

THE PSALMS

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!” (Ps.84:1)

“מה יְדִידוֹת מְשֻׁבְּנוֹתֶיךָ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת” (תהלים פד:ב)



Bible Study Guide

with Insights from **BIBLICAL HEBREW** & Answer Key

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Bible Study Guide

with Insights from BIBLICAL HEBREW

Welcome

It is our privilege to present you with this gift from eTeacherBiblical. We wish you an exciting journey through the world of Psalms accompanied by insights from the Hebrew Language.

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Yours,

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About the Authors



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Read Psalm 1

“אֲשֶׁרִי הָאִישׁ”

 1:1 ashre ha-ish > “blessed is the man” or literally: “the man (is) blessed...”

- ~ The basic meaning of **ashre** “blessed” comes from the noun “happiness.”
It refers to the happiness resulting from a wise and prudent life.
- ~ The masculine reference to “man” provides a window into Israelite patriarchal society.
However, the message of the Psalm is applicable to all people.

“בְּעֵצַת רְשָׁעִים”

 1:1 b-atsat reshaim > “in the counsel of the wicked”

- ~ The Hebrew **atsat** “counsel” could also be translated as “council.”
- ~ This verse refers to one who walks “in the counsel of the wicked.”
The action of “walking” suggests a type of habitual association with the wicked, seeking their advice or discernment in everyday life.

Discussion Questions:

1. Jewish and Christian tradition suggest that Psalm 1 and 2 function as an introduction to the Book of Psalms.
Why do you think this is so?
2. Compare and contrast the righteous and the wicked in this psalm. What characterizes both?
3. Notice the three actions - walking, standing, and sitting. How do these characterize the man who is not blessed?
4. Why do you think that the longevity of the righteous man is described in more detail than impermanence of the wicked man?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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Read Psalm 2

“עַל-יְהוָה וְעַל-מְשִׁיחוֹ”

 2:2 Al yhwh w-al meshicho > “Against the Lord and against his anointed”

- ~ The Covenant name of Israel’s God is used here. This recalls the covenant promise that Israel will have dominion over the “Kings of the Earth.”
- ~ The “anointed one” in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament refers, especially in this context, to the King of Israel.

“בְּנִי אַתָּה אֲנִי הַיּוֹם יְלִדְתִּיךָ”

 2:7 Beni attah ani h-yom yeliditicha > “You are my son; today I have begotten you”

- ~ Sonship in the Ancient Near East was synonymous with Kingship (2 Sam. 7:14).
- ~ Not only Israel’s King, but also Israel as a people, was referred to as God’s son (Ex. 4:22).

Discussion Questions:

1. This Psalm begins with a rhetorical question. What other rhetorical patterns are evident?
2. Why does the author shift from third person to first person narration in v. 3?
Identify the lines assigned in the psalm to 1) narrator, 2) nations, 3) Israel’s king, and 4) God himself.
3. How is Psalm 2 connected with Psalm 1?
4. Compare this with Is. 52:7. How does the good news of the reign of Israel’s God relate with psalm?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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Read Psalm 23

“לְמַעַן שְׁמוֹ”

 23:3 L-ma'an shemo > “for the sake of his name”

- ~ Psalm 106:8 uses the same phrase in the context of salvation from Egypt.
- ~ The reason for Israel's redemption is rooted in this idea.

“בְּגֵי אֶצְלָמוֹת”

 23:4 B-gey tsalmaveth > “in the valley of deep-darkness”

- ~ **Tsalmaveth** is a compound noun from maveth “death” + tsal “shadow”.
The phrase basically denotes the idea of utter darkness and impenetrable gloom.
- ~ The opposition (or evil) symbolized by this term is rendered irrelevant and impotent by Israel's God, who manipulates tsalmaveth at will (Amos 5:8; Jer. 13:3; Ps. 44:20).

