

The Wisdom of God

Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books

Leader's Guide

(for use with both the book only or
the book combined with video study)

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The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books Leader's Guide

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Based on the book *The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books (A 10-Week Bible Study)*, first printing 2012

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An Introduction to *The Wisdom of God* for Leaders

The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books is an in-depth study of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature of the Bible, with the goal of understanding it in the way that Jesus himself taught the disciples to read and understand the Old Testament: with him at the center. As we see not only the wise principles for living in these biblical books, but also the wise person they point to, it will help us to understand the person and work of Christ more clearly which will prepare us to worship him more fully. This guide will equip you to plan and lead a study of *The Wisdom of God* using either the book alone, or the book along with the video series. Teaching experience or gifting is not required to lead this study—just a willingness to organize, oversee, and facilitate a meaningful discussion time, as well as personal enthusiasm for knowing Christ more deeply through the study of his Word.

Determining Your Schedule for Studying *The Wisdom of God*

This study has been put together in a way that offers flexibility in how you use it and flexibility in how you schedule your time for working through it. Everything is provided in the book that is needed by participants. Each week's lesson includes:

- ≈ Personal Bible Study
- ≈ Teaching Chapter (with a "Looking Forward" addendum at the end of each chapter)
- ≈ Discussion Guide

It is divided into ten weeks of study. But you may want to carefully consider dividing the material in a way that would extend the study over twenty weeks, giving your participants

more time to think through and talk through the truths presented. Expanding the study may also be beneficial when you have only one hour or less to meet together each week and also want to incorporate time for worship, prayer, or personal sharing into your small group time. Following are outlines for how the study would work for different schedules.

A 10-Week Book Study—Participants would need to have books in advance of the first week you meet, with instructions to read the chapter in Week 1, "What We Need Most to Know," before they arrive the first week. There is no Personal Bible Study portion of the lesson for Week 1. When you get together that first week, you can spend some time getting to know each other, communicating the format you will use, and discussing the chapter you've all read, using the Discussion Guide for Week 1. From then on, participants will be asked to come to the group time having completed the Personal Bible Study section and having read the Teaching Chapter of that week's lesson (unless your group's style will be to read the chapter aloud as a group, which some groups elect to do). You may want to suggest to participants that they put a star beside questions in the Personal Bible Study that they want to be sure to bring up in the discussion, and underline key passages in the chapter that are meaningful or that raise questions for them that they'd like to discuss. During your time together each week you will discuss the big ideas of the lesson using the Discussion Guide, bringing in content from the Personal Bible Study and Teaching Chapter as you see fit.

Sample Weekly Schedule for a 1-hour Study:

- 7:00 Welcome, get settled, announcements, maybe singing
- 7:10 Open discussion using the “Getting Started” question found in the Discussion Guide, working your way through the Discussion Guide questions, bringing in comments and questions from the Personal Bible Study and Teaching Chapter as desired.
- 7:50 Take prayer requests and pray
- 7:59 Close

A 11- or 12-Week Book Study—You may prefer to meet the first week and distribute the books at that point, using that first week solely to get to know each other and get organized. Assign the group to read the chapter in Week 1 for discussion the following week and then proceed as outlined in the ten-week book study. If you want to extend the study to twelve weeks, you might set a week following the last lesson to come back together, asking each member to plan to share the truths and take-aways from the study that have been most meaningful, or perhaps to talk through any lingering questions from the study.

A 20-Week Book Study—There is a great deal of material here and you may want to take your time with it, giving more time to discuss its foundational truths, and allowing it to sink in. To expand the study over twenty weeks, you would break each week into two parts. You would spend one week on the Personal Bible Study section—either doing it on your own and discussing your answers when you meet, or actually working through the questions together when you meet (which would lessen the amount of time required outside of the group time and perhaps diminish barriers to participation for those who struggle with working through the questions on their own). Then, you would ask group members to read the Teaching Chapter on their own before the next meeting, and use the Discussion Guide to

discuss the big ideas of the lesson the following week. If you meet once for Week 1 (since there is no Personal Bible Study section for the first week), and meet for a final week to share big-picture truths taken away from the study, it will add up to twenty weeks.

Sample Weekly Schedule for a 1-hour Study
Week A (Personal Bible Study):

- 7:00 Welcome, get settled, announcements, maybe singing
- 7:10 Work your way through the questions in the Personal Bible Study, looking up the answers together and allowing various members to share what they are putting down.
- 7:50 Take prayer requests and pray
- 7:59 Close

Week B (Teaching Chapter):

- 7:00 Welcome, get settled, announcements, maybe singing
- 7:10 Open discussion using the “Getting Started” question found in the Discussion Guide, working your way through the Discussion Guide questions, bringing in comments and quotes from Teaching Chapter and reading the “Looking Forward” section together.
- 7:50 Take prayer requests and pray
- 7:59 Close

A 10-week Book Study Using the Video—

If you’re using the book in combination with the video series, group members will be asked to complete the Personal Bible Study section of each week’s lesson in the book before they come. On the videos, Nancy presents virtually the same content as the Teaching Chapters minus the “Looking Forward” addendum found at the end of each chapter. So if you are using the video series, participants have the option to:

1. Read the chapter in advance as a preview of what will be presented on the video.
2. Just listen to Nancy teach the content of the chapter on the video and read only the “Looking Forward” as part of the group discussion time or on their own.

3. Go back and read the chapter after watching the video, if needed or desired, to seal in or clarify what was presented in the video.

When group members miss a particular week, you may want to encourage them to go to the website, www.seeingJesusintheOldTestament.com, where they can download the video they missed, or they can simply read the chapter in the book.

It is a good idea to encourage participants to take notes during the video even though the content of the video is in the book. For each video presentation, reproducible note-taking pages that you may copy for your group members are included at the end of this Leader's Guide. Note-taking during the video is a good idea because something transpires when we process words and ideas through a pen or pencil onto paper, which aids us in processing and retaining the words and ideas. But those taking notes may also rest easy if they miss something significant, because the complete content is also in the book.

*Sample Schedule for 2-hour Study
Incorporating the Video*

- 9:00 Welcome, get settled, announcements, maybe singing
- 9:10 Watch video teaching session
- 9:50 Respond to video with various women praying as they feel led in response to what they've heard (not general prayers, but responding to what was presented). Because the lessons end each week in some poignant ways, it will be helpful to be able to be quiet and also respond to what was presented before rushing off to hallway conversation and small group discussion.
- 10:00 Break to go to small groups
- 10:05 Welcome, connecting and checking in with each other time
- 10:10 Start discussion using the Discussion Guide and bringing in Personal Bible Study questions group members want to discuss as well as points made in the video.

- 10:50 Take prayer requests and pray (be sure that the prayer time is not only about personal needs but also praying through the truths presented in the passage you're studying. This will likely need to be modeled by the leader and/or assigned to one of the people praying).

10:59 Close

Making the Most of the Personal Bible Study

The question is often asked, "How long should it take to complete the Personal Bible Study questions?" The answer is, there is no set time frame. We all approach this differently. Some participants love to luxuriate, think through, look up, and write out. Others have the approach of simply looking for the answers and making short notations rather than writing long answers to questions. So how should you answer the question, "How much time should it take?" I suggest you say that it takes as much time as they choose to invest in it. Certainly some weeks they may have more time than others, and we all know that we get more out of a study the more we put into it. The depth of thinking through the lesson is not necessarily reflected in the length of answers written on the page or the time spent according to the clock. What is most important is not how much time it takes, but planning a time to work through the Personal Bible Study and keeping that appointment. In fact, in the first week, you might ask each group member to share with the group when she intends to work on the Personal Bible Study in the coming week. This will help everyone to think about their schedule and set a time. One person's strategy may serve to be helpful to someone else who has not been successful in the past in carving out time for personal study. You might ask those who have done similar studies if they prefer to do it in one sitting or to break it up over several days. Also suggest they consider using Sunday, a day set aside for God, to study God's Word.

Included in the following pages of this Leader's Guide is a copy of each week's Personal Bible Study that includes possible answers to the questions. This is provided for you as the leader to assist you in dealing with difficult questions, but it should not be provided to group members. I also encourage you to avoid having this Leader's Guide open as you work on the Personal Bible Study yourself just as your group members are doing. We all know that it is a challenge to resist looking for the answers to a crossword puzzle in the back of the book while we're working on it. And likewise, as the leader, it may be a challenge for you to resist working through the questions with this resource at your fingertips. After completing the Personal Bible Study yourself, you may want to look over the suggested answers in this Leader's Guide and add notes to your own answers as desired in preparation for the group discussion rather than having this guide in hand during your group time, which cannot help but imply that these are the "right" answers. You will find what I hope will be some helpful suggestions for encouraging your group members in regard to completing the Personal Bible Study in the "Dealing with Common Challenges" section of this Leader's Guide.

Incorporating the "Looking Forward" Section

I grew up in church and have spent most of my life in the evangelical culture with lots of sound Bible teaching for which I am so grateful. But for most of my life I have had a very limited, and less than fully biblical, understanding of heaven and eternity. I thought of heaven primarily being a place away from here where our spirits go after we die to be with God forever. Honestly, I think I never really thought through what the difference would be in that existence when what we repeatedly read about in the New Testament in terms of the resurrection of

the body (1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4) comes about at the return of Christ.

Additionally, I always thought of God's purposes of redemption being really only about people. I did not have an understanding of God's intentions to redeem all of creation, including this earth, making it the place where we will live forever in our resurrected bodies with Christ. But this is clearly the future hope that all of the Bible is directed toward. The purposes of God are not merely about Christians going to heaven when we die, but about his intentions to restore all things, about heaven coming down to earth, and living forever with God in its perfection and beauty like Adam and Eve once did in the Garden—except even better.

I assume there are a lot of people who have had a similar experience and limited understanding, and that is why I have made the consummation a part of every chapter in this study. To truly understand what God is doing in the smaller bits of Scripture we study, we have to have a sense of the big picture of the purposes of God. We must see every aspect of Scripture in context of the Bible's larger story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. To reorient how we've understood heaven and eternity, we've got to see it not just in a handful of passages that we think of as telling us about the return of Christ and "end times," but rather throughout the whole of Scripture and in fact every part of Scripture. When we see it from all of the various angles as we work our way through Scripture, it completes the picture and solidifies our grasp on what is revealed about what is yet to come. That is one reason I've included it in the "Looking Forward" section of each chapter. But another reason I have done so is because this is the essence of our Christian hope. Growing in our grasp of future realities in Christ helps us to face present difficulties with confidence in Christ.

If this understanding of what is ahead for us

as believers is new to you like it was to me only a few years ago or if you feel you need a firmer grasp on it, here are some resources that you might find helpful:

The Restoration of All Things (A Gospel Coalition Booklet)
by Sam Storms (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011)

Heaven by Randy Alcorn (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2004)

How should you incorporate the “Looking Forward” section in your group time? The “best” way is going to be whatever works best for your group. You may do it differently on different weeks. It may be more of a time issue than anything else. And it may depend on if your group is reading the chapters in the book or watching the video presentation of the Teaching Chapter. The video presentation is the content of the Teaching Chapter minus the “Looking Forward.” So if you are using the video, you may be more inclined to want to include reading and/or discussing the “Looking Forward” section in your discussion time, perhaps working it in with the final question in the Discussion Guide each week which is always about how the particular passage being studied fits in with the larger story of the Bible. Or, since every person attending the video study will have a copy of the book, you might simply suggest that participants read that section of the chapter on their own sometime after watching the video before they go on to the next lesson. In this way they can really think it through and take it in, bringing together all that they learned in that week’s lesson.

Using the Discussion Guide

Oftentimes in Bible studies in which we’re given a series of questions to work through on our own, our group discussions consist primarily of sharing the answers we found to the questions. But this study is different. While each week you will want to ask participants if they have any lingering questions from the Personal Bible Study

section, or aspects about it they would like to talk about, the Discussion Guide for *The Wisdom of God* is designed to facilitate a discussion about the broader themes from the passages being studied. In this way we will be seeking not just more information but to develop deeper understanding.

As the leader, you should make it your goal to draw out the members of your group, creating an environment that is safe for personal struggle, difficult questions, discovery, and even ambiguity. Because the discussion questions don’t always lend themselves to simple answers, but provide for more interaction with the themes and challenges of the passages being studied, you may want to spend some time working your way through the questions in the Discussion Guide prior to the group time to anticipate where the discussion will be headed. You will find each week’s Discussion Guide in the pages that follow along with a few notes from me. Since these questions are designed to bring out various perspectives, there are not “suggested answers” as I provide in the Personal Bible Study. However, where appropriate, I’ve made notes about issues that might come up in the discussion or goals for particular questions where clarity might be helpful.

You can use the Discussion Guide as a script to lead you through the discussion time. Or you can use it simply as a resource, picking and choosing the questions you think will be most effective with your group. You may also want to plan each week to invite participants to share something that was significant or meaningful to them from the Personal Bible Study, determining ahead of time at what point in the discussion you will invite those comments. On some weeks, you will find that a question is already included in the Discussion Guide, connecting back to the Personal Bible Study that week.

Each week the discussion begins with a question called “Getting the Discussion Going”

which is designed to make people comfortable with talking and sharing personally from their lives. If someone does not have enough confidence in their understanding of the Bible to want to talk much on the more biblical questions, this is a question you may want to use to invite that person's participation. If discussion comes to your group quite easily, or if you've just watched the video presentation of the teaching and sense the group is ready to dive directly into the heart of the lesson, you may want to skip this question. Admittedly, many of them are very lightweight, but are offered for the purpose of giving those who may be hesitant to talk about the biblical material an opportunity to talk in the group setting. Feel free to skip it, if you'd like, and instead head directly to the heart of the matter.

Depending on the amount of time you have, you may want to work through each of the "Getting to the Heart of It" questions, or you may want to select only a few of these questions to save time for the final two key questions.

While the bulk of the discussion questions center around the biblical storyline and the theology presented in the passage at hand, each week there is also a "Getting Personal" question. This is where you will want to be especially sensitive to encourage a number of people to answer and not allow the discussion to simply follow the flow of the initial comments. Be sure to go back to the original question at some point, asking other participants to share their thoughts and experiences that may be different from those shared first.

The Discussion Guide presents a final question each week that will help participants to

grow in their grasp of the larger story of the Bible and how the passage at hand fits into that larger story. If your experience is like mine, this is the part of Bible study that has been lacking for most of my life. Often in studies we have jumped quickly to personal application to the life of faith, and we haven't stepped back to develop our understanding of the implications of the particular passage we are studying in light of the larger story of God's redemption of all things through Christ. But as we develop our understanding of how God has worked and is working to bring about his plans, we find that it actually helps us to understand and apply parts of Scripture that otherwise would be difficult to grasp. If you want to develop more of your own understanding of the larger story of the Bible, you may want to supplement your study with one of the following books that I have found helpful:

According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible by Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991)

Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry by Michael Lawrence (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010)

Far as the Curse Is Found: The Covenant Story of Redemption by Michael Williams (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005)

God's Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible by Vaughan Roberts (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002)

The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010)

The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative by Christopher J. H. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006)

Ideas and Resources for Discussion Group Facilitators

Thank you for your willingness to lead a group through this study of the Wisdom Books in the Old Testament. I always find that when I lead, I learn far more than I do when I'm just a member of the group because I know I must invest more effort to truly "own" the material. I hope that the extra investment in this study of the Wisdom Books will be a blessing to you as you seek to effectively lead your group.

Leading Your Discussion Group Well

What is your goal or role as a discussion leader? I suggest you make it your goal to guide your group through a time of open and authentic discussion of the biblical truths presented in the Personal Bible Study and Teaching Chapter or video, seeking to clarify challenging concepts, solidify the group's grasp of the truths presented, and apply those truths to real life. Sometimes we have anxiety about leading or are reluctant to lead because we know we don't have all the answers, and we're afraid someone will come up with a question we can't answer or will take the discussion in a direction we can't handle. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated by the false expectation that if you step up to facilitate the discussion you must have all of the "right" answers. Too many times in our discussions of the Bible, someone in the group (and often-times it is the leader) feels he or she must sum up every part of the discussion with the "right" answer. But as you lead your group, I encourage you to avoid the compulsion to come quickly to the "right" answer to every question. Don't be afraid to let some questions hang for a while or to allow members to struggle with the issues

involved in the series of questions. Keep asking for the input of other participants. Also, there's nothing wrong with admitting, as the leader, that you don't know something or don't fully understand something and need to do some more study on it or want to invite someone on the pastoral staff to help answer the question. Determine to lead your group as a fellow-learner and not as an expert who knows all. Expect God to use his Word not only in the lives of your group members but in your life as well!

