



What Are the Psalms?

PSALM 1

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Psalm 1:3

Gather

CHECK IN

Today we will establish our check-in ritual. We take a moment to breathe and settle into the space with breath and prayer.

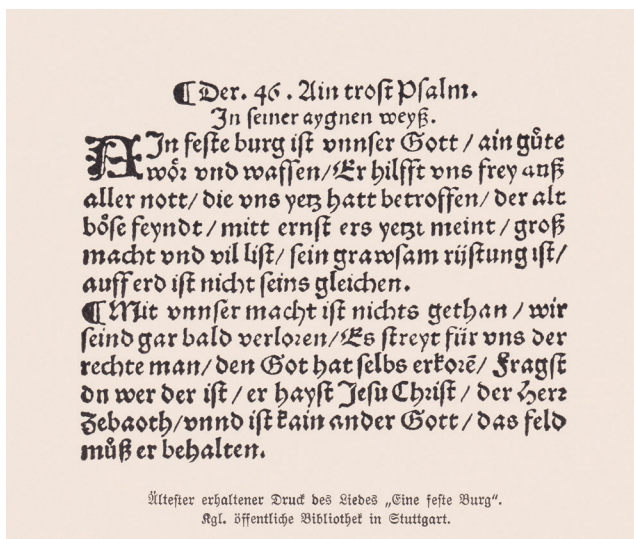
We will then move to introductions: State your name and one piece of writing that has meant a lot to you and why.

OPENING PRAYER

Holy God, you come to us in water and word, wine and bread. You also promised to send your Spirit when we gather in your name. Come, Holy Spirit—come and lead us to the word, which is the river of life. Plant us there and let us flourish. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

COMMUNITY-BUILDING

We will start today by engaging with our group covenant on page 9. Once completed, we'll engage with a group activity that draws from the main image in Psalm 1: the believer as a tree that is planted by streams of water and that is grounded, flourishing, and nourishing.



"A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," by Martin Luther. Facsimile (wood engraving) of the oldest surviving print in the Württembergische Landesbibliothek Stuttgart, Germany, published in 1895

Dwell

DWELLING IN THE WORD

As you hear the text read, picture that flourishing and nourishing tree. What would it feel like to be so grounded? Compare that feeling to the way the existence of the wicked is described.

Psalm 1:1-6

¹Happy are those
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked
or take the path that sinners tread
 or sit in the seat of scoffers,
²but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.
³They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
⁴The wicked are not so
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,
⁶for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

CONVERSATION

1. In the Psalms, we eavesdrop on conversations between God and God's people.
 - ♦ How do you talk to God? What sorts of things do you say?



*King David Plays the Harp, from Notker
 Labeo's Psalter, 11th century*

- ♦ When do you find it easier to talk to God? When is it more difficult? Do you ever hear God talk back?

2. The Psalms were originally written in ancient Hebrew, the ancestor to modern Hebrew. They were created around 2,500 years ago. They are, at heart, prayers. The Psalms record the profound gratitude, desperate pleas, and deepest desires of God's people. They are fiercely honest in their portrayal of the journey of faith. They offer language that is gorgeous and life-giving, but they also include messages that are challenging, even repulsive. They invite us to deepen our relationship with God and to borrow their words when we cannot find words of our own. The Psalms originated in organized religious settings and were often related to music. Some psalms call themselves songs (Psalm 121); others list musical instructions like "for the flutes" (Psalm 5). It is no surprise, then, that the Psalms have been put to music for thousands of years. Many churches still read or sing a psalm in worship every week. The Psalms call to us, both individually

and communally, inviting us to articulate our faith, for ourselves and for generations to come.

- ♦ Think back on your life: If you were to create a prayer that future generations would use, what would you want included in it? What form (poem, song, essay, text) would it take?

3. One of the words in Psalm 1 that is easy to misunderstand is *meditate* (v. 2). When we hear “meditate,” we think of stillness, silence, and serenity. The Hebrew word here translated as “meditate” is *hagah*. It is a noisy word. To *hagah* the law of the Lord is to speak it out loud, to mutter it, to verbally muse over it. Reflect for a moment, then discuss:

- ♦ What difference does it make if we meditate on God’s word in our minds versus *hagah*-ing God’s word with our bodies?

