

SUMMER 2023 UALC FACILITATOR GUIDE



SONGS OF SUMMER

ENCOUNTERING GOD IN THE PSALMS

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

Scrolling through the radio is like scrolling through the full range of human emotions. The bravado of a rap song, then the lament of a country crooner. The anger of hard rock and the lounging of a singer-songwriter. Believe it or not, thumbing through the book of Psalms is just like that. The full range of emotions is there, and God wants to meet us in it!

So, this summer we will look at the emotion behind popular songs from the radio, match that emotion with the Psalms from the Bible, and discover that Jesus is the fulfillment of our deepest longings.

In addition to these small group discussions, we encourage your group to join us in our Daily Worship devotions, reflecting on a different passage throughout the week that correlate and texturize the theme of our Sunday passage. You can find our Daily Worship devotions at ualc.org/dailyworship.

HOW TO USE THE FACILITATOR GUIDE

This is meant to be a resource to help you guide your group through a Bible-based discussion and into your prayer response time. You'll begin with a brief introduction to the topic, followed by a warmup question, often somewhat related to the topic of the study ahead. From there you'll read Scripture together, explore questions in an open conversation (remembering to practice good listening and encourage dialogue), and close with a time of prayer with each other. We end with prayer prompts that may help you tie these passages to the needs or desires of your group, and to bless what the Lord has done in your time together.

There are typically more questions that your group will get through. This is by design. We would rather you have more questions than you need than too few. We advise that the facilitator review the lesson ahead of the meeting and choose a few questions they'd most like to ask, so that you can skip over some questions for the sake of time. Remember, you're meeting routinely, so there will be time to circle back on these conversations again.

Please allot appropriate time for prayer at the end of your meeting. Prayer is an essential and irreplaceable part of small group. We'd rather you abbreviate the discussion and move on to prayer rather than have a long discussion and speed through prayer. That doesn't mean you can't pray efficiently (Mat 6:7), but we believe that God hears and responds to our prayers, and that we are knitted together when we pray with each other.

If you have any questions or comments, please contact Dan Kidd at dkidd@ualc.org. For more small group resources, including facilitator training, visit ualc.org/smallgroups

Special thanks to our authors: Brian Chandler and Elaine Pierce.

I FOUGHT THE LAW & THE LAW WON

psalm 1

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 1

The Psalms (often called the Psalter) are a collection of prayers, poems, songs, laments, and prophetic proclamations written by a variety of named and unnamed authors. The Psalter is part of the Wisdom Literature portion of the Bible, a subcategory of the *Ketuvim* or “writings” in the classic Hebrew groupings. Wisdom literature is interested in identifying the nature of a righteous life—those who live according to God’s wisdom rather than what is right in their own eyes—and the consequences of these divergent paths. Without stating it explicitly, this harkens back to the Garden of Eden, where humanity chose to “know” good and bad for themselves—acting however seemed right in their own eyes—rather than relying on the wisdom of God.

The psalms broadly deal with this wisdom theme by poetically and lyrically describing, in first hand witnesses, the experiential push and pull of trying (and often failing) to live in the wisdom of God. There are also a number of Psalms that identify others who are acting wickedly, describing the consequences of their sinfulness, and asking for God’s judgement against these evil-doers.

Psalm 1 distinctly identifies the nature and consequences of living life in God’s wisdom—that is God’s Law. This would include and interact with the Mosaic law—the Deuteronomic tradition of all the things found in the Torah—but it’s also speaking more broadly than just the Mosaic law, about a life lived in obedience to and blessed by God’s prevenient will and wisdom. In our passage and discussion today we will see how crucial living in God’s wisdom way is, while also recognizing that we are profoundly prone to wander away and rebel against God’s will.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This week we begin a new summer series from the book of Psalms called Songs of Summer. Over the course of this series we will look at the themes and emotions behind popular songs from the radio, match them to the themes and emotions within the Psalms, and explore together how Jesus is the fulfillment of our deepest longings. In Psalm 1 we will hear the psalmists’ heart for God’s wisdom, will, and instruction, and how that path leads to blessing, rootedness, and good fruit, and how the alternative path, away from the Lord, leads to misery and destruction.

OPENING QUESTION:

- If you had to choose one song to sing karaoke to, what song would you choose?
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OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like: *Father, we thank you for being a creative God who knows us and our hearts and delights in our prayers. We pray that as we hear your word today we would encounter you and that we would, in fact, delight in your will and way. Amen*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Psalm 1. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- How does this psalm make you feel? Did you have an emotional response to it?
 - One of the many gifts of songs and poetry is that they can cause us to feel or experience something that other forms of writing simply don't. Take a few moments to consider the effect of the poem on your small group.
- What stood out to you about the way this psalm was written? Are there any verses or phrases that you found extraordinary?
- In this context, what do you believe the psalmist means by "blessed?"
 - v. 3 describes that they are fruitful, not prone to withering, and "all that they do prospers." Consider together what that might mean in practical terms. What are some of the features in the life of someone who lives within this blessedness?
 - You might consider together that there are different measures for prospering, and that even Jesus, who lived an entirely righteous life, was not rich, was mocked, and eventually executed by so many around him.
- What might it be like, in practical terms, for us to "walk in step with the wicked," "stand in the way of sinners," or "sit in the company of mockers?" In what ways might we behave like that?
 - We might be tempted to think of these as things that other, wicked people do, but not us. But anyone whose honest with themselves knows that they are not without sin. Encourage the group to think about ways we might behave that defies God's wisdom and will.