Discussion Questions:

1. Is there a discernible historical or social setting for this psalm? To what setting described in other parts of the Bible can you best connect this psalm?
2. How are the two themes of protection (vv. 1-4) and provision (vv. 5-6) related?
3. How do the symbols of rod and staff counter the frightful image of the tsalmaveth (impenetrable gloom)?
4. Compare this psalm with other metaphors related to the shepherd-flock (Ps. 95:7, 100:3; Is. 40:11; Ezek. 34:11-16).
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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Read Psalm 42-43

“נַפְשִׁי תַעְרֹג”

42:2 Nafshi ta'arog > “My soul longs...”

~ In Hebrew, *nefesh* “soul” can also mean: throat, neck, life, breath, living being, personality, or soul (as the center of emotions/perception).

“הוֹחִילִי לְאֱלֹהִים”

42:5 Hochili lelohim > “Hope in God”

- ~ In this verse, the form of the word “hope” is a command.
- ~ The psalmist is caught up in a peculiar and poignant intrapersonal dialogue with his own soul, commanding it to hope for/in God.

Discussion Questions:

1. What objective references are given that might help contextualize Psalm 42-43? (e.g. “House of God” or “Holy Hill”)
2. In v. 4, we are given hints of a festival procession as the psalmist is reflecting on his past experience. What does he miss? What does he long after?
3. What key phrases are used to articulate the disposition of the psalmist?
4. Describe the tension between the psalmist’s condition and his trust in God.
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 51

“בָּא אֶל-בַּת שֶׁבַע”

 51:1 Ba el bat-sheva > “He entered to Bathsheba”

- ~ The superscription uses the word (“go/enter”) to describe the actions of both Nathan and David. (A superscription is a phrase written above the psalm that was not part of the original. It was intended to give a psalm additional context.)
- ~ The phrase “He entered to Bathsheba” is likely a euphemism for intercourse.

“לֵב טָהוֹר בְּרָא לִי אֱלֹהִים”

 51:10 Lev tahor bera li elohim > “Create in me a clean heart, O God”

- ~ The verb **bera** “create” is only used with God as the subject (Gen 1:1; Isa 40:28, 65:17; Jer 31:22).
- ~ **Tahor** is the same word used to distinguish between clean and unclean animals in references to the level of acceptability to God.

Discussion Questions:

1. Psalm 51 is one of seven penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143). These express deep regret for sin and guilt. Read these psalms as a group and compare similar expressions.
2. The superscription of Psalm 51 alludes to the Biblical event of David’s affair with Bathsheba. How would you interpret Psalm 51 if the superscription was not there?
3. Note that sacrifices of a “broken spirit” and sacrifices of “bulls” are mentioned at the end. Do these concluding lines suggest that another application of this psalm could be national in addition to being personal? What difference does it make, if any?
4. Describe the tension between the inward vs. outward expressions of the psalmist’s spirituality.
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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Read Psalm 73

“קִנְיַתִּי בַּהוֹלְלִים”

 73:3 Kinneti b-hollim > “I was envious of the arrogant”

- ~ The cause of **kinah** is the infringement on someone's rights (real or imagined).
- ~ Positive and negative connotations apply.

“בְּגָדְתִּי”

 73:15 Begadti > “...I would have betrayed”

- ~ The word “betray” (or “act treacherously”) is closely related to the noun “garment or cloak”.
- ~ The verb is an extension of maliciously “cloaked” things (e.g., a dagger or evil intentions).

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the experience of the psalmist provide a background for the theological affirmations at the beginning and end of Psalm 73?
2. What inequalities are described in Psalm 73?
3. The psalmist speaks of betrayal by God. How does this relate to the wisdom tradition (Job)? What changes the situation for the psalmist?
4. Why is this so important to the psalmist? Consider personal and national contexts. (Ps. 73.15)
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 84

“מִשְׁכָּנוֹתַי”

84:1 Mishkanotecha > “your dwelling places”

- ~ The noun **mishkan** is also the word for “tabernacle.”
- ~ The plural may refer to the many rooms of the Temple (Pss. 43:3; 46:5; 132:5, 7).
It may also refer to the belief that God’s presence is “everywhere.”