Also be careful, as the leader, that you are a facilitator and not a dominator. Our goal as a facilitator is to encourage other people to talk and discuss, and sometimes, because we are so enthusiastic, we, as leaders, can tend to dominate the discussion. For some of us, it requires significant effort to limit our own input in the discussion so that others will be encouraged to talk.

While you do not want to dominate the group, you do want to lead effectively and efficiently. I assure you that you will have group members who will want you to lead with strength to create an environment that fosters meaningful discussion. As the leader, you set the tone for authenticity and openness. You set an example of giving short answers so that others can talk, and of being a good, responsive listener. Being an effective leader also means that it is up to you to bring reluctant talkers into the conversation and to redirect the conversation when it has gone off-track. Few people want to be part of a group that is inflexible, restrictive, or rules-oriented, but they do want to be part of a group that is organized and purposeful, in

which expectations are unapologetically communicated and stated guidelines are respected.

Using Your Time Effectively

As the leader, you have the responsibility for directing how to use the time for group discussion. While some participants may be very casual about how the time is used, others in your group are very aware of the time and become frustrated when they feel their valuable time is being wasted. There are several issues, I've found, that have a significant impact on using the time allotted for small-group discussion effectively:

Getting Started

So often we run out of time because we are slow to get started. We are waiting for latecomers, or chatting, or enjoying some food together and simply let valuable discussion time get away from us. All groups develop a culture, and members learn whether the group will really start on time or not, and they adjust their sense of urgency in regard to arrival time accordingly. Certainly you need to allow some time for participants to greet each other and to share their lives with each other, but you will want to determine how long that will last and give the group a firm start time for the discussion. If you set a culture of starting on time regardless of whether or not everyone in the group has arrived, and not allowing latecomers to interrupt your discussion when they arrive, you may likely find that group members become more punctual.

On the first day you meet, be sure to ask members to join the group and enter into the already-commenced discussion as unobtrusively as possible when they arrive after the discussion on the lesson has started. When we stop the discussion while everyone greets the late arriver, perhaps hearing the story of what caused the lateness, it can be challenging to get started again. You as the leader will need to

manage this area with a blend of appropriate firmness and grace.

Prayer Requests

Many times, we want our small-group discussion times to include a time of sharing prayer requests, which is a meaningful way of sharing our lives together and exercising our trust and relationship with God. But we also know that sometimes sharing requests can turn into telling long stories and lengthy discussions as other members offer advice or input. One way to handle this, if the use of time for prayer requests is a concern for your group, is to provide note-cards for people to write down their requests and share them at the end or simply have members swap cards with someone else. Or you may simply want to determine a time to bring your discussion to a close that will allow for time at the end for sharing requests, praying together over those requests, and praying through the truths presented in the lesson.

Getting Stuck Along the Way

So often we give too much time to earlier questions and simply don't have time to work our way through all that we want to cover. I strongly suggest you look over the Discussion Guide before your group time to determine how you will use the time. Mark the key questions you must get to. Make a note beside each question you want to be sure to include, indicating an estimate of how much time you want to give for discussing that question, and then watch the clock along the way to keep on track.

Keeping the Focus on God's Word

People come to a Bible study for many reasons, from many situations and struggles, and with varying levels of knowledge of and interest in the Bible. Sometimes our groups can easily slip from being a Bible study group into becoming more of a personal support group. Finding that right balance between biblical study and

personal support is a significant challenge for every small-group leader.

I've sometimes heard group leaders say that when a group member arrives with a significant struggle or sorrow, the leader feels she must set the study aside to listen and give input to that hurting person. Perhaps there are situations where this is the best thing to do, but we must also remember that the Word of God speaks into every need and situation in our lives. It heals, it gives perspective, it instructs, convicts, restores, and renews. Be sure that you do not assume that the advice and input of group members has more power than your discussion of the truths of God's Word to help that hurting person.

Keep in mind that while some participants may come more for the fellowship and sharing of their lives with each other, many other participants are hungry to feast on biblical teaching and discussion of God's Word. If, over time, these participants find that the Word is often set aside or given short shrift, they may look for another forum in which to study God's Word with others.

Ending On Time

Because participants have plans after the study, people to meet, children to pick up from child-care, etc., it is important that you end on time so that participants will not be slipping out one-by-one, or be unable to focus on the discussion because of the distraction of needing to be somewhere else.

Dealing with Common Challenges

Sharing of Opinion Without Regard to God's Word

It is only natural that group members will often begin their input in the discussion with the words, "Well, I think . . ." And in fact, you will notice that many questions are phrased in a "what do you think" manner. This is purposeful not only to get people thinking, but to emphasize that there isn't necessarily a right or wrong

answer and that varying perspectives may be helpful. But we also want to cultivate a sense of the authority of Scripture in our discussions. Though it is not a welcome perspective in our culture, every opinion does not have equal value or weight with every other opinion. The revealed truth of God's Word is what must carry the greatest weight in our discussions. While you don't want to embarrass someone in the group setting who states something that is clearly unscriptural, it may be a good idea to gently challenge a questionable opinion with something like, "That's interesting. I wonder how you would support that from Scripture?" Or you might want to find a time outside the group setting to discuss the issue, using biblical support to gently challenge error.

The Discussion Gets Lively but Off-Track

Sometimes one person answers, and then another person answers, and the discussion can quickly get away from the original question and onto an interesting but perhaps not directly related issue. When this happens, it may be wise to state the obvious and then turn the focus back to the content at hand by saying something like, "We could certainly talk a long time about X, but we have so much important material to discuss in our lesson this week, let's get back to that." If you haven't gotten to some of the key truth involved in the question, go back and state the original question again, asking perhaps, "Did anyone see it differently or have another idea?"

Group Members Are Quiet and Slow to Respond

It is important as a leader to become comfortable with silence, especially at first. Sometimes people are just slow to get going in the discussion and don't want to appear to be a know-it-all or a dominator of the discussion time. Some people fear having the "wrong" answer or revealing their biblical illiteracy, especially if they are surrounded by people they perceive to have

more biblical knowledge than they do. One way to deal with an awkward silence is to make a joke about the silence without coming across as chiding your group. Humor is always a great way to diffuse discomfort. I have a friend who sometimes says, "I can wait you out!" Don't be afraid to call on people to answer questions. You probably don't want to do that with every question, but some people simply don't like to answer a question unless they're invited to do so. Often these people have very thoughtful answers that will benefit the group. You might want to turn to the reluctant participant and say, "What do you think about that, Joan?" or, "Is that how you see it, Katie?"

You will also want to develop the habit of affirming the answers and willingness of those who share in your group. Set the example of being a responsive and attentive listener and commenting on their input as insightful, something you've never thought of before, or as personally helpful to you. Make sure you are focusing on the person who is sharing rather than on how you will ask your next question. Resist the temptation to sum up or add to every answer given, though it may be helpful to restate some answers if you can help to clarify something that someone may be struggling to articulate. You can also help to generate genuine give-and-take by asking a follow-up to someone's statement or by asking that person to tell you more about what she has said.

One Person Dominates the Discussion

If you have someone who tends to answer every question or dominates the discussion, you might begin the next question with the statement, "I'd love to hear from someone who has not shared yet today; what do you think?" Or you might direct your next question specifically to another group member. Sometimes, when a participant is speaking too long, you do a service to the group and the discussion to

discreetly interrupt, perhaps saying something like, "What you're saying is helpful, and I'd love to hear someone else's thoughts," or summarize what they've said in a concise statement and use it as a transition to the next question. Another method is to interrupt with a question such as, "What verse or phrase helped you to see that?" Remember, the other group members want and need you to take charge in this situation to lead effectively. You might also want to pull that person aside at some point and tell her that you really want to create an atmosphere in the group in which everyone is sharing. Ask her if she would be willing to pick two or three of the questions that she really wants to share and to refrain from answering questions less important to her, so that others in the group might become more willing to take part in the discussion.

Participants Habitually Do Not Complete the Personal Bible Study

Everyone has weeks when their schedule or a sick child makes it difficult to complete the lesson. But when group members are habitually not completing the Personal Bible Study, it is a problem. If you are using the video study, the content of the lectures assumes participants have a great deal of familiarity with the passages as there is not enough time to read all of the applicable Scripture; therefore, participants will not be prepared for what is being presented without having completed the Personal Bible Study. If you are using only the book for your study, there will be little foundation for group discussion if the Personal Bible Study and Teaching Chapter have not been read prior to the group time. Be sure to emphasize the importance of completing the assignments. Do this at the beginning of your time together on the first week and again the second week you meet. Without being rigid or lacking in grace, you want to call participants to follow through on their commitment

to the study, rather than give them an easy out every time.

As humans we all need accountability, and sometimes in Bible study groups we are so afraid of offending or embarrassing participants that we do not fulfill our role as leaders by encouraging faithfulness, punctuality, and full participation. If someone repeatedly struggles to get the lessons done, you might:

- ≈ Suggest that rather than hoping to find some time during the week, she should make an appointment for a specific time on her calendar to complete the lesson during the week and then commit to keeping the appointment, as she would for a lunch date with a friend or for a doctor's appointment. Maybe you can even ask if she would like for you to check in with her to see if she kept her appointment prior to next week's meeting.
- ≈ Explore the possibility of her setting a time during the week to get together personally or by phone with another group member to work through the questions together. Or offer to do this with her.
- ≈ Consider expanding the study to twenty weeks so that the group does the Personal Bible Study together every other week.

If a group member continues to be unable to complete the work, don't worry about it if it does not adversely affect the rest of the group or the discussion time. We cannot always fully grasp what another person's life is like, and if the best she can do is get there, you might decide that is enough. If it *does* adversely affect the group's morale, attitude, or discussion time, you might ask her if it would be better to withdraw and participate in a study requiring this level of commitment and preparation at a later time when she can devote herself to it more fully.

Disagreement with What Is Being Taught

Sometimes seeing things a little differently can be very productive in a group discussion. We learn from each other as we discover and discuss the differences or nuances in how we see things. There are many matters in this study that allow for a breadth of perspectives, and there are some matters that challenge what may be dearly held perspectives. What is not welcome in the group is a repeatedly argumentative spirit or combative approach to what is being presented. If areas of disagreement come up that cannot be productively resolved in the group, you may want to say something like, "I appreciate your perspective on that. We need to move on in our discussion, but let's get together, just the two of us, or with Pastor ———, and talk this through some more. I'm sure we both can learn more about this."

Because we are humans dealing with other humans, we will likely have areas of disagreement, different experiences, and different preferences. But that never means that we cannot have unity as we seek to submit ourselves to God's Word. This and every other aspect is a matter of prayer as you prepare to lead your group. God always equips us to do what he calls us to do. Ask God to give you the wisdom to work through whatever may come up in your small group. Ask him for insight into the personalities of the people in your group and the backgrounds that have made them who they are and shaped their perspectives about the Scriptures. Ask God to fill your heart with a burden to love your group members as you lead them through this study of his Word.

Week 1:

The Wisdom Hidden in the Wisdom Books

Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Over the coming weeks we'll be studying the Psalms and Wisdom Books together—Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon. Tell us something you remember about one of these books, or perhaps a question you've always had about one of them.

Getting to the Heart of It

2. It is hard for those of us who have the entire Old and New Testaments to imagine what it must have been like for God's people to live in this world and seek to follow after him without that complete written revelation. Try to put yourself in the place of God's people living in those times. How might the teaching of the Wisdom Literature on matters such as suffering, the future of God's people, dealing with people, finding meaning, and sexuality have been important to you?

It would have been helpful to have wisdom from God about the big questions of life as well as the ordinary matters of life written down for reference. One who had trusted in God's promises and wanted to live a life that was pleasing to him would value having revelation from God about who he is, what he is doing, and how to please him.

3. Our aim as we work our way through these books is to consider what the author of each book intended to communicate to his original audience. We also want to see what the divine author intends for us to see in light of the fuller revelation of Christ. As the introduction offered

previews of how we will see Jesus in these Old Testament books, what were your thoughts or reactions?

4. We read in 1 Corinthians 2:12 that Paul did not come with "lofty speech or wisdom" but was determined to "know nothing" among the Corinthians except "Jesus Christ and him crucified" in contrast to the wisdom teachers of his day who impressed the people of Corinth with philosophy and rhetoric. How is preaching the cross both incredible foolishness and infinite wisdom?

It seems like foolishness to the world that God would descend in human flesh and offer himself in death so that we might be saved from death. But that is the wisdom of God—that God himself will make a way for sinners to dwell with him forever.

5. How does embracing the gospel and working it into your life provide the wisdom and guidance we need for life in this world?

To respond to the gospel of Christ in faith and repentance is the greatest of wisdom. But it also proves to be the first step toward growing in wisdom as we abide in Christ and feed on his Word and the wisdom of God works its way through how we think and feel and act.

Getting Personal

6. We've seen in this chapter that God speaks to us and guides us by his Word. Have you experienced that? Can you think of a time you would be willing to share with the group when God spoke directly to you through the Bible, giving you clear instruction?

Here we are looking for specific verses or truths from the Bible that group members heard and received as God's

Word to them. This is as opposed to a general sense of "God told me" which can sometimes be our own thoughts and feelings that we spiritualize to be from God. Remember that when God speaks through his Word, he speaks words of command, conviction, and comfort that calls us to trust and praise.

7. Recognizing that God is in the process now of sanctifying our wisdom as he renews our minds, making it possible for us to discern what God's will is and therefore to do what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:2), how do you think he might like to use this study of the Wisdom Literature to do that, and what is your part in it?

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

8. Throughout this study, we will be seeking to grasp how the passage we're studying fits into the bigger story of God's plan for redemption. The Psalms and Wisdom Books are not part of the sequence of narrative books in the Old Testament that tell us what happened next to the

Israelites. Rather, they reflect the experiences, the insight, and the revelation of God that God's people turned over in their minds as they looked back at their history and forward to their future. With what you know at this point about the Psalms and Wisdom Books, what do they add to our understanding of how God is working out his plan to redeem all things?

The wisdom books provide pictures of the need for Christ to come to set all things right through Job's struggle with suffering, the Psalmist's laments and longings, the incomplete wisdom of Solomon, and the unsatisfied desires of Song of Solomon.

Week 2:

Job

Personal Bible Study

Even though it is not the first book in our Bible, Job may actually have been the first book of the Bible written, though we don't know who wrote it or exactly when it was written. Job is a story or drama about a real person in a real place (Uz, which is southeast of Israel), who lived at a particular time in history, probably between the time of Abraham and that of Moses. Job was likely not a descendant of Abraham like most of the key characters in the Old Testament were, but was more likely a gentile who embraced God's covenant promises similar to Caleb, Jethro, Rahab, Ruth, and Naaman.

1. Read Job 1:1–5. What does the writer of this book seem to want us to understand about Job?

Job is a godly and good man who has been blessed by God in generous ways.

2. Read Job 1:6–11. How would you paraphrase Satan's argument against God?

"Job only loves you because you've blessed him so much. He only loves you for what he can get from you, but if you take away your hand of protection and blessing, he will reject you."

3. Read Job 1:12. Notice that Satan has asked for permission to harm Job and that God has granted that permission along with setting some parameters for Job's suffering. What do you think this says about Satan and ultimately about God?

Satan's power is limited to what is granted to him by God. This tells us how limited Satan is in this world and how sovereign God is.

4. Read Job 1:13–2:10. How is Job's response to incredible suffering so far quite different from the way Satan said Job would respond in 1:11 and 2:5?

Satan had said that Job would curse God, but instead, Job has fallen down to worship God and express his gratitude to God for all that he had been given.

In chapter 2, we read that Job had three friends who traveled to where he lived just to comfort him, and when they saw what had happened to him, they "raised their voices and wept" (v. 12). They sat with him silently for seven days, and then they couldn't stay silent any longer. In chapters 3–37, we have three rounds of impassioned debate between Job and his three friends, later joined by a fourth friend, as they focus on the question of what Job's suffering reveals both about him and about God's governing of the world.

The book of Job doesn't dismiss Job's friends as hypocrites or heretics. In fact, each believes firmly in the one God who is not only all-powerful but wholly just and, at the same time, quick to restore the penitent and to heap blessings on the teachable. Yet both Job (16:2) and God (42:7–9) deem them "miserable comforters." "The basic error of Job's friends is that they overestimate their grasp of truth, misapply the truth they know, and close their minds to any facts that contradict what they assume."

5. You may want to read chapters 3–37 if you never have before. Or you may want only to skim these chapters, utilizing the chapter titles in your Bible to develop a general sense of the flow and content of the arguments. As you read or skim, write down some key phrases or questions from the chapters along with your own impressions about what you observe about Job and his friends.

6. A key question is voiced by Eliphaz in 4:17: “Can mortal man be in the right before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker?” Job expresses something similar in 9:1–2. How does Job’s question differ from his friend’s question?

Eliphaz asks if it is possible for a man to be made right. Job seems to know that it is possible but wonders how it can happen.