You might notice that the poem, when describing the way of those who are not blessed, regresses from walking to standing to sitting.

- Why do you think the psalmist might have used the idea of growing sedentary as an example of waywardness?

- What would it look like for someone to avoid sitting in the company of mockers today?
 - It might be worth paying special attention to this particular path, because of how common mockery and casual cruelty can be.

The psalmist describes the blessed ones as those who yield fruit in season.

- What kind of fruit might one walking in step with the Spirit bear in season? Where have you seen this kind of fruit yielded in people around you lately?
 - Paul lists several fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Certainly there are more in addition to this. Allow your group to spend time reflecting on how the Lord is growing this fruit in those around them.
 - Facilitator, you might take this opportunity to call out some of this fruit in the lives of the members of your group.

The psalmist speaks about the blessed one delighting in the law of the Lord; meditating on the law day and night. In this case, the law almost certainly includes the laws in first books of the Bible, but also to the wholistic will and way God intends for humanity.

- When you think of delighting in God's law, and meditating on it day and night, what comes to mind?
 - We might be inclined to think of the law as a list of behaviors that are permitted and forbidden. It could be that in this case the psalmist is thinking of a world full of God's creatures living as God intended them to live from the very beginning. God's people delight in his will, they want his version of the world to be true—that his Kingdom would come on earth as it is in heaven. The law, in this case in the wisdom and will of God, and the instructions God gives us to live in this will and way.
 - The word the NIV translates "meditates," in Hebrew, is a word that evokes mouth sounds, like chewing cud. The idea here is that God's wisdom is to be rolled around in our minds, to be chewed on consistently.

The sermon title of this passage is *I Fought the Law and the Law Won*. In this song, the artist sings about several ways he's rebelled against what he ought to have done (leaving his baby, robbin' people with a six-gun), and as a consequence, the law won and he's left with the consequences (breaking rocks in the hot sun, regretting that he's lost the best girl he's ever had, pining for the good fun he once had).

- What are some of the consequences of our rebellion?
 - Notice here that even though our God is gracious and forgiving, there are often consequences for our sinfulness. The Lord will sometimes discipline us in order to prevent us from continuing to sin and harm ourselves and others and bring us back into his will, but it's also the case that our sin harms others and the consequences are not easily resolved.
 - Discuss with your group how God's grace and forgiveness can help mitigate some of the consequences of sin, including broken relationships with others. You might also consider that some sin has consequences that won't be resolved until Christ returns.

- Compare the mood of the psalmist to the mood of the artist singing *I Fought the Law and the Law Won*. How do you relate to them?
 - Facilitator, you might consider reading a few of the lyrics or playing the song for your group at this point.
- If all that is required of us is to know and obey God's law, why don't we?
 - In reading this psalm, we might get the impression that all we need to do is to know what God's will is and then do it. This sounds simple enough. But the whole Bible, and our own lives, show us that knowing and doing what is wise in the eyes of the Lord is beyond our own abilities. We continue repeat the story from Genesis 3, we choose to do and live by what is right and good in our own eyes, forsaking the wisdom and goodness of God.
- What hope do we have to enjoy the blessings of God and instead walk in the path of God's wisdom and will?
 - We depend on the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, the resurrection and abundant life of Jesus, and the hope of God's Kingdom proclaimed by the prophets. We receive the fruit of the Spirit and cultivate it inasmuch as it depends on us. We hear God's voice as we worship, read Scripture, pray, and hear his word preached.

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

In today's passage we encountered a psalmist who longed to delight in God's instructions and will. Take some time as a group to silently reflect on listen for the Lord. Invite the Holy Spirit to delight you in the his intentions for the world and for you life specifically.

Invite the group to share any things they would like to request of the Lord in this time together. Pray for one another.

EVERYBODY WANTS TO RULE THE WORLD

psalm 2

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 2

Today our groups will be hearing and discussing Psalm 2. There are a number of similarities between Psalm 1 and 2, particularly in their shared focus on the paths of the wise and righteous (the will and way of the Lord) and of the wicked and foolish (those who do what is right in their own eyes). It's worth noting that God is described as scoffing and wrathful in this passage, which are relatively atypical descriptions of God throughout Scripture. In our discussion we will examine why God takes that posture against those who claim themselves rivals to the Lord, his people, and his throne. We want to find a healthy balance fear of the Lord without undermining Psalm 85's proclamation that the Lord is gracious, merciful, and slow to anger (literally, "long in the nose.")

