everything in between. Some psalms express great joy, some psalms lash out in anger, some psalms cry out in distress, some psalms recount the majesty of God, some psalms prophesy about the future, and some psalms contain wisdom about living in relation to God. Psalm 32 is one such wisdom psalm; it is the first of thirteen *maskils*, or teaching psalms, which are meant to guide and instruct God's people.

This particular *maskil* of Psalm 32 teaches us about sin, confession, and forgiveness. Notice that in the first two verses this psalm uses three different words to describe our wrongdoing: transgression, sin, and iniquity. These three words cover the whole spectrum of things that separate us from God, covering everything from mere mistakes to willful disobedience. But despite the many things that can serve to separate us from God, this psalm reminds us about the wideness of God's mercy, and how God forgives us of our sins if we are just honest with God.

Many of us may shy away from talking openly about sin. It's in our nature from the very beginning to avoid admitting when we are wrong—Adam and Eve themselves hid from God after they ate the forbidden fruit because they knew they had done something wrong. And though Adam and Eve were punished and faced consequences for their actions, God ultimately forgave them and still showed them mercy when they revealed themselves to God.

Likewise, this psalm teaches us that when we acknowledge our sin, do not hide our iniquity, and confess our transgressions to the Lord, we are offered forgiveness. This is good, happy news! This is why the psalm begins with the refrain that “happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,” and “happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity.” But it takes that first step of being honest, laying our sin and our hurts bare, and trusting the Lord—even with the darkest and most vulnerable parts of ourselves—for us to experience that forgiveness and happiness. If we can be honest about who we are and what has separated us from God, then God can work within us to heal us and reconcile us back to God.

Luckily, Lent is the perfect time for some honest self-reflection. This season is all about recognizing the ways we have strayed from God, and in turn taking the steps to repent and refocus on our walk of faith. This is hard work, and Lent is a long season of doing this hard work—but this psalm reminds us that there is light at the end of the tunnel. This teaching psalm teaches us to have hope, reminding us that reconciliation with God *is* possible, that God *does* forgive us for our shortcomings, and that God's steadfast love surrounds us when we put our trust in the Lord. The lesson of this *maskil* is that if we do this hard, honest work of confession and repentance, then we will be met with forgiveness and love. Ultimately, we all will sin and will fall short of the glory of God; but even so, God still offers us forgiveness, if only we will reach out to God with an honest look at who we are and ask for it.

This Lenten season, may we all do this work of reflection and confession so that we, too, may be included in the refrain “happy are those whose transgression is forgiven.”

Discussion Questions:

1. What were you taught about sin, confession, and forgiveness growing up? What is your knee-jerk reaction to these words?
2. Is confessing your sins and shortcomings easy or hard for you? Are you quick to admit when you are in the wrong? Are there people it is easier to admit this to?
3. Lent is a season of honest self-reflection; where are places you can be honest this week? With your loved ones? With yourself? With God?
4. In verse 8, a second voice enters the Psalm, speaking to the first voice who has sinned and been forgiven; this could be the voice of God, or it could be a wise voice of counsel pointing to God. Who is someone in your life who has served as that wise voice, teaching you in “the way you should go” and encouraging you to “trust in the Lord”?
5. This psalm is all about repentance, which includes both being sorry for what you have done and also committing to changing your ways. During Lent, people often change their habits in order to refocus on their walk with God. Are you changing anything during this season to strengthen your relationship with God?

Breath Prayer:

If you are looking for a new habit to take on during the season of Lent, look no further! As a part of this study, we are going to offer some breath prayers to pray throughout the week.

What is breath prayer? Breath prayer is an ancient practice that ties a short, rhythmic prayer to our breathing. It's a simple, meaningful way to practice mindfulness and to recenter yourself in God's presence wherever you are. Often these prayers are taken from scripture (like the Psalms!), but they can also be taken from hymns, poetry, liturgy, you name it. The point is to have a short phrase that you pray repeatedly as you breathe, and praying in this way helps us tune our hearts to God and reminds us that God is as near as our very breath.

