

**Going Deeper in Prayer and Praise
with the Psalms**

**(15 Weeks, 13 Meetings)
May 30—September 11, 2021**

**SMALL GROUP PACKET
Into the Deep Water with Christ**

HEALTHY SMALL GROUPS

(Please review the following regularly together as a group)

GUIDELINES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR “DEEP WATER” SMALL GROUPS

- Try to keep your group size from two to six people. The larger the group, the more time it will take at each meeting for everyone to participate and share actively.
- Try to meet together once a week, on average.
- Meet in a place that is conducive to listening and speaking. Loud, crowded restaurants, for example, will probably not work too well.
- Everyone should bring a bible, a pen, and this packet to each of their small group meetings.
- This packet, focusing on the Psalms, has enough material to cover 13 weeks’ worth of meetings. On September 11, 2021, a new packet of materials will become available for the next part of our “deeper water” journey.
- **Buffer weeks:** We are adding *two additional weeks* to this session, so that **you have 15 weeks in which to cover 13 weeks’ worth of materials.** Your group can use these extra two weeks to 1) catch up if your group has to miss a weekly meeting or two, or 2) If your discussions go long on some weeks, you can use the extra time to spread things out and/or backtrack as necessary.
- While it is not a requirement, we recommend that men partner with men, and women partner with women.
- You do not need to designate any particular person in your group to be a facilitator or leader. Just follow the materials together and agree on a time limit to your meetings.
- Allow extended silences to happen during your small group discussions. The bible is a challenging book and the Word can sometimes shake our thoughts up at first before bringing them around towards Christ. Silence allows time for the Spirit to give us speech.
- While you are discussing with your group, always jot down thoughts that the group shares.
- It is likely that you will encounter different Bible translations within your group. If the group feels this is an obstacle to understanding or discussion, discuss the possibility of procuring bibles of the same translation for everyone. The New Revised Standard Version, which St. John’s uses at worship, is an example of a well-balanced, readable and accurate translation. Call Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) if you need any help or guidance regarding Bible translations.
- On **September 11th**, we will start a new topic in our Deep Water journey. Every time we begin a new topic (about every two-three months), small groups and partnerships can reconfigure themselves as necessary. As you approach the end of each topic, please talk intentionally about how and whether your group will continue into the next topic together intact, or what changes you need to make based on your personal schedules, etc. While we encourage everyone to plug in to as much of our deep water journey as possible through the next few years, we also understand that some of us will need to drop out and rejoin at various points in the journey.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PRINCIPLE TO OBSERVE IN YOUR SMALL GROUP: CONFIDENTIALITY

Keeping things confidential is vital to establishing trust and open communication with your partner or small group. Be sure to acknowledge this rule clearly with each other at the beginning of your journey together, and regularly over the course of the following weeks. What is said in your small group should stay in your small group!

REMEMBER: PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT MEMBERS OF ST. JOHN'S ARE WELCOME TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS JOURNEY!

We encourage you to invite non-members to participate. Think of a friend with whom you'd like to take this journey, and invite them to jump in.

IF YOU LOSE YOUR PACKET, OR NEED MORE PACKETS

Hard copies are available in the church office, in the display in the Link (breezeway) at church, or from one of the pastors. You can download a packet from our St. John's website:

<https://www.stjohnsgc.org> If you have a printer, you can request an electronic copy of the packet by email: SJersild@stjohnsgc.org Just remember, the packets can be over 40 pages long!

IF YOUR SMALL GROUP IS STRUGGLING OR DISSOLVES

Call Pastor Seth at 217.255.2118 if you need help or have special concerns.

SMALL GROUP INFORMATION

(Names, phone, email etc.)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)

Going Deeper in Praise and Worship with the Psalms

WEEK #1 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: May 30—June 5

1. Confirm as a group what your time limit is going to be. Over time, each group will develop a natural feel for what kind of pace they need to maintain in order to fit everyone's schedules.
2. Please review the material under the heading "Healthy Small Groups" together, above.
3. Emphasize together the crucial importance of keeping what you share in this group confidential. Also, make sure you have each others' phone numbers, email addresses, and etc. for communication purposes.
4. Please note our practice of adding **buffer weeks** for each topic (from the "Healthy Small Groups" section, above). Remember, you will have 15 weeks in which to cover 13 weeks' worth of meetings.

5. OPENING PRAYER

- Designate someone to pray the prayer in italics, below. Always feel free to improvise as the Spirit moves you. You can use the written prayer loosely, as a model. Special intercessions can be added.

Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us together to study the Psalms and to grow in our appreciation of your powerful Word. Thank you for sending Jesus into our lives for our salvation, and for the new life and power that you pour into us through the Holy Spirit. Protect, heal, and uphold all those for whom we have special concerns today. Give us courage to go into deeper water in order to be more effective witnesses to Christ. We pray in his name. Amen.

6. Spend about 5 minutes having everyone share high points and low points from the last several days.
7. Have someone in your group read the following aloud (or better yet, break it up among different readers):

For the next 13 weeks, we'll be discussing selected Psalms from the Bible. The Psalms are a beautiful treasury of prayer, worship, praise and wisdom from ancient Israel. Originally, most of them were set to music. The ancient Israelites probably used the Psalms much as we do hymns today in our worship services. Indeed, we can think of the Psalms as Israel's "hymn book."

Much as the hymns in our current "Evangelical Lutheran Worship" hymnal originated from a variety of times and places, and were created by many different lyricists and composers, the Psalms are a broad collection of pieces from different times and circumstances in Israel's history. We no longer know the ancient melodies used for particular Psalms, and in most cases we don't

know who wrote the lyrics (although later collectors attributed many of them to King David). But we have a good idea of how certain Psalms spoke to particular occasions in Israel's life. For example, many psalms were specially composed for people to sing while on pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem (we call these "Songs of Ascent"). Other psalms were clearly used specifically at the coronation of a new king ("Royal Psalms"), and etc. Still others were used to commemorate times of national catastrophe and sorrow. The point here is, the Psalms are not just good individual prayers; they were used by the worshiping community in Israel in a liturgical, public way.

The wonderful thing about the Psalms is that they have a way of speaking to us immediately, on a gut level. Unlike other parts of scripture, where we often need to dig into a bigger story, learn a few theological ideas, and know some background history to really connect with what the author is saying in particular passages, we can pick up any psalm and almost always quickly identify with the thoughts and emotions. It is as if the author is right here with us. With most of the Psalms, we can immediately say "yes—this is how I've personally felt before. Yes—I've experienced this in my own life." If you open the Bible, close your eyes, and drop your finger on a Psalm, you will almost always immediately be able to relate to what you read. This would not be the case with some of the other books.

The Psalms help us worship God and bring our sorrows and challenges to him with complete honesty. They teach us how to speak to God and how to stand humbly (but boldly) in his living presence on a daily basis. They are truly cries from the heart. They provide us with an endless supply of vivid images, through which we can make powerful connections between God's life and ours. Most importantly, the Psalms witness to the God of Israel, who not only is the transcendent master of the universe and ruler of history, but who also cares infinitely about each one of us, intervenes personally in our lives, forgives our wrongs, and shows tender mercy to sinners. It's worth mentioning that Jesus regularly quotes Psalms in the gospels, and indeed, the Psalms faithfully point us to the Savior "who was, who is, and who is to come."

8. As a group, read **Psalm 1** (below) aloud responsively. Designate one person to be the leader who reads the regular print, while the rest of the group reads the bold print.

PSALM 1

¹ Happy 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;
² **but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law they meditate day and night.**
³ 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.

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.

9. Someone please read the following, aloud:

In Psalm 1, the psalmist contrasts two ways of life, the one characterized by sin, weakness, transience and impermanence; and the other by obedience to the law of the Lord, health, growth and long-lasting strength.

*The psalmist affirms that we are always being influenced by (and conforming ourselves to) **examples outside of ourselves**: we can follow in the way of the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers, or we can be shaped by God's Word. It's not like we invent ourselves and our own "lifestyle." Whether we think so or not, we are always following basic paths that are in place already, long before we arrive on the scene. Note how the psalmist emphasizes that we are "following the advice," "taking the path," or "sitting in the seat" of others. Or, we are "meditating" on the law of the Lord (which is also something outside of ourselves). In short, you might say that **our lives are shaped by the company we keep**. In what direction are we looking to find guidance and direction? To whom are we listening? On what (or who) are we modeling our lives?*

Have another person read: *In verse one, the Hebrew word for "wicked" usually refers to a person who has been publicly judged for a particular transgression against God's law. The word "sinners" refers more generally to a state of existence that is constantly set against God's will. A sinner regularly goes against God's will because it's become a deeply ingrained way of life. "Scoffers" are those who have gone beyond sinful living and who **actively express** disdain for right living and seek to belittle and undermine those who want to be righteous. You might say, a scoffer is a person who publicly preaches against any sense of solid morality or goodness, ridiculing the notion of God's law.*

10. In light of the above, discuss the following as a group:

- Have you ever regretted taking advice from someone, or following their recommendations? Without naming names, describe the situation and its outcome.
- What are some of the *general* traits of people from whom you *avoid* taking advice?
- In whose advice, right now, could you place your trust? What makes them trustworthy in your eyes?
- Respond to the idea that "we are shaped by the company we keep." How has this been true in your experience? Think of different areas of life where you have seen this truth borne out: e.g. youth, politics, religion, media, social groupings, etc.
- Think of examples you have seen of people taking a generally sinful path in life, where their behavior seems to go against what you understand to be God's will on a regular basis. Without naming names, describe their life, and what you see as their values, their apparent beliefs/convictions.

- Where in the world right now do you see “scoffers”: People who seem to delight in tearing down the notion that there is an objective way of truth, goodness and beauty that we are called to follow in this world? What, generally, are the results of their activities?

