

## Sing to the LORD a New Song Psalms of Reorientation

*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. Begin with the introduction. The next three sections (I, II, III) each introduce a different type of psalm of reorientation. You may choose to do only two of these three sections for the sake of time. Section IV looks at prayers of reorientation that are prayed by two figures outside of the Psalter: Hannah and Mary. If you choose to do each of the first three sections, you may opt to skip section IV. However you navigate sections I-IV, it is highly recommended that you cover Section V, which looks at implementing psalms of reorientation in our lives.*

### 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 5 and in it we’ll be exploring what are known as psalms of reorientation, which speak of how God’s intervenes to bring about new hope and transformation in the wake of grief and loss.
- 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 for the previous week of this study. As a result, you may wish to offer additional comments of your own to help give a sense of what was covered during week 4.
  - An e-book version of the participant’s guide for week 4 is available online. See <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- Pose the **Conversation Starter** question to the class.

- This is optional – feel free to move directly to section I, which deals one of the two basic types of psalms of reorientation.
- The goal of this question is to get individuals to begin to think about when they have experienced a season of reorientation.

## I. Hymns of Praise

- Background: Hymns of praise are not only the second most common type of psalm in the Psalter (exceeded only by laments) but they also tend to be the most familiar. In fact, hymns of praise are the most frequently occurring psalms drawn upon in the lyrics of mainline Protestant hymnals, outnumbering laments psalms by a ratio of 5 to 1.
- Read the opening text and then read Psalm 117 with its accompanying question.
  - While most hymns of praise exhibit two characteristic parts (call to praise and reason for praise) these parts can be variously arranged, with one being more emphasized than the other depending on the particular psalm in question.
  - Psalm 117 is the shortest psalm in all of the Psalter. It also provides us with the simplest blueprint of the two parts of a hymn of praise.
  - In verse 1, the call to praise is both expansive and inclusive. The “nations” and “peoples” named implies that Israelites and non-Israelites alike are being addressed.
  - In verse 2, the reasons for praise are introduced with the English preposition “for,” which could also be translated “because.”
  - The two reasons given for praise are God’s steadfast love (a word implying covenant loyalty) and God’s enduring faithfulness. The Hebrew word for faithfulness, *’emet*, is the word from which we derive the English term “amen.”
- Read (or have someone else read) the next block of text.
  - This paragraph explains the meaning of the familiar term “Hallelujah.” This term, which also can be occasionally written as “Alleluia,” is often used as part of the congregation’s response to the assurance of pardon:
    - Leader: In Jesus Christ you are forgiven.
    - People: Thanks be to God, Hallelujah, Amen.
  - During Lent, many churches follow the tradition of not saying “Hallelujah” in worship. This is a symbolic way of reminding ourselves that Lent is a time for penance and reflection in which we anticipate, but don’t yet fully experience, the good news of the resurrection.
  - The question asks people to reflect on whether they are comfortable with public expressions of faith, especially those that are as unrestrained and exuberant as the calls to praise listed in this block of text. While praise need not take the form of raising our hands in worship or singing contemporary Christian worship music, even those for whom faith is more private should consider how it is they publically bear witness to their faith.
- Read Psalm 103:3-18 and pose the accompanying question.
  - Psalm 103 is one of the most well known and dearly loved hymns of praise.
  - vv. 3-5 offer a type of lyrical description of the benefits of God (see v. 2).
  - vv. 6-18 identify a common set of attributes that describe the nature and character of God.
  - vv. 8-10 recall the language of Exod 34:6-7, an ancient confession about God’s character.

## II. Songs of Thanksgiving

- Background.
  - Songs of thanksgiving share points of commonality with both hymns of praise and psalms of lament.
  - Like hymns of praise, songs of thanksgiving proclaim who God is by telling what God has done. Both types of psalms assume a divine and human audience, and both can come in individual and communal forms.
  - Like psalms of lament, songs of thanksgiving are uttered in relation to a specific situation of crisis. However, unlike psalms of lament which are prayed in the midst of crisis, songs of thanksgiving are sung after the crisis has passed.
- Read Psalm 30 along with the accompanying question.
  - Songs of thanksgiving often employ vivid imagery to picture the move from disorientation to reorientation.
  - Examples in this psalm include:
    - v. 1 – the psalmist rejoices, the foes do not
    - v. 2 – the psalmist cries for help, God heals
    - v. 3a – the soul is brought up from Sheol (the realm of the dead)
    - v. 3b – life is restored from the Pit
    - v. 5a – God's anger is a moment, but favor is for a lifetime
    - v. 5b – weeping in the night, but joy in the morning
    - v. 11a – mourning turned into dancing
    - v. 11b – clothed in sackcloth (used in rituals of lament), clothed in joy
    - v. 12 – praise, not silent
- Read the next block of text, which explains the function and purpose of giving thanks in these psalms.
  - The Hebrew word for “to thank” implies a public expression that is overheard by others.
  - This idea of thanks is very different than in English, where thanksgiving is often viewed as a private word of gratitude exchanged from one person to another.
  - Patrick Miller is a retired professor from Princeton Theological Seminary. The quote comes from his magnificent study: *Interpreting the Psalms* (Fortress Press, 1986), 68.
- Read Psalms 34:11-14; 40:9-10; and 57:9 along with the accompanying question.
  - In Ps 34:11-14, God's intervention leads the psalmist to teach others about the “fear of the LORD.”
  - In Ps 40:9-10, the psalmist bears witness to the “glad news” (the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *euangelion* = “gospel” or “good news”) within the congregation – likely meaning the temple or worshiping community.
  - In Ps 57:9, the psalmist gives thanks to God before the peoples and the nations (that is, non-Israelites).
- Read and consider the final discussion question.