Each week, we will provide you with a new breath prayer taken directly from that week's psalm for you to pray and meditate on. To learn how to pray these breath prayers, please refer to the “How to Pray Breath Prayers” guide at the beginning of this curriculum. The “inhale” and “exhale” parts of each new breath prayer will be separated by a // symbol. This week's breath prayer is:

I will confess my transgressions to the LORD // You have forgiven the guilt of my sin.

ASSURANCE OF GOD'S PROTECTION

A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
² My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
³ He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
⁴ He who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade at your right hand.
⁶ The sun shall not strike you by day
nor the moon by night.
⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
⁸ The LORD will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.

Psalm 121 (NRSVUE)

Reflection:

If I am not careful, the Book of Psalms can simply be considered a loose unit of one hundred and fifty individual prayers or songs, each intended to be utilized in the same ways for our spiritual growth. Then come the notations like the one found with Psalm 121, “*A Song of Ascent*” and my preconceptions are challenged.

Psalm 121 is part of the fifteen psalms with that title, Song of Ascent. It could be that this particular psalm initially referred to a military journey or some other trip, but in this collection, it finds its way into the hearts of those looking to find their way home to God. These are likely pilgrimage psalms, prayed, spoken or sung by those who are on their way. Many times, that pilgrimage way would be “up” toward Jerusalem, a spiritual hub for many in the writers’ days as well as in ours. The “up” is more theological than geographical, in that the pilgrims were “going up” to this holy site.

Finding our way toward God is what we find in Genesis 12. There, we properly meet Abram, only just introduced in Genesis 11:26 as one of the children of Terah, who himself was just earlier introduced as a “Descendant of Shem.” Abram is told by the Lord that Abram would be made a great nation, made a great name, receive a great blessing, and pass that blessing along to all the world. It is fitting that our Song of Ascent is connected to the story of this person sent to a place and future of God’s call and provision.

Psalm 121 is a prayer we can take through the hills and valleys, through the highs and lows with us, as we journey with God. Six times in this psalm we are told that God will ‘keep.’ God keeps and doesn’t slumber or sleep. God keeps us from evil, God keeps our life, God keeps our coming in and our going out.

The sixth of the ‘keep’ statements is actually the hinge around which this psalm swings, many say. In the first section of verse 5, the psalmist says, “*the Lord is our keeper.*” Students of the language have found that there are exactly the same number of syllables before this assertion as there are after. In biblical construction, this is often done intentionally to indicate that the thought, word, idea, concept, promise at the center is indeed at the center. If that is so, we are reminded that *the Lord is our keeper.*

On our Lenten journey with Jesus to the cross, it may be helpful to remember that God is faithful to be our keeper as we journey through the hills and valleys, into unknown spaces like Abram or into places of our own repentance. God keeps us, keeps true to us, never leaves us as we journey, and sees us into new lands, new days, new moments of hope-filled living, all with God our keeper.

Discussion Questions:

1. What pilgrimage journeys have you taken? Where did you sense God's presence as you journeyed?
2. When have you accidentally been on pilgrimage, only looking back later realizing that it was indeed a journey toward God?
3. How does God being our "keeper" speak to you? What has God kept in you or kept you from?
4. In addition to the Psalms, what songs resonate in your soul as you are on pilgrimage? What prayers or assurances?

Breath Prayer:

If you are looking for a new habit to take on during the season of Lent, look no further! As a part of this study, we are going to offer some breath prayers to pray throughout the week.

What is breath prayer? Breath prayer is an ancient practice that ties a short, rhythmic prayer to our breathing. It's a simple, meaningful way to practice mindfulness and to recenter yourself in God's presence wherever you are. Often these prayers are taken from scripture (like the Psalms!), but they can also be taken from hymns, poetry, liturgy, you name it. The point is to have a short phrase that you pray repeatedly as you breathe, and praying in this way helps us tune our hearts to God and reminds us that God is as near as our very breath.

Each week, we will provide you with a new breath prayer taken directly from that week's psalm for you to pray and meditate on. To learn how to pray these breath prayers, please refer to the "How to Pray Breath Prayers" guide at the beginning of this curriculum. The "inhale" and "exhale" parts of each new breath prayer will be separated by a // symbol. This week's breath prayer is:

I will remember the Lord is my keeper // You remain near on my pilgrimage journey.