“מַסִּילוֹת בְּלִבָּם”

84:5 Mesillot bilvavam > “the ways/pilgrimage (are/is) in their heart”

- ~ The **mesillot** “ways” could denote the road leading to Jerusalem (pilgrimage).
- ~ At the same time, the phrase **bilvavam** “in/on their heart,” could accent “ways” as a metaphor (i.e., expressing the devotion of a pilgrim to the “ways” of God).

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does the psalmist use the image of a sparrow in the Temple? What does it illustrate?
2. What does the idea of pilgrimage entail? How is the strength of a man (vs.5a) connected with “heart set on pilgrimage”?
3. What does it mean to go from strength to strength (Is. 40:31), and why is Zion the ultimate goal here? (vs. 7)
4. In what sense is God a sun and a shield? (vs.11). What other themes in the Book of Psalms are connected with sun and shield?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 90

“דָּכָא”

 90:3 Daka > “dust”

- ~ The root of **daka** means “crushed, pressed down”.
- ~ The idea is meant to convey the finiteness of human existence.

“כָּלֵינוּ בְּאַפֶּךָ”

 90:7 Chalinu v-apecha > “we are consumed by your wrath”

- ~ The verb **chalinu** means “completed, finished.”
- ~ **Apecha** “your wrath” literally means “your nose/face.”

Discussion Questions:

1. What features distinguish this Psalm from others?
2. Discuss the contrast between human mortality and the everlasting nature of God. (vs. 2-6) What phrases highlight this distinction?
3. Summarize and discuss the idea of God’s wrath (vs. 7-11).
4. What is the response of the psalmist’s own heart (vs.12-17) to his early reflection?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 97

“עָנָן וְעָרָפֶל”

 97:2 Anan va-arafel > “cloud and thick darkness”

- ~ This is the language of theophany (God’s visual appearance).
- ~ It occurs also in Ex. 19:18, 20:21; Dt. 4:11, 5:22; 2Sam. 22:10; Ps. 18:10, 50:1-3.

“בְּנוֹת יְהוּדָה”

 97:8 Benot yehuda > “towns of Judah”

- ~ Based on parallelism with Zion, many translate **benot** as “towns/villages,” although it literally means “daughters”. A comparable English idiom would be a “daughter or sister city”.
- ~ Psalm 97 is part of a cluster of “enthronement” Psalms (47, 93, 96-99). Royal language describes God’s universal sovereignty as King and righteous Judge.

Discussion Questions:

1. Each “enthronement” psalm provides a different nuance to the theme of kingship. What themes stand out in Psalms 47, 93, and 96-99?
2. What is the main theme of this psalm? What terms does the psalmist use to convey the idea of God’s dominion?
3. What images does the psalmist provide to depict God as sovereign over other “gods”?
4. Psalm 97 ends with a description of the righteous and a call to rejoice. How do the righteous (v. 11) contrast with the enemy (v. 3)?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 103

“בְּרַכֵּי נַפְשִׁי אֶת יְהוָה”

 103:1 Berachi nafshi et yhwh > “**ble**s**s, O my soul, Adonai**”

- ~ In a figurative sense, the psalmist commands his soul to bless Adonai.
- ~ The phrase **berachi nafshi** (bless, O my soul...) is used in many contemporary Jewish and Christian liturgies.

“הַסֹּלֵחַ”

 103:3 Ha-soleach > “**the one who is forgiving**”

- ~ The Hebrew root **slh** “forgiveness” can be traced back to water purification ceremonies.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do the series of comparisons in vs. 11-13 describe?
2. What is the significance of God remembering that the people are “dust”?
3. How might this Psalm function both on personal and communal levels? What difference would it make, if any?
4. How does Ps. 103:7-8 compare with Ex. 34:6; Num. 14:18; Neh. 9:17; Jonah 4:2?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 107

“גְּאוּלֵי יְהוָה”

 107:2 Ge'uley yhwh > “the redeemed of LORD”

- ~ The term **ge'ul** also means “deliver or ransom” in a political or legal sense.
- ~ **Ge'ul** also relates to Israelite family law, meaning to “buy something back” and thus return it to its original owner.