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This is the second week of our Songs of Summer series and today we'll be hearing from and discussing Psalm 2. We will examine together what it looks like when we pursue what is right and good in our own eyes rather than trusting in the will and way of the Lord. We will hear about how God responds to those who set out to be God's enemy, and how the Lord blesses those who seek refuge in him. In short, we will explore together how everybody wants to rule the world.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Have you ever had a great boss or coach? What made them great?
- Who comes to mind when you think of great leadership? What made/makes them a great leader?

OPENING PRAYER:

Lord, we ask that you lead us and bless us as we hear your word. Train us in your wisdom, transform us by the power of your Spirit, and show us yourself and your heart today. Amen.

SCRIPTURE:

Ask someone to read Psalm 2. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- What phrases or verses stand out to you from this psalm?
 - Take some time to allow your group to share about what drew their attention in the passage. You might point out some of the imagery used in the passage or the emotions described or lying beneath the psalm.

The psalmist begins by speaking of the nations conspiring and plotting and kings rising up and uniting against the Lord and his anointed one.

- What are some examples from the Bible of kings or groups of people behaving in this way?
 - The Bible is full of stories of individuals and groups that defied God and threatened God's people. We might think of the people in the days of Noah, or the people at Babel, or Pharaoh, Haman, the Philistines and Goliath, Jehoiakim, Ahab and the prophets of Baal, Nebuchadnezzar, or King Herod.
- What became of these individuals and groups that defied the Lord and his people throughout the Bible?
 - To the people of Noah the Lord sent a flood, at Babel they were divided and confused by various languages and sent away, Pharaoh and his army were crushed in the Exodus, Haman was hanged, Goliath was slain with a rock and beheaded, Jehoiakim lost Judah to Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuchadnezzar went mad and wandered about like a wild animal, the prophets of Baal were slaughtered in the Kishon Valley, and Herod died a murderous tyrant who plotted but failed to defeat Jesus.
- Why do you think the Bible offers so many instances of people defying God, ruling over others, and eventually toppled by the Lord?
 - There are many right answers to this question. Certainly the Bible wants to make it clear that power, honor, riches, and subjugation are common temptations, and that these temptations, though they might seem good for a time, lead to destruction. These stories also remind God's people who have suffered because of cruel, abusive, oppressive leaders or hateful groups that mean harm, that the Lord is with them and that justice will eventually come and what's wrong will be made right again, if not in this life, in the Kingdom to come.

In v.3, the enemies of the Lord say to themselves, "Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles."

- What do you imagine they think are the Lord's chains and shackles binding them?
- In what ways might we be tempted to think of God's instructions and law as chains or shackles?
 - Receive all answers. This is another instance where we can explore our tendencies to want to do what is right in our own eyes rather than what is wise and from the Lord. Take this opportunity to discuss some specific ways we might treat God's will as though it's oppressive.

- Why do you think the psalmist portrays the Lord as one who scoffs and laughs at those who plot against him?
 - This is a relatively rare way of speaking about God throughout the Bible. There might be a distinction to be made between God scoffing here and the mocking described as an activity of the wicked in Ps. 1:1. That said, it is preposterous for anyone to believe that they can successfully oppose the Lord or his people indefinitely.
 - Again, this verse is likely intended to comfort those who fear those who threaten God and hurt others. Though it may seem like there harm and rebellion will go on indefinitely, the God of justice will not allow evil or rival “gods” to last. What may seem to us like truly impenetrable evil to us is laughable to the God of the universe who will make all things right and will rule as the one true King. This same tone of mocking is used against death because of Jesus’ resurrection; “where, o death, is now thy sting?”
- Do you relate to the sentiment behind this passage? Does this psalm give you hope and encouragement, or does it concern you?
 - This is open to interpretation by those who hear it. Later we will discuss a healthy fear of the Lord, but it’s worth considering together the temptation we all have to want be the masters of our own universe.

In 1985, Tears for Fears wrote and sang,

All for freedom and for pleasure
 Nothing ever lasts forever
 Everybody wants to rule the world

- How do these lyrics reflect what we’ve heard from Psalm 2?
 - Certainly the conspirators against the Lord are expressing this same notion of wanting freedom and pleasure, unrestrained (in their minds) by the will of God for them. But, for Christians who have tasted and seen the liberation and healing of God’s Spirit, the notion that we are “more” free left to our own devices is foolish.
 - You might also consider whether “nothing lasts forever” is meant to explain or to excuse the notion that everyone wants to rule the world. It might be worth asking “do Christians agree with the statement that nothing lasts forever?” Is that not antithetical to the everlasting, abundant life Jesus promises us?

Psalm 2 ends with a warning to kings and rulers and a proclamation of blessing over those who seek refuge in the Lord.

- How does this psalm help us understand the nature and causes of God’s wrath?
 - Notice that this wrath is leveled at those who would claim superiority over the Lord, he will not allow other people to act as God, especially when they act in violence, greed, and subjugation.
 - It might be worth comparing this psalmist’s portrayal of God’s wrath being likely to flame up at any moment to Psalm 85, which describes God as “merciful, gracious, and slow to anger.”