A CALL TO WORSHIP AND OBEDIENCE

- ¹ O come, let us sing to the LORD;
let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
- ² Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
- ³ For the LORD is a great God
and a great King above all gods.
- ⁴ In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
- ⁵ The sea is his, for he made it,
and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
- ⁶ O come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
- ⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture
and the sheep of his hand.
O that today you would listen to his voice!
- ⁸ Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
- ⁹ when your ancestors tested me
and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
- ¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation
and said, “They are a people whose hearts go astray,
and they do not regard my ways.”
- ¹¹ Therefore in my anger I swore,
“They shall not enter my rest.”

Reflection:

“O come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!” It is easy to envision this opening verse being read aloud as a greeting in a worship service, calling the community of faith to join their voices together in praise of God. This is a psalm that calls us to worship and obedience, two things we practice when we gather together in sanctuaries and other places of worship to tune our hearts toward God.

This call to worship and obedience is developed throughout the entirety of the psalm, though the psalmist has a marked shift in tone from the beginning of the psalm to the end. In the first seven verses, the psalmist uses beautiful, evocative language describing how God is worthy of our praise: this God is the rock of our salvation, a great God and a great King, the Maker of all things, and a God who cares for us like a shepherd cares for the sheep of his hand. But after these grandiose descriptions of the goodness and majesty of God, the psalmist shifts focus away from why *God* should be *praised* to why *we* should be *careful*. In the final four verses of the psalm, the psalmist admonishes us as the audience to listen to God’s voice and ensure that we do not harden our hearts against God like the Israelites of old.

In verses 8-11, the psalmist harkens back to the story of Exodus 17, in which the Israelites complain about God’s provision for them in the wilderness after fleeing Egypt. Heeding the Israelites’ complaints about being thirsty, God answers their prayers by having Moses bring forth water out of a rock. But the Israelites’ complaining had consequences: Moses named that place Massah and Meribah—meaning Testing and a Strife—marking this place for future generations because here, the Israelites had not trusted the Lord and had put God to the test.

Psalm 95 recalls this demarcation and harshly criticizes the Israelites at Massah and Meribah, describing God’s anger at them for questioning whether God would care for them in their time of need. The Israelites had hardened their hearts against God, and stopped believing in God’s goodness and provision. And because of the Israelites’ wayward, rebellious behavior, they were punished: the psalmist concludes the psalm by telling of how God loathed that generation for forty years and swore “they shall not enter my rest” (i.e., they will not enter the Promised Land).

What a harsh turn from the beginning of the psalm! But even though the psalm ends on this grim note, we know that the end of the story is not a grim one: for God does not give up on the Israelites when they hardened their hearts against God. Though this generation was punished for turning away from God and questioning God’s character, even so, God continued to be present with God’s people and ultimately still brought them to the Promised Land.

As with the Israelites, we can rest assured that in our moments of turning away from God, God is still with us and committed to caring for us like a shepherd cares for his sheep. But Psalm 95 encourages us to avoid this “even so” fate; the psalmist gives us this example of the faithlessness of the Israelites in Exodus 17 so that we may keep our faith and continue to listen to God’s voice. The Psalm encourages us to turn to God in praise throughout all the moments of our lives, from our certain mountain-top moments to our uncertain wilderness wanderings. So this Lenten season, “let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation,” even in the midst of our journey towards the cross.

Discussion Questions:

1. This psalm contains a lot of images of God; God as Rock of our Salvation, God as King, God as Maker, God as Shepherd. What image of God is most comforting for you?
2. What is your experience of worship? How do you “make a joyful noise” in your worship of God?
3. Do you find it easy to listen to God’s voice? How do you discern God’s voice?
4. What hardens your heart to the praise and worship of God?
5. When is a time you have questioned what God was doing? Is there a time when you have been like the Israelites and asked, “Is the Lord among us or not?”

Breath Prayer:

If you are looking for a new habit to take on during the season of Lent, look no further! As a part of this study, we are going to offer some breath prayers to pray throughout the week.