11. Someone please read the following aloud:

*In contrast to the wicked, sinners, and scoffers, the psalmist introduces those whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.” Note: the **law** here does not just refer to God’s law given explicitly in the first five books of the Bible, but also to the Jewish wisdom tradition that grew out of the law and whose teachings were based on it—wisdom we can see throughout the Psalms themselves, and in books like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, etc. So, the psalmist is referring to a broad swath of scripture when he talks about meditating on God’s law.*

Jewish wisdom literature (e.g. Proverbs) strongly held that by following God’s law, a person would receive blessings, joy and happiness in this world. Psalm 1 definitely upholds this view of an orderly creation where one path leads to blessings, the other to chaos and dissolution.

By “meditation” on the law of the Lord, the psalmist means regular immersion in scripture. The Hebrew word translated as “meditation” here, in fact, refers to a common practice among ancient Jews to read scripture aloud in a low, slow, murmuring voice. Such constant meditation does not just speak to the rational thinking part of our brains, but involves the whole person. Meditating on God’s Word is more than thinking about it as a subject; it’s more like ingesting it so that it becomes part of our basic identity. We can think of it as “eating” God’s Word. One of the great gifts of scripture is that through it, the Holy Spirit plants our feet on the path of life, and diverts our attention away from the many other voices that are clamoring for our attention.

12. Respond to the following as a group:

- How do you understand believers as “trees planted by *streams of water*?” How does this image describe your life as a believer?
- The image is not of a lucky oak whose acorn happened by chance to fall on a good patch of soil, but rather that *we have been purposely planted* in a good place (as by a master gardener). You might say that through God’s Word, we live in a carefully prepared, botanical garden where we are cared for and tended regularly. How do you relate this to our lives as believers?
- How do you understand the difference between a life of “trying to plant ourselves,” and “God planting us?”
- What kind of *fruit* comes from those who meditate and abide in God’s Word?
- Describe how meditation on scripture has served to “plant” you and give you solidity and a sense of permanence at different times in your life.
- What do you think of the psalm’s description of the wicked as being like “chaff” that blows away in the wind? What is it about a life of sin that ultimately leads to unrootedness, impermanence, shallowness, and ultimately death?
- Have you ever witnessed or heard of situations in which a faithless or wicked people seem to thrive and faithful, honest people get bulldozed? If so, how do you relate what this psalm is saying to those kinds of situations?

- Have someone read **John 4:11-15**. How do you relate what Psalm 1 says about trees planted by water and the “living water” that Jesus offers the woman at the well?

13. Discuss the following as a group:

- In what ways does Psalm 1 serve as a good preface for the *whole book* of Psalms? What does it tell us about the Psalms and their value to us?

14. In turn, without going into too much depth about each situation, share one or two specific issues that you would like your partner(s) to pray about for you this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.

15. Remind each other that there’s homework to do (below) before each group meeting. The homework material provides the substance for each group meeting. Confirm the time and place of your next gathering. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.

16. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer. Include a prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide your group and fill you with confidence and determination as you get started on this journey together.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (2nd) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Almighty God, I thank you for sending Jesus into this world and into my life, so that I can know you and love you, through him, as my Heavenly Father. Speak to me now as I study your holy Word. Give me courage and faith to go deeper in my discipleship for you, that I may glorify you in all that I do. Use me as an instrument of your Holy Spirit to draw the people around me into your loving presence. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 27**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

PSALM 27

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?

**The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?**

² When evildoers assail me
to devour my flesh—

**my adversaries and foes—
they shall stumble and fall.**

³ Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
**though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident.**

⁴ One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
**to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,**
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

⁵ For he will hide me in his shelter
in the day of trouble;
**he will conceal me under the cover of his tent;
he will set me high on a rock.**

⁶ Now my head is lifted up
above my enemies all around me,
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

⁷ Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!

⁸ “Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!”
Your face, LORD, do I seek.

⁹ **Do not hide your face from me.**

Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
**Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation!**

¹⁰ If my father and mother forsake me,
the LORD will take me up.

¹¹ Teach me your way, O LORD,
and lead me on a level path
because of my enemies.

¹² **Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they are breathing out violence.**

¹³ I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD
in the land of the living.

¹⁴ Wait for the LORD;
be strong, and let your heart take courage;
wait for the LORD!

3. Below, identify the one verse from Psalm 27 that stands out for you more than any other, and share why you think it does.

4. In the space below, identify specific verses in which, on the one hand, the psalmist a) expresses confidence in God and, on the other hand, b) cries out to God in fear that God might “turn away” from the psalmist.

--CONFIDENCE

--FEAR

5. In **Mark 9:23-25** Jesus is speaking with the father of a deaf child who expresses both faith and doubt at the same time: *Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, “Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!”* How, in your own words, can faith and doubt sometimes exist in tension in our hearts at the same time? Have you personally ever felt this way? If so, describe the situation(s).

6. In the first three verses of Psalm 27, the psalmist expresses supreme confidence in God while being surrounded by adversaries. What about *God* makes him confident in the face of threats?

7. Here, as with many other scriptural authors, the psalmist calls God his “light.” What is it about darkness that has always inspired fear in human beings? Try to remember a time when being in a dark place frightened you. Describe it. How do you understand God as “light?”

8. The psalmist calls God his “stronghold.” In what other kinds of (worldly) strongholds might we sometimes seek shelter, in this life? How does our relationship with God offer us a different kind of security than those other, worldly strongholds?

9. When it comes to conflict with adversaries and enemies, our first response is often to obsess over our response and think about ways we can beat them. Describe a situation where you might have been caught up with the desire to defeat or destroy someone who threatened you or hurt you. How did it turn out over time? How might taking refuge in God as our stronghold change the way we look at and respond to adversaries and threats?

10. Have you had an experience where you were living under extreme stress or threat, but your faith in God gave you confidence like the psalmist expresses in the first three verses? If so, share it.

11. Verses 4-6 express the psalmist's intense desire to be in the direct, protecting presence of God. Notice how, in these verses, images of *public worship* (in the temple) enter into the poetry: for example the psalmist will "seek to live in the house of the Lord," "inquire into the Lord's temple," "be sheltered and concealed under the Lord's tent [*tabernacle/temple*]," and will "offer sacrifices in his tent," etc. In short, when seeking God's presence, it's not just an individual trying to get close to God by himself, but a person who is actively engaging in *communal worship*. In what ways (if you can think of any) has involvement with God's people (the Church) helped you, supported you, and kept you in God's protective presence in times of trial?

12. In verses 7-11 the psalmist cries to God, asking him to not turn his face from him. Describe a time in which you felt that God was absent, distant, or "turned away" from you. What were the circumstances? How do you understand what is going on in your relationship with God during those "empty" times? This will be a good thing to discuss with your small group.

13. C.S. Lewis in various writings described our relationship with God as life washing over and through us like waves on the ocean. Since we will always be small, finite creatures who can only experience one thing at a time, we will always experience life as a kind of procession of waves where times of "fullness" (the wave itself) alternate with times of "waiting" (the trough between waves). In heaven, we will experience the trough times for what they are—simply a time of exciting anticipation where we are eagerly *waiting* to receive the next surprise, the next gift, the next beauty, that God is sending our way. The waiting only makes the next surprise better! However, as broken sinners on earth, we experience those same "trough" times as the *absence of God*, where we are thrown into doubt and fear about the future. Can you apply these ideas to anything you've experienced in your life?

14. How does your faith in Jesus help you embrace verse 13 of this psalm?

15. The psalmist emphasizes the importance of *waiting on the Lord* by telling us to wait for him **twice** in the final verse. Below, talk about a time when waiting for something was particularly hard for you. What can make "waiting" so difficult for us? How is waiting directly related to faith?

16. Below, talk about a time when being impatient got you into trouble—you might think of a very small incident when you did a job too fast, for example, or it might have been a life-changing experience. In any case, talk about how impatience can often be a sign of our fear-

filled need to have things our way, in our time (a manifestation of our fear of being out of control).

17. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

Going Deeper in Praise and Worship with the Psalms
WEEK #2 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: June 6-12

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Heavenly Father, we thank you for bringing us together today to study your Word and to support each other in our walk of faith. Help us to listen to each other with open hearts and minds. We thank you for the new life and forgiveness you have given us in Christ, and we pray that you will remove all fear from our hearts as we follow your call to let go of our old lives, that we may live for you alone. In Jesus' name, Amen.
3. Please go back to the homework you all did for this session, starting on **page 8**. Discuss the material as a group. When you come to the end of the material, read the assigned psalm one more time out loud together, responsively (as you did at the beginning of your discussion). After you finish, return here and continue with item #4, below.
4. In turn, without going into too much depth about each situation, share one or two specific issues that you would like your partner(s) to pray about for you this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have one person volunteer to pray for the group. Try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer. Include a prayer for the power of the Holy Spirit to guide your group and fill you with confidence and determination as you continue this journey together.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (3rd) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free spirit. Make me an agent of your love towards all. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 8**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

PSALM 8

¹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

You have set your glory above the heavens.
² **Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.**

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
⁴ **what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?**

⁵ Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
⁷ all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
⁸ **the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.**

⁹ O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

3. The psalm begins and ends with the same shout of praise: “O Lord, our Sovereign / how majestic is your name in all the earth!” The Hebrew word translated as “Lord” throughout scripture, usually written in small capital letters, is YHWH (correctly pronounced *Yah'-weh* when the vowels are added). The name “Yahweh” is first given in Exodus 3:14, where God reveals himself to Moses at the burning bush. It can be translated as “**I am who I am,**” and also as “**I am who I will be.**” The fact that God identifies himself in this way is his way of telling us that we will only be able to grasp him through *what he chooses to show us*.

