



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: *'You let your glory be seen in the heavens above'* v. 1(b).

This psalm is a great outburst of praise and wonder, inspired by looking up into a night sky that is bright with stars. No wonder this is such a favourite for so many people, who, like David, are awed by the majesty of the heavens and who by them are prompted to ask the big questions about what God is like and who they are. It is usually the natural world that is held up as a mirror of the glory of God. Paul writes about that to the Christians in Rome in Romans 1:20 and preaches the same to the Greeks in Athens in Acts 17:23-24. Here, however, it is the stars, galaxies and solar systems above that bear witness to God's grandeur. The power of God is made visible by glimpsing the immensity of the universe around us. And human beings are a special part of God's glory (see vv. 3-5), each with a unique job to do, ruling it on God's behalf (vv. 6-8). God is the star-maker and God makes people - you and me - star attractions within that creation.

For many of us, it was in childhood that faith was nurtured as we encountered the wonder of the heavens. Perhaps this is why David includes the verse about the praises of children (v. 2). It might even be that this is a psalm from David's earliest years, composed while he was out in the fields watching over the sheep beneath a starlit night sky.

Act out the Psalm

When we first meet David in 1 Samuel 16, he is quite literally a bit of a nobody! He is the youngest

of seven brothers and surely at the bottom of the pile in the family pecking order. For example, when Samuel comes to Bethlehem to make a sacrifice, it is clear that the family hasn't even bothered to invite David along to the party! Instead he is out on the hills looking after the sheep and has to be fetched when Samuel asks if there are any other brothers (1 Samuel 16:11).

I wonder how this made David feel? Did he perhaps have an inferiority complex? Did he maybe think he wasn't worth much and wasn't very special? One way into this psalm is to read it as David's discovery of just how special he is, as he looks up at the stars above and talks with God in prayer. As a group, use the following simple drama guidelines to interpret and unpack the psalm in this way:

1. David as the youngest of the family must have lived on everyone else's hand-me-downs. In addition, he was given the worst jobs to do. *Act out the feeling of not being very special.*
2. This worried him and he couldn't sleep at night for thinking about it. *Act out tossing and turning; pulling the bedclothes over him to make it darker and then off him because it became too hot; trying different ways of getting to sleep (take some suggestions from the group and act them out!)* But it is all in vain, as all he can think about is how unimportant he is.
3. Finally, David gets up and goes to the window to look out at the night sky. As he sees the stars he says 'wow'. *Act out this response.*
4. Then, after a pause, David gives a great sigh of despair because, on looking at the vastness of space, he thinks again of just how little he is and how unimportant his life seems. *Act out the despair creeping in on him again.*
5. But then he hears God speak to him! God tells him to look up at the sky. *Point to the stars above in your imagination.* And to look at the moon and the stars. *Point at various imaginary objects above.* God made it all; it is God's handiwork. *Act out amazement at these words.*
6. And God has made everything special, including David. *Act out putting one hand on your heart and looking up amazed.* God has made David to be almost like God! God made David and every single person that special!
7. And God has given David a job to do: to look after God's creation. *Act out further reactions of wonder from David.*

This imagined experience transforms David. Finish this acted-out story with everyone calling out the words that open and close this psalm:

Our Lord and ruler, your name is wonderful, everywhere on earth.

Talk about the Psalm

I wonder how a glimpse of the night sky affects you?

Using a picture of the constellations or maybe a set of photos in a book about the wonders of space, explore different reactions to seeing the beauties of the heavens. Awe? Fear? Insignificance? Curiosity? Excitement?

Does looking up into the stars help or hinder a belief in an all-powerful creator God? What big questions does it lead to?

Read how Isaiah writes about this in chapter 40:12-26. See also Psalm 147:4.

Does the group think that maybe we have made God too small when we think about him? But does having a bigger picture of God make it impossible to imagine that this same God loves each one of us intimately?

If there is time, read what God says to Job in chapter 38, especially vv. 31-38 and then read Job's reply in chapter 42, vv. 2-6.

Here are two reactions to looking up at the wonders of the universe. David's in Psalm 8 and Job's in chapter 42. How are they different but also similar? How do both lead to faith?

For another imaginary take on the wonder of creation and how God 'sings the stars into existence', why not read how Aslan creates Narnia in chapter 9 of *The Magician's Nephew* by C.S. Lewis?

Craft the Psalm

As a group create a large collage of the universe, including suns, planets, solar systems and galaxies in abundance! Use some large pieces of black card and a variety of materials with which to fashion planets in different colours, including some with rings; swirling nebulae; white star giants; the milky way and countless other asteroids and suns. Use different beads and buttons, cotton wool, paints, coloured foil and star shapes.

As you work on this together, encourage the group to make up names for the stars and planets, just as God named the stars and fashioned them with his fingers (see Isaiah 40:26).

Perhaps one group can also work on a small model of the earth, using blues and greens, to be included somewhere in the collage.

Use the key verse for this Psalm as a title for the finished piece:

You let your glory be seen in the heavens above.

Retell the Psalm

According to v. 2 of this psalm, it is children who appreciate the glory of God most keenly. The purity of their praise is such that it silences all those who would deny God and his Lordship. The power of children's prayers could not be more strongly affirmed! So here's a version of the psalm that involves children singing a chorus, while the rest sum up the other parts of the psalm in punchy, descriptive phrases.

For the chorus use the song 'Glory in the highest' (see *Mission Praise* 174), but only the first part. To match the words of the psalm, it could be rephrased slightly:

line 3 – Glory to our Maker God

line 4 – and glory to our ruler Lord

line 5 – glory to the Lord

Use this chorus in between each of the following four sets of statements, which should be declared with wonder and excitement by everyone else:

1. Lord-God
Wonder-worker
Globe-ruler
Glory-sharer
2. Star-namer
Moon-spinner
World-creator
Heaven-shaper
3. People-creator
Human-lover
Honour-crowner
Glory-giver
4. Ruler-granter
Power-devolver
Earth-entruster
Partner-maker

Reflect on the Psalm

Use as a base cloth an outline in the shape of a musical instrument (perhaps as a harp) just as for all the psalms in this series.

As you read through the psalm slowly and thoughtfully, place down 3-D objects or pictures as suggested below.

Verses 1-2: Place a small globe down and then a group of small (gingerbread) child-like figures in a circle around the earth.

Verse 3: Put down a piece of black felt and then scatter some golden stars across it.

Verses 4-5: Stand up one figure of a person in the middle of the stars on the black felt.

Verses 6-8: Put down a blue circle of felt to represent the earth again, but this time put on it a model sheep, cow, lion, bird and fish.

Verse 9: Hold out your hands to surround and bless the whole image.

Pause before you then ask a few open-ended questions about this visual of the psalm. Which part of the psalm do you like the best? Which part of the psalm is especially for you at the moment? Which



part this psalm makes you wonder and ask even more questions?

Pray for others with this psalm

Pray for all those who don't feel very special; those who have low self-esteem and whose confidence has been shaken by what has happened in their lives.