What is breath prayer? Breath prayer is an ancient practice that ties a short, rhythmic prayer to our breathing. It's a simple, meaningful way to practice mindfulness and to recenter yourself in God's presence wherever you are. Often these prayers are taken from scripture (like the Psalms!), but they can also be taken from hymns, poetry, liturgy, you name it. The point is to have a short phrase that you pray repeatedly as you breathe, and praying in this way helps us tune our hearts to God and reminds us that God is as near as our very breath.

Each week, we will provide you with a new breath prayer taken directly from that week's psalm for you to pray and meditate on. To learn how to pray these breath prayers, please refer to the “How to Pray Breath Prayers” guide at the beginning of this curriculum. The “inhale” and “exhale” parts of each new breath prayer will be separated by a // symbol. This week's breath prayer is:

Let us sing to the Lord // Make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

THE DIVINE SHEPHERD

A Psalm of David.

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

² He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³ he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴ Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil,

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

⁵ You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Psalm 23 (NRSVUE)

Reflection:

Do you know any Bible verses by heart? If you grew up in the church, what scripture passages did you have to memorize? Chances are, Psalm 23 is one such passage you are intimately familiar with, whether you can recite it in perfect King James English or you just know the major beats of the prayer.

This psalm is one that shows up in all different seasons of our lives: reminding us of our days studying memory verses in Sunday School; speaking words of comfort to us as at funerals as we grieve the loss of loved ones; challenging us to slow down when we are running on fumes and life seems chaotic; offering us an encouraging reminder of God's continued presence with us during times of uncertainty and anxiety. This steady image of God as a shepherd who guides us and provides for us has been a balm to weary people across generations and throughout the world, and it continues to be a solace to the people of God today.

One reason that this psalm has such comforting staying power is because in each verse it affirms the steadfast provision and presence of God. Attributed to David, the shepherd boy turned anointed king, this psalm is full of imagery that shows how just as a faithful shepherd watches over his sheep, so God watches over God's people. Notice all the ways this psalm describes how God watches over God's people: the Lord provides so that I shall not want; the Lord leads me; the Lord restores my soul; the Lord prepares a table for me; the Lord anoints my head with oil. And if there was any doubt about the limits of when God is with us, verse 4 gives us the unmistakable reminder that "Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; *for you are with me.*"

This psalm is a prayer that no matter what we face, even so, God is with us. Whether we are basking in our mountain top moments, trudging through our darkest valleys, or just trying to make it through somewhere in between, God is right along there with us, leading us and restoring us and comforting us. The final verse of the psalm is an affirmation of God's continued presence with us through it all, stating with conviction that "surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long."

This is a psalm for all seasons—because it tells us about a God who is for all seasons. Seasons of joy and seasons of grief, seasons of learning and seasons of forgetting, seasons of chaos and seasons of peace. God is with us through it all. So even as we journey together through this season of Lent, reflecting honestly on the ways that we fall short and fail to focus on God, may we remember that even though we walk through x, y, or z, we fear no evil, for this Good God Shepherd is with us.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you have any Bible verses memorized? If so, what are they?
2. Do you follow God like a sheep follows their shepherd? Do you believe this refrain that with God you shall not want? We all struggle with wanting more sometimes; how might you combat your tendency to want for more?
3. What memories or feelings does Psalm 23 stir up for you?
4. Are there seasons of life when Psalm 23 has been particularly meaningful for you?
5. Where have you seen God's goodness and mercy recently? These could be showing up in big ways, like long awaited answers or that prayed for opportunity falling into your lap, or they could show up in small ways, like that light turning green as you pull up to the intersection or the warmth of a cup of coffee in your hand.

Breath Prayer:

If you are looking for a new habit to take on during the season of Lent, look no further! As a part of this study, we are going to offer some breath prayers to pray throughout the week.

What is breath prayer? Breath prayer is an ancient practice that ties a short, rhythmic prayer to our breathing. It's a simple, meaningful way to practice mindfulness and to recenter yourself in God's presence wherever you are. Often these prayers are taken from scripture (like the Psalms!), but they can also be taken from hymns, poetry, liturgy, you name it. The point is to have a short phrase that you pray repeatedly as you breathe, and praying in this way helps us tune our hearts to God and reminds us that God is as near as our very breath.