We know that God overflows all our attempts to “catch” him and “hold” him with language, images, or ideas. We know likewise that we cannot control God’s responses to us by the works we do. At the same time, God graciously gives us his NAME (verses 1 and 9). In other words, even though we can’t hold or control God, we *can* know him personally and call upon his name. In a sense, by giving us his name, God makes himself “our size” so that we can relate to him personally (through *faith*), just like we use personal names in our human relationships.

In scripture, God gives us his name and shows us what we need to know about him. For instance, from scripture we ultimately know that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We know that God is a personal God who loves each of us individually. We know he has a plan for the world that will end in beauty, wholeness and triumph. From scripture we learn that he is good, and that there are no other gods. More than any other “character trait,” God shows himself in scripture as our Savior. The NAME of God tends to refer to God *as he chooses to reveal himself*, on his terms. The Name (particularly Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) tells us a lot about him. We can’t “hold” him, but he gives us everything about himself that we need to know.

- What kind of name(s) might you give yourself (good and bad) if your name truly reflected who you are, both in your brokenness and in your strength? Make a list below.
- What kind of person do you wish you could be, or know you should be? What’s the difference between the names you might give yourself and the names you *wish* you had?
- What’s the name God puts on you in your baptism, and what does this mean to you?

4. In verse 1b, the psalmist proclaims, “You have set your glory above the heavens.” This phrase sets the vast, unknowable transcendence of God’s power in contrast with the power of human beings, who are, in comparison, completely dependent “babes and infants.” Nevertheless, in verse 2, the psalmist amazingly states that God establishes his power on earth (“you have founded a bulwark”) through the “mouths of babes and infants”! It is a surprising connection, where God shows forth his almighty power on earth through the proclamation of weak, dependent human beings. Respond to the points below:

- When have you felt most vulnerable in life? Most dependent? How do you see God working in people’s weakness and dependence to show forth his strength and glory?
- Have you ever understood God working through *your* weaknesses to reach others with his grace, forgiveness and love? Another way of putting it: Has God ever worked through your wounds to reach other people who have been wounded in the same ways you have?

- How do you understand this: the difference between trying to constantly cover over our weaknesses, rather than exposing them to God’s light and using them to his glory? Have you experienced this dynamic/struggle in your own life as a believer? Describe it below.

5. When you think of the “the enemy and the avenger” who is silenced in v.2b, what comes to your mind?

6. Verse 3 calls to mind Abraham looking up to the stars in Genesis 15.

- Describe a time when something you witnessed or gazed upon in creation gave you an especially powerful sense of God’s presence and power. Try to articulate the feelings and thoughts you had. What did the experience tell you about God?
- Obviously the psalm present God as a kind of master artist who produces vast, beautiful, orderly works effortlessly, with an easy turn of his “fingers.” In what ways does our faith in God lead to such different *moral* conclusions about the universe than, say, an unbeliever who sees everything in the world as a product of mindless chance?

7. In verse 4, in light of the vastness of the universe, the psalmist acknowledges the smallness and the apparent insignificance of human beings: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, / mortals that you care for them?”

- In other ancient near-eastern polytheistic religions (prior to and contemporary with Israel), the gods were pictured basically as powerful, immortal super-humans who were selfish and deeply flawed. We see this in Greek and Roman mythology as well. One pagan myth described the creation of human beings in the following way: Some higher gods were forcing less powerful gods to do all their work. When the lower “grunt” gods complained about it, the higher gods created—you guessed it—*humans* to do the work instead! In the space below, talk about how a person who does not know the God of the Psalms (Israel’s God) might very well come to the conclusion (from their experience of life) that human beings are indeed insignificant and expendable creatures.
- How does verse 4 give us an honest and helpful, humbling perspective on ourselves as human beings? How does it help us see the contrast between what we really are, and what we often worry about, complain about, aspire to, and concern ourselves so passionately with, each day?
- Read **Ecclesiastes 1:4** and **1:11**, and talk about these thoughts as they relate to verse 4 of the psalm.

- Jesus regularly called himself the “Son of Man.” By doing so, he is purposely emphasizing his humanity—his smallness, vulnerability, mortality, and dependence. How do you understand this amazing fact in light of verse 4?

8. A sudden shift takes place in verses 5-8: the real source of the psalmist’s wonder is that God has given seemingly “insignificant” human beings such a *lofty, exalted* position in the universe! These verses hark back to Genesis 1 and 2.

- Read Genesis 1:26-28 and make connections with verses 5-8 of the psalm.
- What does it mean to you that you are created “in God’s image?”
- We know that we are completely dependent upon God as creatures, but we have a special role to *represent* and *show forth* God in creation. In your own words, how do you understand this role God has given us? How do we “bear the image of God” in the world (or not)?
- What does the psalm tell us about human responsibility? How are we stewards, not owners?
- Does God need us? If so, what does he need us for? If not, why does he call us into this world?
- How does this psalm put things in perspective for you?
- How does this psalm speak to you in terms of the “goal” or “purpose” of humanity?

9. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS

WEEK #3 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: June 13-19

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Lord God, we give you thanks for all the gifts you have given us in this life: our family, friendships, and the beauty of your creation. Most of all, we thank you for sending Jesus into the world to save us from the powers that seek to enslave us. Lift us up, Lord God, and set us free by

the blood of Christ to live our lives in joy and confidence as your sons and daughters. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen

3. Go back to your homework for last week, beginning on **page 12**. As a group, please discuss your responses to the material. When you reach the end of your discussion, recite Psalm 8 once again aloud with your group, responsively. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, pray a “popcorn” prayer. Go around the room, and have everyone offer a brief word of thanks and/or praise to God. As is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (4th) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.
Heavenly Father, I thank you for you for the gifts, talents and abilities that you have given me, and I pray for a spirit of discernment, that I might continue to find ways that I can best serve you and build up your holy Church on earth. Bless the work of your people throughout the world, and make us strong in our witness to you, so that people may be drawn to Christ and find eternal life in him. In Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 19**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

PSALM 19

- ¹ The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
- ² Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
- ³ There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
- ⁴ **yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.**

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
 and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

**⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
 and its circuit to the end of them;
 and nothing is hid from its heat.**

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
 reviving the soul;

**the decrees of the LORD are sure,
 making wise the simple;**

⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
 rejoicing the heart;

**the commandment of the LORD is clear,
 enlightening the eyes;**

⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure,
 enduring forever;

**the ordinances of the LORD are true
 and righteous altogether.**

¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
 even much fine gold;

**sweeter also than honey,
 and drippings of the honeycomb.**

¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

¹² But who can detect their errors?
Clear me from hidden faults.

¹³ Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
 do not let them have dominion over me.

**Then I shall be blameless,
 and innocent of great transgression.**

¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
 be acceptable to you,

O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

3. In verses 1-4a, the created universe stands as a living witness to God's glory and goodness. Even though the created world does not speak with human language, it points us towards the order, harmony, goodness and balance which God has brought to his creation in order for life to flourish. Think of a time when your experience of a natural phenomenon (e.g. a landscape, or a natural event) powerfully conveyed the presence and power of God to you. Write about it below.

4. Read **Romans 1:18-23**. How does Paul use the idea that we can see God's character reflected in creation to make the point that no human beings anywhere (whether or not they've been given

the 10 commandments, the Bible, or heard about Jesus, etc.) have any excuse for failing to at least recognize a divinely ordained, moral order in the universe? How do you understand these ideas?

5. In verses 4b-6, the sun is used as a metaphor for God, who not only has created all this goodness but who shows himself as a kind of “groom” coming out of his “canopy” for the marriage celebration. Along with the marriage imagery, these rich verses also emphasize how nothing in creation escapes God’s gaze and mention the “heat.” In your own words, describe the overall impression of God’s character and nature that these verses evoke in you.

6. Beginning in verse 7, the focus suddenly shifts to the perfection of God’s **law**. By law, the psalmist is referring to the revealed law of Moses, starting with the Ten Commandments and all the subsequent commands, rules and ordinances that grow out of the ten. Also, as was taught in the material from your first small group meeting, the psalmist is thinking of law in a very broad sense, like the wisdom that we find in books like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes (and the Psalms themselves).

The point here is that this psalm presents the *revealed law of the God of Israel* (which is given in human language) as God’s direct expression of the order which he built into the very foundations of the universe. In other words, when we go against God’s law, we go against life and creation itself. We can’t change the order of the universe. We can’t break God’s laws and win.

This is very important. Many people today believe that all law is basically the creation of powerful people who construct laws in such a way as to protect their position over and above others. In other words, law is not connected with any deeper *objective* order in the universe—it’s purely a political construction which certain human groups invent and modify for their own benefit. In the space below, talk about some of the societal ramifications that this currently popular belief might carry with it, and how it differs from our biblical understanding that there is, indeed, an order to the universe, and that the order was created by a God who loves each of us personally.

7. Think of a time when someone reprimanded you (perhaps a parent) for something you did. At first it might have been painful, and also difficult to admit that you made a mistake. Can you think of an instance in which you came to regard that incident where the “laying down of the law” ultimately had a positive, “reviving” effect on you (as verse 7 puts it)?

8. How, in your own words, can God’s law be thought of as a beautiful gift in the sense that the psalmist sees it—as something which gives us clarity and “enlightens our eyes?”

9. People today often immediately associate law as something restrictive and negative. The psalmist obviously does not. He says “*More to be desired are they [God’s ordinances] than*

gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.” How, in general, do you understand the psalmist’s clear and intense *love* for God’s law?

10. Think about, and write down your response to the following statement: “Our human response to rules and laws is deeply shaped by our perception of WHO IT IS who’s making the rules and laws.”

11. In ancient polytheistic religions (where people believed there were many gods), one of the big problems people faced was not knowing if they could trust any of the gods, who were always in competition with each other. Human beings saw themselves as pawns of the gods, who were always playing their own power games among themselves. You could not know when the rules of the game were going to change, and you never knew if anyone was going to have your back. In the space below, share your thoughts about a) how this psalm expresses a completely different view of God, and b) how ancient polytheistic religions might help us understand a lot of what we see happening in our culture today.

