



# PSALMS

REAL HELP FOR REAL LIFE

RAY ORTLUND

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ray Ortlund received a BA from Wheaton College; a ThM from Dallas Theological Seminary; an MA from the University of California, Berkeley; and a PhD from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Pastor Ortlund served as associate professor of Old Testament and semitic languages at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, from 1989–1998.

He was ordained by Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena, California in 1975. He served as the pastor of Immanuel Church in Nashville, Tennessee (an Acts 29 church), is a council member with the Gospel Coalition, and is the president of Renewal Ministries. Ray has been married to Jani Giles Ortlund for fifty happy years, and they have fifteen delightful grandchildren.

# HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to know and understand the Psalms. Six sessions of study examine the Psalms through six key felt needs. Through the study we will meet the God who meets us where we are and offers real help for real life.

## GROUP STUDY

Regardless of what day of the week your group meets, each session of content begins with the group session. Each group session uses the following format to facilitate simple yet meaningful interaction among group members and with God's Word.

## START

The group session will begin with a few questions designed to help you introduce the session's topic of study and encourage everyone to engage with the study.

## WATCH

Beyond Ray's teaching outline, this page is intentionally left blank for you to take notes during the group teaching. Codes to access the teaching videos are included with your purchase of this book and can be found on the insert located at the back of this book.

## DISCUSS

This section is the main component of the group session. The questions provided are designed to facilitate the group study of the session's topic. The goal is to better understand God's heart and how the Psalms offer us real and immediate help in a variety of circumstances.

## PERSONAL STUDY

Three days of personal study are provided after each group session to help individuals think biblically about the session's topic. With biblical teaching and introspective questions, these lessons challenge individuals to grow in their understanding of God's Word and to respond in faith and obedience.

## PERSONAL BIBLE STUDY 1 AND 2

The group and personal studies are complimentary. The first personal Bible study takes a fuller look at the psalm being studied in the group and expands on the content and themes from the group teaching. The second personal Bible study examines another psalm with a similar theme. These studies are meant to deepen your understanding of the Psalms and give you more concentrated time to reflect upon and apply what you learned in the group session. The personal study section ends with a journaling activity designed to help members distill key truths.

## GOING DEEPER

In addition to the group video teaching, this study includes one personal study video per session where Ray helps you become a better reader of the Psalms. These videos can be accessed by redeeming the access code found on the insert in the back of this book.

## LEADER GUIDE

A cutout leader guide for each session is provided on pages 128–42, which highlights key points from each session and offers helpful considerations for leading a group discussion. Additionally, you'll find tips for helping you lead a small group.



SESSION ONE

REAL HELP  
FOR  
REAL LIFE

# GROUP STUDY

## START

*Welcome everyone to session 1, “Real Help for Real Life.”*

**Ask participants to introduce themselves. As they do, invite them to find and share one verse from the Psalms that’s meaningful to them. This can be a favorite verse or a verse they find in the moment.**

**What are some emotions we might experience reading and studying the Psalms together?**

John Calvin called the Psalms “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.” He explained, “There is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. . . . There is no other book in which is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solicitude which God exercises towards us are celebrated.”<sup>1</sup>

**With this in mind, what real help for real life do you hope to gain in our study of the Psalms?**

In all circumstances—joyful and tragic, confident and fearful, calm and anxious, righteous and sinful, hopeful and despairing—David and other psalmists wrote songs of prayer to God. These are not tidy, polite, or fake. They are the honest expressions from real people getting real with God—and finding real help. As such, they teach us what it’s like to encounter the living God. They help us answer the questions: Who is God really? Who am I really? And what happens when those two collide?

We’ll begin our study in Psalms 1 and 2, as a way of discovering the direction of the entire book. As we begin the first video session, let’s invite God to speak to us.

*Father, we need to rediscover and experience You as personal, vivid, and real each and every day. Give us new insight into Your heart as it is connected into our mess. We want to know You—not hypothetically or only as doctrine, but as our moment by moment presence and help in every need.*

1. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, translated by James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), xxxvii–xxxviii.

## WATCH

*Use these statements to follow along as you watch video session 1.*

Three things to notice in Psalms 1 and 2:

1. These two psalms introduce the whole book.
2. Psalm 1 is marked with strong contrasts, with wise personal guidance.
3. Psalm 2 is equally bold, with hope for the entire world.