- What does it look like, practically speaking, for someone to take refuge in the Lord?
 - Receive all answers.
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Invite your group to prayerfully reflect on if or how they might be treating God's will as a shackle, or how they might be thinking of rebellion against God as freedom. As things come to mind, consider sharing them with the group or an individual in the group, and pray for each other, that the Lord would continue to lead you into full surrender to him—that you would seek full refuge in his arms, and that he would lead you in his way.

JESUS TAKE THE WHEEL

psalm 6

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 3

Note that our second opening question is about the worst pain your members have experienced. This is a good, insightful thing to know about one another, but it does open the door to uncomfortable disclosure. Consider beforehand if you think your group will be comfortable enough sharing this information with the group. If your group is newer, or if you have a visitor, you can always permit anyone not to answer, or skip the question.

We will discuss how Jesus Takes the Wheel is similar to Psalm 6. You may want to plan to play part or all of this song from Carrie Underwood for the sake of your conversation.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

This is our third week in our summer series in Psalms, titled Songs of Summer. Each week we're hearing a psalm together and exploring the themes and emotions expressed in them, using songs we might hear on our radios that match them to help connect with them even further.

Carrie Underwood's song, "Jesus Take the Wheel" perfectly captures the feeling the Psalmist is communicating in Psalm 6:4. "Turn, LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love." Lots of people have had this experience – things get so dire that they have nowhere else to turn and must call out to the Lord, "Jesus, take the wheel!" Today we will hear and consider these themes in Psalm 6 together.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Have you ever seen a movie or read a book that had you in real suspense? What made that story so suspenseful?
- What is the worst pain you've ever experienced? How was it resolved?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Father in Heaven, thank you for the opportunity for us to meet together, pray together, and hear your Word. As we consider the troubles and pains of this world, reveal yourself to us. Meet us in our hurt, our fear, and our needs, and turn our eyes to you, even today.. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Psalm 6. Consider inviting them to read it as though they're reading a poem. Thank them for reading..

DISCUSSION:

This is a song, meant to be played with stringed instruments, attributed to David, clearly written in a time of great trouble, both outward and inward.

- How does David describe his state of mind, physical and mental?
 - He is faint (v.2), his bones are in agony (v.2), his soul is in anguish (v.3), he is worn out from groaning (v.6), he is weeping constantly (v.6), his eyes are weak with sorrow (v.7).
- Why is David so sick with grief?
 - Is God punishing David? Is David afraid that God is against him?
- What about David's song do you relate to? Have you ever felt this? How so?
 - Discuss how the Lord uses discipline and judgment to halt sinfulness and draw people back to God and the Kingdom he intends. Consider the right balance between fearing the Lord and his response to evil, and believing the confession that God is merciful and slow to anger.
 - You might speak together about how God's judgment in David's life leads him to confession and a plead for mercy.

In the beginning of the song, we get the sense that the Lord is turned away from David.

- Why might David feel as though the Lord has turned away from him? Have you ever felt like that?
 - Receive all answers.
- Based on this song, what does David believe about death?
 - v.5, "Among the dead no one proclaims your name, Who praises you from the grave?"

Note that the song seems to shift in tone beginning in v.8.

- Why do you think the song shifts its tone in the end? Has anything changed in David's circumstances to bring about this shift?
 - Receive all answers. In v.10 we read that his enemies "will be overwhelmed," indicating that this has not yet happened, but that he is relying on the yet-unfulfilled hope that God will respond in this way.
- How does David know that the Lord has answered him?

- Discuss what it means when David says, “The Lord accepts my prayer.”
- How might we join David in the conclusion of his song, hoping in God’s deliverance even when our circumstances haven’t changed?
- Have you ever prayed for physical healing? What was the result?
 - Hear each other’s stories. Consider our reality, that sometimes God heals us in real time as a sign and act of his love, power, and mercy, and sometimes the Lord doesn’t heal us immediately or this side of the grave.

In her song, Jesus Take the Wheel, she sings

Jesus, take the wheel
 Take it from my hands
 'Cause I can't do this on my own
 I'm letting go
 So give me one more chance
 And save me from this road I'm on
 Oh, Jesus, take the wheel.

And

Oh, I'm letting go
 So give me one more chance
 Save me from this road I'm on
 From this road I'm on

- How are these songs alike? What makes these songs so similar and relatable even though they’re written centuries apart?
- What in your life makes you cry out “how long, O Lord?”

PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

Today’s discussion ends by inviting the group to consider what makes us cry out to the Lord. Allow your group to take a few minutes to prayerfully think and listen to the Lord about the things that make them cry, “how long, O Lord?” After a few minutes, invite members to share what came to mind. Take time to pray for God’s help, presence, and his answer to these prayers and situations.

WAITING FOR THE WORLD TO CHANGE

psalm 10

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 4

Today's discussion from Psalm 10 will invite your group to consider the sentiment behind John Mayer's song *Waiting on the World to Change*, and how this matches the psalmist's desire for a world that is not as it should be. You may want to prepare to play part or all of the song for the group.

We will invite you to read a passage from Ecclesiastes with your group. Prepare to leave time for this in your discussion.