12. When the psalmist talks about “fear of the Lord” in verse 9, he is not talking about a paralyzing terror, but rather about the only possible appropriate human response to God: deep reverence and a sense of complete dependence. In the space below, express how you feel about this “fear of the Lord” that the psalmist is talking about. In what situations might “fear of the Lord” cross the line and become a paralyzing terror of God, which God does not want us to have (think, for example, of Martin Luther). On the other hand, what is it about today’s popular religion that often leads people to an inappropriate, almost total *lack of reverence* towards God?

13. How do you understand what the psalmist says in verse 11? How does the law warn us, and to what kind of rewards can following the law lead us?

14. Verse 12 is very interesting, because in it, the psalmist acknowledges (perhaps not as strongly as we Christians might be used to) that no matter how much we try to follow the law perfectly, we will always fall short, and our brokenness will remain hidden from view. In other words, there will always be a part of us that we can’t fix, because it’s simply beyond our ability to see, understand, and control. What does the psalmist ask for in this verse? How do you understand the verse, in your own words?

15. What does verse 13 tell us about the influence of others? What do you think of the psalmist’s assertions that he can achieve “blamelessness?” Is this possible? Is it just an ideal? A worthy goal? A command of God? Share your thoughts.

16. Make sure to preface your closing prayer today (as directed below) by saying **verse 14** from the Psalm aloud.

17. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS
WEEK #4 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: June 20-26

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Holy Spirit, direct us in all we do towards our Savior, Jesus Christ. Keep us deeply rooted and grounded in him, that we will serve him faithfully and give our lives generously to the work of his Church. Help us to love each other as the Father loves us, and guide us to new insights today as we study your Word together. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, beginning on **page 17**. As a group, please discuss your responses to the material. At the end of your discussion, once again recite aloud, with your group, Psalm 19, responsively. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, pray a "popcorn" prayer. If possible, hold hands. Go around the room, and everyone offer a brief word of thanks and/or praise to God. As is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (5TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer *aloud*; always feel free to add any petitions or thanks as you wish.
Lord God, lift me up, heal me, and renew me. Help me to give my life completely into your hands and to trust in your will for me. Be with (my small group partner[s]), help them to know your constant love for them. I thank you for all that we have been able to

share in our meetings. Help us to continue to lovingly uphold and support each other in this journey, and make us faithful to you in all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 32**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

PSALM 32

¹ Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

² **Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**

³ While I kept silence, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ **For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.**

⁵ Then I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not hide my iniquity;

**I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the guilt of my sin.**

⁶ Therefore let all who are faithful
offer prayer to you;

**at a time of distress the rush of mighty waters
shall not reach them.**

⁷ You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble;

you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹ **Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle,
else it will not stay near you.**

¹⁰ Many are the torments of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD.

¹¹ **Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**

3. This Psalm delves into the importance of (and the gift of) honest, total confession and repentance. What is your immediate impression of the first two verses? What are they saying about God? About human beings? About the relationship between God and human beings?

4. How, in your own words, do you understand the connection the Psalmist is making in verse 2 between divine forgiveness and a human soul “in which there is no deceit?”

5. In verses 3-5, the psalmist shares a gripping, personal example of silent guilt and struggle. What correspondence does he draw between “keeping silence” and “wasting away?” (v.3)

6. Have you ever had an experience where “keeping silent” about an issue added to your spiritual/mental/emotional—and perhaps also physical—misery? Describe the situation. What were the factors that led you personally to keep it to yourself?

7. What would you say are some general factors (there are many) that make human beings hide their problems, sins, guilts, shames, and worries? Why can “holding on” become a “torment?”

8. Describe a situation (if you can) where you experienced great relief in being able to “offload” your problems with someone you trusted.

9. Have you ever found yourself hanging on to guilt, shame, anger, or dark secrets out of a fearful reluctance to take action that you know you need to take? If not yourself, then have you seen someone do this? Describe the situation.

10. How does the psalmist describe God’s activity in relation to his silently holding on to his guilt in verse 4? How do you picture/understand what *God* is *trying* to do when the psalmist feels God’s hand “heavy upon him.”

11. Have you personally ever looked back and seen that what you had thought was God’s heavy hand on your life (where you saw everything as a fearful threat) was actually God trying to break through to you in his grace and love? If so, describe the situation/experience.

12. Do you think your faith in God has had an impact on your ability to see yourself clearly and honestly? In your experience, are believers in Christ generally more able to admit fault and ask for forgiveness than others?

13. Describe what you think is happening when we confess our sins in worship, and hear God’s promise of forgiveness.

14. Think about 1) being willing to confess in your heart (and admitting silently to yourself that you are in the wrong), and 2) actually telling someone out loud that you have done wrong. What different dynamics come into play once you “get it out in the open?” How might this relate to our faith in Christ, which always has both vertical (God/us) and horizontal (us/other people) dimensions?

15. Luther tried to reform the way the Church of his time practiced personal confession. In his day, confession was regarded as a requirement where the believer would list all his/her trespasses, and then the priest would instruct him/her how to do appropriate penance. It had become a mechanical process which falsely conveyed the idea that a person could pay for his/her sins if he/she made the right moves (works-righteousness). Private confession fell by the wayside in many protestant churches; however, Luther always championed personal confession as a gift. He always had a confessor—a person who would listen to his confession in confidence. How, in your view, is our ability to confess our sins in front of our merciful Savior a healthy, life-affirming gift? Do you feel you have reliable venues, in your own life, where you can confess your sins in a personal way, in the name of Jesus?

16. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God’s continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS
WEEK #5 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: June 27—July 3

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.

2. Have someone in your group say the following prayer out loud (feel free to add petitions as you wish):

Come Holy Spirit, make God’s Word known to us. Make us desire the truth in all that we do and always bring us home to the source of all truth, our Savior Jesus Christ. Open our hearts and minds to your guidance today as we discuss the sacred scriptures and share this time together. Give us joy in our fellowship, and set us free from our fears, that we may welcome others into the peace of your presence with the graciousness with which you have welcomed us into eternal life with you. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on **page 21**. As a group, review the material and discuss your responses to the material. At the end of your discussion, once again as a group recite the Psalm from the homework aloud, responsively. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.

4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, pray a “popcorn” prayer. Go around the room, and everyone offer a brief word of thanks and/or praise to God. As is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (6TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer aloud; add any petitions or thanks as you wish.
Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for all your gifts to us. Help us each day to grow more fully into the image of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When we stumble and make mistakes, lift us up and fill us with a sense of your forgiveness. When our hearts are cold and we are filled with frustrations, give us your peace. Keep us focused on you in all that we do. In Jesus' name. Amen.
2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 37**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

PSALM 37

- ¹ Do not fret because of the wicked;
do not be envious of wrongdoers,
- ² **for they will soon fade like the grass,
and wither like the green herb.**
- ³ Trust in the LORD, and do good;
so you will live in the land, and enjoy security.
- ⁴ **Take delight in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.**
- ⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.
- ⁶ **He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.**
- ⁷ Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
**do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices.**

⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.

Do not fret—it leads only to evil.

⁹ **For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.**

¹⁰ Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.

¹¹ **But the meek shall inherit the land,
and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.**

¹² The wicked plot against the righteous,
and gnash their teeth at them;

¹³ **but the LORD laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that their day is coming.**

¹⁴ The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy,
to kill those who walk uprightly;

¹⁵ **their sword shall enter their own heart,
and their bows shall be broken.**

¹⁶ Better is a little that the righteous person has
than the abundance of many wicked.

¹⁷ **For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.**

¹⁸ The LORD knows the days of the blameless,
and their heritage will abide forever;

¹⁹ **they are not put to shame in evil times,
in the days of famine they have abundance.**

²⁰ But the wicked perish,
and the enemies of the LORD are like the glory of the pastures;
they vanish—like smoke they vanish away.

²¹ The wicked borrow, and do not pay back,
but the righteous are generous and keep giving;

²² for those blessed by the LORD shall inherit the land,
but those cursed by him shall be cut off.

²³ Our steps are made firm by the LORD,
when he delights in our way;

²⁴ **though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong,
for the LORD holds us by the hand.**

²⁵ I have been young, and now am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.

²⁶ **They are ever giving liberally and lending,
and their children become a blessing.**

²⁷ Depart from evil, and do good;
so you shall abide forever.

²⁸ **For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his faithful ones.**

The righteous shall be kept safe forever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

²⁹ **The righteous shall inherit the land,
and live in it forever.**

³⁰ The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak justice.

³¹ **The law of their God is in their hearts;
their steps do not slip.**

³² The wicked watch for the righteous,
and seek to kill them.

³³ **The LORD will not abandon them to their power,
or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.**

³⁴ Wait for the LORD, and keep to his way,
and he will exalt you to inherit the land;
you will look on the destruction of the wicked.

³⁵ I have seen the wicked oppressing,
and towering like a cedar of Lebanon.

³⁶ **Again I passed by, and they were no more;
though I sought them, they could not be found.**

³⁷ Mark the blameless, and behold the upright,
for there is posterity for the peaceable.

³⁸ **But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;
the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off.**

³⁹ The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.

⁴⁰ **The LORD helps them and rescues them;
he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.**

3. In what respect does this psalm consistently echo the basic theme of Psalm 1 (review Psalm 1)?

4. Think of times when you have felt envious of other people. What were the circumstances? What did you perceive they had, that you did not have? Do particular *types* of people make you consistently envious or jealous (in other words, have you seen a pattern in yourself)?

5. If applicable, is there one particular person in your life, right now, who is causing you to *fret*? Without naming names, talk about the situation. What about them is bothering/worrying/bugging/tormenting you? How might this psalm speak to the situation? Do you think you can pray to God for this person's well-being right now? If you can, do so, and write down how it goes.