To access the teaching sessions,  
use the instructions in the back  
of your Bible study book.



## DISCUSS

*Use these questions and prompts to discuss the video teaching.*

**Read Psalms 1 and 2. In your view, what statement of truth do these two psalms together make?**

Ray gave three insights to help us get the most out of Psalms 1 and 2.

1. These two psalms introduce the whole book.

**Who is blessed in Psalm 1:1? In what way?**

**Who is blessed in Psalm 2:12? In what way? How are the blessings of these verses related?**

**Do you most often pray and relate to God in a personal or worldwide context? Why? Why are both necessary?**

**Is it possible to truly experience personal renewal apart from confidence in worldwide renewal, or vice versa? Explain.**

2. Psalm 1 is marked with strong contrasts, with wise personal guidance.

**What does the pattern of “Not this, but that” in Psalm 1 make boldly clear?**

We asked God to show Himself to us not hypothetically but as personal, vivid, and real each and every moment. And in the video teaching, Ray explained, “Psalm 1 is a flag-planting psalm that helps us be decisive.” So let’s personalize it.

**What should Psalm 1 help you be decisive about? What clear contrast does your life need to begin to exemplify?**

3. Psalm 2 is equally bold, with hope for the entire world..

**How would you describe the overall message and tone of Psalm 2?**

**What does it mean to take refuge in the Lord?**

Our world, like the world of David, the world of the first Christians (Acts 4:23-31), and the world of every generation, is filled with people in angry internal and external war, refusing to take refuge in the Lord. At the very same time, Jesus offers the hope of eternal blessing to all who turn to Him.

**In what situation do you need to acknowledge the evil around you and pray for boldness to speak and act with the certain hope of Christ?**

**What remaining questions or comments do you have about this session's teaching video? What was challenging, convicting, encouraging, or timely for your current circumstances?**

## CLOSE IN PRAYER

*Prayer Requests*

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## PERSONAL STUDY 1

# PSALM 1

### OUTLINE OF PSALM 1

The Present: The believer flourishes, the wicked decline (1-4)

The Future: The Lord will preserve the righteous, and them only (5-6)

Psalms is a book of sacred songs—songs of praise and songs of lament. In fact, the Psalter (the book of the psalms) was the hymnbook of the temple; its content filled Israel's personal and corporate worship. It is interesting, then, that Psalm 1, which stands as the introduction to the biblical hymnbook, focuses on “the law of the LORD.”

**Read Psalm 1.**

**Why would “the law of the LORD” stand out as the emphasis of the very first song in the Psalter? What does this teach you about worship?**

We step into the worship of God through and according to the Word of God. It's not as though we're worshipping God when we're singing, and then the sermon is something else. Christians worship God by singing the Bible, praying the Bible, reading the Bible, preaching the Bible, and hearing the Bible. Psalm 1 puts the gospel at the forefront of biblical worship, because *the biblical message alone* can lift us to God in worship that is pleasing to Him. Worship is the human response to the presence of the Lord. And since the Lord is ever present, worship is a whole-life practice.

**What principles in Psalm 1 can you apply to your personal worship?**

Psalm 1 instructs our heads and woos our hearts, because God wants to free us from disorder and distraction within to worship Him with both our head and heart.

# TRUTH FOR OUR HEADS

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Psalm 1 offers God’s truth for our heads as the first step away from false worship and into the true worship of God. It replaces our idolatry—“the counsel of the wicked”—with the law of the Lord as the only finally convincing and fruitful object of the mind’s meditation. The word *meditates* in Psalm 1:2 is neither a dreamy religious laziness nor an uninvolved intellectual sport, but a profoundly personal internalizing of biblical truth. Meditation is human thought at its best, and it is essential to true worship.

**Read the following verses and identify the truths God wants you to affirm and confess:**

**Psalm 14:1**

**Psalm 92:5**

**Psalm 145:3-5**

**Which of these truths stand out to you most personally right now as real help for real life? Why?**

Psalm 1 defines two ways of life and the choices related to them with no ambiguities. The word *not* appears six times in six verses in the original text, and the word *but* appears three times. The logic of the psalm is clear: “Not this, but that.”

**Describe what Psalm 1 teaches regarding “not this, but that”:**

(Verses 1-2) Not \_\_\_\_\_,  
but \_\_\_\_\_.

(Verses 3-4) Not \_\_\_\_\_,  
but \_\_\_\_\_.