“כָּל חֲכָמָתָם תִּתְבַּלַּע”

 107:27 Kol hochmatam titbala > “all their wisdom is swallowed”

- ~ The Hebrew word **hochma** has a broader range of meanings than the English equivalent, “wisdom”.
- ~ It can also mean “skill, craft, expertise, experience” (cf. Ex. 31:1-7).
- ~ Here, the sailor’s “skill” in navigation is “swallowed up” (i.e., rendered irrelevant) by the stormy waves.

Discussion Questions:

1. The psalmist recounts four situations of crisis (vv. 4-5, 10-12, 17-18, and 23-27). What is distinctive about each one and how are they resolved?
2. It is clear that the psalmist believes that God resolves the four crisis situations. Is it possible to discern whether or not the psalmist suggests God causes the crises? (Compare v. 25 with v. 29 as well as v. 33 with v. 35.)
3. What historic and social settings might form the background of this psalm?
4. In relation to question 1 (above), a repeated pattern is evident - crisis followed by rescue. If the psalmist was going to add another crises story to Ps. 107, what components of the story should we expect and what components may not be present next time around?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

Read Psalm 145

“אֲשִׁיחָה”

145:5 Asicha > “I will meditate/converse”

- ~ The root **sich** can also mean “loud, enthusiastic, emotionally laden speech”.
- ~ In other contexts, **sich** carries a less robust meaning, such as “mediate, converse, speak or say”.

“יִבְעִזוּ”

145:7 Yabi'u > “they will celebrate”

- ~ The root **n-b-ʿ** also means “gush, flow, or ferment” (cf. Prov. 18:4, Ps. 19:3).
- ~ In a concrete sense, the image is of a gushing stream. In a figurative sense, it refers to speech, or praise “pouring forth”.
- ~ Ps. 145 is an acrostic poem. Each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet
Other Hebrew acrostics include Ps. 9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, and perhaps most elaborate is Ps. 119 and Lam. 1-4.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think is the reason behind such acrostic composition? What does it tell us about the Bible as literature?
2. As evident in the Hebrew terms above, the words for praise and giving thanks are quite diverse. How many different expressions of praise does the psalmist use?
3. Notice that Ps. 145:8 is a quotation of Ex. 34:6. In our previous study of Ps. 103, we also discovered a similar quotation of Ex. 34:6. Compare and contrast how Ex. 34:6 is used in Ps. 145:8 and Ps. 103:7-8.
4. Read the entire Psalm through. What major themes stand out? What is this Psalm about?
5. Are there parallels with the other parts of the Holy Scriptures?

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LEADER'S ANSWER KEY

Psalm 1

- (1) The themes in Psalm 1 and 2 address wisdom and God's Kingship. By placing these at the beginning, the reader is alerted to their importance for the entire Psalter.
- (2) The righteous: happy, like well planted trees, fruitful. The wicked: not happy, chaff, brief life.
- (3) This is a warning against becoming closely associated with the wicked. If one starts on that path, they will eventually "sit" in the wicked's seat.
- (4) The number of words used to describe the righteous and the wicked is also a picture of the content. How an author expresses meaning is important, not simply what the author means.
- (5) Ps. 19; 32; 34; 40:8; 49; 119; Jer. 17:7-8; Prov. 2:12-15; 20-22.

Psalm 2

- (1) In the transition from verses 9 and 10, the author projects the meaning of verses 1-9 onto verses 10-11.
- (2) By placing the words in the mouth of the enemy (first person), the psalmist develops his characterization of the enemy.
- (3) The last phrase of Ps. 2 reflects the theme of wisdom that is highlighted in Ps. 1. Also, in Ps. 2:10, the kings are advised to be wise.
- (4) God's reign in Is. 52:7 means that Israel has been restored from exile. This means that suffering and oppression are over. A similar situation could be read into Ps. 2.
- (5) Ps. 89:26-27; 2 Sam. 7:14; Acts 4:25-26; 13:33.