The NIV makes this note: Psalms 9 and 10 may originally have been a single acrostic poem in which alternating lines began with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. In the Septuagint they constitute one psalm. You might encourage your members to read 9 and 10 over the following week for the full effect of both passages.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

As we continue on in our Songs of Summer series today we'll be hearing from Psalm 3. "Waiting on the World to Change" by John Mayer captures a feeling that many of us have had, maybe especially in the last several years. There is a mixture of hope and cynicism in the cry of the song – looking for something to come and fix what seems so broken. In Psalm 10, we hear the same kind of desperation, and learn that God is, indeed, working on behalf of those in suffering.

OPENING QUESTIONS:

- Is there a song you go to when you are feeling a certain emotion?
- Share with us a time you heard a song or read a poem that really made you feel something.

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord, thank you for the gifts of summer, of small group, and the evergreen gift of your Word. As we read your Scripture today, show us your heart, your will and wisdom, and we pray that we will encounter you today. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Psalm 10. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

Psalms 10 begins similarly to Psalm 6, expressing a perceived distance between the psalmist(s) and the Lord.

- Why do you think feeling or fearing that the Lord is distant is such a common theme in Bible?
 - Notice that this is not a feeling reserved for the Bible, but for so many of us in times of suffering or turmoil.

The psalmist speaks a good deal about the character and behaviors of the “wicked man.” I suspect that most of us will read this and think of others—either another person or group of people—who are villains in our own story. But, it’s worth considering that none of us are immune to sinfulness and any of these things might tempt us.

- How might even well-intentioned Christians be tempted to behave in the ways described in vv.2-11?

In Psalm 1, we hear that the blessed person is “*like a tree planted by streams of water*” and “*whatever they do prospers*.” But in Psalm 10:5, we hear that prospering is not exclusively a consequence for those who are blessed.

- In what ways do you see this in our world? How do we see people prospering even because of their sinfulness?

This is a common problem we see in the books of the Bible some scholars call “wisdom literature” (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs). In some important ways it is true that righteousness leads to thriving and a good life. But, sometimes, it seems like people whose lives are consumed with evil become rich, powerful, popular, and live long lives with healthy bodies, all while the people of God suffer. The book of Ecclesiastes has a lot to say about that topic.

Have someone read Ecclesiastes 8:11-17

- What might this type of observation lead us to feel? How might we be tempted to respond to the reality that sometimes evil seems to be rewarded?
 - We might be tempted to believe that God is not actually just or concerned with our suffering. We may be tempted to be nihilistic, where we’re convinced that goodness, faithfulness, or righteousness is meaningless or even detrimental to a good life. Or, we might be convinced that because we are not wealthy, healthy, universally loved or accepted that we are wicked and experiencing the judgment of God (note that is what Job’s friends and wife thought about him even though he was not being punished by God).

- How might we protect ourselves from giving into the belief that life or how we live is meaningless?
 - We allow the truth of psalms like Psalm 1 or the wisdom of Proverbs to shape our minds and hearts. Oftentimes sinfulness leads to quick and evident destruction, but not always. We consider that Psalm 10 and Ecclesiastes offer healthy and legitimate questions about what we observe in the world, and we don't give into simple minded thinking that good things always happen to good people and bad things to bad people. We ultimately trust that Jesus is a good and trustworthy judge and that all the things that are bad will be made good eventually, and all that is bad will be burned away like chaff in a fire.

In his song *Waiting on the World to Change*, John Mayer sings,

Me and all my friends
 We're all misunderstood
 They say we stand for nothing and
 There's no way we ever could
 Now we see everything that's going wrong
 With the world and those who lead it
 We just feel like we don't have the means
 To rise above and beat it
 So we keep waiting (waiting)
 Waiting on the world to change

- How does this song “rhyme with” the sentiment of the first part of Psalm 10?
- What might be some unhealthy ways of responding to the feelings described in this song?
 - Note the cynicism or nihilism we discussed above. We might be tempted to give up on the idea of being righteous or living in God's wisdom and will and choose to do what is sinful so that we may be rich, powerful, famous, or physically healthy. Or, we may lose all hope and live in profound sorrow and anger, even such that we lash out and harm others.
 - You may also find your group considering that there are times when God's people are called to act in ways that bring about justice. It is crucial that we only do this as we are led by the Lord, rather than acting how we see fit and then justifying that the Lord would approve.
- Have you ever prayed that God would bring harm to someone else? Why do you think that this is part of the Psalm 10? (v.15)
 - We may have been tempted to do so. This is by no means an isolated prayer in the Bible or the psalms. The truth is most of us can relate to wanting our enemies or those who hurt us to feel our pain (and then some). Driving in rush hour, for instance, might be a time we need most to pray “lead us not into temptation.” So, on the one hand, it is refreshing to hear in the Bible a raw and honest emotion we understand personally. That said, because we follow Christ, we pray that his will and way would be done in and through us, so that we would be slow to anger, and that we would love and pray for even those who persecute us. When we find ourselves praying something like this, that might also be an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to draw us into mercy, peace, and forgiveness—in order that we would be liberated from the influence of our enemies and that we

would truly receive and believe in God's forgiveness of us.

Psalms 10 ends with the confession that the Lord is King for ever and ever.