6. Have you ever experienced the truth of verse 4: "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart"? How do you understand the relationship between a) a peaceful, healthy relationship with God, and b) blessings flowing to you? Is it always a simple connection between the two?

7. How do you understand verse 5? How does it express a basic biblical truth, and how is it at the same time so challenging?

8. Meditate on verses 10-11. Have you seen these verses play out in your life, or in history? What is challenging about these verses?

9. Verses 21-22 and verses 25-26 talk about *giving* as a basic characteristic of the righteous. What two kinds of life are placed in opposition in these verses? What do they tell us about God? About human beings? About the relationship between human beings and God?

10. The psalm repeatedly talks about God's promise that the faithful/humble/meek will "inherit the land." Can you think of specific times when God's promise to you in Jesus, that you will "inherit the land" (have everlasting life), been especially powerful, comforting, and helpful to you? What were the circumstances?

11. The psalm paints a consistent picture of the differences between the wicked and the upright. If you were to generalize, on what kinds of things (according to the psalm) are the wicked constantly focused? What types of things are they most concerned about? On what are the righteous consistently focused?

12. In the spirit of going deeper, make a prayer plan this week where you consistently pray for a particular person who is troubling you or about whom you are worried. It may be a co-worker, a boss, a family member, etc. Write their name down and put it in a spot where you will see it daily. Pray positively for them. Try to remove yourself from the picture altogether and, as challenging as it may be, pray only for their health, happiness, wholeness, success and blessing. You will revisit this next week.

13. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God's continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS

WEEK #6 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: July 4-10

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Lord, please give us your wisdom now as we approach your word. Help us to discern your will for us, and open our hearts to hear your voice speaking to us through the scriptures. Help us not rely on our own understanding. Thank you God for the clarity, encouragement and hope your Word brings. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on **page 25**. As a group, discuss your responses to the material. Then, recite the psalm once again out loud as a group, responsively. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number 4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, do a "popcorn prayer." Hold hands and go around the group. Each person says a brief prayer. Then, everyone join in the Lord's Prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (7TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish.

Lord, I come into your presence today to learn, to grow and to change. Help me to move into a deeper understanding of your truth. I lay my life down before you and ask that you will guide me into your paths. Fill me with your Spirit and open my heart and mind to your Word of truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 51**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 51

To the leader. A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.

¹ Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

² **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.**

³ For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

⁴ **Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,**
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵ **Indeed, I was born guilty,**
a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶ **You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.**

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ **Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.**

⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ **Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.**

¹¹ Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹² **Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.**

¹³ Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴ **Deliver me from bloodshed, O God,
O God of my salvation,
and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.**

¹⁵ O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶ **For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.**

¹⁷ The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸ Do good to Zion in your good pleasure;
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

¹⁹ **then you will delight in right sacrifices,
in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.**

3. This psalm is attributed to David, who composed it after the prophet Nathan confronted him about his sinful behavior with Bathsheba. Take time to read **2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12**. How does the story of David, Uriah, Bathsheba and the prophet Nathan cast light on the psalm's content?

4. David cries out for God's forgiveness in the psalm; yet in 2 Samuel, we know that the infant son born to David and Bathsheba ultimately dies. 2 Samuel makes a direct "consequences" connection between David's sin of killing Uriah, and the sad death of David's little boy. Indeed, after this chapter, David faces a dangerous challenge to his power from his other (grown) son Absalom. So it seems like David's sin with Bathsheba leads to all kinds of subsequent damage and pain in his own family. How do you understand the relationship here between God's forgiveness, and the real worldly cost of David's actions? In other words, it appears that the death of David and Bathsheba's infant son is "justice" (the worldly consequences still play out...what goes around still comes around). So how do we understand the interplay between divine *forgiveness* and divine *justice* here? This is not an easy question with a cut-and-dry answer. It's worthwhile to spend some time thinking about and discussing it.

5. Related to the above: if I as a Christian cause a lot of damage to someone else, how does God's forgiveness manifest itself and become *real* in my life, and what does God's forgiveness mean for my subsequent actions towards my neighbor?

6. The psalmist appeals to God: "according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy." Obviously David depends on what he knows about God's basic character—his forgiving nature, and his goodness—here. David appeals to God not on the basis of David's

own character (which is obviously sketchy in view of what he's done), but on the basis of *God's* character. By what means do you think David has come to this knowledge of God? How do *you* and *I* know God's character?

7. We know that David has sinned appallingly against Uriah and Uriah's family. Nevertheless, David in the psalm says: "Against you [God], you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment." Why is it so striking (and important) that David ultimately recognizes that his sin is directly against **God**? Do you think that our recognition, as believers in Christ, that our sins are not just against a bunch of people, but against God himself, makes us different than people who don't see God as part of the equation? If so, how? How does this recognition that our relationship with God is the key to all others play itself out in our lives, when it comes to facing the challenges of our sins, failures, and mistakes?

8. Read **2 Corinthians 5:21**. Then please read **John 19:28-30**. With these New Testament verses in your mind, draw connections with verses 7-8 from the psalm. Spend time meditating on this. How does David's plea for mercy (to be "purged with hyssop") relate to Jesus on the cross being touched with hyssop? How do you understand Jesus "standing in" for David on the cross, and for all people who cry out for God's mercy like David?

9. Recite verses 10-12 from the psalm *aloud* several times, in prayer. These verses are probably familiar to you from our worship liturgy, where we often use them after the offering is collected (before communion). If you already know these verses by another translation, use the translation with which you are familiar. As a *Going Deeper* challenge: make these verses part of your morning prayer this week, every day.

10. In verses 13-15, the psalmist shifts focus from his personal "vertical" relationship with God (receiving God's forgiveness) to expressing a "horizontal" commitment towards praising God openly in the presence of other human beings. In your own words, describe this shift and what you think it says about the natural "flow" of our relationships with God and with each other.

11. Summarize what you think the psalmist is expressing in verses 16-19, when he contrasts offering ritual sacrifices with having a "broken and contrite heart." Why do you think God will value a "broken spirit" more highly than a burnt offering? Why does the psalmist emphasize the value of a *broken human spirit* as a kind of necessary condition that must be in place before any ritual, religious actions could be OK?

12. Have you ever caught yourself—or seen others—falling into an attitude where religion becomes a way of building yourself up and seeking certitudes rather than being about *faith* in

God's power and mercy? If so, describe the situation. How does the latter part of this psalm speak to that kind of "human-centered" religion?

13. Below, describe your experience over the last week of praying positively for that person whom you identified as bothering you or causing you anxiousness lately. Have you noticed any changes in the situation? In yourself?

14. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other prayers, ask for God's continued guidance and blessing on your small group and on our congregation as we continue into deeper water with Christ. May the Holy Spirit fill us with life and power so that we can become more confident and effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS
WEEK #7 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: July 11-17

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer, (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer):
Lord, you have called us to serve you. Grant that we may walk in your presence: your love in our hearts, your truth in our minds, your strength in our wills; until, at the end of our journey, we know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
3. Go back to your homework for last week, starting on **page 30**. As a group, discuss your responses to all the questions in the homework. Then, once again recite the psalm out loud together as a group, responsively. When you are finished, return here and continue with item number **4**, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week, for you. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, *and be sure to pray for them!* Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, in your prayers, have each person share one thing for which they are especially thankful to God right now. Then close with the Lord's Prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (8TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Holy Spirit, lift me up from the pit of my sin and selfishness and fill me with your life-giving power. Unite me with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and guide me in the way of truth as I seek your will for my life. Lord God, make me your faithful representative, and help me to pour myself out joyfully in service to your Kingdom. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 90**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 90

A Prayer of Moses, the man of God.

¹ Lord, you have been our dwelling place
in all generations.

² **Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.**

³ You turn us back to dust,
and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

⁴ **For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.**

⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;

⁶ **in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.**

⁷ For we are consumed by your anger;
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

⁸ **You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your countenance.**

⁹ For all our days pass away under your wrath;
our years come to an end like a sigh.

¹⁰ **The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.**

- ¹¹ Who considers the power of your anger?
Your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you.
- ¹² **So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.**
- ¹³ Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
- ¹⁴ **Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.**
- ¹⁵ Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
- ¹⁶ **Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.**
- ¹⁷ Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

3. The psalm is attributed to Moses, “the man of God,” but otherwise does not suggest any other particular context. This psalm mostly depicts the overwhelming vastness of God’s power, which encompasses all history and sweeps through time “from everlasting to everlasting.” When you look at verses 1-10, how would you summarize how this psalm makes you feel?

4. What do you think the psalmist means when he says that God has been “our dwelling place?” How can we picture God’s power as a kind of “space” in which we live? In what ways might “God’s space” be different from the other spaces in which we might seek shelter in this world?

5. Even though the first verse gives us a feeling of shelter and safety in God (“dwelling place”), the psalmist quickly emphasizes the transitory, fragile nature of human life, and dwells on God’s “cold” side, as if he were a kind of alien power. In your own words, summarize what verses 3-6 are saying about human life.

6. Verses 7-12 go to the source of the psalm’s barren, cold quality: God’s *wrath* at human sin. Suddenly the cool observation of human mortality is replaced by images of being actively *consumed* and *overwhelmed*. According to verse 8, in these circumstances, what is God *seeing* about us? What is in front of his countenance?

7. Have you ever felt like life was an altogether unfriendly force that was beating you, consuming you, overwhelming you? How did you look at your relationship with God during that time (or those times)? Did it throw you into doubt? Did it make you angry at him? Did it make you cling all the more tightly to God’s promise? All of the above? Something else?

8. Martin Luther acknowledged that without knowing Jesus, who hung on a cross for us (and who promises to be with us as we face our crosses), we would be hard put to distinguish between God and the devil sometimes. As the psalm describes it, God bears down on us and we feel his weight as a stifling, destructive force, because *we are not what we should be*. Even though both might *feel* the same when they're happening sometimes, how do you *understand* the difference between God's wrath, and the work of the devil in people's lives? What's different about them?