Psalm 23

- (1) This appears to be a song of trust and deliverance, perhaps imagining a military encounter.
- (2) The themes of protection and provision are compatible. The author needs both; humans need both.
- (3) The rod was used as a weapon to fight off wild animals. The staff was used as a support, in general, or to guide stray sheep. Both offer a different kind of comfort.
- (4) – Compare –
- (5) Deut. 2:7; Jer. 2:6; Ps. 7:5; 22; 71:11; 78:19; Neh. 9:21



LEADER'S ANSWER KEY

Psalm 42-43

- (1) The "House of God" refers to the Temple. The "holy hill" refers to Zion/Jerusalem. "Procession" may refer to one of the three great festivals or pilgrimages (Deut. 16).
- (2) The psalmist longs for the "living God." He writes from a position of distance, perhaps of exile or banishment. At one time, he led the multitudes in procession to the Temple. But now he is among the ungodly who oppress him.
- (3) Note the phrases: "my tears have been my food" (v. 3), "my soul is cast down within me" (v. 6).
- (4) The psalmist is in a present condition of suffering, thirst, and estrangement. He believes, however, that God may restore him to his prior position. The verse, "hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (v. 42:5, 11, and 43:5) are interjected three times into the larger dialogue between the psalmist and God. Note the structure of this psalm: lament, refrain, lament, refrain, prayer, and refrain.
- (5) For the group behind this Psalm, see 2 Chr. 20:19. Also see Deut. 16; Ps. 27:4-6; 79:10; 84:1-2.

Psalm 51

- (1) – Compare –
- (2) This would be interpreted as a psalm of individual confession.
- (3) The phrase "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit" (v. 19) represents an idea in which animal sacrifice has become "spiritualized." This has personal application because there would be no need for a Temple. Verses 20-21, however, make concrete petitions: "do good to Zion" "rebuild the walls" "bulls will be offered on your altar". These concluding phrases have national implications. The movement from personal to national suggests that national success depends on individual obedience and responsibility.
- (4) Note the focus on metaphors of washing, or, near the end, sacrifices of bulls and rebuilding the walls.
- (5) Lev. 14:2-9, 48-53; Num. 19:6, 18; 2 Sam. 12:1-15; Ezra 9:6-15; Neh. 1:4-11.

Psalm 73

- (1) The psalmist opens with the affirmation that "God is good to the upright." Then, he describes an experience in which he perceives gross inequality. This prompts the question: How can God be good if the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? In verses 18-20, the psalmist perceives the true nature of things, which in turn supports his original affirmation.
- (2) The arrogant and wicked are healthy, without pain, fat, receive honor and praise from people, etc.
- (3) This psalm and Job both share the observation that, at times, the world around them is not morally coherent. Sometimes good people suffer and bad people prosper. The same question is raised in the Psalms and in Job: How can a good God allow righteous people to suffer? The psalmist's physical situation does not change. His perspective, however, is reoriented to God's overall sovereignty.
- (4) The new orientation of the psalmist is critical. At one time, he thought his obedience and efforts were done in vain (v. 13-14). This distorted perspective would have soon become toxic for his faith and his community.
- (5) Ps. 1; 37; 49; Job.



LEADER'S ANSWER KEY

Psalm 84

- (1) The image of a sparrow in the Temple reflects concern for even the most vulnerable and delicate creatures.
- (2) A journey or pilgrimage represents the loyalty of the faithful. It represents trust and determination to maintain commitments that are not always convenient.
- (3) From "strength to strength" is an expression that acknowledges the need for renewed strength, which God provides, especially for those who become weary. Zion is likely the ultimate goal because it is the holy city, where God's presence is most palpable.
- (4) The phrase "the Lord God is a sun and shield..." is a common title, in the ancient near east, for royalty or deities. See Mal 4:2; Ps. 19:5-7.
- (5) Ps. 107:33; Is. 35:6-7; 41:18; 43:20; 48:21.