- How might confessing that for ourselves help us deal with the circumstances described in this psalm?
 - Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you needed to believe in God's Lordship despite the circumstance? What was that like?
 - Receive all answers.
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

In today's discussion we explored how we might feel like God is absent or disinterested in our times of need. Perhaps someone in your group is feeling like this now. Invite your members to share if anyone would like to receive prayer that the Lord is with them and for them. You might also consider together what injustices or problems in our world seem entirely out of our hands and cause us fear or anger. As your group is willing, have them share those things and pray together that the Lord would heal what is broken.

I SAW THE SIGN

psalm 19

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 5

This week we will use the chorus of *I Saw the Sign* by Ace of Base to consider the themes of Psalm 19. You might note that the theme of the song in general is not the same as the psalm, so you might skip playing the song, or simply play the chorus of the song if you think the verses might be distracting or confusing.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

In our Songs of Summer series, we're exploring the book of Psalms, and how these songs, poems, anthems, and laments creatively and evocatively express a vast array of emotions, desires, and proclamations. Each week we're pairing a psalm with a song you might hear on the radio and meditating together on the timelessness of the Psalter.

Today we will be reading Psalm 19 together. Wouldn't it be great if God always gave us a sign when we faced a tough decision? That's the feeling Ace of Base made famous in their song, "I Saw the Sign." In Psalm 19 we hear that all of creation points to the truth of the Creator, and that the Word of God is a constant sign to those who will listen for it.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Is there a time you saw or experienced something that made you marvel at God's creation?

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Thank you for bringing us back together this week. God, we are thankful for your creation and for your desire for us to know your goodness. We pray that you would open our eyes and ears to see and hear the signs you have declared for us this week.*

SCRIPTURE:

Biblical poetry, like that found in the Psalms, is often written in couplets. These couplets are a poetic feature used by the author to sometimes either state the same thing again in a different way for emphasis or for continuity of a point.

Psalm 19 is one such poem. For example: v. 1: "The heavens declare" is paired with "the skies proclaim" while "glory of God" is paired with "work of his hands". As we hear Psalm 19, enjoy the imagery of the poem, and how these images are artistically woven together in these couplets.

Have someone read Psalm 19. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

- Are there any images or couplets in this psalm that stood out to you?
 - More on v. 1 example: As mentioned above, there is a pairing of “the heavens declare” with “the skies proclaim” as well as with “glory of God” paired with “work of his hands.” Notice these statements are similar but there is another layer to these verses as well. The *glory* of God is in the *heavens* which would be the higher heavens where God resided while the *skies* refers to the earthly realm that is *the work of his hands*.
- How do the skies proclaim the work of God’s hands? What other things in nature are personified in the Bible as praising the Lord?
 - The psalmist mentions both day and night. Both the sun by day and the stars and moon at night speak to God’s creation.
 - Just a few other examples of this personification of the creation singing praise in the Bible can be found in Psalm 8, Psalm 148, Job 38:7
- Why do you think that nature—the skies, seas, earth, flora, and fauna—are such regular topics in the Bible, especially in Biblical poetry?
 - There are many right answers to this question. The Bible begins with two stories of God creating (Genesis 1 the world, Genesis 2 the garden). Within the repetitions throughout Genesis 1 and 2, there’s a clear character emphasis on God as the Creative One. Humanity is then created and give the responsibility of tending to the earth, partnering with God in caring for the plants, animals, earth, and sky. Not only does creation point to her creator, creation reminds us of our relationship with God as beneficiaries and caretakers of his creation.

When reading this psalm, you may have noticed there seems to be a thematic shift between vv. 6 and 7 of this psalm.

- How might these distinct subjects (the evidence of God in the created world and the law of the Lord) be connected for our psalmist? What might they mean to tell us by linking these two subjects?
 - In v. 7 the psalmist changes to discussing the law of the LORD or God’s *torah*. God’s law is perfect or complete, providing the nourishment for the soul. The psalmist switches from describing the material world God created to provide physical nourishment to the even more life-sustaining attributes of the moral and spiritual values. The psalmist understands that existing merely on the nourishment of the sun is not the same as truly living, nourished by wisdom, will, and way of the Lord. Only God’s word can provide the sustenance we need to truly thrive as God intended.
 - It’s interesting that in the first 6 verses the psalmist uses the more ancient, generic Hebrew word for God, *El*, while in the verses after v. 6 he uses the personal name for God, *Yahweh* (this often appears as “LORD” in translations like NIV). When expressing the God that has created the cosmos,

the author uses the more general name for God but when discussing God's word, his revelation to his people, the author uses the more personal, relational name for God. Some scholars and theologians have described these distinctions as "natural revelation" and "special revelation."

The quality of life determined by obedience to God's word is described by the author in vv. 7-9.