Each week, we will provide you with a new breath prayer taken directly from that week's psalm for you to pray and meditate on. To learn how to pray these breath prayers, please refer to the "How to Pray Breath Prayers" guide at the beginning of this curriculum. The "inhale" and "exhale" parts of each new breath prayer will be separated by a // symbol. This week's breath prayer is:

I fear no evil // For you are with me.

WAITING FOR DIVINE REDEMPTION

A Song of Ascents.

¹ Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

² Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

³ If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

⁴ But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

⁵ I wait for the LORD; my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;

⁶ my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

⁷ O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.

⁸ It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

Psalm 130 (NRSVUE)

Reflection:

Psalm 130 is another in the collection of ascent psalms, which, as we remember from our look at Psalm 121, were usually associated with times of spiritual pilgrimage. In addition to being a pilgrimage psalm, though, this is counted as a lament or complaint psalm, crying to God for help. Perhaps it isn't so difficult for us to imagine our own pilgrimage times when we have cried out to God for similar forms of help.

Our companion text this week points to a similar reason for lament. In Ezekiel 37, the valley is filled with dried out bones, representative of the spiritual condition of God's people. We imagine these forms, outlines of lives without life, lying there—not barely past living, not breathing their last, but dried out, past hope, beyond last ditch efforts. Into those depths, into those dried out bones, God calls for life. And, in a reanimation that reminds us of the frightening impossibilities of the *The Walking Dead*, the dried out bones take on form, take on life, are revived. Breath then is added and hope returns. In the depths, God meets us.

The psalmist yearns for a similar new life for themselves, from the first line calling to God “*out of the depths*.” This reference to “the depths” is common in the lament psalms, evoking images of the depths of the sea and calling to mind everything from the depths of despair, guilt, loneliness, and even death. We, the readers, can imagine this predicament without further qualification. We understand deep, pronounced, profound dark periods of being lost or broken and in need of the presence of a loving God. Scholars say this psalm is often known simply by two Latin words, *de profundis*, which is literally “out of the depths.” When we are out of our depth in waters or groaning too deep for us, we cry out like the psalmist for God to hear, for God to be merciful, for God to be present. And despite how we may be overcome in the midst of our own deep waters, we are comforted to find that even so, God is with us.

On our Lenten journey with Jesus to the cross, it is helpful to remember that God enters into the deepest of our depths, meets us in brokenness cast upon us or caused by our own sinfulness, and gives us hope. God, the psalm says, will redeem Israel (and us) from all their (our) sins. Thanks be to God.

Discussion Questions:

1. When has pilgrimage seemed more a descent to the deep than an ascent to the holy? Where did you experience God, even in this?
2. Meditate more on the word ‘depths.’ Relate it back to two other “depth” verses: Psalm 139:8 and Ephesians 3:18-19. How do those depths speak to the presence of God?
3. What are things that remind you to put your hope in God, even when facing your own deep waters?
4. Verse 3 speaks of the waiting while in the depths. How is your practice of waiting on the Lord?
5. What does “redemption” mean to you in your current situation? What is something in your life you need to ask God to redeem?

Breath Prayer:

If you are looking for a new habit to take on during the season of Lent, look no further! As a part of this study, we are going to offer some breath prayers to pray throughout the week.

What is breath prayer? Breath prayer is an ancient practice that ties a short, rhythmic prayer to our breathing. It's a simple, meaningful way to practice mindfulness and to recenter yourself in God's presence wherever you are. Often these prayers are taken from scripture (like the Psalms!), but they can also be taken from hymns, poetry, liturgy, you name it. The point is to have a short phrase that you pray repeatedly as you breathe, and praying in this way helps us tune our hearts to God and reminds us that God is as near as our very breath.

Each week, we will provide you with a new breath prayer taken directly from that week's psalm for you to pray and meditate on. To learn how to pray these breath prayers, please refer to the “How to Pray Breath Prayers” guide at the beginning of this curriculum. The “inhale” and “exhale” parts of each new breath prayer will be separated by a // symbol. This week's breath prayer is:

Even in the depths I call on you // You, O Lord, are my hope.