7. Last week we learned that the Wisdom Books raise questions that can only be answered in Jesus Christ. How is that the case with this key question (question 6)?

Jesus is the one who will make mortal men and women right before God. He will be the propitiation for our sin and will give us his own righteousness so we can stand before God.

8. Job longs for God to vindicate his integrity, but he knows he can’t forge the gap between himself and God; he longs for an intermediary who can make this happen (9:33; 16:19–21; 19:25–27). How is this longing fulfilled only in Jesus?

Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. He closes the gap between sinful humans and a holy God so that we can be invited to draw near to God.

Finally, after all of these speeches, God himself speaks from out of a whirlwind in chapters 38–41. Read through these chapters, noting a phrase or two along with its reference about:

God’s wisdom in creation: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?” (38:4).

God’s wisdom in executing justice: “Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?” (40:9).

God’s wisdom in the use of his power: “No one is so fierce that he dares to stir him up. Who then is he who can stand before me?” (41:10).

9. How does what God has to say in the storm answer or not answer all that has been said about him in the previous chapters?

God doesn’t really answer Job and his friends’ questions and statements about what has caused Job’s suffering or why God does what he does. Instead, God reveals his wisdom in creation, justice, and power—and it is so high above all of their questions that Job’s questions are silenced.

10. Job 40:3–5 and 42:1–6 record Job’s response to hearing God speak from the storm. Write down phrases or ideas from these verses that reveal the following responses from Job:

Submission: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted” (42:2).

Humility: “Behold I am of small account; what shall I answer you?” (40:4).

“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know” (42:3).

Repentance: “I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:6).

11. Job’s restoration is almost like a resurrection. He has been reconciled with his friends and is given double portions of everything he had before except that he is given only ten more children rather than twenty children. How might this detail alone perhaps hint to us that Job’s story is meant to point us toward anticipation of resurrection?

Perhaps this speaks of the reality that while his children had died physically, they had not died spiritually and therefore were not to be “replaced.”

12. How does Job point us to Christ as a type of Christ both through comparison and contrast? Read the observation and quote from Job in the first column and write down a statement of similarity or contrast to Christ in the second column as indicated by the reference following the example provided in the first one.

Job	Jesus
Job was “blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.” (Job 1:1)	Heb. 4:15 <i>Jesus was “without sin.”</i>
God used even the work of Satan for his own glory and for Job’s sanctification. (Job 2:6)	Acts 2:23 <i>God used the work of Satan in Christ’s crucifixion to accomplish his glorious plan of salvation.</i>
Job’s misery was increased by the friends who come around him. (Job 16:1)	Matt. 26: 40, 43, 56; Mark 14:66–68 <i>Jesus’s misery was increased by the friends who abandoned him.</i>
Job bemoaned, “Men have gaped at me with their mouth; they have struck me insolently on the cheek; they mass themselves together against me. God gives me up to the ungodly and casts me into the hands of the wicked” (Job 16:10–11); and, “Sure there are mockers about me. . . . I am the one before whom men spit.” (Job 17:2, 6)	Matt. 26:67; 27:29, 31, 41 <i>In his crucifixion, Jesus was struck, cast into the hands of the wicked, mocked, spit upon.</i>
Job said: “I will give free utterance to my complaint. I will speak in the bitterness of my soul” (Job 10:1); and “I will defend my integrity until I die.” (Job 27:5 NLT)	Matt. 27:12; Mark 14:61 <i>Whereas Job complained and spoke about his suffering, Jesus was silent in his suffering.</i>
Job determined to put his hope in God even if God killed him. (Job 13:15)	Matt. 26:38–39 <i>Jesus entrusted himself to God knowing that it was God’s plan from before the foundations of the world that he would die.</i>
Job’s hopes were centered in resurrection, saying, “After my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God.” (Job 19:26)	Luke 9:22 <i>Jesus’s hopes were centered in resurrection saying, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”</i>
Job submitted to God in his suffering. (Job 42:1–6)	Heb. 5:7–10 <i>Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered.”</i>
Job prayed for his friends, and God forgave them. (Job 42:10)	Luke 23:34 <i>Jesus prayed for his enemies asking God to forgive them.</i>

13. In the second column, record how the book of Job also points to Christ in the way that Christ answers its unanswered questions, meets its unfilled needs, and brings about its anticipated restoration and resurrection.

Job	Jesus
Finding no meaning or purpose in his suffering, Job asks, “Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul?” (Job 3:20)	Phil. 3:8–10 <i>Knowing Christ gives meaning to our suffering as it gives us an opportunity to share in his sufferings.</i>
Eliphaz asks, “Who that was innocent ever perished?” (Job 4:7)	Luke 23:47 <i>Jesus was completely innocent and yet died a criminal’s death.</i>
Job asks, “What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him?” (Job 7:17)	Heb. 2:6, 10 <i>God so loves man that he will become a man who will suffer to accomplish our redemption.</i>

Job asks, "Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity?" (Job 7:21)	Matt. 26:28 <i>Forgiveness of sin comes through Christ whose blood was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.</i>
Bildad asks, "Does God pervert justice?" (Job 8:3)	Rom. 3:23–26 <i>God executes perfect justice when he declares sinners to be right in his sight when they believe in Jesus based on his acceptance of Christ's sacrifice for sin.</i>
Job longed for an "arbiter" or "mediator" between himself and God. (Job 9:14, 33)	1 Tim. 2:5, 1 John 2:1–2 <i>"There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."</i>
Job wonders if God can sympathize at all with his suffering, asking him, "Have you eyes of flesh? Do you see as man sees?" (Job 10:4)	Heb. 4:15 <i>Jesus took on flesh so that he can sympathize with our weaknesses</i>
Job asks, "If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14)	John 5:24–25 <i>Jesus will call the dead in Christ to resurrected life.</i>
Job believes he has an intercessor, saying, "Even now, behold, my witness is in heaven, and he who testifies for me is on high." (Job 16:19)	Rom. 8:34 <i>Jesus is at the right hand of God interceding for us.</i>
Job wonders if the best he can hope for is the grave, asking, "Where then is my hope? . . . Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?" (Job 17:15–16)	1 Cor. 15:19–20, 54 <i>Our hope and destiny is not the place of the dead but eternal life in the new heaven and new earth.</i>
Job says, "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God." (Job 19:25–26)	1 Cor. 15:20–23; Rev. 22:4 <i>Jesus is the Redeemer who lives and who, in the last day, will stand upon the earth. In resurrected bodies we will see him face to face.</i>
Job asks, "But where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?" (Job 28:12)	1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3 <i>Christ is the wisdom of God.</i>

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Some of us wonder how we would respond if the worst thing we can imagine were to happen to us, and some of us already know, because the worst thing we can imagine has already happened to us. What are some of the ways people respond to incredible loss and suffering?

Anger, hopelessness, despair, escape, denial, acceptance, sadness, trust in God

Getting to the Heart of It

2. Often when someone suffers we say, "She doesn't deserve that." What does that statement reveal about our assumptions about godness and godliness in relation to suffering?

We think that a good God will give us only good things if we are godly.

3. In this challenge between God and Job, what would define a "win" for Satan? How about for God? For Job?

While Satan intends for Job to curse God to his face, his intention has more to do with humiliating God than

ruining Job. God intends for Job to grow in his understanding of God and therefore worship him more fully. Job wins by trusting and worshipping God.

4. God gives Satan permission to harm Job. What does this reveal about Satan and about God?

Satan has no power that is not granted to him by God. And, for purposes that are difficult for us to fully comprehend, while God is not the author of evil and does not do evil, God is glorified through granting Satan power for evil in his world.

5. In Job 13:15, Job says, “Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face.” How is this a direct answer to the wager between God and Satan that began this drama?

Satan said Job would curse God to his face; instead Job expresses confidence in God to his face.

6. When God finally answers out of the whirlwind, his entire reply is a stream of unanswerable questions. God has clearly changed the subject. It becomes clear that Job and his friends not only have the wrong answers but have been asking the wrong questions. There is nothing soothing or explanatory in these chapters. Instead, how would you characterize God’s response?

7. At the beginning of Job’s story we feel sorry for Job as he appears to be the unwitting victim of Satan’s efforts to prove that no one loves God for who he is apart from the gifts he gives. When you read Job’s response after God has revealed himself to him in the whirlwind, do you sense that God has used the suffering in Job’s life for any good purpose? If so, what is it? And do you think it was worth the suffering he experienced?

The key is in Job’s confession, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5). His experience of God in the struggle seems to have made the suffering worth it for Job.

Getting Personal

8. Throughout the book of Job, we see Job vacillate between despair and hope, between confusion and clarity. Can you relate to that from your own experiences of suffering?

Getting How It Fits Into the Big Picture

9. Job’s righteousness had to have come about through his faith in God’s promise of a savior as expressed in Genesis 3:15 in whatever form and with whatever additional information Job may have been taught. Whatever he knew of the history of redemption, it would seem that Job was clinging specifically and explicitly to some promise or affirmation from God (Job 6:10). Somewhere along the line Job had been convinced that God had spoken a promise of grace and that he could stand on those words with full assurance. His faith had content (words) and was not just whistling-in-the-dark wishful thinking, and yet his understanding of how God would provide salvation to him was not as clear as ours is because we have the entire Old and New Testaments. Looking back at the two charts you filled out in regard to the various ways the book of Job points to Christ, which were particularly meaningful to you?

Week 3:

Psalms: The Songs of Jesus

Personal Bible Study

How does the created speak to the Creator? How does a sinner cry out for mercy before a holy God? How does a sufferer lay out a complaint against a just God? How does a needy human lay out his or her needs before the Shepherd? The Psalms show us how. Because, while we hear the voice of God speaking to us through most

of the Bible, the Psalms speak in a human voice, providing us with divinely inspired poetry to express our hearts and minds to God.

The Psalms are an honest expression of emotions, while at the same time they help us to discipline our emotions. They teach us that our emotions are grounded in our covenant faith, contradicting our mistaken belief that emotions are something over which we have no control.

1. Read each of the quotes from the psalms in the first column and identify the emotion the psalmist is expressing to God, writing it down in the second column.

"You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound." (Ps. 4:7)	<i>Joy</i>
"In peace I will both lie down and sleep." (Ps. 4:8)	<i>Peace</i>
"I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you." (Ps. 5:7)	<i>Reverence</i>
"Make them bear their guilt, O God." (Ps. 5:10)	<i>Passion for Justice</i>
"My eye wastes away because of grief." (Ps. 6:7)	<i>Grief, Sorrow</i>
"I will be glad and exult in you." (Ps. 9:2)	<i>Gladness</i>
"My heart shall rejoice in your salvation." (Ps. 13:5)	<i>Rejoicing</i>
"I love you, O Lord, my strength." (Ps. 18:1)	<i>Love</i>
"In your salvation how greatly he exults." (Ps. 21:1)	<i>Celebration, Exultation</i>
"I am lonely and afflicted." (Ps. 25:16)	<i>Loneliness, a Troubled Spirit</i>
"Though war arise against me, yet I will be confident." (Ps. 27:3)	<i>Confidence</i>
"My life is spent with sorrow." (Ps. 31:10)	<i>Sorrow</i>
"Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you." (Ps. 33:22)	<i>Hope</i>

"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and save the crushed in spirit." (Ps. 34:18)	<i>Brokenhearted/Crushed</i>
"I will thank you in the great congregation." (Ps. 35:18)	<i>Thankfulness</i>
"I am sorry for my sin." (Ps. 38:18)	<i>Sorrow</i>
"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?" (Ps. 42:5)	<i>Depression, Anxiety</i>
"All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face." (Ps. 44:15)	<i>Shame</i>
"A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps. 51:17)	<i>Remorse</i>
"Zeal for your house has consumed me." (Ps. 69:9)	<i>Passion/Zeal</i>
"All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence." (Ps. 73:13)	<i>Regret</i>
"I am afflicted and in pain." (Ps. 69:29)	<i>Vulnerability</i>
"This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." (Ps. 118:23)	<i>Wonder</i>

The psalms were a part of Israel's worship, both corporate and individual. Some psalms began as works of private devotion, while others were designed for the purpose of public worship. In the end, however, the psalms always lead people to the worship of the living God. Psalms reveal not only the agony of the human soul but also revealed truth about our covenant God.

Development

The psalms were written by a number of different people and were a work in progress for a long time, continually being added to. We can think of the book of Psalms being "constructed," similar to the way great cathedrals took shape. Most cathedrals were built over several centuries with new sections being added over time. And while there was diversity in what was added, it all became part of a unified whole. The same is true of the Psalter. Like a cathedral, it was not constructed all in one decade or

even in one century but over a one-thousand-year time period. It includes a psalm associated with Moses, and another psalm that was clearly written after the time of exile. Within the whole are recognizable smaller groupings such as the Egyptian Hallel (Psalms 113–118), which focuses on the theme of deliverance and the exodus event and was used in celebrating Passover; and the Songs of Ascents (Psalms 120–134), which are pilgrim psalms sung by people on their way to the feasts at Jerusalem.

Because it was built up over time does not make Psalms any less inspired than the books of the Bible written by a single individual. The same God who inspired Moses to write the Pentateuch and Paul to write his letters also inspired a multiplicity of authors as they wrote the psalms. And just as each psalm was composed by inspiration, so was their arrangement into a book inspired, brought together by divine design.

Genre

When we think through the various kinds of literature in the Bible, we realize that there are letters (such as Romans or Philippians), historical narrative (such as Genesis and the Gospels), prophecy (such as Isaiah and Amos) and Apocalyptic (such as Daniel and Revelation). And while there are other poetic books in the Bible, the psalms are unique in their genre of Hebrew musical poetry.

Poetry is addressed to the mind through the heart. It engages us differently from a straightforward statement of fact or imperative and sometimes leaves matters ambiguous. Poetry can involve hyperbole, exaggeration, and imagery, as well as all kinds of anthropomorphisms, metaphors, and similes that we should not try to read in a strictly literal sense. In Psalms mountains skip like rams (Ps. 114:4), enemies spew out swords from their lips (Ps. 59:7), and God is portrayed as shepherd, fortress, shield, and rock. So when we read the psalms we have to carefully consider the metaphors being used, seeking to understand what they signify.

2. The psalms are intended to appeal to the emotions, to evoke feelings rather than propositional thinking, and to stimulate a response that goes beyond simply understanding facts. Why do you think God in his wisdom might have chosen to put this large portion of scriptural truth in poetic form?

God reveals himself through the Scriptures, and the variety in type of literature helps us to grasp him more fully. God desires relationship with us that goes beyond knowing facts about him to setting our affections on him. The poetry of the Bible engages our emotions in our relationship with God.

Authorship

The psalms are mostly associated with David, particularly in the early portion of the Psalter, and he is known as the “sweet psalmist of Israel.” The historical books of the Bible speak of David’s considerable accomplishments as a musician,

singer, and composer of poems. King Solomon followed in the footsteps of his father by writing some Psalms (72 and 127), while the authors of many of the uncredited psalms are believed to have been contemporaries of David whom he placed in charge of Jerusalem’s worship.

Organization

There are several ways to understand the organization of the 150 psalms. One way is to see that Psalms is made up of five books, perhaps an imitation of the five books of Moses called the “Pentateuch” (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). The five books within Psalms are:

- Book 1: Psalms 1 to 41
- Book 2: Psalms 42 to 72
- Book 3: Psalms 73 to 89
- Book 4: Psalms 90 to 106
- Book 5: Psalms 107 to 150

Each book concludes with a doxology, or praise to God, usually found within the last verses of each of the five books. Psalm 150 serves as a concluding doxology to book 5 as well as to the entirety of Psalms.

Categories

While there are a number of different ways to categorize the psalms, there are seven general categories into which we can classify the 150 psalms.

Hymns of praise were used by individuals and by the community to offer praise to God for who he is and for his greatness and his beneficence toward the whole earth. Hymns of praise begin with a call to worship and offer reasons for praise.

Laments constitute the largest group of psalms, and these include individual and corporate laments and penitential laments. On the emotional spectrum, laments are the polar opposite of hymns of praise, openly expressing distress with deep, honest fervor. Laments usually include a complaint, a curse on enemies,

and either a confession of sin or protest of innocence, and most resolve with praise to God and determination to trust him.

Thanksgiving psalms were used in circumstances opposite from those of laments or were offered in response to an answered lament. They gave individuals or groups the words to express their gratitude to God.

Salvation history or *remembrance* psalms review the history of God's saving works among the people of Israel, especially his deliverance of them from bondage in Egypt and his establishment of them as a people.

Royal or *kingship* psalms focus on the human king of Israel and the city of Zion in which he reigns, while others proclaim God as king.

Wisdom psalms praise the merits of wisdom and the person who lives a wise life. They emphasize the contrast in consequences between living a life of wisdom and a life of wicked rejection of God and his ways.