9. How does meditating on Jesus, our Savior who suffered and was nailed to a cross for us, help us to distinguish between the righteous wrath of God and the destructive work of the devil when we're going through tough times in our lives?

10. In your own words, explain what you think the psalmist means when he says to God: "your wrath is as great as the fear that is due you." (verse 11)

11. How is verse 12 a center-point (and a turning point) of this psalm? How does it summarize the psalmist's purpose in sharing these melancholy and disturbing thoughts with us?

12. In a section of the *New England Primer*, an educational resource that circulated widely among the American Puritans, children were encouraged to dwell at length on death and human mortality. Why do you think the people who composed the *New England Primer* thought it was important for kids to think about death? How does "counting our days" lead to a "wise heart?"

13. How do you think our culture today acknowledges death and mortality, in both positive and negative ways?

14. Often in scripture, a person in trouble cries out to God, asking him to "turn" (as in this psalm, verse 13). In light of what the previous verses said about God *seeing our sins*, how do you picture what the psalmist means when he begs God to "turn" and show compassion?

15. Luther affirmed that when we see *Jesus*, we are seeing the *true face* of God, head-on. How does this relate to what the psalmist is asking for God to do in verses 13-17? How is this the final ground of our hope as people who put all our trust in Christ?

16. While God is presented as a completely transcendent, rather "cold and alien" force in the first part of this psalm, the psalmist still cries out passionately to God from his position of weakness and mortality. He presents God as being completely righteous and fair in his dealings with sinful humanity, but he also calls upon God to "turn"—to literally shift his position—towards his people. In your own words: on what grounds do you think the psalmist stands in believing he

can a) get God's attention in the first place, and b) ask God to "turn?" What amazing hints does this Psalm give us about God's nature?

17. After affirming that everything about this world and mortal human beings fades away and vanishes, the psalmist calls upon God to "prosper the work of our hands." How does this make sense (or not) to you?

18. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns from your first group meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS WEEK #8 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: July 18-24

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Loving Father, we gather together to learn, to grow and to change. Help us to move into a deeper understanding of your truth. We lay our lives down before you and ask that you would move among us. May we all feel safe with each other. Safe to think and question. Safe to ask for help. And safe to share our lives with you, our loving heavenly Father. In Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 34**. With your small group, discuss your responses to the material. Then, once again recite the psalm together out loud as a group, responsively. After you finish your discussion, come back here and continue with item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray for the person on their right. As much as is possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayers.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (9TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate. Say the following prayer aloud; always feel free to add extra petitions and thanks.

Holy Spirit, lift me up from the pit of my sin and selfishness and fill me with your life-giving power. Unite me with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and guide me in the way of truth as I seek your will for my life. Lord God, make me your faithful representative, and help me to pour myself out joyfully in service to your Kingdom. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 118**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 118 (A Song of Victory)

- ¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!

- ² Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."

- ³ Let the house of Aaron say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."

- ⁴ Let those who fear the LORD say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."

- ⁵ Out of my distress I called on the LORD;
the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.

- ⁶ **With the LORD on my side I do not fear.**
What can mortals do to me?

- ⁷ The LORD is on my side to help me;
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

- ⁸ **It is better to take refuge in the LORD**
than to put confidence in mortals.

- ⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD
than to put confidence in princes.

- ¹⁰ **All nations surrounded me;**
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

- ¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

- ¹² **They surrounded me like bees;**
they blazed like a fire of thorns;
in the name of the LORD I cut them off!

- ¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling,
but the LORD helped me.

**14 The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.**

¹⁵ There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous:

“The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

**16 the right hand of the LORD is exalted;
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”**

¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.

**18 The LORD has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.**

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.

**20 This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.**

²¹ I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.

**22 The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.**

²³ This is the LORD’s doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.

**24 This is the day that the LORD has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.**

²⁵ Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!

²⁶ Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.

**Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.**

²⁸ You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.

**29 O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.**

3. The first four verses of this psalm definitely evoke a communal setting, where a joyful congregation is following along with the responses. We can also be quite sure that this psalm was used while processing towards and arriving at the temple for a special victory celebration,

since it mentions the “procession,” the “gates” and the “altar.” The “house of Aaron” almost certainly refers to the priesthood who would be present in the assembly. We can easily picture the worship leader calling out repeatedly to the crowd, who responds together, “his steadfast love endures forever!” In the space below, write about a time in church when you truly felt the congregation praising God with a sense of triumph and final victory. At what point in a typical Sunday worship service do you think you feel the most joy, and why do you think so?

4. Have you ever called out to God for help from a difficult situation, and he answered you in a surprising and decisive way, beyond anything you’d hoped for? Talk about the occasion, and share how it made you feel, and how you might have celebrated.

5. Describe the feelings that the psalmist evokes when he says, “Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.” What does the phrase “broad place” make you picture in your mind? On another level, how might we think of faith in Jesus as something that frees us from tight, bound-up situation, and into a broad place where we have freedom of movement?

6. Along the same lines, have you ever had this experience: in “letting go” of your own control over events and people, you find yourself much more free to “take hold” of things that you need to take hold of?

7. Can you identify with the wonderful prayer that people who attend AA say together at every meeting (a prayer by a Christian theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr): “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

8. Share your thoughts on verses 8-9, where the psalmist says it’s better to take refuge in God than to put trust in any human beings or “princes.”

9. Continuing with verses 8-9, how do you see a misplaced trust/hope in human beings (which we can always see throughout human history) rather than God at work in our culture right now? In what ways would you personally say that this misplaced trust is most evident today?

10. Verses 13-20 are often very effectively read at funerals while the family and friends of the deceased are gathered at the cemetery, before the casket is lowered. Below, share a few thoughts on why you think we believers in Christ choose to read these victorious words at the side of a grave? How can we say, at that place, that “there is a sound of exaltation and victory in the tents of the righteous! The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! The right hand of the Lord is exalted! The right hand of the Lord has triumphed!”

11. In ancient Israel, the following words were almost certainly spoken as the processing congregation reached the courtyard of the Jerusalem Temple:

“Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the LORD.
This is the gate of the LORD;
the righteous shall enter through it.”

Today, these words are most often heard by Christians by the side of an open grave. Meditate on this. What does this mean to you, in light of Jesus saying that HE would be the new temple? Also, the Temple was the place God designated as the key, formal, public meeting place between God and human beings. Jesus called himself the new temple, and his “throne” was a cross. The cross (where death took Jesus) has become the new, final meeting place between God and human beings, for all time. What does all this mean to you? How can **you** enter through that gate? How do the words of the psalm speak to you, in light of these connections?

12. Perhaps surprisingly, the New Testament quotes verse 22 of this psalm (the stone that the builders rejected...) more often than practically any other Old Testament passage. Jesus himself quoted it, referring to himself as the rejected stone. The verse’s placement in the psalm is hard to explain. People have always had trouble figuring out exactly what the psalmist is referring to here. However, it is obvious that he is conveying a surprising and delightful development, as in—“we never thought God would bring such a surprising victory out of such dire circumstances.” How do you understand this verse in light of Jesus’ victory over sin and death? How do you understand Jesus as *the rejected stone*?

13. In verses 26-29, it seems like the psalm has again become a back-and-forth dialogue, perhaps between the priests and the people. Among many good contenders, what is your favorite verse from this psalm, and why?

14. Look back at what you wrote down with your partner(s) regarding their prayer concerns. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS
WEEK #9 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: July 25-31

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).

Lord, you have called us to serve you. Grant that we may walk in your presence: your love in our hearts, your truth in our minds, your strength in our wills; until, at the end of our journey, we know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

3. Go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 38**. With your small group, discuss your responses to the material. Then, once again recite the psalm together out loud as a group, responsively. After you finish your discussion, come back here and continue with item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (10TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

Heavenly Father, make me an instrument of your will. Forgive me of my sins and rid me of every fear that keeps me from serving you. Take away my selfishness, my tendency to dwell on past hurts and slights, my anger and frustrations. Help me to let go of the past and to move on to what you would have me do this day, to glorify you and serve the people around me. Give me joy in my work and give me confidence in your love for me. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 121**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 121

A Song of Ascents.

- ¹ I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
² **My help comes from the LORD,**
who made heaven and earth.

³ He will not let your foot be moved;
 he who keeps you will not slumber.

⁴ **He who keeps Israel
 will neither slumber nor sleep.**

⁵ The LORD is your keeper;
 the LORD is your shade at your right hand.

⁶ **The sun shall not strike you by day,
 nor the moon by night.**

⁷ The LORD will keep you from all evil;
 he will keep your life.

⁸ **The LORD will keep
 your going out and your coming in
 from this time on and forevermore.**

3. The “Songs of Ascent” (this is the second psalm designated as such in the book) were likely used as the people of God made their way to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. Have you ever taken a trip you considered to be a kind of pilgrimage, whether it was to Israel, your hometown, a historical battleground, or Graceland if you are an Elvis fan? Whatever it might have been, describe your pilgrimage experience. Why did you go? What did you go to see? How did the experience affect your life?

4. In the first verse, the “hills” which the psalmist looks up to probably carry the meaning of “God’s place of self-revelation.” In scripture, many important meetings and communications between God and humanity take place on mountain tops. Other interpreters see the “hills” as threatening places where enemies might be hiding out, ready to pounce on the traveler as he/she makes his/her way to Jerusalem. Either way, while looking at the hills either in hope or in trepidation, what question does the Psalmist ask?

5. Why might the simple question, “from where is my help to come?” be one of the most important questions a human being can ask? How does the question focus us, and put everything in perspective? From what different places/people in this life might we expect (wrongly or rightly) our help to come?

6. Have you ever put your hope and trust in something, or someone, which/who ended up disappointing you? Describe the experience.