Psalm 90

- (1) The superscription is unique: "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God." The name "Moses" occurs 8x in the Psalter, 7x are in Book Four (Psalms 90-106). Note also the absence of Selas (compare with Ps. 89).
- (2) Note the phrases "everlasting to everlasting," "thousand years in your sight," etc.
- (3) This psalm recognizes that God's wrath is a consequence of human sin. The psalmist's plea that God "turn" away his wrath reflects Mosaic tradition (especially on mount Sinai, Exod 32:12).
- (4) The psalmist asks God to "teach us to count our days," which leads to acknowledging the nature of God's eternity and human frailty. The result is a wise heart and the hope that God will "satisfy us...make us glad," extending his favor and prosperity.
- (5) Gen. 2:7; 3:19; Exod. 32:12; Deut. 33:27; Ps. 6:3; 46; 71:3; 91:9; 103:14; Job 34:14-15; 38:4.

Psalm 97

- (1) God is the "great king" (Ps. 47), clothed with royal garments (Ps. 93), worthy of honor (Ps. 96), the consuming fire (Ps. 97), judge (Ps. 98), and a holy king (Ps. 99).
- (2) The main theme of this psalm appears to be God's terrifying glory. He is the God of the storm.
- (3) The psalmist depicts God as surrounded by clouds and thick darkness, a consuming fire, the heavens and all people beholding his glory, and "most high over all the Earth."
- (4) Light dawns for the righteous and the upright have joy. For the enemy, fire consumes on every side.
- (5) See the Hebrew phrase in Ps. 97:2 and the verse references in the discussion guide.



LEADER'S ANSWER KEY

Psalm 103

- (1) The height between heaven and earth is an analogy for the extent of God's love.
- (2) The idea that humans are "dust" in this context is a metaphor for the basic limits on human capability. The psalmist encourages his readers that God is understanding, compassionate and merciful.
- (3) The reader might imagine being in the shoes of the author. In this case, the references to "my soul" would have personal implications. The reader might also imagine hearing this psalm in a communal setting. In this case, the references to "you" and "your" would have implications for the entire community.
- (4) In verse 7, the phrase "his ways" may refer to the 10 commandments, given on mount Sinai. Verse 8 is an ancient confession about God's character. In each text, the covenant relationship between God and Israel reaches a pivotal moment. This statement is a thread that runs throughout the Bible.
- (5) Exod. 19:1-5; Is. 40:31; Ps. 28:6-7; 31:21; 66:20; 82:1-8.

Psalm 107

- (1) 1) The desert wanderer finds an inhabited town; 2) the prisoner is set free; 3) the afflicted sinner is healed; 4) the drowning merchant prospers.
- (2) From the context of the entire psalm, it is clear that the psalmist considers God to be all sovereign. The tensions depicted in verses 25 and 29 as well as 33 and 35, may be thought of as a logical extension of God's sovereignty.
- (3) This psalm was probably part of a thanksgiving liturgy. The various scenarios are intended to strike a chord of relevance for each member of the community. The returnees from the Babylonian captivity may also be in mind.
- (4) – Group exercise –
- (5) 1 Sam 2:4-8; Is. 41:17-18; 62:12; Ps. 40:9-10; 66:13-15; 116:17.

Psalm 145

- (1) Acrostic poems, among other literary features, tell us that the importance of a Biblical text is found in how the author structures and arranges words, not only what words mean. This type of poetic arrangement also probably aided memorization and transmission.
- (2) For example, "extol," "bless," "praise," "laud," etc.
- (3) In Ps. 103, the quotation of this ancient confession appears with many other Mosaic themes. In Ps. 145, the confession is in a broader context of thanksgiving.
- (4) This is a hymn of praise. The first line "I will extol you, my God and King" sets the agenda for the remaining psalm.
- (5) See acrostic poems above. Also, Ps. 7:17; 116:12-19; 144:9-10.