Songs of trust provide God's people with words for expressing their trust in God regardless of circumstance.

Why are these categories or genres important for us to understand as we study the psalms? Because they guide us to read the text rightly. For example, wisdom psalms must be read as Wisdom Literature, which means that we read its statements as general principles and not as promises. Laments must be read as human emotion and not as propositional truth. In royal psalms we need to think through whether it is the divine king or a human king being referenced and consider the implications of the psalm through the lens of God's everlasting intentions to reign over his covenant people.

3. Read each of the psalms below and determine which of the seven categories you think each psalm fits into: praise, lament, thanksgiving, salvation history, royal, wisdom, or trust.

Psalm 13	<i>lament</i>
Psalm 21	<i>royal</i>

Psalm 23	<i>song of trust</i>
Psalm 100	<i>hymn of praise</i>
Psalm 112	<i>wisdom</i>
Psalm 136	<i>salvation history</i>
Psalm 138	<i>thanksgiving</i>

It is true that the psalmists express a lot of distressing emotions throughout the 150 psalms. In fact, about sixty-seven of the 150 could be categorized in part or as a whole as lament psalms—psalms that complain to God about the psalmist's circumstances and cry out to God to act. Virtually all of the lament psalms include the following elements, though perhaps not in this order:

- ≈ *Introductory cry or addressing of God.* The psalmist identifies the one to whom the psalm is prayed, the one he is turning to for help, the Lord. Example: "Give ear to my words, O LORD" (Ps. 5:1).
- ≈ *Complaint.* The psalmist pours out what the trouble is and why the Lord's help is being sought. Example: "In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor" (Ps. 10:2).
- ≈ *Trust.* The psalmist immediately expresses trust in God. Example: "But I have trusted in your steadfast love; my heart shall rejoice in your salvation" (Ps. 13:5).
- ≈ *Request for deliverance/reason for God to act.* The psalmist calls on God to act and offers reasons he should do so. Example: "Turn, O LORD, deliver my life; save me for the sake of your steadfast love" (Ps. 6:4).
- ≈ *Assurance.* The psalmist expresses the assurance that God will deliver. Example: "O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear" (Ps. 10:17).
- ≈ *Praise.* The psalmist realizes what God can and will do for him, which leads him to offer praise. Example: "I will sing to the LORD because he has dealt bountifully with me" (Ps. 13:6).

4. Many psalms may have a historical connection, and it is believed that David wrote Psalm 3 when he was fleeing from Absalom (2 Samuel 15–18). To develop skill in identifying the common elements of lament psalms, read Psalm 3 and note which of the six elements of a lament psalm described above is being expressed in the verses indicated.

O LORD, how many are my foes!

... *introductory cry or addressing of God* ...

Many are rising against me;
many are saying of my soul,
there is no salvation for
him in God. *Selah*

... *complaint* ...

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me,
my glory, and the lifter of my head.
I cried aloud to the LORD,
and he answered me from
his holy hill. *Selah*
I lay down and slept;
I woke again, for the LORD
sustained me.
I will not be afraid of many
thousands of people
who have set themselves
against me all around.

... *trust* ...

Arise, O LORD!
Save me, O my God!

... *request for deliverance* ...

For you strike all my enemies
on the cheek;
you break the teeth of the wicked.

... *assurance* ...

Salvation belongs to the LORD;
your blessing be on your
people! *Selah*

... *praise* ...

5. The psalms of lament are a model of godly response to suffering. Rather than expecting us to remain stoic through our suffering, God wants us to pour out our hearts and souls to him. He also, however, wants us to remember his loving care for us and how he has forgiven our sins. This will help us trust him in the future. What are your prayers for help like in times of trouble? And what do you learn from the elements of lament psalms that should shape your prayers?

6. As we begin to think about how we can see Jesus in the Psalms, read through Psalm 3 again, recognizing that Jesus is the Lord we call out to, Jesus is our brother who understands the difficulties of living in this world, and Jesus is our deliverer. What difference does it make in how you understand this psalm and how you experience it, when you think of singing this song to Jesus?

Jesus understands what this feels like—to have many foes rising up against him saying that God is not saving him. He provides the protection we need at his “holy hill” of Calvary where he provided protection from our greatest enemy, death. He is the one who will come again to judge the wicked even as he saves those who belong to him. He is the one who saves; he is the blessing given to God’s people.

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. When you think of the Psalms, is there a particular psalm or phrase from a psalm that comes to your mind? Has there been an experience in your life in which a particular psalm has been especially meaningful to you?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. Many of us have a cerebral relationship with God. We like to think through the Bible's teaching and chew on its meaty truths and doctrines. But while the book of Psalms is filled with instruction and precepts, its truths are not meant to be absorbed only with the mind but must be experienced in the heart, felt with the emotions, and sung from the soul. Why do you think it is important to God that we relate to him on an emotional level?

God intends for us to have a love relationship, not one of dry duty, but to love him with heart, soul, and mind. This demands that our emotions be engaged. Love for God is certainly more than just emotional feeling, but it is not less. It brings God glory and honor to prefer him, desire him, find joy in him—which are emotional responses to him.

3. What do you think it means that God wants not only to change how we think and what we do but also to change how we feel? Are there ways you think God's sanctifying work in you has changed how you feel?

4. The Pharisees asked Jesus which is the greatest commandment, and Jesus told them, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). How can the Psalms help us to love the Lord in this way?

The Psalms present us with godly emotions to feel. They give us words and focus to both express as well as nurture those feelings. They show us what is worthy of our emotional energy.

5. Of course, we know that only one person truly

loved the Lord with *all* of his heart, soul, and mind. Why is this important for us to remember?

We are sinners, and we will never be able to love the Lord perfectly and completely until God's work of renewing all things is complete. But Christ has loved God with all of his heart, soul, and mind, and because we are united to Christ, we can enjoy acceptance with God.

6. Let's take a familiar psalm, Psalm 23, and think through how it impacts our understanding of the Psalms once we know that Jesus fulfills the Psalms as both the perfect Israelite who could pray the Psalms and the Lord of the Psalms to whom we pray. As a group, work your way quickly through various phrases of Psalm 23. How and when in his life could Jesus have prayed this psalm to his Father?

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

*. . . in the wilderness temptation when hungry,
as he faced the cross . . .*

He makes me lie down in
green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.

. . . in the midst of rejection, unbelief . . .

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

*. . . throughout his life in overcoming
temptation . . .*

Even though I walk through the valley of the
shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,

. . . as he faced the cross . . .

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;

. . . as he hung on the cross and looked forward to what his death would accomplish . . .

you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy
shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the
house of the LORD
forever.

. . . as he looked forward to resurrection and returning to the right hand of his father . . .

7. Now, read through Psalm 23 substituting “Jesus” for “LORD” and remembering that Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11, 14). How does this add to the meaning of this psalm?

It is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that makes all of these things possible. He is the good shepherd, he has brought peace with God, restoration to the soul. His Spirit empowers us for righteous living so that we will bring honor to the name of Christ. When we face death, we know that he has been there before us and that we do not have to fear even death. We can be comforted because he defeated death. Forever we will enjoy his goodness in his presence.

Getting Personal

8. Genuine and earnest prayer proceeds first from a sense of our need and next from faith in the promises of God. After working through the Personal Bible Study questions about the various kinds of psalms and the various elements of lament psalms, is there an aspect of prayer that you realize is weak or missing in your prayer life?

Getting How It Fits Into the Big Picture

9. Throughout this study we are considering how the particular book we are studying fits into the larger story of God’s plan of redemption and his written revelation. How might our understanding of God’s covenant care of his people be different if the Psalms were not in the Bible?

The Psalms are unique in that they are not story or history and in that they are inspired expressions in a human voice to God. Throughout the years, these inspired words of praise, thanksgiving, and lament have given God’s people a voice to experience and interact with God as Father, Redeemer, Rock, Shepherd, King, and Giver of mercy and strength.

Week 4:

Blessing and Perishing in the Psalms

Personal Bible Study

Psalm 1, which serves as an introduction to the entire book of Psalms, presents us with one of the primary themes not only of the Psalms but of all the Wisdom Books, and, in fact, of the entire Bible: the reality of and contrast between two groups of people and two ways of life in this world—the righteous who have embraced God’s covenant from the heart and the wicked who reject God’s offer of grace.

The first word of the book of Psalms, *blessed*, is actually challenging to define. Ashrey is the Hebrew word in Psalm 1 that is translated “blessed” in all of the places in the Bible where we read statements such as, “Blessed is he who . . .” Finding an English word to translate ashrey isn’t easy. “Truly happy” might be the best English translation. But happiness, at least the way we think about happiness today, is also inadequate, as ashrey conveys a deep sense of well-being, contentedness, and fulfillment. This is the kind of life we all long for. While happiness in modern use depends upon events or happenings, blessedness in biblical use is not influenced by events but is based on the joy found in one’s good relationship with God. The book of Psalms offers wisdom on how to experience blessedness in the kingdom of God.

1. The Bible doesn’t give us a definition of *blessedness*. Instead, it repeatedly describes what the person who enjoys this blessedness is like. Blessedness is woven throughout the fabric of the Psalms, appearing 125 times. Following are just a few statements about this

blessedness—one from each of the five books of Psalms. What does each of these “Blessed is” statements in the Psalms add to your understanding of blessedness?

≈ Book 1: Psalm 40:4

To trust in God who is true rather than in a proud person whose word can’t be trusted is blessedness.

≈ Book 2: Psalm 65:4

To be chosen by God, brought near to God, satisfied with God is blessedness.

≈ Book 3: Psalm 84:4–5

To be at home in God, drawing strength from God is blessedness.

≈ Book 4: Psalm 106:3

To live rightly in this world consistently is blessedness.

≈ Book 5: Psalm 146:5

To put your hope in the God who helps and transforms sinners is blessedness.

2. While the biblical writers want us to know and enjoy the blessedness of God, they also present the opposite reality: those who are not blessed are actually wicked. Just as blessedness is woven through the Psalms, so is the way of the wicked. Read the following verses, again one from each of the five books in the Psalms. What insight do each of these verses provide into wickedness?

☞ Book 1: Psalm 10:4

The wicked pridefully ignore and deny God.

☞ Book 2: Psalm 50:16

The wicked have no right to enjoy the blessing of God's law or covenant promises.

☞ Book 3: Psalm 75:8

The wicked will experience the full measure of God's wrath.

☞ Book 4: Psalm 94:1–7

The Lord will take vengeance; he will repay the proud what they deserve and put an end to the exultation of the wicked.

☞ Book 5: Psalm 119:155

Salvation is far from the wicked.

3. Read Psalm 1. What is the primary influence in the life of the blessed man of Psalm 1, and what does he refuse to let influence him?

His primary influence is the law of the Lord and he refuses to be influenced by the counsel, lifestyle, and arguments of the wicked.

4. What are the results of the blessed man's delight in and meditation on the Bible?

He is nourished by God's Word and enjoys a quality of life that comes from God. God's Word has its intended effect in his life to give him solidity and security.

5. How are the wicked contrasted with the blessed in Psalm 1 in each of the following categories?

Significance: The wicked are like *chaff*. (v. 4)
The blessed are like *a tree*. (v. 3)

Stability: The wicked are *driven away by the wind*. (v. 4)
The blessed are *planted firm*. (v. 3)

Standing: The wicked *will not stand in the judgment*. (v. 5)
The blessed *are known by the Lord*. (v. 6)

Salvation: The wicked *perish*. (v. 6)
The blessed *prosper*. (v. 3)

6. Notice that “the LORD knows the way of the righteous” (v. 6). What do you think are some things the Lord knows about the way of the righteous? Do you find this comforting or threatening?

He knows that we are dust—that we are human and struggle with sin—and he has compassion on us. He knows our secret desires and secret sorrows like no one else can. He knows what he has prepared for those who love him.

His knowledge is comforting if we know we are united to Christ by faith and therefore need never fear being condemned by him. His knowledge is threatening if we have ignored or avoided Christ and are therefore vulnerable to his judgment.

7. We are told that while the blessed man prospers, the way of the wicked will perish. How would you define what these two words mean in this psalm, recognizing that they are intended by the psalmist to be opposite from each other?

To prosper is to have the rich and full life that God intended for those who fear him and to have a future filled with unending life. To perish is to miss out on the rich and full life that God intends for those who fear him and to have a future filled with unending death.

The psalmist says about the blessed man, “In all that he does, he prospers” (v. 3). Yet we know that many of the psalms actually lament that the opposite appears to be true. Many of the psalms lament that the wicked are prospering while the righteous are suffering. How do we make sense of this seeming incongruity? We must understand what kind of literature we are reading when we read wisdom literature in the Bible.

Wisdom psalms do not offer blanket guarantees but rather make observations on general patterns of life. When readers fail to take the literary genre of the wisdom psalm or proverb into account and read a statement from Wisdom Literature and “claim it” as a promise,

they misunderstand the intent of the text, and this misunderstanding and misappropriation often lead to disappointment and even disillusionment with God. We must remember that the psalms are poetry, and what may appear to be a specific promise is often the psalmist drawing a picture for us in material terms we can grasp of the spiritual blessedness of belonging to God.

While the psalms don't promise that only good things will happen all the time to the Lord's people, they do affirm that those who put their hope in the Lord are indeed blessed. They are blessed because they have relationship with the Lord who is himself the blessing of the righteous. The righteous enjoy the inherent blessing that comes from following God's law and avoiding paths of sin that often result in pain and misery. Often the blessing for those who trust in the Lord does include special measures of physical or material blessing. The psalms express a spiritual optimism based on the recognition that God is a faithful, righteous, and loving father. So it is never wrong, as a child of God, to ask your Father for the favor and blessing that

only he can provide. But as we do so, we remember, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26).

8. When we read "Blessed is the man" in Psalm 1, it reminds us of the teaching of Jesus that we find in the New Testament, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. The blessedness of the beatitudes is the covenantal happiness of Psalm 1. Similar to Psalm 1, the Sermon on the Mount begins with "Blessed" and ends with the perishing of the man who rejects God's Word. Once again, two opposite realities are woven into the sermon and span the sermon beginning to end.

Psalm 1:6 says, "The LORD knows the way of the righteous," and the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3–12 could be summarized as the "way of the righteous." The opposite of the Beatitudes is to walk in the counsel of the wicked. To help you to really think through these familiar statements, read through the Beatitudes on the next page and compose their "opposite" in keeping with the sample provided.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:3)	<i>Perishing are those who arrogantly think they are "in" with God because of their own perceived goodness, for they will never enjoy God's perfect rule over their lives.</i>
Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. (Matt. 5:4)	<i>Perishing are those who celebrate their sin, for they will be miserable into eternity.</i>
Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. (Matt. 5:5)	<i>Perishing are the proud and pushy, for they will end up with nothing.</i>
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied. (Matt. 5:6)	<i>Perishing are those who have no appetite for the things of God, for they will have an eternal gnawing hunger.</i>
Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. (Matt. 5:7)	<i>Perishing are those who are always after revenge and pay-back, for they will experience the vengeance of God.</i>
Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. (Matt. 5:8)	<i>Perishing are those who are too distracted and divided to nurture affection for God, for they will be shut out from his presence.</i>
Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God. (Matt. 5:9)	<i>Perishing are those who are always stirring up a conflict, for they shall be called sons of Satan.</i>
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:10)	<i>Perishing are those who persecute those who love Christ, for they will find their home in hell.</i>

Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Do you think most people today think that there are good people and bad people? What would they say is the difference?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. The Wisdom Books replace our human wisdom with godly wisdom. After studying Psalm 1 this week, how would you define and describe who is righteous and who is wicked?

Righteous: those who have embraced the covenant from the heart.

Wicked: those who have rejected God's covenant.

3. What is the difference between someone who walks in the counsel of the wicked, stands in the way of sinners, and sits in the seat of scoffers, and someone who is salt and light in the midst of a corrupt world?

Both engage with the worldly. One is influenced and shaped by the worldliness around him for evil, and the other is an influencer and shaper of the world around him for good.

4. What is the difference between someone who delights in the law of the Lord and someone who does her daily duty of having devotions?

The delighter comes to the Bible expecting to hear God speak to her and is responsive to what God's Word teaches. The dutiful person might read, study, and pray for knowledge or for works righteousness, but does not engage God's Word with her life and takes no pleasure in God's presence.

5. Psalm 1 makes clear that everyone is either in a state of blessing or perishing. How can a person know which state he or she is in?

"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). Our blessedness or perishing depends not on what we deserve or how we feel, but on our connection by faith through grace to Christ.

6. It is the wisdom of Psalm 1—that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked—that Job's friends embraced. How does understanding many of the statements of the Wisdom Literature as observations on general patterns of life rather than as blanket guarantees help us with this tension?