(Verses 5-6) Not \_\_\_\_\_,  
but \_\_\_\_\_.

## TRUTH FOR OUR HEARTS

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God has defined our choices clearly, yet we struggle between them. The problem is that even when our heads possess knowledge, our hearts can be divided. We sometimes want it both ways. Because of this, we form our thoughts on issues like sexuality, money, success, and numerous other things based on our preferences rather than God's Word.

Because God loves sinners whose hearts are divided, He does not simply leave us with an intellectual choice. He provides the breakthrough our hearts desperately need. In Psalm 1 God invites us to trade in our preferences for His love in Christ as the defining center of everything we are. Being a Christian means that we now define ourselves in relation to Christ. Christ, not self, defines a life worth living.

**Read Romans 12:1-2. In what situation(s) are you tempted to conform to the counsel of the sinful world? Why?**

**God calls you to be transformed, or redefined, by the renewing of your mind. Consider Psalm 1 and Romans 12:1-2 together. How does our renewal take place?**

**Psalm 1:1 begins with the word *blessed* to describe the one who worships God rightly with both head and heart. From verses 3-6, what does it mean to be blessed?**

The word *blessed* is a congratulatory formula. In other words, in Psalm 1:1, God is saying to those who have become decisive in taking a stand for Christ, "Way to go!" Through Christ, God is willing to be the head cheerleader of everyone who worships Him according to His Word. Beyond cheering us on, God enriches our worship as He enables us to grow, bear fruit, not wither, and prosper in a way that will satisfy our hearts forever.

**In what situation do you need to become decisive in taking a stand for Christ? Why is it important that you do?**

**What does Psalm 1 say about the idea that you can be a “casual Christian”?**

The word *delight* in Psalm 1:2 raises the bar for worship by reminding us that there is no such thing as half-hearted, play-it-safe, keep-a-low-profile Christianity. The Christian faith is gladly wholehearted. Given who God is, “the law of the LORD” cannot be a wearying imposition. It can be the object of our highest delight. But the word *delight* also lowers the bar. You don’t need a PhD to be refreshed by the Bible. You only need love for Christ.

**Read John 5:39. What should we be looking for as we read and memorize and meditate on the Bible?**

## **TRUTH FROM CHRIST**

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The Bible isn’t a set of principles for living the Christian life. The Bible is the story of God not abandoning us but coming down to us through Christ, though it cost Him His life. And seeing Jesus as the key to everything in the Bible makes the whole Book come alive. If we read the Bible as the endless display of Christ in His many glories, “the law of the LORD” will never stop activating our worship.

**Does Psalm 1:3 mean that those who delight in God’s Word will always have an easy and comfortable life? How do you know?**

**Read Psalm 73:2-3 and 17. We experience times of weakness in which our deep enjoyment of God's Word will falter. Does this mean that the promises in Psalm 1:3 are not ours during hardship? What does it mean?**

**Reread Psalm 1:5-6.**

The word *therefore* is the hinge on which Psalm 1 turns from time to eternity. Verses 1-4 are in the present tense. Then verse 5 fast-forwards into the future, all the way into the eternal state. Verses 1-4 are about how we live now; verse 5 describes eternity as we shall experience it then.

**Psalm 1 is clear: *Delight determines destiny*. How should this truth impact daily life?**

**In terms of the struggles of daily life, what does it mean to you that “the LORD knows the way of the righteous” (v. 6)?**

If you want to worship Christ but sometimes you feel unable, the Lord knows you. He understands you. He is involved with you. He has chosen you for Himself, He has inclined you toward Himself, He is calling you to Himself, and His grace will hold onto you forever. Rest in that today.

## PSALM 1

# REAL HELP FOR REAL LIFE

*Use the spaces below to journal a prayer or response to each prompt.*

**COUNSEL.** Do you wonder what is the best way to live? You don't have to! God clearly shows you in His Word what is righteous and wicked.

**CLARITY.** There is only one way to turn from idolatry to worship—reject your own formulas for blessedness, and let God redefine you with the blessedness of Christ.

**CONTENTMENT.** The righteous of Psalm 1 are idolatrous sinners whose sin was nailed to Christ on the cross. God offers Jesus's righteousness as your new standing in His presence.

**CONFIDENCE.** If you are in Christ, your future is hopeful and bright—ready for Psalm 2, Psalm 3, Psalm 4—all the way through the Psalter, to the great hallelujahs of Psalms 146–150 in that perfect temple above.

