



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: *'I will celebrate and sing because of you'* (v. 2b).

This psalm is a great 'thank you' to God (v. 2) for blessings received. In particular it celebrates victories in battle (v. 6) and contains a plea for further help for the writer (v. 13) as well as for those who are poor and helpless (vv. 9 and 18). It is a psalm full of singing (vv. 2, 11, 14) and of complete faith in a God, who is just and who will not let wicked people triumph (vv. 4, 8, 16, and 19).

This could be from a period in David's life when he had experienced a string of military triumphs, which he acknowledged were by the grace of God. 2 Samuel 8 records just such a list of victories over the Moabites, over King Hadadezer of Zobar and over the Edomites in Salt Valley. In that chapter it twice records that everywhere David went, the Lord helped him win battles (see vv. 6 and 14). The psalm mentions Zion, which would date it from the time when David was ruling in his new capital Jerusalem. Even though he was now an internationally recognised king with a successful army and great wealth, it seems that power hadn't gone to his head, because he does not forget to give God the glory for what he has achieved. When things go well, it is so easy to forget God (David says as much in verse 17 of this psalm) but David's faith remains strong and the psalm is an exuberant celebration of 'the wonders you have worked' (verse 1).

Act out the Psalm

Perhaps this psalm was composed for a specific service to celebrate all David's successful campaigns



- a great thanksgiving hymn by the king himself. It certainly cries out to be sung and set to some music and so perhaps one way to explore this psalm is through sounds, using instruments and voices to interpret each verse. The psalm falls into sections:

Verses 1-2: the decision to praise and thank God

Verses 3-6: the defeat of David's enemies

Verses 7-10: the character of God

Verses 11-12: the testimony of what God does

Verses 13-14: the cry for help

Verses 15-17: the defeat of all enemies of God

Verses 18-20: the commitment to God, who remembers and does what is right

Divide the group up to work on a section each (or perhaps all work together, depending on numbers), deciding how each group of verses can be 'heard'. Distribute a variety of instruments or let them create some makeshift ones from whatever is to hand (boxes, card, cutlery, tubes and so on.). What note should each part of this psalm strike? How can different sounds capture the meaning of the verses? For example:

Verses 1-2: a great trumpet-like fanfare that is the call to worship

Verses 3-6: a growing rumbling sound to represent the gathering threat of enemies, followed by a great cymbal crash as they are destroyed and cities are razed to the ground

Verses 7-10: some quiet string-based sounds to illustrate trust and confidence in God

Verses 11-12: more trumpet-like proclamation of God's victory and his help for the needy

Verses 13-14: some wind instruments to represent a plaintive cry to God for more help

Verses 15-17: drum rolls and rhythms to illustrate how evil and all wickedness fall into its own traps

Verses 18-20: the tinkle of bells to capture the sound of hope for the forgotten ones, climaxing in a great blowing of horns that call on God's help for the future.

Ask the group or groups to choose some key verses or words from each section, which they can call out over the music in an appropriate tone. Put all this together to 'perform' the psalm.

Talk about the Psalm

It isn't easy for anyone in leadership publicly to acknowledge God's help in what they have achieved.

It can easily sound so pious or just be an empty gesture. In David's day it might even have been regarded as a sign of weakness.

Talk about how we can honestly give glory to God for good things that happen for us in our lives without it sounding cheesy or insincere... or just Christian cliches.

How important is it to let people know that we have trusted in God? Will telling them that attract or just put them off faith?

David's catalogue of victories in 2 Samuel 8 is pretty brutal when looked at in the cold light of day. He was a king of his own time and culture. In our age Christian triumphalism can also sound rather distasteful (for example, 'God is on our side and we are blessed - never mind you!').

How can we make sure that glory goes to God without sounding superior and making others feel failures?

In this psalm David is counter-cultural in as much as he does remember the poor and the homeless, who are so often the victims of the grand designs of the rich and powerful.

Do we remember the plight of the poor when we are blessed and things are all going our way?

The psalm is also very personal (I will pray; I will be happy; You rescue me and so on). It is important to remember that this is a king speaking to his people about what faith means to him.

Do we ever let others know what God has done for us?

Craft the Psalm

Try the following art response as a way to craft this psalm.

You will need some pieces of A3-sized card, one for every group or for every three or four people working together. Firstly draw a circle (about 10 cm in diameter) in the middle of the card. This space must not be used until the very end of the art exercise.

Now give each member of the group some coloured pens and ask them each to take one pen 'for a walk' around the card, moving around in twists and turns, which weave in and out of the other lines that the others are making at the same time. Make sure to leave some useful spaces in between the lines. Each person should come back to where they started his or her line.

Now read the psalm section by section (see 'Act out the Psalm') and then, after a pause, invite each person to choose a space and draw an image that is suggested to them by what they have heard. As you do this, section by section, the spaces between the lines will be filled with images that represent aspects of the psalm.

Finally, when you've finished all the sections, ask the group to talk together and decide which image



- either an existing one or a new one - they will put in the central circle to represent the whole of the psalm.

In this way the words of the psalm are turned into a piece of communal art work.

Retell the Psalm

1. Here's a version of the psalm for a younger group to use. It is to the tune of 'Frere Jaques' and can be sung as a round.

God has helped me, God has helped me.
Shout it loud, shout it loud.
I will sing his praises; I will sing his praises.
God Most High. God Most High.

God has saved me, God has saved me.
Stood by me, stood by me.
Just and fair are God's ways; just and fair are God's ways.
All danger's gone; all danger's gone.

God is caring, God is caring.
Strong fortress, strong fortress.
I can always trust God; I can always trust God.
God keeps safe. God keeps safe.

God will rescue, God will rescue
All who call, all who call.
God will not forget to us; God will not forget to us
God's our hope; God's our hope.

So let's trust God, so let's trust God.
Celebrate, celebrate.
Sing about his goodness; sing about his goodness
To everyone; to everyone.

2. And here's a version for an older or mixed age group to use.

I'll praise; I'll tell; I'll rejoice; I'll celebrate!
All because of you, God.

They'll run; they'll be destroyed; they'll be gone; they'll fall
All because of you, God.

You rule; you judge; you protect; you help
All because we trust you.



We'll sing; we'll trust; we'll cry out; we'll be glad
All because of you God.

Evil will fail; evil will fall; evil will end; evil will be forgotten
All because of you God.

The poor can hope; the poor can be rich; the weak can be strong; the homeless can be safe.
All because of you God.

So, I'll praise; I'll tell; I'll rejoice; I'll celebrate!
The Lord Most High.

Reflect on the Psalm

Use a base cloth in the shape of a musical instrument, such as a harp, as the focus for the following reflection. As you read the verses of the psalm indicated below, put down the suggested 3-D objects (or pictures of these objects) on to the cloth to help focus on the key themes of this psalm. (N.B. Some of the objects can be bought as accessories for use in a doll's house.)

Verse 2: put down a small musical instrument

Verse 3: put down a banner flying triumphantly to represent victory in battle

Verse 7: put down a royal throne (a grand seat)

Verses 12 and 13: put down a horn representing a cry for help

Verse 16: put down a small dark-coloured sack, chained shut

Verse 18: put down a small model hand, holding a person

At the end of the reflection, pause for a while and then ask some open-ended questions to explore what the group feel was important for them from this psalm.

Pray for others with this psalm

Share news together of answered prayer and make a point of celebrating what God has done while at the same time committing to God's care those who are not having such a good time and who feel hopeless and helpless for whatever reason.