

Near to the Heart of God

A Study of Selected Psalms for Today's Woman

by Kay Daigle

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How to Use this Study Guide

This study is designed to help you consistently spend time in God's Word. You will gain more by doing it day by day rather than trying to stuff it all in at once. *The Bible* is God's message to his people, and he wants to speak to you each and every day.

Unless instructed otherwise, **use only the Scriptures to answer the questions.** Rather than go to commentaries or notes in a study Bible, enjoy the excitement of letting God speak to you from his Word. When we need help in interpretation because of a difficult passage or because of cultural information, I will include it in the lesson. Trust God for insight.

The Psalms are full of metaphorical language. Because our purpose is to grow closer to God, feel free to use any translation or paraphrase for this particular study. Although paraphrases are someone else's interpretation, they may be helpful with this particular topic.

God's Heart for You—Scripture to memorize that brings out an essential thought from the week's study. Feel free to use any translation you prefer; you may want to copy the verse from in your version on the back of your card.

Story—Each lesson includes a true story that relates the truths of the week's lesson to a woman's real life experience. Some of the names have been changed to protect the guilty! These stories will encourage you in your walk with God and your growth in godliness.

Specific types of questions included each day:

Sharing question: designed for you to write stories, insights, and applications from your own life. You will never be forced to share one of these answers aloud with your group; however, growing in community with one another requires us to be open and vulnerable so please volunteer to share. What you share may be a needed influence in another woman's life.

Responding to God: reminders that we study God's Word so that he can speak to us and change us thereby. Thus, we should be listening for his voice. These questions ask for a response to God's personal message to you. I have found that writing out my prayers helps me to focus better. No one will ask you to read yours, but you should always feel free to share your response with your group. Sometimes you will be asked to draw a picture. Please try! Stick figures work very well:) We each have different ways to learn and some of us learn best by drawing.

Drawing Nearer involves optional questions designed for those who want to dig deeper. Some of the answers will be easy for even a beginning Bible student, and some will require more experience in the Bible. As a group you will not discuss these, but the background that you gain will certainly enrich your personal study.

Introduction

A study of the Psalms is the perfect vehicle to grow deeper in relationship with God. That is why this study is devotional in nature rather than simply academic. Because of that, it focuses on relating certain psalms to life experiences rather than on their structure and genre. However, the Appendix in the back provides more detailed information about literary forms of the Psalms for those who are interested. There are many great commentaries that can give you more information. I have cited a few throughout the study.

My prayer is that at the end of this study, you will draw near to God at any time and in any situation, that you will have words to help you express your feelings and longings to him, and that you will grow deeper in your relationship with the God of the universe.

My special thanks goes to Becky Hunt, who is so faithful to work through these lessons in advance to help me revise and edit.

Kay Daigle

Near to the Heart of God

Week One Lesson: Psalm 37, a psalm of confidence

God's Heart for You

“Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the LORD,
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.”

Psalm 37:3-5 (NASB)

God's people have always loved the Psalms. Their words give us faith, hope, and comfort, often in times of distress. We identify with the emotions of the psalmists and their cries to God for help; we love the pictures the psalms paint in our minds and the feelings they evoke in us.

My prayer is that in studying these psalms, we will learn how to draw near to God in any situation of life; that we'll have words to use when our own words fail; that the Psalms will become a way for us to pray to God whatever our need may be; and that through them we draw so near to God that we can sense his presence!

Day One Study

Today we'll read a bit of background about the Psalms and our approach to them in this study. Hang in there with the reading, and you'll also have some questions to consider before we begin delving into the first psalm tomorrow.

The book of Psalms is a compilation of individual poems which were written over a long period of time. The Hebrew word used for them is *tehillim*, meaning praise. Our word psalm comes from the Greek word for the music of a stringed instrument and gradually came to mean a song of praise. Although some psalms are more focused on praise than others, they all include that element. In Old Testament days they were essentially the hymnbook of the people of Israel in their temple worship.¹

¹ Sam Storms, *More Precious than Gold: 50 Daily Meditations on the Psalms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 261.

Just like our songs and hymns today, the psalms are poetic and, therefore, contain beautiful imagery. They paint memorable and tender pictures of God, such as Shepherd in Psalm 23. Such images often become personal and precious to us through the years as we share the experiences of the psalmists.