If we take these statements of general patterns of life and assume they are promises or statements about how life in this world always works, we will be frustrated and disappointed. But when we recognize that they are general patterns, and that the corruption and disorder brought by the fall means that life does not always work this way, it helps us to both accept it when life does not work this way, as well as place our hope in God's redemption when all that has become disordered will become ordered again.

7. How does an understanding of God's justice in the life to come (which the Old Testament saints did not have in the fullness that we do, because of further revelation we've been given in the New Testament) help us with our frustrations when we see the good suffer and the wicked succeed?

We can rest in knowing that while we cannot be guaranteed of seeing perfect justice accomplished in this world and in this life, it will be accomplished in eternity.

8. Those who read Psalm 1 in Old Testament times had less light when they read it than we have. How do we read and understand it differently because we read it through the lens of the finished work of Christ?

We know the channel of this blessedness—Christ. We know the one man who has lived this way and find rest in being joined to him. We know that Jesus really does know "the way of the righteous." He has faced temptation without sin and can sympathize with us in our weakness.

Getting Personal

9. The psalmist calls us to the blessedness of delighting in and meditating on God's Word day and night. Some of us struggle with that. Let's talk for a moment very practically about what this means. What practices or habits have helped you to do this? What has hindered you in developing an affection for God's Word and a habit of consistent meditation on it?

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

10. Throughout this study we are considering how the particular book we are studying fits into the larger story of God's plan of redemption and his written revelation. In what way does the blessing of life given to the righteous, who

embrace God's covenant from the heart, and the perishing of the wicked, who refuse God's gracious offer of mercy, describe the whole storyline of the Bible?

In the garden, Adam and Eve knew God's blessedness but sinned against it. But God promised an offspring who would put an end to wickedness. And all who will place their faith in this Promised One will not perish, but will enjoy God's blessedness forever.

Week 5:

The Royal Psalms

Personal Bible Study

It is a common misunderstanding that the idea of the kingdom of God was something introduced by Jesus. Certainly there was a freshness and an urgency about his announcement that “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15). But Jesus was not putting a totally new concept before a bewildered audience. His Jewish listeners knew very well that God is king. Their Scriptures stated it often enough, and they sang words to that effect regularly from the Psalms in their synagogue worship. As we study the kingship or royal psalms today, we have the benefit of being able to read these psalms through the perspective of the ultimate king who came. So as we look at several royal psalms, we’ll be looking for the ways in which Christ fulfilled what was written in the Psalms about that king in his first coming and the ways in which he will fulfill them when he comes again to reign forever on the renewed earth.

Before we look at a handful of specific royal psalms, it would be helpful to take a step back to see the structure of the Psalms as a whole. Perhaps you’ve never seen any structure to the Psalms but have seen the book as a randomly assembled collection of all different kinds of psalms with different tones and perspectives. But there is a shape to the Psalms, a sense of a storyline to its five books that is closely related to the theme of kingship. A simple overview of the aspects of the story presented in each of the five books of Psalms could look like this:

Book 1: Psalms 1 to 41: God established his king in the world.

Book 2: Psalms 42 to 72: The world rebelled against God as king.

Book 3: Psalms 73 to 89: Even God’s king rebelled against God as king.

Book 4: Psalms 90 to 106: But God is still king.

Book 5: Psalms 107 to 150: God’s king will come.

While many of the psalms were written by Israel’s King David during the time of his reign, the book of Psalms was actually collected into its current form much later, at a time when there was no king on the throne in Israel. The sad reality of Israel’s history is that after several centuries, the Davidic kingdom became corrupt. Just two generations after David was installed on the throne, the kingdom split into a northern and a southern kingdom with David’s line ruling only over the southern kingdom. Two and a half more centuries went by with kings coming and going in all kinds of cruelty, abuse of power, and idolatry. Eventually the leaders of the northern kingdom were carted off into captivity under the Assyrian Empire. Another century and a half went by, and, despite occasional times of revival and renewal, the southern kingdom fell to the Babylonians who carried them off into exile.

In time, some of the people came back. They began to rebuild the temple that had been burned down, but the new one never compared to the great temple built by Solomon, and there was no king reigning on Israel’s throne. It was during this time that the Psalter was compiled into its current form. So the Psalms were a helpful reminder of the past faithfulness of God’s

promises to David and his line as well as a source of hope that God would, indeed, fulfill all of the promises he made regarding a king to sit on David's throne forever.

Sprinkled in each of the five books of Psalms are royal psalms related to the activities of the king, such as coronation (Psalms 2, 110); a royal wedding (Psalm 45); issues related to war (Psalms 18, 20, 144); ruling in righteousness and justice (Psalms 72, 101); and the promises related to the Davidic covenant (Psalms 89, 132). Remembering that Jesus said that everything written about him in the Psalms must be fulfilled (Luke 24:44), we realize that all of the royal psalms speak not only of David and his descendants but of David's ultimate descendant who sits on David's throne.

Psalm 2 is a psalm David wrote for his own coronation, which was likely used at the coronation of future kings in the Davidic line. This psalm is one of the most quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Consider how the following New Testament passages help us to see that while this psalm was originally about David, ultimately it is about the greater David, Jesus. Read Psalm 2 and then answer the questions below.

1. According to Acts 4:24–28, who do the “kings of the earth” who “gathered together against the Lord and against his Anointed” in Psalm 2 ultimately refer to?

Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel who crucified Christ.

2. According to Acts 13:32–34, who is the “Son” in Psalm 2?

Jesus

3. According to Romans 1:4, what event established Jesus's royal sonship as described in Psalm 2 (as opposed to his divine sonship, which is from eternity past)?

The resurrection

4. What aspect of Psalm 2 do you see described in Revelation 2:27 that will be fulfilled at the return of Christ?

He will rule with a rod of iron that will break those who resist him.

5. What aspect of Psalm 2 do you see described in Revelation 6:16–17 that will be fulfilled at the return of Christ?

The son's anger is quickly kindled.

6. What aspect of Psalm 2 do you see described in Revelation 19:15 that will be fulfilled at the return of Christ?

He will come in wrath to rule as King of kings.

Read Psalm 45. This psalm was likely written for a particular historical royal wedding of a Davidic king, perhaps Solomon. But difficulty comes in verses 6 and 7, where the king, who is a man, seems to be addressed as God (Elohim):

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.
The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter
of uprightness;
you have loved righteousness and hated
wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your
companions. (Ps. 45:6–7)

7. According to Hebrews 1:6–7, who does the writer of Hebrews indicate this psalm is speaking about?

The Son, Jesus

8. In what ways do you see a fulfillment of Psalm 45, especially verse 3 and 4, at the end of time as described in Revelation 19:6–16?

The setting is a royal wedding, the marriage supper of the Lamb. The picture then moves to a rider (Faithful and True, King of kings) on a white horse who judges and makes war in righteousness. From his mouth comes a sharp sword and he rides victoriously for the cause of truth.

Psalm 72 is a prayer asking that God would bring about his rule on the earth through the reign of the king on David's throne. It is likely that this psalm was composed by David for Solomon. As a father, he is praying that the reign of his son will reflect the justice of God and the blessings that flow forth from such a righteous reign. While some aspects of this prayer were answered

by God in Solomon's reign, it is also apparent that the psalm is not ultimately fulfilled in Solomon. Christ is the fulfillment of the hopes and prayers of Psalm 72, as in him the petitions become reality. But they must be understood in light of both his first and second comings.

9. How do the following passages reveal how God answers the prayers of Psalm 72 in Christ?

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! (Ps. 72:1)	John 5:30; Rom. 3:24–26 <i>Jesus judged according to the Father's judgment. The death of Christ was to show God's righteousness in providing him as a propitiation for sin.</i>
May he defend the cause of the poor of the people. (Ps. 72:4)	Matt. 11:5 <i>Jesus preached good news to the poor.</i>
May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!" (Ps. 72:8)	Matt. 28:18–20 <i>Jesus told the disciples that "all authority in heaven and earth has been given" to him and commanded the disciples to go and make disciples of all nations.</i>
In his days may the righteous flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more! (Ps. 72:7) May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him" (Ps. 72:11). May the whole earth be filled with his glory! (Ps. 72:19)	Rev. 21:22–27 <i>When Christ returns and establishes the new heaven and new earth, there will be no need of sun or moon because the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the Lamb. Kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.</i>

Psalm 110 deals with the role of the house of David in the life of God's people, but like other royal psalms, it goes well beyond the achievements of any merely human heir of David and thus looks forward to the Messiah. The central theme of Psalm 110 is the Messiah's warfare against the enemies of God.

10. In Matthew 22:41–46 and Mark 12:35–37 we find an account of Jesus quoting Psalm 110:1. What is he trying to communicate through his question about this psalm?

He was saying that one of his descendants was also his superior, his Lord, which was a riddle that cannot be solved apart from Christ who was David's descendant as the Son of Man, but also the Son of God.

11. The idea that the risen and ascended Jesus is seated at God's right hand until his enemies are his footstool, in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1, is presented in numerous places throughout the New Testament. What do you think this kingly image intends to communicate about the person and work of Jesus?

He will have complete victory over his enemies. This was accomplished on the cross but will be consummated when he comes again and destroys his enemies for good.

12. Psalm 110 is unique in that while we find that the offices of priest and king in the Old Testament point to Christ, this is one of the few places where we find that the Messiah will uniquely be both priest and king. Hebrews 5:5–10 brings Christ's royal sonship and royal

priesthood together. What does the writer of Hebrews want us to know about Jesus as priest from these verses?

His priesthood will not come from his human ancestry but divine appointment. He is a faithful, obedient priest

who offered up prayers on our behalf with loud cries and tears. He fully identified with us, feeling what we feel and experiencing what we experience. His priesthood and sacrifice provided not just momentary forgiveness of sin but eternal salvation from sin.

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Let's think out loud together about what it would be like to live under a good king. What would he provide? How would he protect? What would make a king and his kingdom truly good?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. The Bible helps us understand the person and nature of God by revealing his names, his deeds, his character traits, and his roles such as father, judge, and shepherd. In the Psalms his role as king comes starkly into view. What do we uniquely come to understand and appreciate about God when we see that he is the king who reigns?

We see that he is in charge of this world and all that is in it and we are subject to him. He is a good king and can be trusted to reign over us with righteousness and love.

3. Did you notice in Psalm 2 that the "kings of the earth" take their stand against the Lord and against his Anointed? Clearly, to oppose God is to oppose his Anointed, and to oppose his Anointed is to oppose God. Jesus said, "Whoever hates me hates my Father also" (John 15:23). What does this mean for many people today who say they are interested in God or believe in God, but are not so sure about Jesus?

We simply cannot love God and reject Jesus. They are one in three persons. If someone says they love God but reject Christ, it is not the God of the Bible they love but a God they have created.

4. Sometimes we struggle when we read psalms in which the psalmist calls down terrible curses on his enemies. How does a deeper understanding of the Davidic king being God's representative in the world help us to make sense of those parts of the psalms?

We realize that Israel was a unique country living in a unique time as God's representatives on the earth. When we realize that Israel's enemies were God's enemies, we do not have to be embarrassed thinking that the Bible condones the worst kind of bigotry, racism, or genocide. We realize that Israel was carrying out the judgment of God against his enemies.

5. How is asking God to accomplish the justice he has promised different from exacting revenge or nurturing vindictiveness?

God's justice is perfect and when we ask him to accomplish justice, we are asking him to do what is right. But because even our righteous anger is infused with sinful motives, we cannot justly execute judgment on others. God commands us to entrust that to him and to pursue forgiveness.

6. Let's take a minute to look back at our work in the Personal Bible Study, in which we saw how God fulfilled his promises regarding the Davidic king through Christ. Looking back over your study, which connection between a royal psalm and its fulfillment in Jesus was especially interesting or meaningful to you?

7. At Pentecost, when Peter preached, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36), Luke

records that the people were “cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (v. 37). Later in Romans 10:9 Paul writes, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” In the modern evangelical church, we oftentimes focus on Jesus as savior without emphasizing his lordship, with some going so far as to say that you can receive Jesus as savior but not as lord. How do you think Peter or Paul might have responded to that suggestion?

They would not have been able to understand making such a distinction, as it would require dissecting the person and purposes of Christ in a way that is impossible. We do not have the liberty to determine who he will be. He is Lord, and he is the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Getting Personal

8. As we’ve studied the royal psalms this week, we’ve considered the appropriate response to the truth “the Lord reigns,” which is submission to his authority. What assumptions or misperceptions about submitting to King Jesus keep us from freely submitting to him?

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

9. Throughout this study we are considering how the particular book we are studying fits into the larger story of God’s plan of redemption and his written revelation. Why was it important to the Gospel writers to make clear that Jesus was a descendant of David?

God made a covenant with David (2 Samuel 7), that one of David’s descendants would sit on David’s throne—that he would be the Messiah.

Week 6:

Repentance in the Psalms

Personal Bible Study

There are a number of psalms that are called penitential psalms, which provide us with words and direction for confessing sin, seeking forgiveness, asking for a fresh start, and celebrating the forgiveness of God (Psalms 6; 25; 32; 38; 51; 130; 143).

1. We'll begin by examining Psalm 51, which begins with the notation "A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba." Explain briefly from memory, or from reading 2 Samuel 11:1–12:15, what incident this notation is referring to.

David saw Bathsheba bathing on a rooftop and sent for her and he slept with her. She became pregnant and so he brought Uriah, her husband, home from the battlefield hoping they would sleep together and Uriah would think it was his child. But Uriah didn't go home to Bathsheba and so David gave orders for him to be sent into a battle situation in which he would certainly die.

2. According to Psalm 51:1, what does David know about God that gave him the courage to cry out to him for forgiveness?

God has abundant mercy and steadfast love for his covenant people.

3. In Psalm 51:1–2 David uses three words to describe his sin. What are they, and what do they each mean? (A dictionary or Bible dictionary might be helpful.)

Transgressions: crossing a forbidden boundary in rebellion

Iniquity: perversion; twisting of what is right; goes to the character that lies behind the fault; inward corruption

Sin: falling short or missing the mark of God's perfection

4. David also uses three terms or images in Psalm 51:1–2 to describe what he wants God to do in regard to his sin. What are they, and what do you think they mean?

Blot out: to completely erase, as in removing writing from a book or removing an indictment in legal proceedings

Wash: to be scrubbed until clean, to get the engrained sin out

Cleanse: ceremonial purity, which allows one to approach God

5. In Psalm 51:3–6, what does David say that he knows about himself and about God?

☞ About himself: *He knows his transgressions, that he has been a sinner since birth. He also knows he can learn wisdom to keep from sinning.*

☞ About God: *He knows that God is the one he has sinned against, and God would be right to judge him. He knows that God delights in integrity and can give him the wisdom he needs to be right with God on the inside.*

6. In Psalm 51:7 David asks God, "Purge me with hyssop and I will be clean." Read Exodus 12:21–23 and Hebrews 9:18–20. How does this help us understand what David is asking for?

Hyssop was used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts. This is the cleansing provided by an innocent substitute. Hyssop was also used by Moses to sprinkle the blood of a sacrifice when the people entered into God's covenant at Sinai.

7. In addition to the request that God purge him with hyssop, David asks God to do a number of other things in Psalm 51:8–12. Write a few sentences putting David’s requests in your own words.

Let me feel joy again. Look away from the filthiness of my sin and create in me a new heart that is not polluted by sin. Give me the want-to to stop sinning. Keep me close to you and restore in me that sense of knowing I belong to you and you are at work in me.

8. In Psalm 51:13–15 David expresses what he wants to do instead of sin. What is it?

He wants to teach other people about the ways of God, calling them to repentance and praise.

9. How might Psalm 32 be a fulfillment of the desire David expressed in Psalm 51:13–15?

David tells about his experience of sin and forgiveness and calls people to go to God for deliverance, instruction, and forgiveness.

10. In Psalm 32:1–2, what does David say makes a person truly happy and deeply satisfied?

Having sin forgiven and being made right with God, with nothing to hide.

11. Using vivid imagery, David describes in Psalm 32:3–4 what it felt like before he confessed his sin. What was it like?

He was miserable, feeling the effects of his sin physically and emotionally.

12. According to Psalm 32:5, what was the breakthrough for David?

He acknowledged and confessed his sin and was forgiven.

13. Think back over the past week, or month, or even year. What specific sins can you remember confessing to God and asking him to wash them away from your life? (If, for privacy concerns, you do not want to write these in this book, find a piece of paper to write them on. But don’t avoid this important exercise.)

14. If you have a hard time thinking of any of your specific sins, what do think is needed in your life to enjoy the blessedness that this psalm promises?



Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Do you think most people in the world today see themselves as evil people who occasionally do bad things or as good people who occasionally do evil things?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. Throughout the Psalms, “the psalmists speak out of the context of covenant. They speak to God and about God on the basis of being in a covenant relationship with him.”⁸ This is clear in the first verse of Psalm 51, when David asks

for mercy from God “according to your steadfast love.” What difference does God’s covenant commitment make when we sin?