7. Describe, in your own words, in what ways every human being is always in need of “help” from something/someone outside themselves. What different kinds of evidence would you point to in order to describe humans as fundamentally *dependent* creatures?

8. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt (or were actually) completely dependent upon someone else? What was the situation, what was challenging about it, and what did you learn from it?

9. This psalm is often heard in situations where families have just lost a loved one. What parts of the psalm do you think would speak most powerfully to you in the middle of a serious loss, and why?

10. The Hebrew word for “help” used in verses 1 and 2 is a special word used only 20 times in the Old Testament, and it almost always carries the meaning of *salvation*. In other words, it does not just mean “assistance,” but God’s total salvation of a person who is caught in a hopeless situation. As a Christian, how do you understand the *difference* between salvation and assistance, and how are God’s salvation and daily assistance for you also *connected*?

11. In verses 3-4, the psalmist begins to emphasize God’s protection. Interestingly, the gods of ancient pagan religions were often pictured as sleeping like humans. This would explain those times when it seems like “the gods are not listening to me” or “the gods don’t care.” In contrast, how does the psalmist picture God in these verses, and what does this mean to you?

12. The psalmist says “the Lord is your shade at your right hand” (v. 5). In the ancient world, soldiers carried their shields on their left arms, leaving the right side of their bodies more exposed. So whoever was standing on your vulnerable right side was serving as your physical protection. How does this image help you make connections between God’s presence and your own experience in life?

13. God providing “shade” is also a fairly common metaphor in scripture. The Sun, in the ancient world, was not only thought of as the giver of light, but also with its searing heat was also often seen as spiritually connected with violence and destruction. The Moon doesn’t seem as obviously dangerous to us moderns, but for the ancients, it was often associated with bringing disease and sickness. In fact, the Greek word for “seizure” which we find a few times in the gospels literally means “moonstruck.” How do you understand God’s protection for you from violence and sickness? Obviously we all suffer and ultimately die: where is God when we are going through suffering and death?

14. The image of God watching over our “going out and coming in” probably was based on the sight of soldiers going out to battle and returning home. How can you relate this image to everyday life? How can you relate it to a funeral, where this psalm is often heard?

15. As a *Going Deeper* challenge, write two (2) cards of encouragement this week to people you know who are going through difficult times right now. Try to incorporate some words of Psalm 121 in the card—perhaps one or two verses.

16. Look back at your partners' prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS
WEEK #10 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: August 1-7

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Come Holy Spirit, make God's Word known to us. Make us desire the truth in all that we do and always bring us home to the source of all truth, our Savior Jesus Christ. Open our hearts and minds to your guidance today as we discuss the sacred scriptures and share this time together. Give us joy in our fellowship, and set us free from our fears, that we may welcome others into the peace of your presence with the graciousness with which you have welcomed us into eternal life with you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.
3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 42**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework. Then, once again recite the psalm out loud together as a group, responsively. When you are finished, return here to item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be "doubling up" on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (11TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

I praise you, God, for the grace you have shown me: for the gift of life itself, for my family, my friendships, and all the things that I too often take for granted. Most of all, I thank you for sending your Son Jesus into this world and into my life, that I may know

you and worship you as my Heavenly Father. Set me free from all the false gods that I am tempted to worship because they offer me easy shortcuts around the cross of Jesus, and lift me up by the Holy Spirit to serve you alone with joy and confidence. In Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 130**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 130

A Song of Ascents.

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

² **Lord, hear my voice!**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The psalmist cries to God “from the depths.” The Hebrew word here for “depths” appears five times in the Old Testament, and in Ezekiel and Isaiah it refers specifically to the depths of the *sea*. The sea, in ancient Israel, was often associated with formlessness, death, and chaos. In effect, the psalmist is crying from the same place as Jonah in Jonah 2 (**please read Jonah chapter 2**). The distance between the psalmist and God seems insurmountable. Walter Brueggemann describes the opening of psalm 130 as “the miserable cry of a nobody from nowhere.” Have you ever been in such a place? If so, describe the situation.

4. The fact that the psalmist *cries to God* from out of the depths is in itself an act of faith. What does the psalmist's hope that God will *hear* him say about his understanding of who God is? Where do you think he gets this hope?

5. When people who do not believe in God are in the depths, where do you think they may turn? In what do you think they might put their hope? (There are many possible answers here—base your response on what you've seen and experienced).

6. Do you think that it's possible for a person to be in the depths that this psalm describes *without knowing it*? If so...what makes you answer "yes"? Have you seen a person—or have you yourself been—much deeper in trouble than they/you were aware of or wanted to admit at the time? Did something happen to help the person (or yourself) see how deep in trouble you were? Describe the situation and its outcome.

7. Speaking of Jonah, the "great fish" is sent by God to swallow him when he is thrown into the sea, and ultimately spits him out on the shore. How is the great fish both a terrifying instrument of God and also an instrument of Jonah's salvation? Have you ever experienced God working in ways that, at first, terrified you and made you want to run away? How can we relate these ideas to the cross of Jesus?

8. In verses 3-4, the psalmist steps back from his/her own pain to express some general thoughts on sin and God's forgiveness. What does he/she say about sin? How does he/she express it as a universal condition? In verse 4, how does the psalmist express the ultimate purpose of God's forgiveness (as something bigger than "getting me out of my personal hell")?

9. Read **Romans 11:30-36**. Paul's summary statement in verse 32 can lead us to ask more questions than it answers, but note how Paul erupts into worship and praise after he says it. How do you understand verse 32? How does it relate to verse 4 of our psalm? What fundamental "character trait" (for lack of a better phrase) of God is shining out here? How, above all else, does God want us to know him?

10. What does the psalmist cling to as he/she *waits* for the Lord in verses 5-6? What "handle" has God given him/her to hold onto while struggling in those depths?

11. Why is faith in God's *Word* (his promise, based on who he is) a challenge for us, more so than if we just depended on visible saving miracles—quick cures and amazing turnarounds? In your own words, why do you think God wants us to live in a relationship of *waiting faith* with him rather than *sight*?

12. When the psalmist ends in verses 7-8, encouraging Israel to *hope in the Lord*, how are these verses also a call to NOT put their hope in other things?

13. This psalm obviously presents an image of sin and salvation that goes far beyond “making occasional mistakes and getting a hand from God when we need help.” In your own words, how does the psalm focus us on the basic daily reality of our situation in this universe, and point us towards our only hope? Can this psalm speak to us in a daily way, and not just in crisis situations?

14. Martin Luther paraphrased this psalm and made it into a hymn (#600 in the ELW). Read over it, below, and mark your favorite verses. Make notes on why those particular verses speak to you.

1 Out of the depths I cry to you;
O Lord God, hear me calling.
Incline your ear to my distress
in spite of my rebelling.
Do not regard my sinful deeds.
Send me the grace my spirit needs;
without it I am nothing.

2 All things you send are full of grace;
you crown our lives with favor.
All our good works are done in vain
without our Lord and Savior.
We praise you for the gift of faith;
you save us from the grip of death;
our lives are in your keeping.

3 In you alone, O God, we hope,
and not in our own merit.
We rest our fears in your good word;
And trust your Holy Spirit.
Your promise keeps us strong and sure;
We trust the cross, your signature,
Inscribed upon our temples.

4 My soul is waiting for you, Lord,
as one who longs for morning;
no watcher waits with greater hope
than I for your returning.
I hope as Israel in the Lord,
who sends redemption through the Word.

Praise God for grace and mercy!

15. In verse 3 of the hymn, notice the words, “we trust the cross, your signature, inscribed upon our temples.” This is a reference to Baptism, where God “signs his name” on us and tells us we have died and risen with Jesus. How can God’s Word in baptism, with all its rich associated meanings, be a comfort to us when we are in the depths?

16. Look back at your partners’ prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS WEEK #11 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: August 8-14

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).
Loving Father, lift our eyes to seek you first today and always. Forgive us for getting bogged down in the cares and worries of this world. Renew us through the power of the Holy Spirit to live confidently as your sons and daughters. Give us strength to build up your Church on earth, to witness to Christ, and to serve the people around us with humility and joy. We pray this in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.
3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 46**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework. Then, once again, recite the psalm out loud with your group responsively. When you are finished, return here to item #4, below.
4. In turn, share one or two concerns that you would like your partner(s) to pray about this week. Write down your partner(s) concerns, below, and be sure to pray for them! Use this opportunity to express your commitment to support and care for each other in this journey.
5. Confirm the time and place of your next meeting. Review whether you will be “doubling up” on homework at any point if you are not able to meet weekly, etc.
6. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (12TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

Gracious Heavenly Father, give me grace to set a good example for everyone around me, to be fair and gracious towards others, and to be true to the commitments I make. When I stumble, help me to know your forgiveness, and when I wrong others, give me courage to set things right. I pray that when people witness my words and deeds, they will know that I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I pray in his name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 139**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 139

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² **You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.**

³ You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ **Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.**

⁵ You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

⁶ **Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.**

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ **If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.**

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ **even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.**

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"

¹² **even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.**

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ **I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;**

that I know very well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ **Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.**

**In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.**

¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ **I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.**

¹⁹ O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—

²⁰ **those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!**

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

²² **I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.**

²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.

²⁴ **See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.**

3. The psalm emphasizes the vastness of God, but most of all, his *nearness*. This is not so much a philosophical piece where the writer is talking about God's "all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful" nature, but rather about an intensely personal, close relationship. Talk about your sense of God's closeness to you. When have you felt his closeness most intensely in your life?

4. Looking at just verses 1-4, what is both comforting and also perhaps intimidating about God's intimate knowledge and perception of every aspect of the psalmist's existence?

5. Some belief systems (and sometimes unfortunately Christians) present God in terms of a "clockmaker," as if he made the world and the rules by which it operates, and as if everything is "fated" to happen beforehand. After setting things in motion, he steps back and lets it all play out according to the original plan. Is this the picture that this psalm presents of God? If not—or if so—explain your thoughts.