According to Dr. Ron Allen,

A poem *may* have a message (and the poems of the Bible certainly do). But it is a mistake to look first and foremost for the message, and *miss the experience*. . . . Poetry is to be felt. . . . Our reaction to the reading of the Psalms ought to be such that we feel with them so deeply that we cannot think of these words without some response.²

My hope is that we relate to the experiences of the psalmists with their God and that we draw closer to him week after week! I believe that psalms can become our own voice before God if we truly experience them.

Dr. Sam Storms explains: "Whereas most of Scripture speaks to us, the psalms also speak for us. In the psalms we find inspired examples of what we can and should and must say to God. They are a perpetual reminder that God welcomes our deepest desires, our most unnerving of fears, our anxiety and adoration, our celebration, and our confusion."³

1. **Sharing question:** Do you agree with Dr. Storms that God invites you to share your deepest fears and even confusion with him? Or do you believe deep down that you have to hide those feelings when you talk to him? Why do you suppose you answer this as you do? (If you are new to your group, know that this group is a safe place for you, a place where you can share the truth about your life and your journey with God. However, you never have to share your answer to these questions with your group, so you can freely write down your true feelings.)

² Dr. Ronald B. Allen, *And I Will Praise Him: A Guide to Personal Worship in the Psalms* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 45-46

³ Storms, 17.

R. E. Murphy considers the psalms to be our teachers in this regard: “The psalms form the heart of Israel’s prayer. In fact, they are a ‘school of Prayer’ in the sense that they teach one how to pray The variety of Psalms conveys the entire range of human emotions before God Prayer is not simply asking for things: it is the varied expression of the human condition in the presence of God.”⁴

So that we approach the Psalms in a personal way rather than simply academically, we are going to focus on three types of psalms, categorized by the life perspective of the psalmist. There are other ways to approach them and other types of psalms, but this particular path is very helpful in being intimate with God. Each psalm will be noted as a “psalm of confidence”, a “psalm of complaint”, or a “psalm of celebration”. These divisions are based on Walter Brueggemann’s book *Praying the Psalms*. His categories relate to the journey of life as “1) being securely oriented [our word confidence], 2) being painfully disoriented [complaint]; and 3) being surprisingly reoriented [celebration].”⁵

For the next four weeks we will look at the first type of psalm, those we will call psalms of confidence. What do we mean by that? Dr. Brueggemann explains this type of psalm as arising out of a time of being “well-settled, knowing that life makes sense and God is well-settled in heaven, presiding but not bothering.”⁶ In other words, when life is going well, when all is well with the world from our perspective, and when we know that God is in control, we identify with a psalm of confidence, which suggests that everything is as it should be on earth because God reigns in heaven.

2. **Sharing question:** Describe a period of your life when all was well and it felt like the whole world was in order. Share a bit about what made life so good with your group. Some of you may have difficulty finding such a time. If so, can you share about a period when your faith was strong and you expected that God would work all things out because you knew that he is good?

⁴ R.E. Murphy, *The Psalms are Yours* (New York, Paulist: 1993), 113.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, Second Edition (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 2.

⁶ Brueggemann, 3.

By the way, you may want to begin working on your memory verses today. You may want to write them on cards as a memory aide. It may be helpful to keep them in your car to review while on the road (not while driving but when stopped). Or you may want to attach them to your bathroom mirror. I forget the verse when I don't review it, so you may look for a spot where you can put them all together and add to them as you learn new ones each week. I have chosen the translation of each verse that is most expressive to me. Feel free to choose a different one.

Drawing Nearer: Use your Bible resources or go online to learn ways that various scholars categorize the Psalms. Then, read some of each kind.

As you read the Psalms, it is helpful to read them in more than one translation. You may find that you like various psalms most in different translations, or you may find one translation that you particularly like. If you don't have more than one Bible at home, go to www.bible.org online to read it in the *NET Bible*.