We can know that our sin will not annul the covenant relationship we have with God through Christ, because Christ has taken on the curse of covenant disobedience in our place. The covenant means that God’s mercy will always triumph over our sin.

3. David uses three words to describe his sin: *transgression, iniquity, and sin*. What did you learn about those three words in your Personal Bible Study?

4. Can you think of ways we label specific sins that make them seem less like sin?

We call them “issues,” “habits,” “tendencies,” “struggles,” “mistakes,” “problems,” or “addictions.” We lessen them by calling lying “fibbing,” or rebellion “fooling around,” or idolatry “interest.”

5. David asks God to “restore to me the joy of your salvation.” What is he really asking for, and why do you think he asks for it?

It is not his salvation that David had lost but the joy of it. As long as he was living in sin he had no joy; his fellowship with God was broken. He longs for the real and intimate relationship with God, which brought him so much joy, to be restored.

6. When David says to God, “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering” (Ps. 51:16), he is not saying that God rejects the sacrificial system he established but rather that going through the motions of offering sacrifices is no substitute for genuine faith and repentance. How would you describe true repentance? Is it a feeling, an action, or a decision? Is it an event or a lifestyle? How do we know repentance is real?

Repentance is to turn away from sin and toward Christ. It is a change of heart, mind, and direction that is a result of the Spirit’s work. Sorrow over sin is certainly a part of it, but not the definition of it. The evidence that sorrow over sin has led to genuine repentance is the forsaking of sin and pursuing holiness.

7. We tend to think of things that are broken as useless. But David says that God desires a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart. What kind of brokenness do you think God desires and why does he desire it?

What God requires in regenerate people is a yielded spirit which will express itself in willing obedience.

Getting Personal

8. In the Personal Bible Study you were asked what specific sins you have confessed to God in the last week, or month, or year. Sometimes, if we’re honest, we have a hard time coming up with sins to confess and a hard time working up any genuine sorrow over them. Has that ever been your experience? And if so, why do you think that is?

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

9. Throughout this study we are considering how the particular book we are studying fits into the larger story of God’s plan of redemption and his written revelation. How is the question of how God will be both just and merciful answered only through Christ?

If God were only just, we would have to die for our sin. If God were only merciful, we would have no hope that evil would come to an end in this world. But God is both perfectly just and perfectly merciful. He executed the justice we deserve on an innocent substitute—Christ—and through Christ we receive mercy that we do not deserve.

Week 7:

The Suffering and Glory of Messiah in the Psalms

Personal Bible Study

After Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus who were terribly sad because the one they had thought was the Messiah had been crucified, causing them to conclude that he was not the one they had been waiting for. Jesus then said to them: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26). Jesus was saying that if these disciples really understood and believed what they had read in the Old Testament, they would have known that the Messiah would suffer significantly and emerge from that suffering triumphantly.

1. One of the passages that should have finally made sense to them after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ was Psalm 22. In this psalm David describes his own experience of suffering and deliverance, but he was also clearly writing as a prophet, inspired by the Holy Spirit, having been given the ability to see into the suffering of one of his descendants, Jesus, whose suffering would far surpass his own. 1. What is the lament or cry of the psalmist in Psalm 22:1–2?

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?”

2. After the psalmist expresses his lament, he expresses hope for deliverance. What is the basis of that hope, according to Psalm 22:3–5?

God is holy and trustworthy. He has provided deliverance to his people in the past and surely will again.

3. Not only does this sufferer feel abandoned by God, but also he feels tormented by his enemies. Explain how he is tormented, according to Psalm 22:6–8.

He is scorned, despised, and mocked. They are mocking his trust in his God who apparently is not providing deliverance.

4. Once again, the psalmist comes back around to hope. What, according to Psalm 22:9–11, is the basis of his hope?

He is trusting the God who has been his God his whole life.

5. In Psalm 22:12–18 the psalmist describes his enemies and his suffering using both figurative as well as literal ways of expressing his experience. What is the nature and activity of his enemies, according to these verses?

They are like wild animals clawing and biting him, abusing him, attacking him, and gloating over him.

6. What six details does the psalmist give in Psalm 22:14–18 about the physical impact of his suffering?

Bones are out of joint, heart is melted like wax, has no strength, tongue sticks to his jaws, pierced hands and feet, bones sticking out

7. According to Psalm 22:19–21, what does the psalmist want and receive?

He wants God to come quickly and deliver him from the cruel abuse of his enemies. And in verse 21, he is rescued.

8. What similarities do you see in the psalmist's experience described in Psalm 22:1–21 to that of Jesus when he was crucified?

God turned away from him.

He was taunted by those crucifying him saying that his God was not saving him.

He was physically weakened by lack of sleep, beating, and abuse.

His bones were likely out of joint from hanging on the cross.

He was thirsty.

His hands and feet were pierced.

The soldiers cast lots for his garments.

He was not abandoned for good, but was raised from the dead.

9. In the first half of Psalm 22 the psalmist cries out in complaint, but in verses 22–25, he cries out in another way. What is the nature of his cry in these latter verses?

He is crying out in praise and celebration of being delivered by God.

10. Psalm 22:1–21 is a lonely cry of an individual. In Psalm 22:22–31 the psalmist no longer wants to sing alone but invites “the congregation” to sing along with him in praise to God and celebration of his salvation. List several things the psalmist says will happen because God has delivered him from death.

v. 26—the afflicted shall eat and be satisfied

v. 26—those who seek him shall praise the Lord

v. 27—all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord

v. 27—all the families of the nations shall worship before God

v. 29—all the prosperous of the earth eat and worship

v. 29—before him shall bow all who go down to the dust

v. 30—posterity shall serve him

v. 30—it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation

v. 31—they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it

11. Why, according to Psalm 22:28, is the psalmist confident that these things will occur?

The Lord is king and rules over all. He is sovereign.

12. Jesus told the disciples that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44), and then he trained them how to read and understand the familiar books of the Old Testament in light of his fulfillment. Later, the Gospel writers were careful to show how Christ did, in fact, fulfill what was written in the Old Testament. Sometimes they offered commentary, pointing out when Jesus said or did something to fulfill what was written in the Old Testament. Other times they were careful to quote Jesus when Jesus himself said that he was a fulfillment of something written in the Old Testament.

Let's look specifically at instances in which Jesus himself quoted or referenced a psalm, saying that it was about him or his experience (remembering that there are numerous additional instances when the New Testament writers connect Jesus to various Psalms). Read the psalm quote in the first column below, and then read the passage in the second column, noting briefly the setting or situation in which Jesus made clear that he is the one his hearers had been singing about all their lives when they sang that psalm.

“Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes.” (Ps. 8:2)	Matt. 21:15–16 <i>The children were crying out to Jesus in the temple, “Hosanna to the Son of David!”</i>
“The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.” (Ps. 118:22)	Matt. 21:33–42 <i>Jesus was telling a parable about the tenants who killed the son of the master, and Jesus used this verse to show that he was that rejected son.</i>
“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” (Ps. 110:1)	Matt. 22:41–45 <i>Jesus was presenting a riddle to the Pharisees challenging them to explain why David could call his descendant “Lord.”</i>
“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!” (Ps. 118:26)	Matt. 23:39 <i>In the temple, Jesus said that he would not be seen again in the temple until they say these words from Psalm 118, suggesting that he is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.</i>
“Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.” (Ps. 41:9)	John 13:18 <i>Jesus quoted the second half of this verse in the upper room where Judas shared his bread.</i>
“Those who hate me without cause.” (Pss. 35:19; 69:4)	John 15:25 <i>Jesus told the disciples, as he prepared to go to the cross, that he is the one hated without cause.</i>
“Appoint a wicked man against him. . . . May his days be few; may another take his office.” (Ps. 109:6, 8)	John 17:12 <i>Judas fulfills this Psalm as the wicked man who set himself against Christ, whose office of disciple was filled by another after his betrayal of Christ.</i>
“They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.” (Ps. 69:21)	John 19:28–29 <i>Jesus was given sour wine to drink for his thirst while on the cross.</i>
“Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.” (Ps. 31:5)	Luke 23:46 <i>Jesus spoke these words as he died.</i>

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Did you happen to notice the note to the choirmaster in the heading of Psalm 22? It says: “According to The Doe of the Dawn.” No one really knows for sure what this refers to, though it may be the name of a tune known by the choirmaster. If that is the case, what do you think this tune must have sounded like? Can you think of any song with an appropriate tune for singing these words?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. Psalm 22 opens with the familiar words that we recognize as Christ’s cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” We know, of course, that Jesus knew the answer to this question. What would you say is the answer to the question, and since Jesus knew this, why do you think he broke his silence on the cross to utter these words?

There are lots of good possible answers to this question. Some might be: so we would know that Jesus understands

what it feels like to feel abandoned by God; so that we would realize that we will never be abandoned because he experienced this; or, simply because this psalm reflected his agony of soul.

3. We know that while God had to turn away when Jesus became sin in our place, he did not abandon Christ completely or permanently. How do we know this?

On the cross Jesus quoted another psalm: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." So he entrusted himself to God in death.

4. How would you explain to someone how this psalm, written one thousand years before Christ, can be about David's experience but more profoundly about Christ's experience?

This is evidence of both the sovereignty of God over history as well as the inspiration of Scripture. David may not have understood clearly all that he was writing about, but the divine Author of Scripture did.

5. How do the two parts of this psalm make it an excellent example of what Jesus meant when he told his followers on the road to Emmaus that if they had understood what the prophets had written, they would have known it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and enter into his glory?

If they had recognized the voice of the suffering Messiah in the first half of this psalm, they would also anticipate the victory of the Messiah from the second half of the psalm. It puts both on display.

6. We know that Jesus was meditating on Psalm 22 on the cross, because he uttered its opening and final words. In antiquity, since there were no chapter numbers, verses, or even titles of books to refer to or quote from in the Psalms, the first line was generally used to refer to the whole poem. So we could think of Jesus hanging on the cross and saying, "Psalm 22 is what is happening here," which would include both the first and the second half of the psalm. Surely Jesus was meditating beyond the

suffering of the cross, described in the first half of the psalm, to the glorious and victorious gathering described in the second half. How would this help us to understand "the joy that was set before him" that enabled him to "[endure] the cross, despising the shame" that we read about in Hebrews 12:2?

Jesus understood that his suffering would give way to victory. His suffering would be real but so would his deliverance from death and his ultimate victory shared with all of God's people.

Getting Personal

7. In the Teaching Chapter we read that although we tend to make ourselves the main character of the Psalms and our experiences and needs the primary plot, Psalms, along with the rest of the Bible, are supremely about God's work of redemption through Jesus Christ. Do you have a favorite psalm that has meant a great deal to you? Would you read some of it for us and tell us what difference it makes to read it while thinking of it as a song Jesus sings with you, as a song you sing to him, or as a song about him?

Getting How It Fits Into the Big Picture

8. Throughout this study we have been considering how what we are studying fits into the larger story of God's plan of redemption and his written revelation. How do Psalm 22 and other psalms that prophesy about the death and resurrection of Christ increase our confidence that God is working out his plan of redemption and can be trusted to bring it to completion in the consummation?

As we see these psalms written hundreds of years before his birth fulfilled in the life and death of Christ, it increases our confidence that the victorious aspects of these psalms yet to be fulfilled—his forever ruling and reigning as king—will be fulfilled just as the passages about his suffering, death, and resurrection have been fulfilled.

Week 8:

Proverbs

Personal Bible Study

1. What are several purposes for the book of Proverbs that you find in Proverbs 1:2–6?

1:2a—to know wisdom and instruction

1:2b—to understand words of insight

1:3—to receive instruction in wise dealing

1:4—to give prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the youth

1:5—the wise hear and increase in learning, obtain guidance

1:6—understand a proverb and a saying, the words of the wise

Biblical wisdom essentially involves skill in the art of godly living. It applies God's principles to the whole of ordinary life including relationships, the home, work, justice, decisions, attitudes, reactions—everything a person says and even thinks. The wisdom taught in Proverbs is God-centered through and through, teaching shrewd and sound handling of one's affairs in God's world, in submission to God's will.

Throughout the Old Testament we read about the history of God's people. But the book of Proverbs doesn't give us any sense of history except that it is anchored in history. These are "the proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel" (Prov. 1:1). So obviously we know that while there is certainly wisdom here that will work to some degree for those outside of God's covenant, this is wisdom that is anchored in God and his covenant people. This vital relationship as a foundation for the wisdom in the book of Proverbs is repeated throughout the book.

2. Throughout Proverbs is the repeated phrase "the fear of the LORD." What do you think that means?

To fear the Lord is to respond to him in reverential awe and glad obedience.

3. How does one grow in the fear of the Lord, according to Proverbs 2:1–8?

We grow in the fear of the Lord as we receive God's Word and treasure his commands, inclining our heart to understanding, calling out for insight. The more we understand and treasure God's Word, the greater our reverence for God becomes.

4. One of the most pervasive metaphors of the first nine chapters of Proverbs is *derek*, the Hebrew term variously translated as "way," "path," or "road." Skim through Proverbs 2, 3, and 4. How would you summarize the main point the writer of Proverbs reiterates about the "path" or "paths"?

There are two paths—one that leads us to God and life, and the other that leads to wickedness and death. We must be diligent to choose the path of righteousness that leads to life.

5. In addition to this metaphor of two paths, we also find wisdom and folly personified as Madam Folly (2:16–19; 5:1–14; 6:20–35) and Dame Wisdom (1:20–33; 3:13–18; 4:5–9; 8:1–36), or both (7:1–4, 5–27; 9:1–6, 13–18). These chapters are all addressed to a son from a father, and certainly a father wants to teach his son about the kind of woman to pursue and the kind of woman to avoid. According to Proverbs 9, what are these women like and what do they offer?

Wisdom invites all to come to her for insight and understanding and therefore live.

Folly seduces and knows nothing but calls those who pass by to come to her, but those who do only find death.

6. Proverbs speaks of five basic character types: the simple, the fool, the sluggard, the scoffer, and the wise. Note several things you learn about each of these character types from the following verses, looking especially for (1) where this character comes from; (2) the consequences in this way of life; and (3) the way this character can be changed.

The Simple (Naïve)

The simple believes everything,
but the prudent gives thought to his steps.
(Prov. 14:15)

For the simple are killed by their
turning away,
and the complacency of fools destroys
them. (Prov. 1:32)

The prudent sees danger and hides himself,
but the simple go on and suffer for it.
(Prov. 22:3)

"Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!"
To him who lacks sense she says,
"Come, eat of my bread
and drink of the wine I have mixed.
Leave your simple ways, and live,
and walk in the way of insight."
(Prov. 9:4-6)

- ∞ Where being simple comes from: *believing everything without thinking; turning away from God; going after danger; complacency*
- ∞ Consequences: *suffering and death; being destroyed*
- ∞ How to change: *turn to wisdom and feed upon it*

The Fool

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child,
but the rod of discipline drives it far
from him. (Prov. 22:15)

One who is wise is cautious and turns away
from evil,
but a fool is reckless and careless.
A man of quick temper acts foolishly,
and a man of evil devices is hated.
(Prov. 14:16-17)

The wise of heart will receive
commandments,
but a babbling fool will come to ruin.
(Prov. 10:8)

- ∞ Where foolishness comes from: *it comes naturally to us; we are born foolish*
- ∞ Consequences: *will come to ruin*
- ∞ How to change: *receive discipline with humility; turn away from evil; receive the commandments of God*

The Sluggard

The sluggard does not plow in the autumn;
he will seek at harvest and have nothing.
(Prov. 20:4)

How long will you lie there, O sluggard?
When will you arise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
and poverty will come upon you like a
robber,
and want like an armed man.
(Prov. 6:9-11)

- ∞ Where laziness comes from: *refusing to work or to get out of bed*
- ∞ Consequences: *poverty*
- ∞ How to change: *get up, go to work!*

The Scoffer

A wise son hears his father's instruction,
but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.
(Prov. 13:1)

Drive out a scoffer, and strife will go out,
and quarreling and abuse will cease.
(Prov. 22:10)

Toward the scorners he is scornful,
but to the humble he gives favor.
(Prov. 3:34)

- ∞ Where scoffing comes from: *refusing to listen to his father's instructions or rebuke*

- ≈ Consequences: *strife; scorn from God*
- ≈ How to change: *listen to instruction and rebuke; humble yourself before God*

The Wise

For the Lord gives wisdom;
 from his mouth come knowledge and
 understanding;
 he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
 he is a shield to those who walk in
 integrity,
 guarding the paths of justice
 and watching over the way of his saints.
 (Prov. 2:6–8)

The ear that listens to life-giving reproof
 will dwell among the wise.
 Whoever ignores instruction despises
 himself,
 but he who listens to reproof gains
 intelligence.
 The fear of the LORD is instruction in
 wisdom,
 and humility comes before honor.
 (Prov. 15:31–33)

Get wisdom; get insight;
 do not forget, and do not turn away from
 the words of my mouth.
 Do not forsake her, and she will keep you;
 love her, and she will guard you.
 The beginning of wisdom is this: Get
 wisdom,
 and whatever you get, get insight.
 Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;
 she will honor you if you embrace her.
 She will place on your head a graceful
 garland;
 she will bestow on you a beautiful
 crown. (Prov. 4:5–9)

- ≈ Where wisdom comes from: *the Lord gives wisdom*
- ≈ Consequences: *God is a shield; he watches over the saints; he keeps you, guards you, exalts you, honors you, bestows on you a beautiful crown*
- ≈ How to get more wisdom: *listen to reproof; dwell among the wise; fear the Lord; do not turn away from God's Word*

Proverbs itself is basically divided into two parts. The first nine chapters work like a preface

that attempts to convince you to read the book by explaining why wisdom is so valuable. The rest of the book—chapters 10 through 31—are collections of various wise sayings called “proverbs.” What is a proverb? A proverb is a short, clear, memorable statement of truth learned through the distillation of extended human experience; for example, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder” or “Honesty is the best policy.”