A SONG OF VICTORY

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!
- ² Let Israel say,
“His steadfast love endures forever.”
- Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
- ²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.
- ²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.
- ²² The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.
- ²³ This is the LORD’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.
- ²⁴ This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
- ²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!
- ²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.
- ²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.
- Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.
- ²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God; I will extol you.
- ²⁹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Reflection:

As you read through this week's psalm, listen for themes that resonate with the story of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem and the passion story that follows. The procession of the righteous through the gate of the Lord, the stone that the builders rejected but has become the chief cornerstone, the festal procession bound with branches leading up to the sacrificial altar. Even the words that the crowd shouts as Jesus enters Jerusalem, "Hosanna to the Son of David! *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest heaven!*"—these very words are taken from Psalm 118. And actually, "hosanna" is also taken from this psalm, though this word is hidden in most of our English translations. In 118:25, the psalmist cries "save us, we beseech you, O LORD," and the word for "save us" is the Hebrew word *hosi 'ah na*—hosanna.

As you can see, there are lots of connections between Psalm 118 and the story for Palm Sunday! As such, this psalm has often been used for reflection and study during Holy Week. But before it came to be associated with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, this psalm was long used as a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for the ways God has already heard the people cry out "hosanna" and saved them in the past—from Egypt, from the wilderness, from hunger, from their enemies. Because of this, this psalm came to be a part of the celebration of Passover; Jesus himself likely would have recited this psalm with his disciples at the end of the Passover Feast as a part of the psalms of praise for God's presence and provision.

But I imagine that at their last Passover together, after witnessing the procession on Palm Sunday and hearing Jesus proclaim that his time was near, the words of this psalm would have rang out a little more loudly to the disciples. A little more poignant, a little more painful. But also maybe a little more meaningful.

This psalm is bookended with the refrain, "O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever." In the story of Holy Week, we see the lengths that God is willing to go to in order to ensure that we may all experience God's steadfast love forever. This story is a painful one, in which the Son of God is rejected, arrested, tried, mocked, beaten, crucified, and ultimately killed for his mission of extending the love of God to all. And yet in the face of this pain, Psalm 118 affirms that even so, God's "steadfast love endures forever."

This is a hard week, the culmination of a hard season in which we reflect honestly on how we, too, have rejected God, mocked God's ways, and failed to faithfully follow Christ's example of loving people even to the point of death. But hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners, and this proves God's love toward us. God's steadfast love *does* endure forever; Christ made sure of that, and made sure that we all are invited into God's loving kingdom. Thanks be to God for that. So, in tune with the psalmist, let all God's people say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Amen.

Discussion Questions:

1. This psalm calls on Israel, the house of Aaron, and all those who fear the Lord to say, “His steadfast love endures forever” (Psalm 118:2-4). This is a statement of belief, a sort of affirmation of faith that you truly believe that God’s steadfast love endures forever. What reminds you of God’s steadfast love? How does this theme of God's steadfast love resonate with your personal experiences?
2. Do you find it easy to sing songs of praise and thanksgiving? Have you been through seasons in your life when it was hard to do this?
3. This psalm invites us to embrace radical gratitude and intentional celebration of God and God’s blessings. Where can you show radical gratitude this week? What are some practical ways you can incorporate intentional celebration into your daily life?
4. What has been most meaningful for you this Lenten season?

Breath Prayer:

If you are looking for a new habit to take on during the season of Lent, look no further! As a part of this study, we are going to offer some breath prayers to pray throughout the week.

What is breath prayer? Breath prayer is an ancient practice that ties a short, rhythmic prayer to our breathing. It's a simple, meaningful way to practice mindfulness and to recenter yourself in God’s presence wherever you are. Often these prayers are taken from scripture (like the Psalms!), but they can also be taken from hymns, poetry, liturgy, you name it. The point is to have a short phrase that you pray repeatedly as you breathe, and praying in this way helps us tune our hearts to God and reminds us that God is as near as our very breath.

Each week, we will provide you with a new breath prayer taken directly from that week’s psalm for you to pray and meditate on. To learn how to pray these breath prayers, please refer to the “How to Pray Breath Prayers” guide at the beginning of this curriculum. The “inhale” and “exhale” parts of each new breath prayer will be separated by a // symbol. This week’s breath prayer is:

O give thanks to the LORD // His steadfast love endures forever