3. **Responding to God:** In order to draw near to the heart of God, sit quietly before him. Try to eliminate all distractions from your mind. Remain still until you are able to sense his presence or peace. Listen for his voice. Write down your experience during this time with him. Was it difficult? How long did you sit still without trying to fill the void? Were you able to stay and listen? Share this with your group. Experiencing total quiet and solitude are rare in our society, and we often do not know how to do this. Consider doing this every day as you begin your study or as you get to the **Responding to God** question. It becomes easier with repetition.

Day Two Study

Today we consider our first psalm, which we will study the rest of this week. Read Psalm 37 slowly, thinking through each line and the psalmist's message. We will read it daily. You may want to read it aloud slowly and let it sink in. Let God speak and minister to your heart. Remember that we are calling it a psalm of confidence.

Now focus on vv. 1-11, perhaps rereading those verses.

4. Copy below the one verse that most strikes you as you read. Why did you choose it?

5. In v.1 and again in vv. 7-8, the psalmist warns against holding a certain attitude toward those who do wrong. What is that attitude?

Drawing Nearer: Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7. What does Jesus say that applies to these same kinds of situations? How do his words compare with the psalmist's?

6. **Sharing question:** What ungodly (think unfair, unkind, selfish, judgmental, arrogant, greedy, insensitive, self-centered) things have you seen others do, causing you to fret or worry over their success? This could involve someone whom you know personally, or it could be someone in the news. (Don't share names or too many specifics about someone you do know so that you don't gossip. Simply share the wrong you have experienced or seen.) Certainly, we are all bothered by terrorists at large rather than in prison paying for their crimes. What most bothers you?

7. What will happen to those who practice evil according to vv. 1-11?

As you remember from yesterday, Psalm 37 is a psalm of confidence, meaning it relates to days when things go right, when the earth runs as it should because the guilty are punished and the good guys win.

8. **Sharing question:** Although we don't always see God dispense justice to those who deserve it, we know that eventually, it will happen. What truths in vv. 1-11 are particularly helpful to you when the "bad guys" appear to win?

Psalm 37 became very precious to me some years back when I was slandered. There was nothing I could do to fix the situation, and it looked like the perpetrators had won in a sense. Talk about fretting—I spent a lot of time doing that! Eventually, I began to pray Psalm 37. To help you see how to take a psalm and use it as the basis of your own prayer, I will share how I prayed Psalm 37:1-8 in that situation:

"Father, I will not fret although _____ and _____ seem to succeed. I will not envy them. You have said that they will dry up like grass and wither away like plants. Give me the grace to trust in you and do what is right in the midst of this situation (not gossip about them but forgive and pray for them). Give me the grace to settle in the land—staying where you have planted me rather than flee, and to maintain integrity right here in this church where they have attacked me. Despite how I feel, I will delight in you, O LORD, and I know that you will answer my prayers. I will commit my future to you and trust you. Act on my behalf and vindicate me in broad daylight; publicly defend my just cause, as you have promised. I will wait patiently and confidently on you, O LORD. I will not fret over the apparent success of these who carry out wicked schemes. Give me the grace not to be angry or frustrated and not to worry, which leads to trouble."

9. **Responding to God:** Keeping in mind a specific person or situation which disturbs you because of injustice or other evil, pray vv. 1-11 inserting specifics in appropriate places, as I did. Write down this prayer and pray it often if this situation is ongoing.

Day Three Study

Reread Psalm 37, again aloud and slowly. Then, reread vv. 12-22.

10. One of the beauties of poetry is its imagery. What images does the psalmist use in these verses to convey the way that evil people treat God's people?

Drawing Nearer: David himself, identified as the psalmist in Ps. 37, experienced evil attacks against him. Read at least parts of the story of Saul's attempts to find and kill David in 1 Samuel 18-30.

11. **Sharing question:** Because poetic images are used, we are free to apply them to our own, possibly very different experiences. Have you ever had someone seek to harm you or attack you in some way, physically or verbally? Without naming the person, how does that experience help you relate to these images?
12. These verses have a number of contrasts between what happens to those following God and those pursuing evil. Write down 2-3 of the contrasts that particularly strike you.
13. **Sharing question:** Which contrast helps you personally as you watch the success of people who are unjust and undeserving because of their lack of integrity? Which contrast gives you hope that God will right the injustice?

14. **Responding to God:** Take one verse that you chose in the previous two questions and write it out as a prayer for yourself or for an unjust situation.