But biblical wisdom steps quite beyond the bounds of practical observations about the world to make clear statements of faith. A biblical proverb is a little model of reality, a short verbal representation of some aspect of our daily lives lived in the fear of the Lord. By picking up a proverb and turning it over and over and looking at it from all angles, we can see something about the reality of how life works in this world.

The short, pithy statements of Proverbs are not always clear to people and are often misunderstood and misused. To rightly understand and apply Proverbs we need to remember several things.

We need to remember that the *proverbs are not promises*. They are generalizations and observations, not automatic rules. They are tendencies, not guarantees. (One proverb that is often assumed to be a promise is Proverbs 22:6.) Proverbs are general statements, not iron-clad certainties, and may not apply in all circumstances. They are not universally or absolutely true. They do, however, offer practical guidance for making wise decisions and living godly lives.

Proverbs often have to do with consequences. Do this, and this will follow. Act wisely and rightly, and you will be rewarded. Act wickedly and foolishly ignore God, and you will face disaster. That is the way God has made the universe. Yet because of the fall, the order of the world has been corrupted. The book of Proverbs sets us up to look for someone to sort out the disorder of the world. We want someone who

will put things right and usher in a new order, which is one way Proverbs points us to Christ.

In Proverbs 8 the writer uses a metaphor of a woman named Wisdom to teach about the nature of God's wisdom. And while this Woman Wisdom is not a preincarnate form of the second person of the Trinity, we do know that Jesus is the embodiment of God's wisdom. Because we know that Jesus said that the whole of the Old Testament is about him, we cannot

help but see echoes of who he is and what he has done, in the words of Proverbs 8. And when we compare Proverbs 8 with passages about Christ in the New Testament, the connection becomes unavoidable.

7. Compare the wisdom personified in Proverbs 8 with the Word made flesh in the New Testament and write a statement about Jesus in the second column.

"I have counsel and sound wisdom; I have insight; I have strength." (Prov. 8:14)	1 Cor. 1:30 <i>Jesus is wisdom from God.</i>
"I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently find me." (Prov. 8:17)	Matt. 7:7 <i>Jesus is given to all who seek him.</i>
"The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work." (Prov. 8:22)	Col. 1:16–17 <i>All things were created by Jesus and through Jesus.</i>
"Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth." (Prov. 8:23)	John 1:1 <i>Jesus, the Word made flesh, existed as God, with God, before the world was made.</i>
"When he established the heavens, I was there; when he drew a circle on the face of the deep . . ." (Prov. 8:27)	John 1:1, 3 <i>All things were made through Jesus.</i>
"I was beside him, like a master workman." (Prov. 8:30)	Heb. 1:2 <i>It was through Jesus that God created the world.</i>
"I was daily his delight." (Prov. 8:30)	Luke 3:22; 17:24 <i>Jesus is the Son in whom God is well pleased.</i>
"Blessed are those who keep my ways." (Prov. 8:32)	John 15:10 <i>Those who keep Jesus's commandments abide in his love.</i>
"Whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the LORD, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death." (Prov. 8:35–36)	1 John 5:12 <i>Whoever has Jesus finds life and whoever does not have Jesus does not have life.</i>

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. What makes the proverbs effective is that they are short and easy to remember. Can you recall a proverb from the book of Proverbs or at least the gist of it?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. Think of someone you know whom you think of as a wise person. What is it about that person that causes you to think of him or her as wise?

3. How do you think a person becomes wise or increases in wisdom? Is it something a person

can pursue or develop, or is it simply a matter of personality type or disposition?

Becoming wise comes from increasing in the knowledge and fear of the Lord through listening and responding to his Word, walking in his ways, obeying his commands, prayer, and abiding in Christ.

4. The Old Testament speaks of the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom. How would you put that in New Testament terms? What would you say is the beginning of wisdom now that we know the triune God in a fuller way?

To fear the Lord is to embrace the gospel of Christ: Christ's righteous life, atoning death, and victorious resurrection as our substitute.

5. Proverbs is full of insight on how to use money, how to deal with people, and how to be successful in this life. Is this insight of benefit to those who do not fear the Lord?

Yes, but not of saving benefit. It is actually a curse, not a blessing to pursue this way of living apart from Christ, outside of his covenant.

6. After studying Proverbs, how would you respond to someone who insists that all paths lead to God as long as one is sincere?

Proverbs makes it clear that there are only two paths—one that leads to God and life and the other that leads to death. A person can be sincere and very wrong.

7. Is it possible to be wise and yet reject Christ?

It may be possible to have a measure of worldly "wisdom," but if true wisdom is Jesus Christ crucified, it is impossible to reject him and be wise.

8. Many people in our world today can make no sense of belief in a god who was publically executed. Certainly the Greeks of Paul's day saw it as utter foolishness. Yet Paul describes the crucifixion of Christ as the power and wisdom of God. What do you think that means?

Christ crucified is God's plan from before the creation of the world that has shaped all of life and history. It is his

supreme wisdom to provide a way for sinful people to be accepted by a holy God and live together forever.

Getting Personal

9. Throughout Proverbs we've seen that, to be wise, a person needs to receive instruction and learn. So teachability is an important quality of a wise person. Do you think you are a teachable person? Would those closest to you describe you as teachable? Why or why not?

10. Many of us live with lingering regret over foolish things we have done or failed to do, and so we are grateful for the healing, forgiving, restoring grace of Jesus Christ. What difference does it make, or could it make, to truly grasp what it means that Christ has become your wisdom as you are united to him?

Just as Christ has transferred to me his own perfect righteousness so that I will not be damned for my sin, so has he transferred to me his own perfect wisdom so that my foolish ways will not determine my standing with God or my future with him. It also means that the Spirit is working in me to transform my foolishness into godly wisdom.

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

11. In the beginning of the Bible we witness a perfectly ordered universe where actions had predictable consequences. That order was disrupted, yet not completely destroyed when sin entered into the world. And while Christ has accomplished what is necessary for perfect order to be reestablished, all will not be set completely right until Christ returns and the old order passes away for good. Proverbs helps us to see that there is still *some* order in the world we are living in. How does Proverbs also help us as people who are living in this in-between time as we wait for perfect order to be restored?

Proverbs gives naturally foolish people godly wisdom for living in a world that has been wrecked and disordered by sin. It points out the way to God to people who would foolishly pursue destruction apart from God's saving call.

Week 9:

Ecclesiastes

Personal Bible Study

Do you have questions about how life in this world works, quandaries about some of its unfair agonies as well as its unexpected joys? So did the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes, and through this book, he invites us into his questions as well as a few of his conclusions. This book is not easily understood. Nor is it a book from which we can pluck out a verse or two and attempt to hang our whole theology on it. But certainly the key way to approach this book is to seek to understand its purpose and its place within the wisdom books of the Old Testament. To do that, we have to go back to the very beginning of things.

1. When God created everything in the beginning, it was “very good” (Gen. 1:31). But when Adam and Eve fell from the perfect state in which they were created, everything changed. Fulfillment changed to futility. What signs of fulfillment becoming futility do you find in Genesis 3:14–19?

There will now be a need for a redeemer who will have to do battle with Satan. Childbearing will become painful and marriage will become difficult. Work will become a burden, the creation will become cursed, and life will end in death.

2. In Ecclesiastes 1:2 and, in fact, thirty-eight times throughout the book, the author will describe all of life as “vanity.” What does *vanity* mean? (You may want to use a dictionary.)

Futile, temporary, unsubstantial, meaningless

3. Read the introduction to Ecclesiastes in 1:2–11. Think about the images used and the questions asked. How would you summarize the preacher’s assumptions about life?

None of it really matters. It doesn’t last. Nothing changes.

4. Read Ecclesiastes 1–2 and 3:16–4:16. List five or more things the preacher determines are “vanity.”

Work, pleasure, wine, houses, vineyards, possessions, living wisely, justice, oppression, envy, accomplishment

5. Many interpreters say that the repeated phrase “under the sun” means a life apart from relationship with God. Yet several passages talk about life “under the sun” in relationship with God (Eccles. 5:13–20; 8:14–15; 9:9). What conclusions do you come to about what the writer is referring to when he talks about “under the sun” in Ecclesiastes 1:14–15; 3:16; 6:12; and 9:3–6?

In one sense God is assumed in the writings of the Old Testament. All of life was considered in light of him. Yet the writer in these passages doesn’t seem to take him or his promises into account. He seems to, perhaps, be writing about life lived in this world under a curse with no understanding of a personal God and no expectation of a God who will one day make things right again.

6. The New Testament also speaks to life in this world “under the sun.” What is its estimation of it according to these verses?

☞ Matthew 6:19–20: *This earth is not the place to lay up treasure because moth and rust destroy it, and thieves steal it, but there is a place beyond this earth—heaven—where there is security and significance.*

- ≈ 1 Timothy 4:8: *Godliness matters now in this present life as well as in the life to come.*
- ≈ 1 Timothy 6:7: *Godliness with contentment is not vanity. It is “great gain.”*

7. In Ecclesiastes 12:9–14 an editor or narrator makes some concluding comments about what “the Preacher” has said throughout the book of Ecclesiastes. Put into your own words what you think he is trying to express to “my son,” the one to whom he appears to be speaking in verses 9–12.

The Preacher had wisdom and knowledge to offer and wrote words of truth that come from God. His words have the power to poke and prod. But they don’t answer all of our questions or address all of our needs. They are limited. We need more than this wisdom, a greater wisdom that will come in Jesus Christ.

8. The narrator’s final conclusion is to “fear God and keep his commandments” (Eccles. 12:13). Considering the content and struggle of Ecclesiastes, how is this a necessary resolution and a fitting conclusion?

To fear God is to take God seriously, to acknowledge him in our lives as the highest good, to revere him, to honor and worship him, and to center our lives on him. Only in fearing God can we find a clear and true perspective that gives meaning to life lived in this confusing, broken world. We cannot find meaning in this life apart from him. We were created for his purposes and for his ends, and only in God’s revelation of himself in Jesus Christ do we find certainty that there is something beyond this life under the sun and beyond the grave.

9. What are the two reasons the narrator gives in Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 for fearing God and keeping his commandments?

This is our duty, and we are going to be held accountable before God.

10. Is the answer in Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 a satisfying or unsatisfying ending to this book for you? Why?

11. One way we see Christ in the Old Testament is that the Old Testament raises questions that can be answered only in Jesus Christ. And clearly Ecclesiastes raises plenty of questions: Does life in this world have any real meaning? Is there anything worth working toward in this life? Anything worth knowing? Any truth worthy of being believed? Is there anything I can be sure of about life except death?

Of course, we have revelation that the writer of Ecclesiastes did not have—the entire New Testament, which reveals the person and work of Christ. The obvious need of man for whom “everything is futility” (under the sun) is an existence not under the sun. How is this possible and what do we learn about it from these verses in the New Testament?

- ≈ Romans 5:12, 17: *While death and seeming futility is the reality of this world we live in because of sin, Jesus has broken that power and gives life.*
- ≈ Romans 8:20–23: *The futility of life in this world as it is now will come to an end when Christ returns and renews all of creation.*
- ≈ 1 Corinthians 15:17–19, 58: *The resurrection is what assures us that trusting Christ assures us life beyond this life under the sun. The hope we find in his resurrection assures us that our lives matter now and for eternity.*
- ≈ 2 Corinthians 5:17: *If anyone is in Christ, the old life of futility is gone and a new life of meaning and purpose has come.*
- ≈ Philippians 2:16: *As we live our lives in light of the salvation we’ve received in Christ, we will one day discover that our struggles and obedience were not in vain.*
- ≈ Revelation 14:13: *Our deeds will follow us into eternity. They will matter.*

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. What are some things about life in this world “under the sun” that are frustrating, unfulfilling, or don’t last that the writer of Ecclesiastes also found to be empty or “vanity.”

Getting to the Heart of It

2. In Ecclesiastes we are listening to a thinker who seems to be pulled by two perspectives: one based on the knowledge of God and the other based on his own experience and observations. How do these two perspectives seem to clash with one another throughout Ecclesiastes?

The writer says many true things about God, but not the whole truth. Most of the time he seems hopeless about life in this world yet at times he seems to have hope that God will make things right. He seems to question the harshness and injustice in the world yet calls on others to trust and obey God.

3. Look back at question 6 in the Personal Bible Study. What does the New Testament say about this life under the sun?

4. Does the New Testament affirm that “all is vanity”? To support your answer, share the insights you found in the verses you looked up in question 11.

5. The narrator gives the son a direct warning about something that is in vogue in our day, and that is to be forever on a spiritual search without ever finding, deciding, or embracing the truth. Many voices in our world today suggest that it is arrogant to claim to have found what is true and to put confidence in it. What would be the narrator’s response to that, according to the final few verses of Ecclesiastes?

“You can search for your whole life with your limited capacity and this world’s limited understanding to no avail. Understand that wisdom will be complete and satisfying only when Christ is revealed.”

6. Ecclesiastes doesn’t have any prophecies about or references to Christ unless, perhaps, we see Qoheleth’s limited wisdom as pointing us to Jesus, the greater preacher of the meaning of life, or if we see him shadowed in the shepherd who give words of wisdom in Ecclesiastes 9:11. But, in a larger way, how would you explain to someone how the book of Ecclesiastes points us toward or prepares us for Christ?

Ecclesiastes expresses human longing in the time before Christ, for Christ to come and infuse what seems futile with meaning and what seems hopeless with hope.

Getting Personal

7. Qoheleth sought to find satisfaction in a number of things that did not ultimately satisfy. And he had a number of questions about the realities of this world that he could not find answers to. Which of his pursuits and perplexities could you especially relate to?

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

8. Throughout this study we have been considering how what we are studying fits into the larger story of God’s plan of redemption and his written revelation. How does Ecclesiastes point back to what happened in the garden as well as to what is to come when Christ returns, according to Romans 8:20–23?

It is a very realistic response to the disorder and dysfunction that became the reality in this world when Adam and Eve sinned and sin corrupted all of creation. The problems raised by the Preacher will be fully dealt with only when Christ returns and the old order passes away and all things become new.

Week 10:

Song of Solomon

Personal Bible Study

1. Take a few minutes to read the Song of Solomon. It might sound like a big assignment to read the whole book, but you will see that its eight chapters have only 117 verses. On this quick read-through, you're not looking for any answers or getting stuck trying to figure anything out. Your goal is to get a feel for the book and its flow, allowing it to raise questions in your mind that you hope to get answered. What are your general impressions about this book? What questions do you hope to get answered?

Song of Solomon has been read and interpreted in vastly different ways throughout the history of the church. So our goal in studying the Song of Solomon this week will not be to nail down the "correct" interpretation of this enigmatic book but rather to familiarize ourselves with it and with the various ways it can be read, and to enjoy it. Rather than becoming frustrated by the ways it does not fit into the mold of our modern Western thinking, we want to enter into its Near Eastern ancient context and let it speak to us, as the whole of the Bible speaks to us, about the goodness of God and his plan to redeem all things through Christ—including human love.

Having read through the book, you may have struggled to find a storyline. Perhaps it doesn't have one. You may have struggled to know who was saying what. That is not always particularly clear either. As we study Song of Solomon, we need to consider three important questions about the text, remembering that

these questions have been and continue to be answered in differing ways by faithful Bible scholars and interpreters.

- ≈ Is this written by Solomon, about Solomon, or perhaps simply written under Solomon's oversight during his lifetime?
- ≈ What kind of literature are we reading?
- ≈ Who are the characters we hear speaking?

