



Weekly Letters from Denise Domkowski Hopkins

The following eight letters may be copied and distributed to your class. Ideally, each letter should be distributed the week prior to that particular class session. So, for example, the letter for Lesson 3 could be handed out at the conclusion of the second week's class.

Alternatively, digital copies of these letters may be sent by you as email messages to class members.



Lesson 1: Praying the Psalms

Dear Fellow Travelers,

We are about to begin together an eight-week journey through the book of Psalms. Fasten your seat belts because there will be a few bumps along the way as we take our whole range of human experience and emotions to God in psalm prayer. This journey mirrors Jesus' march toward Jerusalem, Good Friday, and Easter. Be prepared to stretch your understanding of prayer and of faith along the way.

I can't think of a time when Christians have needed to study and pray the psalms more than right now. We live in a culture of hype—everything is over the top and in your face. We live in an atmosphere of fear—of terrorists, Rican, snipers, hamburger, and dwindling retirement funds. We are over stimulated and distracted by scandals, things to buy, "wardrobe malfunctions," and war. How can we find God in the middle of such a world as this? How can we envision the kind of world that God intends for us?

The figurative, image-laden language of the Psalms can help. Psalm 1 begins our journey by speaking of the "way" of the righteous and wicked. There is a way through the mess of our daily living, and it is dependent upon obedience and honest prayer, on praise of God and doubting questions, on thanksgiving and quiet reflection, and ultimately, upon a God who receives us as we are.

In these weekly letters I hope to help set the tone for each lesson, to recommend related book titles, and to look at what's going on in our culture in relation to the psalms we are studying. This week let me recommend to you two books offering artistic interpretations of selected psalms: the first entitled *The Book of Psalms* illustrated in expressive calligraphy by Timothy Botts (Tyndale House Publishers, 1997), and the second entitled *The Psalms: An Artist's Impression* by Anneke Kaai (InterVarsity Press, 1999). Their art work is stunning and reminds us that the psalms engage not just as disembodied minds but as whole people before God.

Let us keep one another in prayer as we journey together through the Psalms. May God bless you on the way.

Grace and peace,

Denise



Lesson 2: The Synagogue, the Church, and the Psalms

Dear Fellow Travelers,

When we pray the psalms, we take our place in the stream of faithful through the ages who have prayed the psalms in synagogue, church, monastery, and home. The psalms have endured because they express our seasons of faith - order, chaos, and new beginnings - in ways that speak truthfully of our experience. Walk into any bookstore and you will see new translations and paraphrases of the psalms week after week that testify to this. If we define spirituality in its basic sense as communion or communication with God, the psalms offer ready vehicles for our communication, ensuring that nothing is left out of the conversation.

Yet the church does not often draw upon the entire range of psalms prayer as it should, thereby stunting our spiritual growth. It would be wonderful if we never had to deal with chaos and disappointment. But the truth is, little girls are abducted and found dead, soldiers return in body bags from Iraq, and many children go to bed hungry at night in America. The irony is that when our churches shut out our pain, Jerry Springer, Judge Judy, and Dr. Phil will pick up the slack and deal with our wounds on national TV, where we can participate as voyeurs. No wonder "reality TV" has struck such a chord in our culture!

This week let me recommend to you two books dealing with psalms for children. They would be wonderful for children's sermons or bedtime reading. The first is *Bless This Way* by Anne Kitch, with illustrations by Carol Conahan (Morehouse Publishing, 2003); it includes children of all colors and does not sugar coat the fact that children are not always happy. The second is *Psalms Twenty-Three* illustrated by Tim Ladwig (Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 1993), featuring an African-American family in an inner-city setting. These books can shape positively a child's understanding of prayer as covering all parts of life and can remind many adults of that, too.

May the Lord bless you and keep you,

Grace and peace,

Denise



Lesson 3: Your Hallelujahs Don't Have to be Hollow Anymore

Dear Fellow Travelers,

An editorial piece in the Outlook section of *The Washington Post* several months ago caught my eye. Written by pastor Henry Brinton, it discussed the explosive popularity of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life* among churches and the general public. This book, which sold more than 11 million copies last year, focuses upon personal change as the key to stress reduction, satisfaction, and simplified living. Brinton wonders whether or not the church needs to challenge us to "move beyond the personal to the public." Spiritual growth, he argues, is not only about the personal; it also has a social component that demands our prophetic response.