6. In verses 5-7, the psalmist talks about God's nearness in terms that become (briefly) more uncomfortable, as if sometimes God feels *too* near. Think of a time when you've had an argument with someone you love. You were so mad at each other that you could barely speak to

each other. You separated yourselves from each other. Then, your loved one came back into the same room with you and sat down. How did you feel when he/she first came back into the room, before you started speaking to each other again? Could you say that there have been times when you've felt the same way with God—as if he's *too close*? What was the situation?

7. Can you identify any times in your life when you were fleeing from God, while he pursued you (v.7)?

8. Whereas in verses 1-7 the psalmist talks about how God freely chooses to approach him and be close with him in all circumstances, in verses 8-12, the psalmist begins speaking about his own free movements, and how God still ends up “being there” no matter what choices the psalmist makes. How do you understand this picture, where the psalmist is clearly free to go where he wants (God gives him freedom), but no matter where he goes, it seems that in the end, God has anticipated his every move?

9. Have you ever experienced a time when you got yourself into a very twisted-up situation which God probably did not want you to get in, but somehow God turned the situation into a way for you to come closer to him? If so, describe it.

10. How can the cross and resurrection of Jesus be thought of as God, once and for all, *surrounding* us on all sides, as expressed so effectively in this psalm?

11. Verses 13-18 express the psalmist's wonderful sense that his life is infinitely valuable in God's eyes, and that he is being upheld and treasured from beginning to end in God's powerful and loving presence. The Hebrew phrase which denotes being *knit together* in his mother's womb is the same phrase used for the knitting of the curtains of the tabernacle (the moveable temple where God promised to reside with the people). The sense is that God invests great care and artistry into the creation of each unique individual human being, and that human life itself is a holy thing which points towards the divine. How does this view of the sacredness of individual human lives contrast so starkly, sometimes, with popular views of humanity that have circulated widely in the world at various times, including currently?

12. Have you ever known a child (or an adult) who did not believe they were loved, cherished, or valuable? What was the situation? How, in your experience, can this sense of “not mattering” or “not being worth it” affect the way people live and experience life in general? In what ways might this Psalm inspire you to act towards other people, no matter who they are?

13. In verses 19-24, the tone abruptly shifts and the psalmist starts talking about the opponents of God. The language is very harsh, but note how the psalmist is not defending himself. He is,

rather, stirred to extreme anger by people who “hate God.” Nothing makes him madder than hearing people misrepresent the God and paint a false picture of him. In terms of everything this psalm has said about God so far, what kinds of misrepresentations (false pictures) of God might people of the psalmist’s day be holding onto?

14. In your experience, what kinds of false pictures of God do people in today’s world commonly hold onto, and sometimes even actively promote?

15. In the last verses, the psalmist boldly invites God, “search me, and know my heart.” After everything the psalmist has said, we know that this can be a potentially painful operation...having God **see** everything about us! (Refer also back to Psalm 130). On what grounds do you think the psalmist can be so bold with God? In other words, where does the Psalmist get the courage to say to God: “Even if it hurts, show me everything about myself, because I want there to be no false barriers between us”? Compare the last two verses of this Psalm with what is said in **Hebrews 4:14-16**.

16. As a *Going Deeper* challenge, introduce yourself to someone at church within the next couple of weeks whom you do not know.

17. Look back at your partners’ prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John’s as we follow Jesus’ call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective “fishers of people.”

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS
WEEK #12 SMALL GROUP MEETING
Target Week: August 15-21

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.
2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer). *Lord, you have called us to serve you. Grant that we may walk in your presence: your love in our hearts, your truth in our minds, your strength in our wills; until, at the end of our journey, we know the joy of our homecoming and the welcome of your embrace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*
3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 50**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework. Then, once again recite the psalm out loud with your group, responsively. When you are finished, return here to item #4, below.
4. Talk together about your plans for the next chapter of *going deeper with Christ*. Will you be staying together as a group? Reconfiguring? Disbanding for the time being? Be sensitive to each other’s needs and commitments. If you are continuing to the next topic and need to find a

new group, please act now! Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) can help you as needed.

5. Looking ahead, the next unit of our Going Deeper journey will begin on **September 11th**. We hope you will participate in the next part of our *Going Deeper* journey!
6. Could any of you (or all of you) write a blurb about your experience for the newsletter and/or website and/or Facebook regarding your journey so far?
7. Close with prayer. Today, have each person pray briefly for the person on their right. If possible, try to include elements of your discussion from this meeting in your prayer.

HOMEWORK FOR YOUR NEXT (13TH) SMALL GROUP MEETING

1. Find a place where you can concentrate, with few distractions. Say the following prayer; add any petitions or thanks as you wish:

Heavenly Father, make me an instrument of your will. Forgive me of my sins and rid me of every fear that keeps me from serving you. Take away my selfishness, my tendency to dwell on past hurts and slights, my anger and frustrations. Help me to let go of the past and to move on to what you would have me do this day, to glorify you and serve the people around me. Give me joy in my work and give me confidence in your love for me. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

2. Very slowly, read **Psalm 146**, which follows, **twice**. When you revisit this psalm with your small group, have one person read the regular print while the rest of the group reads the bold type.

Psalm 146

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD, O my soul!

² **I will praise the LORD as long as I live;**
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ **When their breath departs, they return to the earth;**
on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,

⁶ **who made heaven and earth,**
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;

⁸ **the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.**

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;

the LORD loves the righteous.

⁹ The LORD watches over the strangers;

he upholds the orphan and the widow,

but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The LORD will reign forever,

your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

3. The Psalms are organized so that, as we approach the end of the book, there's a crescendo of joyful praise directed to God. In addition to Psalm 146, above, please **read Psalm 150** (the last psalm in the book) and simply note how it expresses nothing but pure praise throughout. Just as the universe will end with all the multitude of God's creations worshiping him, the Psalms themselves end with ecstatic shouts of joy, where "every breath" of every creature is given to glorify God. How does knowing that all of creation will end in *worship* help us Christians understand the primary purpose of what we do on a daily basis?

4. How do you see the relation between public worship in church (i.e. observing the Sabbath) and what you do through the week? How is public worship both different from daily life, and how do the two realms "cross-fertilize" each other?

5. After studying the Psalms as we have, why do you think (or not think) it's important to set aside actual time in our schedules to meditate squarely on our relationship with God?

6. Why are WORDS like we have recorded in the Psalms (and not just deeds) so important in our relationship with God? Think of what happens so often when Jesus heals people: what does the healed person often start doing?

7. Psalm 146, in one shot, covers several of the basic themes we've discussed over the past several weeks. Summarize what the psalmist is saying here about:

- The goal and purpose of our existence (verses 1-2).
- Where we put our trust/faith (verses 3-4)
- The true source of life and power (verses 5-6)
- God's reliability (verses 5-6)

- God's attitude towards people who are empty, in trouble, helpless, vulnerable (verse 7) and conversely, (implied), his attitude towards who are "full of themselves."
- God as SAVIOR (7-9)

8. In what respects has your discussion of the Psalms with your small group been especially helpful to you these past 13 weeks?

9. What do you think the psalms can teach us about emotional honesty in front of God, even when the honesty might bring up some ugly stuff?

10. What particular images and/or themes from the psalms we've looked at stand out most strongly for you, and why?

11. Did you introduce yourself to someone at church whom you did not know?

12. Please think and pray about your next step *going into the deeper water with Christ*. By this time, you will know what our next "Going Deeper" focus will be, starting **September 11th**. At your upcoming small group meeting, you will be discussing with your partner(s) whether you will continue as a group or reconfigure.

13. Please consider writing a blurb about your experience so far with going deeper with Christ for our church newsletter (the Eagle) and/or our website.

14. Look back at your partners' prayer concerns from your last meeting. Make sure to pray for them now. Among your other closing prayers, please ask God to bless your small group and the congregation of St. John's as we follow Jesus' call to go into the deep water with Christ and become more confident, effective "fishers of people."

GOING DEEPER IN PRAISE AND WORSHIP WITH THE PSALMS WEEK #13 SMALL GROUP MEETING

Target Week: August 22-28

1. Spend about 5 minutes sharing highs and lows of the past few days.

2. Someone pray the following prayer (or use it loosely as a model for a spontaneous prayer).

Almighty God, we are in awe of your magnificent power displayed through the universe, for through you all things were made and all things have their being. We come before you with grateful thanks and with hearts that long to adore you and worship only you. Lord, may we know the presence of the Holy Spirit here with us today. May we be open to your leading, and alert to your calling. Father, we invite the same power that was at work when Jesus was raised from the grave to be present with us here now. We thank you for the privilege of being able to

meet together these past weeks to share your Word of truth and grace with each other. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

3. Please go back to the homework you did for this week, starting on **page 54**. With your partners, discuss your responses to all the homework. Then, once again, recite the psalm aloud together as a group, responsively. When you are finished, return here to item #4, below.
4. Talk together about your plans for the next chapter of *going deeper with Christ*. Will you be staying together as a group? Reconfiguring? Disbanding for the time being? Be sensitive to each other's needs and commitments. If you are continuing to the next topic and need to find a new group, please act now! Pastor Seth (217.255.2118) or Pastor Patti (614.875.2314) can help you as needed.
5. The next unit of our Going Deeper journey will begin on **SEPTEMBER 11**. We hope you will participate in the next part of our *Going Deeper* journey!
6. Could any of you (or all of you) write a blurb about your experience for the newsletter and/or website and/or Facebook regarding your journey so far?
7. For your final prayer, have *everyone* pray in turn. Thank God for your partner(s). Thank our Lord for this opportunity we've been given to share our faith, and to build each other up in the love of Christ. Ask for God's blessings and guidance for our congregation as we continue together on this journey into the deep water with Christ.