4. The concept of law versus gospel is a foundational Lutheran idea. The law, according to Luther, refers to things that bind us, restrict us, keep us from flourishing (sin, death, pain, and the devil). The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ that frees us from things that keep us from flourishing and gives us new life. One of the mistakes Lutherans have made is to connect the word *law* in Psalm 1:2 with this concept of law and gospel. This mistake perpetuates an anti-Jewish understanding of the Old Testament that assumes the Hebrew Bible is only filled with “law.” It’s not: The gospel springs up from every corner of the Bible. (We will experience this together as a group as we walk through this Psalms study.) The Hebrew word here translated as “law” is *torah*, which means something closer to teaching, word, guiding relationship.

- ♦ How would you translate *torah* in this poem to move away from a sense of legalism and toward a sense of life-giving faith?

Engage

WORD AND SERVICE

The Psalms invite me this week to _____.

WORSHIP AND PRAYER

Prayer concerns:

O Lord our God, in the ancient music of the Psalms, we hear the rolling echoes of your love resounding throughout generations. Let that love reverberate in us this week. May it hum in our bones, sing in our bellies, and pour out of our lips to be oxygen for a suffocating world. In your name we pray. Amen.

SESSION RECAP

The Psalms are ancient prayers of God's people. In them, we hear the joyful gratitude and deep pain of the life of faith. They are the earliest examples of songs about God that we have in the Christian tradition—and we still sing many of them in hymn form today (for example, “A mighty fortress” is a paraphrase of Psalm 46). When we allow the language of the Psalms to suffuse our lives, we grow deeper in our relationship with God. Psalm 1 promises that immersing ourselves in God's word leads to a flourishing life, both for ourselves and for those around us.

SUGGESTIONS FOR GOING DEEPER

- ✦ Instead of quietly reading, try *hagah*-ing God's word this week. See if speaking the word aloud changes your interaction with God and prayer.
- ✦ Draw a picture of the kind of tree that symbolizes what you'd like to be in your faith life. Take a picture of it and set it as the lock screen on your phone. Go for a walk, find the tree in real life, and place a small stick from it in your pocket for this week. Whenever you see that image on your phone or touch the stick in your pocket, ask God to transform your faith into just such a tree.
- ✦ Remember, the Psalms were both musical and communal. Find a musical version of Psalm 1 (or any psalm). Go for a walk and listen to that song as part of your prayer time this week. Invite a friend or family member to join you, if you would like.
- ✦ If you enjoy doing yoga, flow through your moves with the image of yourself as a tree of faith.



Martin Luther playing the lute while singing psalms with his family (circa 16th century). Vintage etching circa 19th century.

- ✦ Note the very first word of the book of Psalms: “Happy.” What do you think it means that the Psalter begins with this emphasis on happiness?
- ✦ Read more from the Psalms. Feel free to pick and choose from this list or read one passage a day.
 - ♦ Psalm 150
 - ♦ Psalm 92
 - ♦ Psalm 13
 - ♦ Psalm 121
 - ♦ Psalm 100
 - ♦ Psalm 89
 - ♦ Psalm 103
- ✦ Take a few moments to think and wonder about what you experienced in this session. Here are a few prompts you might use to reflect or journal.
 - ♦ When are times in your life when you feel you have the faith of a tree? When do you feel more like chaff?
 - ♦ Think about the people around you and the situations you are in on a regular basis. Who and what make you feel like a flourishing tree? And who and what make you feel like chaff?
 - ♦ Martin Luther wrote that the book of Psalms “might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that

is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book” (LW 35:254). Write about something you have learned from this “little Bible”—the Psalms—today.

LOOKING AHEAD

The Psalms may not rhyme, but they are poetry. What is one of your favorite poems or song lyrics? Bring a copy of it to the next session and be willing to share why it is meaningful to you.