The praise in psalm hymns also has a social component. Psalm 146, for example, declares that God executes justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets the prisoners free, upholds the orphan and the widow, and brings the way of the wicked to ruin. But when we read the newspapers and look at the television news, we see clear evidence that denies the psalmist's praise, and we wonder whether this praise is naive or phony. It is neither. The praise of Psalm 146 is prophetic praise. The psalmist knows full well how broken the world is, but insists on holding out a picture of the future, a vision of the world that God intends for us. This God-centered world of justice lures us into the future at the same time that it critiques our present, our government, our experts, ourselves.

Our God is praiseworthy because our God is the Creator, "who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them" (Ps. 146.6). God is the One upon whom we all depend for our very lives. Many of the things upon which we once depended, in which we placed our trust, have betrayed us—our fast food, our health plans, our 401Ks, our government. But not God, the Creator of us all. Retreating into our individual spiritual bubbles and focusing upon personal change might just keep us from this life-giving, world-transforming recognition.

I recommend to you a book that addresses the social component of our praise: David Pleins: *The Psalms: Songs of Tragedy, Hope, and Justice* (Orbis, 1993). Pleins investigates the psalms as "poetry of justice" that helps us see the world through God's eyes so that politics and praise can never be separated.

May you find ways this week to bring your politics and praise together.

In our Creator's name,

Denise



Lesson 4: You Get What You Deserve, Don't You?

Dear Fellow Travelers,

One of the primary goals of wisdom thinking in ancient Israel was to pass knowledge about life on to the next generation and to form character. I wonder what kind of wisdom we are passing on to our children and grandchildren these days. It has been recently reported that the average child, no matter what age, watches more than 40,000 television commercials a year. The American Psychological Association has urged federal regulators to restrict TV advertising aimed at children 8 and under because these kids "lack the skills to question a commercial's claims as anything but fact." Is our media wisdom, encapsulated in commercials, creating obese children who learn early that buying things is the key to happiness?

In ancient Israel, the wisdom outlook on life was rooted in experience that showed how one could live life successfully. Proverbs, short sayings that summed up life, were optimistic about our ability to live in harmony with the order that God intended for the world. Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* perpetuated that kind of wisdom: a penny saved is a penny earned. Today, we seem not to understand the foundation of ancient Israel's wisdom thinking: that actions have consequences. We ignore the possibility that manipulative commercials selling sugary cereals will make our children obese or contribute to diabetes. Bumper stickers, our modern, popular proverbs, mock "act/consequence" (the idea that our actions have direct consequences) with an in-your-face attitude: the one who dies with the most toys, wins. Our cynicism has replaced ancient optimism about life. So-called "prosperity theology" insists that the good life can be ours if we just pray the right way. The focus is no longer on forming character, but on power and consumer satisfaction.

Take a look at this bumper sticker web site and gauge for yourselves how our modern wisdom teaching has changed: www.InternetBumperStickers.com

Ancient Israel believed that older people were natural sources of wisdom. In this regard, see *A Very Present Help: Psalm Studies for Older Adults* by Miriam Dunson.

May God give you the wisdom to live optimistically this week,

Denise



Lesson 5: Complaining in Faith to God

Dear Fellow Travelers,

I am puzzled by the apparent disconnect between the church's discomfort with psalm laments and our cultural embrace of complaint. Over a decade ago, Robert Hughes wrote the bestseller *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, which described America as so excessively polarized and politicized and focused upon the subjective and feelings that true discussion and genuine multiculturalism are impossible. Our television "reality" shows like *Survivor*, *Dr. Phil*, *The Apprentice*, and *Top Model* seem to bear this out; they delight in manipulation, backstabbing, name calling, and self-promotion in front of millions of strangers. Showing compassion and solidarity just gets you voted off the island.

The psalm laments complain about the psalmist's suffering, enemies who cause or add to that suffering, and God. Many Christians argue that it is unfaithful to complain to and about God; perfect faith is passively obedient and accepting of suffering. But the laments make it clear that there is room for complaint in our prayers. Our relationship with God is not confined to our happy moments. As Psalm 139:1,3 declares: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me...and are acquainted with all my ways." To withhold our anger and complaint from God is dishonest. God accepts all of who we are in prayer. Perhaps our culture is so saturated with complaint because we have declared our prayer to be off-limits to it. We do not take our complaints to God in prayer within the community of faith, which can provide a supportive context for dealing with our anger and pain.

