

Like a Tree Transplanted Psalms of Orientation

Please remember that the participant guide includes more information and topics than can be covered in a normal 45-minute Sunday School class. This is purposeful and is designed to give participants additional materials to study throughout the week if they wish.

Please review the lesson and pick which sections you would like your class to focus on. In this lesson, it is recommended that you do the introduction, sections I and V, and then one or two of the middle three sections (II-IV).

Welcome & Prayer

- Allow class to gather and have fellowship.
- By 10:00am at the latest, convene everyone for general announcements and attendance.
- Be sure to introduce yourself to the class. If guests are present, it would be appropriate to go around and have everyone introduce themselves (just names for brevity).
- Remind everyone about the First in Focus series and how it works. For instance:
 - “First in Focus is a special six-week Sunday School series designed to generate church-wide conversations around important topics in Christian faith and theology. In weeks 1 and 6, all participants gather for a lecture in Fifield Hall. In weeks 2-5, participants meet in their individual Sunday School classes to explore the topic further with the help of a curriculum.”
 - “This is week 2 and in it we’ll be exploring what are known as psalms of orientation and how they can guide the way we relate to God.”
- Lead class in a brief prayer.

Introduction

- Handout this week’s curriculum (printed copies are available in the classroom).
 - Please note that e-book versions of the participant’s guide are also available on the web at: <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- Read, or have someone else in the class read, the **Introduction** and the **Lesson at a Glance** sections printed in the curriculum.
 - Remember that some SS participants may NOT have been present at the week 1 lecture. Because of this, the introduction to this lesson offers a very brief review of the series as a whole.
 - You may wish to offer additional comments of your own to help give a sense of what was covered during the week 1 lesson.
 - Both an audio podcast and a video of the week 1 lecture are available online, as well as a link to the Prezi slides. See <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- For this lesson, there is NOT a “conversation starter” question. However, you may wish to offer one of your own that invites participants to reflect on the week 1 lesson.
 - You might ask: “What is one insight or idea that stood out to you about what the Psalms are and how they function in our lives of faith?”

I. Seasons and Psalms of Orientation

- Background: While the idea of the orientation-disorientation-reorientation sequence comes from Walter Brueggemann, he derives this schema from the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur.
- Read the opening text and pose the accompanying question.
 - The goal here is to try to name and describe what seasons of orientation look like in our own lives.
 - Encourage participants to think about what conditions in life (family, health, career, faith, community, etc.) led to this feeling of well-being and stability.
- Read (or have someone else read) the next block of text.
 - Keep in mind that the 3 labels used in this study (orientation-disorientation-reorientation) name different *functions* that individual psalms might play in our lives of faith.
 - What we'll attempt to do in this and the next 3 lessons is to explore how different genres of psalms (laments, hymns, thanksgiving psalms, wisdom psalms, etc.) match up with these various functions.
 - There are at least 3 types of psalms whose function could be described in terms of "orientation" –
 - Wisdom Psalms
 - Songs of Zion
 - Creation Psalms
 - This section gives a very brief description of these 3 types of psalms, including a list of individual psalms that fit that category.
- The next 3 sections explore these three types of psalms in more detail.
 - As noted above, you likely will not have time to cover each of these 3 sections (II-IV) in detail. Select 1, or possibly 2, to look at.
 - It is highly recommended that you make time for section V, even if it means only doing 1 of the 3 middle sections.

II. Wisdom Psalms

- Background: Though we typically associated OT wisdom literature with Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes, a handful of psalms also pick up on themes of wisdom. Among topics addressed in these wisdom psalms are reflections on the role of *torah* (Heb. for instruction, including law and narrative) in faith formation.
- Read the opening text and Psalm 1.
 - Psalm 37 is an example of a wisdom psalm that is structured as an acrostic poem.
 - A number of scholars suspect that Psalm 1 was placed at the front of this book as a way of framing all the Psalter as a meditation on wisdom.
- Pose the first discussion question.
 - Encourage participants to focus on the language and imagery of Psalm 1.
 - Possibilities include: a well-watered garden, a flourishing tree, delight, prosperity, the LORD watching over, a pathway, meditating on the law of the LORD
- Read the next block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - In Psalm 1, the water seems to be a symbol of God's *torah*. In the OT, streams of water are also associated with God's presence. In Ezekiel 47, streams of water flow from the temple and give super-abundant life to the land.
- Read the final block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - Transplanting trees is risky (and expensive). It essentially involves cutting a tree off from its life source (roots, soil, water). Once transplanted, the tree must be stabilized with

ropes and stakes and carefully watered and cared for until its roots begin to grow again and until the tree adapts to its new environment.