## III. Enthronement Psalms

- Background: At the heart of the psalms of enthronement is the acclamation that “Yahweh is king.” It is likely that these words were uttered as part of a liturgical performance, carried out every year in the Jerusalem temple at New Year (Rosh Hashanah), as a way of acknowledging that Yahweh is king over other gods. This annual re-enthronement of Yahweh was meant to

affirm, in the context of worship, that God guarded and governed the world even in the midst of forces of death and disorder.

- Read the first block of text, Psalm 96, and the accompanying question.
  - According to this psalm and other psalms of enthronement, God's reign extends over all the earth; including over other gods.
  - Because of the universal scope of God's reign, the call to sing a new song to the LORD extends not only to Israel, but also the nations (v. 10) and even the heavens and earth itself (the seas, the fields, the trees of the forest; vv. 11-12).
  - These two points imply that God's reign brings about a state of peace and well-being for all of creation. The Hebrew term for this is *shalom*.
- Read the next block of text and along with the corresponding discussion question.
  - The belief that there is only one God (no other gods exist) is called monotheism. This view is only rarely found in the OT.
  - The belief that one God reigns supreme over lesser deities is called monolatry. This view is far more common in the OT and is implied in the enthronement psalms.
  - Monolatry is even implied by the wording of the first commandment: you shall have no other gods before me. That is, other gods exist, but Yahweh should be at the front of the line!
  - The discussion question introduces a quote from Martin Luther in which he defines a god as "that to which we look for all comfort and refuge in life." Thus, even though Christianity is a monotheistic religion, it can still be appropriate and useful to identify the other "gods" that compete for our loyalty and affection.
  - The point is that in praying enthronement psalms, we are invited to re-acknowledge God's sovereignty over these lesser deities that we might otherwise chose to "bow down to."
- Read the next block of text, which describes the nature and purpose of God's kingship in the enthronement psalms.
  - God's kingship is described in terms of equity (96:10), righteousness and truth (96:13), hating evil and rescuing the faithful from the wicked (97:2), and executing justice and righteousness (99:4).
  - The notion of "distributive justice" refers to the maintenance of a social order in which the most vulnerable members of society (in the OT they are characteristically described as the orphan, widow, and stranger) are protected and treated with fairness and equality in both the courts and in community life.
- Read Psalms 96:10, 13; 97:2; and 99:4 along with the accompanying question.
  - You might consider breaking up this question into two parts: 1) Who are the most vulnerable members of society today? and 2) What would it look like for the church embody God's "distributive justice" for these people?

#### IV. Prayers of Reorientation

- Background: The goal of this section is to explore several examples outside of the Psalter in which biblical characters pray psalms of reorientation. In addition to the examples provided, one might also consider Exodus 15:1-18, Ephesians 5:18-20, and Colossians 3:16.
- Read the first block of text, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, and the accompanying commentary.
  - There is no discussion question for this text. However, you may wish to include one.
  - For instance, you may begin by asking participants what they can remember about the story of Hannah.

- Alternatively, you could ask participants to identify where they see the theme of “reversal” in Hannah’s prayer.
- Note that Hannah’s prayer also picks up on several important themes from enthronement psalms: the incomparability of God (see v. 2); God as judge over all the earth (see v. 10)
- The last verse of the prayer mentions God’s anointed (Heb. = *messiah*). Rather than being a prediction of Jesus Christ, in this context God’s anointed likely refers to Samuel (prophets were often anointed) and/or Samuel’s role in anointed Israel’s first king (Saul).
- Read Luke 1:46-55 along with the accompanying question.
  - The most immediate context of Mary’s song is the visit she makes to her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Elizabeth greets Mary with the words “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb,” a phrase that is cited in the Catholic prayer known as the “Hail Mary.”
  - Mary’s song can be compared to hymns of praise in the Psalter, such as Psalm 34:1-3 and 103:17.
  - This song anticipates the central theme of the Gospel of Luke: divine reversal.
  - You may wish to ask participants where they have encountered Mary’s song before.
  - Some ancient manuscripts include Elizabeth’s name rather than Mary’s name in v. 46. In some ways, it would make more sense for Elizabeth to utter this prayer because her situation of barrenness more closely parallels that of Hannah.
- Read the discussion question at the end of this section.
  - That Paul and Silas sing hymns while in prison may reflect their profound sense of joy and thanksgiving for being made into new creations through Christ and in spite of their current circumstances.
  - Alternatively, Paul and Silas might be singing hymns rather than laments because, in that seemingly hopeless situation, such hymns reminded them of the ways in which God graciously intervened in their lives in the past.

## V. Living Doxology

- Background: The goal of this section is to encourage participants to reflect on how psalms of reorientation can help them cultivate a “life of doxology” – that is, a life in which praise and thanksgiving are boldly practiced.
- Read the three suggestions listed.
  - You may wish to read all three together and then discuss, or you can pause for discussion after each point.
- Pose the final discussion question, leaving room for participants to interact with the content of this final section and to add their own thoughts and suggestions.