

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Because this book is designed for both individual *and* small group meditation, I strongly suggest that you invite your small group to follow this 12-week program. Doing it in community makes the journey more motivational, enjoyable and accountable. Each person does their meditations during the week and they look forward to discussing the psalm at the weekly meeting.

Start by reading the Introduction, then tackle the first psalm – Week One. There is a developmental process in the Psalter, so it is important to begin with Psalm 1 and follow the psalms in the order I have selected for the 12 weeks. The progression is designed to teach you how to pray more effectively. In so doing *you will acquire two basic disciplines: you will learn how to have a daily devotional time with God, and to live with or chew on one psalm for five days.* (You can have the weekends off!)

If you want to extract all the nourishment from a psalm, it will take a few days, not just one. Do not fear that you will exhaust its meaning or get tired of it in one or two days. These age-old, Spirit-inspired prayers are deep and profound with layers of meaning. But the real benefit is that, the more you read the psalm, the more it reads you. The more you work with the psalm, the more it works you. It will yield its treasures and slowly transform you. As you live with a psalm over a few days, going back to it again and again, your ability to meditate will grow – likewise your capacity to memorise God’s Word – and to use it as *the means* of moment-by-moment, interactive intimacy with God.

Each psalm has a brief introduction and explanation, followed by questions for personal meditation and group discussion. The questions are designed to:

1. probe your heart (beliefs, emotions, life experiences);
2. help you enter and understand the biblical text, and
3. connect you directly with God and the workings of his Spirit through prayer.

I recommend you write or journal your answers. Writing your thoughts in God’s presence leads to an open-ended dialogue with

God. *Writing is a very helpful discipline*, as opposed to thinking briefly about the question and moving on. Writing focuses the mind and expresses the heart. Committing your thoughts and feelings to paper disciplines you to engage God *and* the text in an intentional manner. You then have a record of your meditations and dialogue with God to refer to when needed. (Believe me, there will be trying times when you will need to go back to what God has said to you.) The psalms themselves are *written* prayers. I have journalled many of my own prayer-psalms and poems over the years. They have become not only a record of the journey of my soul, but a deep reservoir of comfort and meaning, inspiration and strength in my life.

This is how I recommend you do each psalm exercise:

1. Plan a *time and place* for a daily devotion from Monday to Friday, where you can be undisturbed, alone with God (as Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:6). First thing in the early morning is best, but you need to find a time that works best for you. I recommend *at least* twenty minutes each day; thirty minutes is ideal: 5 – 10 minutes to enter silence, 10 – 15 minutes for psalm meditation, and 10 minutes to journal and pray. You will quickly find how fast this time passes, and may take more time.
2. *Begin with thanksgiving and prayer.* Enter God's presence, thanking him for his goodness, and invite his Holy Spirit to guide and speak to you.
3. *Take a few minutes to become silent.* Allow your thoughts and feelings to subside and become still as you breathe in God's presence. Become present to God. If you are not practised in silence, it will take a few weeks to get used to entering silence, to move beyond inner and outer distractions, and focus on God.
4. *When you are ready, slowly and thoughtfully read the psalm aloud* (two or three times), allowing the words to wash over you. Reading aloud helps you to "hear" the psalm, to "taste" the words.
5. *Pause to think* about anything that immediately grabs your attention, that "speaks" to you. This is how God speaks to us. Record it in your journal and use it to respond to God in prayer – talk to God about what he may be saying to you.
6. *Now go deeper: Read through the introduction to and explanation of the psalm.* Get a sense of the psalm, what it is about, its flow, feel, layout and structure.
7. *Begin to answer the questions, doing two or three each day.* You have five days to work on the psalm. Think about the questions and meditate on the text. Journal your answers, listening to what God is saying to you – in thoughts, revelations, feelings, connections. Talk to God about what you have written.
8. *It is really important to take the few key thoughts (revelations) with you into the day.* You can write them in point form on a card or your smart phone to keep in your pocket, recalling and praying them throughout the day. *And/or* you can record a verse or two – the focus of your meditation that day – on the card or in your phone, to memorise and use for prayer throughout the day.
9. *When your time is finished, thank God and close in prayer.* Do not worry about completing the questions. The point is to work with what comes up, to hear God in the few thoughts that arise from your meditation – too many are overwhelming. Then use them as the focus of interaction with God throughout the day.
10. If you happen to complete the questions before the end of the week, use the remaining devotional times to go over your meditations and journaling to deepen your understanding of the psalm. By the end of the week, you will have learnt the psalm by heart by having "lived with it" through each day. You could make this your aim. In this way "the Word [becomes] flesh" once again – *in you* – "full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Share your experience of the psalm with your small group, and begin the next week by repeating the exercise with the next psalm.

If you have access to a *commentary on the psalms*, read the commentary *after* you have done your meditation-exercise using this book. I do recommend reading commentaries for a better under-

standing of the text, but doing your own meditation first gives a fresh and personal experience of the psalm, and what God is saying to you through it. *Then* the commentary deepens and broadens your meditation.

For Small Group Leaders

There are too many questions per psalm for everyone to give feedback on all the questions in one group meeting. A sharing of what the psalm generally meant to each person, or feedback on certain aspects of the psalm will be conducive to maximum participation. Keep the feedback focused on personal disclosure, leading to prayer and ministry to one another, rather than technical debates (who is right or wrong on the finer meanings of the text).