**CONSTANCY.** If you want to worship God, shut the distractions out and pick up your Bible. Open it, read it, believe it, meditate on it, delight in it, obey it. God will show you Christ. He will refresh you and help you, from now on into eternity.

## PERSONAL STUDY 2

# PSALM 2

### OUTLINE OF PSALM 2

The psalmist asks: Why do the nations rage? (1-3)

God responds: The Lord laughs (4-6)

The Messiah declares: This world is His (7-9)

The psalmist advises: Surrender to the true King (10-12)

As the gateway into the Psalter, Psalms 1 and 2 zoom in and out. Psalm 1 zooms in to emphasize our individual reality with the living God. Then Psalm 2 zooms out to show us the macro reality—our Messiah is a conquering King, having absolute rule over the entire world. Both psalms help us discover God—not hypothetically, but as personal and present, moment by moment.

**Read Psalm 2:1-12.**

**List the words and phrases about God that stand out to you, along with any questions, concerns, or feelings those descriptors raise.**

Psalm 2 could be described as the ancient Israelite national anthem. It celebrates the struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of man, with God's victory through Messiah.

The psalmist took his stand in this conflict. He was devoted to God. He was astonished to see the nations of the world conspiring to overthrow God's kingdom. With a sense of outrage he picked up his pen to alert us to what is happening in the world, to assure us of God's victory, and to call us to commitment.

This psalm consists of four paragraphs of three verses each. In the first paragraph, the psalmist points to world events, turns to us, and asks a question.

## OUR QUESTION

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**Reread Psalm 2:1-3. What point is the psalmist making with this opening question?**

**Where do you see evidence of the world raging against God today?**

Everywhere we look we see people trying to construct an alternative reality that excludes the authority of God. The important thing to grasp is that people move in crazy directions because they are rebelling against *God*. That is what the psalmist is helping us to see in verse 1. There is no peace in this world because the world resents divine authority.

**What does verse 3 indicate about how the world perceives the rule of God?**

**Read Matthew 28:18-20. What connection is there between Jesus's words to us here and Psalm 2:1-3?**

All around us there is a rebellious attempt to build a world without God. This is why the church is so important. It is a constant reminder that God is still there, and that life under God is freedom and blessing, not chains and slavery.

**How has the community of faith pointed you back to God at the time when you needed it most?**

# GOD'S LAUGHTER

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In the second paragraph, we find out how God feels about what is happening.

**Reread Psalm 2:4-6. Does God's laughter mean He is insensitive to the effects of rebellion in the world or that He thinks it's funny? What does God's laughter teach us about Him?**

As God looks down at this world, He is not biting His nails with sweat running down His face. He is totally unthreatened. He views human rebellion—however powerful and sophisticated—with contempt. In comparison to His power and authority, the attempts of rebellious people to throw off that authority is laughable. No one can knock God off His throne.

We know that God is gracious toward all His creatures. But He doesn't worry. He is in control, enthroned above in the heavens, and will conclude the day of grace when He wishes.

**How does recognizing God's sovereign control change your perspective on world events?**

**What about your own personal struggles?**

In the first four verses, the psalmist looked out at the world scene. In verses 5-6, he looked forward into the future, when God will step in decisively to put a stop to the world's conspiracy.

**Read 1 Thessalonians 5:2-3. What do these verses teach us about the forms of "peace and security" we construct that exclude God's authority?**

In the third paragraph, the Messiah speaks.

**Reread Psalm 2:7-9 to see Jesus and His authority.**

**Read Acts 13:32-33. What is the “today” referred to in Psalm 2:7?**

This psalm is a declaration of the messianic office, which many Israelite kings occupied but which only Jesus fulfills. In Acts 13 Paul quoted Psalm 2 to explain that our Lord’s resurrection and ascension into glory were His coronation as King of the world. God has fulfilled His promise through the resurrection of Christ.