Let's consider each question, understanding that our conclusion about each one impacts our conclusions about the other two. *Is this written by Solomon, about Solomon, or perhaps simply written under Solomon's oversight during his lifetime?* In the first verse we read:

The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.
(Song 1:1)

This is grammatically ambiguous. It could mean that it was written by Solomon, or it could mean only that it was written in his honor. We know from 1 Kings 11 that Solomon was not exactly an expert in healthy sexual relationships. It tells us that he "loved many foreign women" (1 Kings 11:1). In fact, he had "700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines" (v. 3), and "his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not wholly true to the LORD his God" (v. 4). It could be that this book was written not by him or even about him (since he is mentioned only generally as a distant figure) but simply during his lifetime, or under his oversight, or perhaps to present to him. (Can you see already that we aren't going to be able to nail down all of our conclusions about this book?)

Why is it called the "Song of Songs"? To say

it is “the best of songs” is to denote a superlative, similar to expressions such as “holy of holies” (as some translations render “Most Holy Place”) and “King of kings and Lord of Lords.” This is the love song that surpasses all other love songs.

What kind of literature are we reading? We recognize right away when we come to Song of Solomon that these are not songs like the psalms are songs. Neither is this narrative story like we read in the history books of the Bible. And it isn’t propositional analytical teaching like the letter to the Romans. In fact, the Song of Solomon is a unique literary genre in the Old Testament.

Some read Song of Solomon as a *drama* that tells a story, either about two lovers—King Solomon and a shepherdess, or a shepherd and a shepherdess in ancient Israel—or about a love triangle between King Solomon, a shepherd, and shepherdess.

For much of history, Song of Solomon has been read as *allegory*. Jewish interpreters have read it is an allegory about God’s relationship to his beloved Israel, and Christian interpreters have read it as an allegory about Christ’s relationship to his bride, the church. Those who read the book this way would say that when the book begins with the bride’s statement of desire, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (Song 1:2), this expresses the believer’s desire for fresh experiences of Christ’s love. They would say that kisses represent the Word of God, that the woman’s breasts represent the nurturing doctrine of the church, and that her lips represent law and gospel.

A good example of an allegory is *The Pilgrim’s Progress* by John Bunyan. This story was written to describe a Christian’s journey to heaven using the literary tool of allegory. Everything in the story represents something else, and it is clear to us as the reader that we are to read it this way. But the Song of Solomon

does not make it clear that it is to be read as allegory. And, in fact, if we try to make the details in the book fit an allegorical reading, we have to make some strange interpretive leaps, especially when the imagery is especially erotic. So, those who oppose the view of reading this book as allegory would say that, in the Song of Solomon, kisses are kisses and breasts are breasts, and when the woman invites her beloved to come to her garden and eat its choicest fruits, she is inviting her husband to enjoy her body in sexual intimacy.

What seems to make the most sense to me is that Song of Solomon is *love poetry*. It is a collection of poems that celebrates sexual love. What is less clear is how or if the poems are connected to each other. Each of the songs may be about different characters and may even have different authors. But because we find repeated imagery, settings, themes, and characters, as well as a repeated refrain or chorus, it would seem to indicate a connection between the poems. This does not mean, however, that we can impose a linear storyline or sequence on the poems. To use a modern analogy, if we see Song of Solomon as a collection of unconnected poetry, we would need to read it not like a Shakespearean play (which has a plot) but like a collection of Shakespearean love poems.

But we can’t ignore the fact that the book seems to have some story to it, even if it is not told in the linear way we modern readers like to read a story. So while we don’t see a sequential storyline, perhaps we do see poetic structure. “Hebrew stories and poetry often follow what is called a ‘chiastic’ structure. This simply means that the work has a central pivot of meaning from which it moves outward symmetrically in both directions. The beginning and ending, then, will match, in a sense, as they are both farthest away from the middle.” So, if we were to diagram the Song, it might look like this:

- A. Home in the country
- B. Developing love
 - C. Dream Sequence
 - D. Consummation
- C'. Dream Sequence
- B'. Developing love
- A'. Home in the country

Seeing this structure at work in the Song of Solomon helps us to read it as a coherent series of love songs that intertwine, rather than as dramatic sequence that we try to force into a logical mold.

Who are the characters we hear speaking? The Song of Solomon is a series of exchanges, mostly between two or three characters with chorus-like “Others” sprinkled in. These others usually pick up items from the lovers’ speeches and urge the two forward in love.

If we want to understand the book, we must seek to identify who is speaking from verse to verse, as it is not indicated clearly in the text. If you read the Song in two or three different translations, you might find that the editors have identified the speakers differently. The variations of interpretation come from the fact that these headings are not indicated in the original text but have been created by translators and editors to aid readers in understanding.

There are three primary possible scenarios to explain who is speaking throughout Song of Solomon, each of which is based on differing understandings of the nature of the story.

In the first scenario, there are two characters, King Solomon and a young shepherdess. In this scenario King Solomon notices a chaste and attractive young vinedresser in one of his vineyards, falls in love with her, marries her, and brings her into his court. One version of this story sees the young bride as shy and reluctant to open the door to her husband, and another sees the bride as devoted but struggling with the polygamy of the king. In this storyline, the conclusion of the Song, “Set me as a seal upon your

heart” (Song 8:6), is a call for her husband to be as exclusively dedicated to her as she is to him.

One problem with this storyline is that some elements of the story, e.g., his shepherding in the fields, make it difficult to identify the bridegroom as a king. Additionally, we know from 1 Kings (3:1; 7:8; 9:24; 11:1) that if there was a favored woman in Solomon’s life, it was the Pharaoh’s daughter, whom he married very early; it was not a working woman from the king’s flocks and vineyards who is pictured in the Song. If this woman was one of the scores of Solomon’s wives, it doesn’t seem that the romance between them would have such deep sincerity. If it did, why would Solomon add hundreds more women to his harem?

In the second scenario there are three characters: King Solomon, a young shepherdess, and a shepherd. In this scenario, King Solomon falls in love with a young, virtuous shepherdess and brings her into his court, but she is really in love with a shepherd and apparently leaves Solomon for her shepherd lover in the country.

While this storyline helps to explain the references to the bridegroom as a king, it seems unlikely that Solomon would be treated as an interloper in a work that is dedicated to him. Also, there is no indication in the text that would differentiate definitively between the voices of Solomon and the shepherd.

In the third scenario, there are two characters, a shepherd and a shepherdess. In this scenario we are reading a series of exchanges mostly between two betrothed Israelites. These two peasants refer to each other in royal terms. The simple shepherd is as King Solomon in her eyes, and she is a princess in his. Sometimes the bride is speaking; other times we hear her thoughts and perhaps an account of her dreams.

Do all of these possibilities cause you some confusion or frustration? Most of us are more comfortable with reading things in which events are related in a sequential flow of time.

But in Hebrew literature, such as the Song of Solomon, the sequence of events is not necessarily time-ordered. In addition, many of us are used to reading the Bible with left-brain rationalism rather than right-brain artistry. Song of Solomon, as poetry, is meant to spark our imagination, stir our emotions, and awaken all of our senses. Don't let the enigmas of this book rob you of its joy and beauty.

Now that you are more familiar with the possible scenarios and characters, read through Song of Solomon again, imagining that you are listening to a reader's theatre. Seek to determine the backdrop for each section as well as who is speaking. Enjoy its vivid and tactile imagery, its flowery and fruitful landscape, and its romance and wonder, and seek to understand its poetic allusions. Don't worry about a time sequence; let each section be what it is. And look for key themes, repeated phrases, and images.

2. A refrain repeated throughout the book is found in Song 2:7; 3:5; and 8:4. While the speaker is uncertain, the tone is commanding. Who is being spoken to, and how would you paraphrase what is being said in this repeated refrain?

Speaking to young women of Israel: do not become sexually active and intimate before you are ready to make a whole-life commitment.

3. Why do you think this refrain is repeated throughout this book of love poetry?

It is all very erotic and exciting in regard to sexual love, and so there needs to be a reminder about the bonds of commitment in which this love is to be consummated.

4. A key passage in the Song is found in 8:6–7. What do you think the speaker is asking for, and what is she saying about the nature of love?

Sexual love is meant to be enjoyed inside the safety of a lifelong commitment. Sexual love has tremendous, fiery power that can scorch or seal. This love endures and its flames are not easily doused.

While we would not suggest that Song of Solomon is an allegory, in which every image of the story represents something else, we do know that the marriage relationship is used as a vehicle to illustrate spiritual realities throughout Scripture. So while the Song is primarily a celebration of love and the gift of sexual intimacy, we cannot help but hear echoes of the passionate love Christ has for his bride and feel a longing for our complete oneness with him to be consummated when he returns for us, his bride.

5. Read the following passages, which use the human marriage relationship as a vehicle to illustrate spiritual realities. Beside each reference note a particular phrase in the passage that is most meaningful to you.

≈ Isaiah 54:5–8

≈ Isaiah 62:5

≈ Hosea 2:16–20

≈ Ephesians 5:22–32

≈ Revelation 19:6–9

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Discussion Guide

Getting the Discussion Going

1. Can you remember the first movie you saw that profoundly moved you, shaped you, or perhaps scared you about the power of romantic love and sex?

Getting to the Heart of It

2. If we were to get our view of sex only from movies and television (including the commercials), what would that message be?

That sex is all fun and can be free of commitment with little consequence. That our bodies are our own to do with as we please. That sexual satisfaction is a right and the greatest satisfaction there is.

3. If we were to get our view of sex only from the sermons and teaching we've heard in church over the course of our lives, what would that message be?

That sex is not something we talk about in polite company. That sex is dirty or bad or shameful. That sex is not something God is interested in apart from telling you not to do it until after you're married.

4. If we were to get our view of sex only from the Bible, what would that message be?

That sex is good though often misused like every other good gift. That it is a gift from God to reveal something about his own nature and purposes in the world. That sex is a powerful force and should be reserved to be enjoyed inside the bonds of covenant commitment.

5. As you read through Song of Solomon and asked yourself the three questions in the Personal Bible Study—Who wrote this book? What kind of literature am I reading? Who are the characters speaking?—what were your conclusions and why?

6. To interpret the Bible correctly, we have to think first about the author's intention for the original audience. What do you think the writer

of Song of Solomon wanted to communicate to his original readers, the kingdom of Israel living under Solomon's rule?

Different theologians would likely have widely varying views on this question. So this is a "what do you think" question and thus a variety of views may be valid. But we must always remember that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). We must also remember that Jesus presented himself as the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament, so we must recognize that every part of the Bible is intended to reveal Christ to us in its own way.

7. If sex in marriage is a physical sign that points to a spiritual reality, to what spiritual reality does sex outside of marriage point?

God intends to relate to us, his people, in an intimate, loving, committed, forever relationship.

8. In light of what we've read in Song of Solomon, do you think a sexless marriage might betray God's purpose for marriage as much as adultery?

Yes, in that it would not reflect the on-going, life-giving, intimacy-producing relationship he intends to share with his bride. But the qualifier of "as much as" might be problematic as refraining from sexual union for a time is affirmed in the Scripture, and clearly sometimes physical limitation impacts a couple's ability to have sexual relations. However, adultery is never permitted or excused in the Scripture.

9. What do Song of Solomon and the gospel it points to have to say to our current culture of hooking-up, recreational sex, friends with benefits, and serial monogamy?

Since sex was created to reflect the love and intimacy God intends to share with his bride, all of these things betray that reflection.

Getting Personal

10. In the Song of Solomon, words of praise extolling the virtues of the bride's beloved flow freely and abundantly from the bride's lips, an overflow of her thoughts about and passion for him. As a member of the bride of Christ, what would you want to tell us about your beloved?

Here the goal is to encourage group members to offer short statements about the beauty and qualities of God, our heavenly bridegroom—in other words, statements of praise for who he is and what he does.

Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture

11. Throughout this study, we have sought to grasp how the passage we're studying fits into the bigger story of God's plan for redemption. To what future hope does Song of Solomon point us?

That one day the bride of Christ will enjoy the perfect beauty, oneness, and relationship that God has always intended to share with us.

Note-taking Pages for Duplication

The process of taking notes is, for many of us, less about having the notes to refer to later than it is about the increased concentration and comprehension that comes to us as we hear something and process it through our pen onto paper. Certainly your members should each have a copy of the companion book, *The Wisdom of God*, and all of the content from the videos is included in the book. Still, it may be helpful for some

members to take notes with an outline to help them track along with the teaching presentation on the video. Others may choose to take notes on their own blank page, and some may choose not to take notes at all. Following are reproducible note pages for each week, with the major headings as presented on the videos. You are free to make as many copies of these note-taking pages as needed for your group members.

Notes on Week 1: The Wisdom Hidden in the Wisdom Books

What We Need Most to Know

The Secret Wisdom Hidden

The Secret Wisdom Disclosed

The Image We Are to Be Conformed To

The Questions We Need to Have Answered

The Newness We Need in Our Minds

Notes on Week 2: Job
No Fair

Assumption #1: If I Am Godly, I Won't Have to Suffer

Assumption #2: My Suffering Is about Me and My Life in the Here and Now

Assumption #3: My Suffering Is the Result of God's Punishing Me for My Sin

Assumption #4: What I Need Most from God Is Relief for My Suffering and Answers to My Questions

Notes on Week 3: Psalms: The Songs of Jesus

I Can't Stop This Feelin'

“Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You Richly . . . Singing Psalms” (Col. 3:16)

Hearing the Voice of Jesus in the Psalms

The Word of Christ's Thirst (Ps. 42:1-2)

Christ's Struggle for Breath (Ps. 42:7)

Christ's Deliverance (Ps. 43:1-4)

Notes for Week 4: Blessing and Perishing in the Psalms

Secure in the Storm

Blessed Is the Man

What the Blessed Man Rejects (Ps. 1:1)

What the Blessed Man Enjoys (Ps. 1:2)

What the Blessed Man Expects (Ps. 1:3)

What the Wicked Should Expect (Ps. 1:4–6)

Who Is “the Man” of Psalm 1?

King of Israel? (Deut. 17:18–19)

Joshua? (Josh. 1:7–8)

David? (Ps. 19:7–8, 11)

Solomon? (1 Kings 2:2–3)

Kings of Israel? (2 Kings 22:11–13)

Nation of Israel?

Jesus

What Do We Do with Psalm 1?

Notes on Week 5: The Royal Psalms

The Royal Wedding

The Lord's Enemies Speak (Ps. 2:1–3)

The Lord Himself Speaks (Ps. 2:4–6)

The Lord's Anointed Speaks (Ps. 2:7–9)

The Lord's Ambassador Speaks (Ps. 2:10–12)

The Lord Reigns

Notes on Week 6: Repentance in the Psalms

Wash Me

Have Mercy on Me (Ps. 51:1–2)

Forgive Me (Ps. 51:3)

Cleanse Me (Ps. 51:7–9)

Make Me New (Ps. 51:10)

How can David's sin simply be "put away"? David's sin is "put away" only in the sense that it is "put upon" Christ.

Notes on Week 7: The Suffering and Glory of Messiah in the Psalms
Who Is This Song About?

Song of Rejection (Psalm 118)

Song of Betrayal (Psalm 41)

Song of Desolation (Ps. 22:1–20)

Abandoned by God (Ps. 22:1–2)

Despised by Men (Ps. 22:6–8, 12–13)

Racked with Pain (Ps. 22:14–18)

Song of Deliverance (Ps. 22:21–31)

He Has Done It

Notes for Week 8: Proverbs

Wisdom Calling

Wisdom Comes from God Himself (Prov. 1:1–6)

Instruction

Insight

Wise dealing

Prudence

Knowledge

Discretion

Learning

Wisdom Begins with Holy Fear (Prov. 1:7)

Wisdom Invites All to Walk in Its Way

Wisdom Enjoys Its Creation (Proverbs 8)

Wisdom Culminates in the Cross of Christ (1 Corinthians 1–2)

Notes on Week 9: Ecclesiastes

What Really Matters

Does Anything Last? (Eccles. 1:14–15)

Does Anything Satisfy? (Eccles. 2:1)

Is Anyone in Control? (Eccles. 3:1–4)

Is There Any Comfort? (Eccles. 4:1)

Does Anyone Dare Draw Near? (Eccles. 5:1–2, 4, 7)

Is Anything Gained? (Eccles. 6:7)

Is There Any Hope? (Eccles. 6:12)

Does Anyone Know?

Is This All There Is? (Eccles. 9:7, 9)

Does Anything Matter? (Eccles. 12:8-14)

Notes on Week 10: Song of Solomon

Kiss Me

Naked and Unashamed (Gen. 2:23–25)

What kind of literature are we reading when we read Song of Solomon?

And God Said, "It Is Good."

Sex Is Powerful, Even Dangerous

Even the Best Sex Leaves Us with a Longing