- What 6 things does the psalmist attach to the name of the LORD? Why does he choose these nouns to God's name?
 - Law, statutes, precepts, commands, fear, and decrees. By attaching these nouns to the name of the LORD, the psalmist is framing the LORD as the King and lawgiver. It may be that, in coupling these proclamations about God's *torah* with the revelation of God in creation, the psalmist is identifying Yahweh as the Creator of all things (naturally revealed) and as the King of Creation, who reigns in directives and ordinances that lead humanity to live as they were intended (specially revealed).
- Do any of these six nouns listed seem different from the others? Which one and why?
 - In v. 9 one of the nouns mentioned is fear. Unlike the other objects listed that all originate from God, in this instance the fear of God is something that originates from the individual in relation to God. The answer here may lie in the translation. "Fear of the LORD" can also be translated as religious practice or worship. For further study, read 2 Kings 17:25-28. In verse 28, the phrase "taught them how to worship the LORD" can also be translated "taught them how they should fear the LORD". V. 9 in Psalm 19 could be translated "The worship (or religious practices) of the LORD is pure, enduring forever."
 - Fear of the Lord, used this way, is typically applied to those who lead people (kings, priests, etc.). Most of the time in the Bible, when God pours out his wrath, it is on those who have misused their authority, resources, or abilities to harm, neglect, or disenfranchise others. The God of justice will not let those abuses go on indefinitely, and therefore it is wise for leaders to live disciplined lives with a healthy fear that God will not long tolerate that kind of evil.

In verse 11-12, the author writes: *"But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults."*

- What do you think is the purpose of these lines in the psalm?
 - Sin in the Bible can be the things we do in rebellion against God's wisdom. It can also be "missing the mark," or failing to live up to the perfect standard of the world the Lord intended for us. Although studying God's law and precepts can help illuminate a person's sinfulness (much like the sun imagery used in the earlier part of the psalm), the psalmist knows that they still need to ask for God's forgiveness for both sins known and unknown.
- What might be some examples of hidden faults? Have you ever had an experience where the Holy Spirit convicted you of something you didn't previously think of as a sin or a fault?
 - Facilitator, you may want to consider an example to model for the group. Consider a time you may have realized after the fact that you'd said something you shouldn't have, perhaps even in a tone that was unnecessary or unkind. Perhaps you'd been carelessly doing or thinking something that was not what the Lord wants for you? Invite your group into appropriate vulnerability here.

In the final verses, the psalmist implores God for acceptance of his thoughts and writings, writing “*May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight.*” We hear this sentiment throughout the Bible in relationship to the Levitical rituals of sacrifice. Leviticus uses the phrase in instances where a worshipper brings a sacrificial offering to the altar.

- Why do you think the psalmist uses this phrase that relates to ritual sacrifices?
 - The psalmist connects the spiritual, prayerful communion with God (found in meditating on his wisdom and will, and by carrying out his commands) to the ritual sacrifices performed by priests. The union with God and the posture of submission are notably similar.
 - It is also interesting to note that in verse 7, the start of this portion of the passage, the author refers to God’s law as perfect which can also be translated as without blemish. When making an animal sacrifice in the Levitical system it was to be perfect and without blemish in order to be acceptable to God. The author is implying that indeed the spiritual, prayerful communion with God is an acceptable form of worship and sacrifice!

Though it’s ultimately a song about a break up, and her basking in a life lived without someone she didn’t need, Jenny Berggren (lead singer of the ‘90’s band Ace of Base), sang this in chorus,

I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes
Life is demanding without understanding
I saw the sign and it opened up my eyes
No one's gonna drag you up
To get into the light where you belong
But where do you belong?

- How do these particular lyrics relate to Psalm 19? What confessions or questions do you see in this chorus similar to those in our psalm?
 - Music, like most art, invites us into creative interpretation and finding abstract connections. We can find connections between this song and psalm even if they were not intended by the songwriter.
 - Notice seeing a sign as evidence and illumination of the truth. Understanding, or in Biblical language wisdom, is a balm for the demands the world makes on us.
 - No person but for Jesus will “drag us” into the light where we belong (1 John 1:7, “*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*”)
 - And of course, a pertinent question for all of us, where do you belong?
 - How might we give ourselves opportunities to marvel at the Creator King?
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

If you are in a larger group, consider breaking into 2 or 3 groups for prayer. Spend some time this week in prayer asking God to reveal signs and wonders to you. Pray specifically that the Lord would meet you as you meditate on his word and way, and as you marvel at his creation. Pray together that the Lord would draw your mind to whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, and whatever is admirable.

UNSTOPPABLE

psalm 27

FACILITATORS:

WEEK 6

This week we are hearing Psalm 27 together, paired with *Unstoppable* by Sia. Consider playing a portion or all of the song to help emphasize the parallels between the psalm and the song. This guide will prompt you in a portion below to ask a question related to the song and this psalm's theme.

INTRODUCTION FOR THE GROUP:

In this summer series we've called Songs of Summer, we're hearing together from the book of Psalms. As we read these psalms, we will notice how they creatively invite us to join the psalmists in their emotions, desires, and proclamations. Each week we're pairing a psalm with a song you might hear on the radio to notice how the themes of the book of Psalms resonate with us thousands of years after they were written.