**Read Colossians 1:16-17. Why is it important to believe that “begotten” is different from “created”?**

**Read Hebrews 1:1-5. What does God’s declaration of sonship teach us about Jesus’s kingship and authority?**

**Read John 5:22. What does it mean that God has given Jesus the nations and ends of the earth as His heritage and possession (Psalm 2:8)?**

Christ is not the son of God in the sense that He is “God Jr.” Rather, the Son shares the Father’s divine being and essence. As the Nicene Creed says, Christ is “begotten not made.” He is God’s anointed, eternal King with absolute authority over this world. In comparison, even the most powerful among us are like clay pots that He can shatter to pieces. God is not saying to us, “Here is Christ. Take Him or leave Him.” God is saying, “Here is Christ. Take Him, accept Him *as your king.*”

## A CLOSING ADMONITION

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The poet concludes with some advice for us all.

**Reread Psalm 2:10-12. What did the psalmist say the kings of the earth should do?**

**How does that apply to you?**

**What changes would take place in your life this week if you were to truly take refuge in Christ?**

God sent Christ to offer peace to anyone who is willing to come under His authority. That's true for all of us, whether we hold great power or little. The call is to voluntarily accept the authority of Jesus as rightful King of the universe. When we do, we take refuge in the One who truly possesses all authority.

Psalm 2, then, zooms out to widen our view of the reality made clear in Psalm 1—there are only two options. We can either take refuge in the one true King, or we can suffer the wrath of the one true King. There is refuge *in* Christ from the wrath to come, open to all who seek Him in faith, but there is no refuge *from* Christ.

**Why is this message of Jesus's royal ultimacy *good* news for us?**

## PSALM 2

# REAL HELP FOR REAL LIFE

*Use the spaces below to journal a prayer or response to each prompt.*

**RESOLVE.** There was a radical edge to the psalmist’s faith. He expressed a sense of outrage regarding human rebellion against the Lord. He refused to accept the charade of human autonomy. What about you? Jesus is King. Does He have your full allegiance, loyalty, purpose, and passion in life?

**STRENGTH.** The Lord reigns—unafraid, steady, resolute, sovereign—over everyone and everything and He is *for you*. What opposition causes you to feel weak? The reality is that in Christ, human opposition counts for nothing.

**JOY.** The introduction to the Psalter begins with “blessed” (1:1) and then comes back around to end with the same word (2:12). “Blessed are all who take refuge in him,” then, isn’t simply a throwaway thought. The blessing for righteous worshipers of King Jesus is uninhibited joy forever. Your everlasting future is described further in Isaiah 35:10. Describe that scene in your own words.

## HOW TO READ THE PSALMS

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In the Going Deeper teaching, Ray gives three helps for reading and understanding the Psalms:

- 1. POETIC STRUCTURE**—parallel lines working together to build and enhance understanding.
- 2. IMAGERY**—opening our eyes to dimensions of God’s care and commitment that might never have occurred to us.
- 3. TYPES**—psalms of praise and psalms of lament, joy, and pain, with patterns emerging in both.

*As a way of putting these helps into practice, take a look again at Psalms 1 and 2. Examine and consider these two psalms in light of the three helps according to the prompts below.*

**POETRY.** List any parallel lines in Psalms 1 and 2 that serve to build and enhance understanding for you. Specifically, how do these lines enrich your understanding of the psalm’s meaning?

**IMAGERY.** Identify any imagery in Psalms 1 and 2 that makes the truth more vivid and real to you. What clarity do these figures of speech give you about the reality of who God is, who you are, or what happens when those two collide?

**TYPES.** Choose from the list below what types of psalms are Psalms 1 and 2 (there can be more than one).

WISDOM—instructive psalms that provide practical guidelines for godly living.

MESSIANIC—royal psalms that portray Christ as the undisputed sovereign King.

LAMENT—impassioned psalms that cry out to God for deliverance from trouble.

IMPRECATORY—provocative psalms that invoke God’s wrath and judgment on enemies.

THANKSGIVING—grateful psalms that express a profound awareness of God’s blessings.

PILGRIMAGE— festive psalms that promote a celebrative mood of praise as Israel, while traveling to Jerusalem for the annual feasts, recollect God’s goodness to them.

ENTHRONEMENT—awe-inspiring psalms that describe the majesty and providential care of God’s sovereign rule.

Now note the emergent pattern or flow of thought in Psalm 1. Psalm 2 is given as an example.

**Psalm 1:**

**Psalm 2:**

*Humanity’s rebellion against God (vv. 1-3), God’s response to rebellion (vv. 4-6), the Messiah’s divine authority (vv. 7-9), resulting instruction for humanity (vv. 10-12).*

To access the teaching sessions, use the instructions in the back of your Bible study book.