- This section emphasizes that seasons of orientation don't just happen. As with a transplanted tree, much work and care must be done in order to bring about the conditions necessary for flourishing.
- In the ancient Near East, kings would transplant trees from the nations they conquered and plant them in "victory gardens" back at their royal capital. This was done to demonstrate the king's power and dominion over both nations and the environment.
 - It is possible that Psalm 1 reflects a post-exilic context. In this view, the Israelites are the "transplanted" trees – while they were removed from their native soil during the exile, God has now replanted them back in the land.

III. Song of Zion.

- Background: The name "Zion" is often used in the OT to refer to Jerusalem, and more specifically, the mount upon which the temple was built. While it can be said that God is omnipresent, OT authors assumed that God's presence was most powerfully experienced in Jerusalem and its temple.
- Read the first block of text and Psalm 46. Pose the accompanying question.
 - The question here is open ended and encourages participants to compare the portrait of orientation found in Psalms 1 and 46.
 - God is more active in Psalm 46 than in Psalm 1; the threat to orientation in Psalm 1 is bad choices / personal sin. But in Psalm 46, the threat to orientation is external – mountains quaking, seas in upheaval, wars, etc.
- Read the next block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - God as Refuge is the most commonly occurring metaphor in the Psalter. It can take many forms: God as shield, strong tower, rock, strength, protective wings, etc. For an example, see Ps 18:1-2.
 - The question here asks participants to consider sources or places of refuge in their own lives. That is, what provides comfort/protection from things in the world that threaten to disrupt seasons of orientation?
- Read the final block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - This question intentionally circles back to a topic raised in our Fall 2016 First in Focus series.

IV. Creation Psalms

- Background: When most Christians think of the Bible and creation, they naturally think of the two creation stories in Genesis 1:1-2:4a and 2:4b-3:24. However, the OT includes a variety of other creation accounts, some of which occur in the psalms.
- Read the first block of text and Psalm 104:1-13. Pose the accompanying question.
 - As opposed to the previous sections, this section looks at more than one example of psalms of creation.
 - You may wish to read the text immediately following the question *before* you pose the question. This text provides additional background on Psalm 104.
 - Time permitting, you may have participants quickly review Genesis 1.
 - Similarities: stretching out the heavens, setting earth on a foundation, separating water from dry land.

- Differences: not as ordered, no explicit creation of light/darkness, creation of humanity not explicitly pictured.
- Read Psalm 139:7-17 and pose the accompanying question.
 - While Psalm 104 focuses on creation at the macro-level, Psalm 139 focuses on God's creative work at a micro-level.
- Read the final block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - Taken together, Psalms 104 and 139 might be thought of as reflecting on God's transcendence and immanence.
 - Transcendence refers to God's sovereign control of the world from afar.
 - Immanence refers to God's intimate involvement in the particulars of our lives.
 - The question here invites participants to reflect on which aspect of God most resonates with them. Different Christian traditions tend to emphasize different aspects of God. Catholic traditionally lifts up God's transcendence, while Baptist, evangelical, and many other protestant traditions lift up God's immanence.

V. Reflection

- Read the first block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - The first part of the reflection invites participants to consider some of the potential drawbacks of seasons of orientation – namely, the way they can lead to complacency and self-reliance.
 - The idea here is that times of crisis and loss typically bring people to the church, while in moments of well-being we feel we don't have any need for God.
 - Praying the psalms of orientation "in season" can help us:
 - be more aware that well-being is a gift of God
 - cultivate a spirit of gratitude
 - take responsibility for cultivating conditions that lead to well being
 - be mindful that seasons of orientation are not permanent
- Read the final block of text and pose the accompanying question.
 - This final section begins to pivot to the topic of week 3 of this series.
 - There can be value in praying psalms of orientation "out of season" in part because in times of disorientation, it is easy to lose hope. During these times, psalms of orientation can help us remember that things have not always been this way and can help point us towards the hope of what one day might be.
- The lesson ends with a list of additional psalms of orientation that participants might choose to pray throughout the coming week.