Day Four Study

Read Psalm 37 aloud slowly. Then, reread vv. 23-31.

15. When the world turns as it should, so to speak, what happens to those who trust and obey God according to vv. 23-26?
16. **Sharing question:** There is great imagery in v. 24. How would this very concrete picture work out in less physical ways in someone's life? If such a scenario has ever happened to you, share it with your group.

Drawing Nearer: What Biblical story brings the picture of Psalm 37:24 to life for you? Find it in your Bible and read it.

17. For what reasons does the psalmist call us to do right or good and shun evil in vv. 27-29?
18. **Sharing question:** What condition in v. 31 is necessary in order to fulfill v. 30? What specific actions can you take in regard to v. 31 so that you fit that picture of the godly in v.30? Share with your group a specific situation where you need to speak wisdom or where you need firm footing, in a metaphorical way. You may consider using vv. 30-31 as the basis of your written prayer request for your group this week.

At this point of our study of Psalm 37 you may be thinking that life doesn't always work out like this. Remember this is a psalm of confidence. The psalmist expresses his faith that God will act and all will turn out right. I am sure that each of us could tell stories of situations that didn't ever work out fairly, when God appeared to be absent. At this point realize that we will get to those psalms in a few weeks. In the meantime, take the psalms of confidence and pray them as expressions of your faith in a great God who someday will right all wrongs.

19. **Responding to God:** For what situation today can you trust and believe that God will turn evil around and bring about fairness and truth? Use a verse from Psalm 37:23-31 to express that confidence in prayer.

Day Five Study

Read Psalm 37 aloud slowly one last time. Reread vv. 32-40.

20. The theme of this psalm was developed back in vv. 1-8. How does the psalmist continue to argue his point in these final verses? In other words, why not fret or envy evildoers according to vv. 32-40?

21. How do these verses contrast God's treatment of the godly with what happens to those who do evil?

Drawing Nearer: Read 1 Sam.19. In what ways was Ps. 37:40 fulfilled in David's life according to this story?

22. **Sharing question:** If you oriented your life to believe the truths about God presented in this psalm, even if you don't see them happen in your lifetime, how would it change your reaction to those who treat you unfairly or even with evil intent?

23. **Sharing question:** Draw a picture, write a poem, or write out your feelings that express the truths of either vv. 39-40 or vv. 35-36.

24. **Responding to God:** Who is that person in your life about whose success you fret—maybe a boss, a co-worker, a politician, a neighbor, or even a family member? Can you trust God to deal with it? Choose a verse from anywhere in this psalm that helps you do that, and write that verse out as a prayer.

Each week's study will include at least one true story. I so appreciate the honesty and transparency with which the authors write. As you will see, Dakan's story parallels that of the psalmist of Psalm 37.

Dakan's Story

I worked with an unbeliever for eight years, at which point she desired my position and I was asked to leave. I was shocked! My anger threw me into a tailspin! I was in a daze not believing what had happened!

But my sweet Heavenly Father knew I needed his intervention and my dependence on him in a situation I could not get through on my own. He knows me all too well; I don't handle anger easily; I am too prideful; I don't easily forgive or acknowledge that I need to; and the list goes on. I began to read psalms and take comfort in God's word. I pleaded with God to take my anger away, give me relief from these negative hateful feelings, to show me right from wrong.

God began putting the former co-worker on my heart, telling me to call her to ask how she was doing. I ignored God. Once again he told me. As God's unfailing love began to cover me, the anger subsided and I was able to see the situation more clearly: perhaps she needed the extra financial help; perhaps God's plan for her was to be influenced by the other Christians in the office.

One day I told myself I wasn't leaving the house until I had spoken with her. I called, she answered, and we visited. As it turned out, weeks earlier she had left the job because it wasn't what she expected. She apologized for taking my position and said she couldn't even get an interview in the industry because of the manner in which she left. I don't know if she is working again; however, I was asked to come back to work at my former position. Only because God had been teaching me about forgiveness and faithfulness was I able to say yes. God gave to me bountifully the wisdom I needed to deal with my anger and to do the right thing.

"For the LORD is righteous, he loves justice; upright men will see his face." Psalm 11:7 (NIV)