On first listen, Sia's chart-topping hit, "Unstoppable" sounds like a triumphant anthem. The character in the song declares that they are, as the title says, unstoppable. And yet, if you listen carefully to the verses, you'll discover that the chorus is a front – the singer is actually hurting while pretending to be strong. So where does real strength come from when it feels like life is falling apart? Psalm 27 gives us the answer that Sia seems to be searching for.

OPENING QUESTION:

- Have you ever witnessed or been a part of a remarkable victory or achievement? Tell us about it.

OPENING PRAYER:

Pray something like this: *Lord, you we begin by proclaiming your majesty and honor. As we prepare to hear this Psalm that speaks of your might and glory, we are so thankful that you have invited us to know you, that you love us, and that you are good to us. Prepare our ears and our hearts for your good news today. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE:

Have someone read Psalm 27. Thank them for reading.

DISCUSSION:

In Psalm 27, David begins by singing praises of God's glory over, and protection from, his enemies.

- How does David describe these enemies?
 - David begins by stating that he shall not fear anyone, which certainly suggests that his enemies might be worthy of fear were it not for God's protection. These enemies seek to attack and devour him, the enemy army besieges him, breaking out in war against David, but they will fail and he is not worried.
- Do you find the first 3 verses of this psalm relatable? Do you find yourself in similar circumstances as David?
 - For many of us, the threat of our enemies violently attacking us may not feel particularly relatable. For others of us, we may know intimately what it means to have enemies who want the worst for us, and we relate to David feeling attacked—be it emotionally or physically. There may be others among us who do not feel attacked by a mortal enemy, but rather a spiritual enemy, who uses our life's circumstances and even our own minds to make us feel defeated and hopeless.
- How is the confidence that David has in the Lord different from self-confidence?
 - Notice in v.5 he writes, "For in the day of trouble, he will keep me safe in his dwelling; he will hide me in the shelter of his sacred tent and set me high upon a rock." This is not a boast of personal strength, or claim of glorious power over his enemies. David is not claiming a brave victory in war, but rather that he is hiding for safety out of the reach of those who seek to kill him.
- How might we find safety and refuge in the Lord? Have you ever sought shelter in the Lord?
 - Receive all answers. Consider sharing with the group a particular instance where you felt overwhelmed or even under fire and found God's cover and help.

In v.6, David states, "Then my head will be exalted above the enemies who surround me; at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy; I will sing and make music to the Lord."

- Why do you think David's response to being surrounded by enemies is to shout for joy, sing and make music? What does this tell us about David?
 - Among many other things, this expresses a deep trust in the Lord, that even when the circumstances seem dire, he will sing and shout for joy. Clearly David is someone who, in times of trouble, responds by signing songs and making proclamations.
- How might shouting joy, singing, and making music effect us in times of trouble?

Not all of us are musicians, or can even carry a tune. We aren't all wired as David is, but certainly we might all benefit from coming to the Lord in some way in our times of trouble.

- In what other ways might we respond to trouble in our lives? Have you ever met God in other ways in seasons of trouble or fear?
 - Receive all answers.

David then goes on to ask the Lord to be merciful to him, and that his heart tells him to seek the face of God.

- What does it mean to seek the face of the Lord?
 - There are many good answers to this question. Among them is that seeking the face of the Lord is obviously a pursuit of relationship and intimacy. It seems that David is not merely looking for God to protect him, but he acknowledges God has been his helper, and he wants to see and be seen by the Lord.
 - Consider with your group what it might look like for you to seek the face of the Lord.

In *Unstoppable*, Sia sings what might first be mistaken for a boastful anthem of self-promotion, but on close inspection, her lyrics revealed something rather different.

I'm unstoppable
I'm a Porsche with no brakes
I'm invincible
Yeah, I win every single game
I'm so powerful
I don't need batteries to play
I'm so confident

Yeah, I'm unstoppable today

Break down, only alone I will cry out loud
You'll never see what's hiding out
Hiding out deep down
I know, I've heard that to let your feelings show
Is the only way to make friendships grow
But I'm too afraid now

- Why do you think we might be tempted to act as though, or even believe that, we are invincible?
 - Consider with your group how we might mistake being vulnerable or mortal to be a moral or social failure. You might share that acting unshakable or powerful in times of real concern is being disingenuous, and it may prevent us from seeking necessary help and cover in the arms of the Lord.
- What might happen were we to respond to trouble by putting on a brave face and “going it alone?” How is that different than putting our trust and lives in the care of the Lord?

Psalms 27 ends with this:

I remain confident of this:
I will see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.
Wait for the Lord;
be strong and take heart
and wait for the Lord.

- What does waiting on the Lord have to do with God's goodness or being strong and taking heart?
 - Have you ever had to wait on the Lord's goodness? What was that like?
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PRAYER AND MINISTRY:

In today's passage we discussed how we might be prone to respond to times of trouble with our own strength, instead of seeking refuge or help in the arms of the Lord. Invite your group to prayerfully reflect on ways or situations in which they might be tempted to act out of their own strength instead of seeking God's face. After a few moments of reflection, invite them to share, if they're comfortable, about how they are tempted to respond on their own, and pray together that each of you would, in these instance and at all times, seek the face and shelter of the Lord.