



On your marks

The Psalms are an amazing collection of poems, prayers and songs of praise and have been the staple diet of worship both for Jews as well as Christians for centuries. They give us words for all sorts of occasions and moods as we work out our faith in God in the rough and tumble of everyday life. Many children will never have come across this book and may be surprised to discover that, for example, as well as expressing thanks and delight in God, it is also OK to argue with God, express despair and depression, shout angrily about things that are wrong and even have doubts about God's love. All this is in the Psalms and a lot more. It is an important resource to help our children grow into a mature faith.

Get set

Read through the psalm first before you work with your group. Look at different translations. The verses quoted in the outline below are from the CEV (Contemporary English Version). Any specific materials needed to step into this particular psalm are included in the instructions below. The outline includes: a key verse; a brief introduction; an idea for acting out the psalm; prompts to talk about the psalm; a craft idea; some new ways to retell the psalm; a suggestion for reflection on the psalm; and finally a focus for praying for others with this psalm.

Go!

Key verse: *The Lord protects everyone who follows him (v. 6).*

All our spiritual journeys start with the choice that this Psalm puts before us.

Will we sink our roots deep into God or we will just be blown along with the crowd and get carried away with what will harm us and those we love? Do we want a life that is worth living or will we just drift along into chaos? This is the choice!

Many people believe that this psalm was written specially as an introduction to the whole collection. Those who sincerely seek God's blessing on their lives will be those who think about the law of the Lord day and night. No wonder the psalms have become the staple diet of morning and evening prayer in so many Christian traditions. Indeed the whole Psalter is regularly chanted and meditated on in as short a period as a week by some monks. This psalm stands then as a doorway into all the psalms that follow. Will we agree with its basic teaching that we need the words of the Lord to live a successful and fruitful life (v. 3) or will we choose to go our own way (v. 4)? In other words, this opening piece is asking us to decide now with what attitude we will be reading all these poems and songs lest our 'stepping into the psalms' be in vain.

Act out the Psalm

Imagine you are a tree. What sort of tree would you be? A great weeping willow? A tall popular? An



enormous blossoming cherry tree? Invite your group to make statues of these different trees. How can you show, as a statue, that you are indeed firmly rooted as a tree?

Now imagine you are just leaves that are blowing around – or as the psalm puts it ‘straw blown by the wind’ (v. 4). Act out being tossed and driven by the wind. What does it feel like to be forever tumbling and rootless?

Talk about the Psalm

Talk with your group about which trees are their favourites. Look through a book together that has lots of pictures of different trees.

What makes some trees special? Is it their size, their blossom, their fruit or their great age?

Do you think a tree is a good image for someone trusting in God’s word?

In the New Testament we are told to ‘plant your roots in Christ and let him be the foundation for your life’ (Colossians 2:7) and of course Jesus tells us to be like a wise person who ‘built on solid rock’ (Matthew 7:25).

What does this mean practically in our everyday lives?

Psalm 1 stands as a clear preface to the whole of the Book of Psalms, asking us to decide what sort of person we want to be. Rooted or rootless? A tree by the water or a straw in the wind?

How could you put this psalm into words that would make sense to people today?

What contemporary image best describes the contrast between putting God first and leaving God out of the picture? Is the tree simile still helpful in doing this?

Craft the Psalm

This psalm tells us that ‘treelike believers’ are the ones who have God’s law – his words – open to them day and night.

Decorate a small branch that has twigs (to represent a tree) with some opened books made from coloured paper to represent the tree’s leaves, as a visual of this psalm’s teaching.

This psalm tells us that ‘treelike believers’ have running water nearby – a regular renewal from God’s Spirit. The water is the Holy Spirit who is poured out for us to help us bear fruit. Put down a blue strip of material next to your decorated tree to represent this aspect of the psalm.

This psalm also tells us that ‘treelike believers’ steer clear of trouble (i.e. bad words, bad company and bad attitudes). Set up a fan and then on different bits of paper ask the group to put words or pictures that represent things that spoil our life with God (such as lying, cheating, saying one thing and doing another, jealousy and hatred, and so on). Turn on the fan and watch the bad being blown



away.

Retell the Psalm

1. Here is a version of this psalm to use with very young children - including actions and repetition

I'm going down, down, down into God's love (*stamp feet on each word 'down'*)

So I can grow up, up, up to be my best (*reach up high on each word 'up'*)

I'm saying no, no, no to all that is bad (*hold out one hand as a stop sign for each word 'no'*)

And I'm saying yes, yes, yes to all God wants (*thumbs up for each time 'yes' appears*)

I'm like a tree, tree, a tree that cannot be moved (*hold up both hands - branch-like -on each word 'tree'*)

So I can care, care, care just like God (*reach out forward on each word 'care'*)

I'll not be blown, blown, blown this way and that (*sway one way and then the other on each word 'blown'*)

But I'll trust, trust, trust in God's great power (*punch the air on each word 'trust'*)

2. And here's a version that you could use with an older or mixed aged group.

You want to be happy?
And make God glad?
Stop going with the crowd
Say 'no' to what's bad

Read God's book
Day and night
Follow what it says
It'll teach you right

Strong like a tree
Rooted by water
At the right time
You'll know what you ought t'

Not like a straw
Blown by the wind
If you've no roots
You might be binned!



God'll keep you
Safe and sound
If you follow him
You're on sure ground!

Reflect on the Psalm

As a focus for reflective worship with the psalms, use a base cloth of felt that is cut in the shape of a musical instrument, such as a harp.

Read the psalm slowly, putting down the following suggested 3D visuals or pictures to illustrate the words:

Verse 1: Place a wooden figure down on the cloth and as you read the opening verse about not listening to bad advice, not following the crowd or becoming a scoffer, place your hand either side of the figure's ears, then in front of the figure's eyes and finally across its mouth.

Verse 2: next place a small open Bible next to the figure.

Verse 3: put down a model tree and then a strip of blue felt for the steam. Finally put down an artificial branch or twig with some leaves and fruit on it.

Verses 4 and 5: put down some pieces of straw and blow them to one side after verse 4.

With your hand make a clear division between the straw and the fruitful tree.

Verse 6: finally, lay down some grey felt cut out like a flat road junction, one arm pointing to the tree and the other to the straw.

Pause and ask those watching which part of the psalm has been special for them today.

Pray for others with this psalm

Pray for all those facing big decisions and hard choices in life