I recommend to you a book by my Wesley colleague in pastoral care, Carroll Saussy, *The Gift of Anger: A Call to Faithful Action*. Carroll speaks about "holy anger" that can be an impetus for constructive action. Also helpful is *The Angry Christian: A Theology for Care and Counseling* by Andrew Lester. He argues that anger is not always sinful; it is an attribute of Jesus himself and an aspect of our humanness. Love governs how we display our anger.

May you find the courage to be honest with God in prayer this week,

Denise



Lesson 6: Life in the Meanwhile

Dear Fellow Travelers,

Each year, the season of Lent brings us up close and personal with the notion of "life in the meanwhile," the time when we feel God's absence. Even Jesus felt this absence when he cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22. 1; Matt 27.46; Mk 15.34). Too often in our churches we ignore these words and concentrate on other last words of Jesus: "It is finished" (Jn 19.30); or "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23.46).

According to an Associated Press article by Richard Ostling last year, Mother Theresa also experienced God's absence. As the Roman Catholic church works toward canonizing her as a saint for her work in the slums of India, letters from Mother Theresa to her spiritual directors from the 1950s and 1960s have surfaced that express her feelings of abandonment by God. The woman whom many Christians credit with a perfectly obedient faith and never-fading smile wrote of "the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness ... so great that nothing touches my soul." These feelings were part of Mother Theresa's ministry until she died. Many Christians may be shocked by this disclosure. Most of us had put Mother Theresa up on a pedestal; we had decided that she was a tough faith act to follow. Like St. John of the Cross, a 16th-century Spaniard whose "dark night of the soul" has been read by millions, Mother Theresa's wrestling with divine absence show us that faith can encompass doubt, and that honest prayer is ironically rooted in the certainty that God cares and will act to help us.

In order to survive "life in the meanwhile," we must give voice to our pain, anger, and sense of abandonment. Two books do so with eloquent power: *Psalms of Lament* by Ann Weems, written for "those who weep and those who weep with those who weep" after the death of her 21-year-old son Todd, and *Lament for a Son* by Nicholas Wolterstorff, written after the death of his 25-year-old son Eric.

Wolterstorff speaks of his being wounded by his son's death: "Wounds are ugly, I know. They repel. But must they always be swathed?" (p. 26).

May we have the courage to honor each other's open wounds this week,

Denise



Lesson 7: The Lord Reigns, Enthronement Psalms

Dear Fellow Travelers,

Following the U.S. presidential election, leaders of the newly elected administration announce their agenda for the next four years, outlining their plans in the State of the Union address in January.

The enthronement psalms also present an agenda, God's agenda. They imagine a new future, not just for one nation, but for the whole world: "Sing to the Lord, all the earth!" (Psalm 96:1). "The Lord reigns" is the central proclamation of the enthronement psalms. Under God's universal rule, in God's kingdom, justice will prevail for all. Many of our Easter hymns, such as "Christ the Lord Has Risen Today," build on this idea that God is sovereign over all. These hymns proclaim that the resurrection of Jesus transforms us and the world.

The problem with this picture of the future is that it challenges present oppressive structures. People resist this alternative vision of the world. What would it mean for our world today if we were to acknowledge God's universal rule? The hymn, "Easter People, Raise Your Voices" asserts that "every day to us is Easter." Is it? If not, why not? What stands in the way of our realizing the possibilities held out by the enthronement psalms and our Easter hymns? Fear of people different from us, national pride, greed, thirst for power, and ignorance are just some the road blocks to this new way of our being in the world.

May Christ's Easter rising give you a renewed sense of the world that God intends for us.

Denise



Lesson 8: I'll Never Be the Same Again

Dear Fellow Travelers,

Thank you for sharing this journey through the psalms with me. I hope that you have deepened your appreciation for the psalms as vehicles for prayer that you can use no matter where you find yourselves on life's journey. I also hope that you have come to know one another better as you have participated in the group exercises, prayed, and studied together.

I mentioned Easter in last week's letter. As my Wesley colleague, William B. McClain, Professor of Preaching, has proclaimed, Easter is a Christian "extreme makeover," complete with "before" and "after." But please remember that there are those around us who have not yet experienced the "after." They are still living Good Friday. Easter critiques our present. So that our joy does not become a knee-jerk proclamation of victory and triumph, we dare not forget the pain of the pit experience. Thanksgiving psalms like Psalm 30 express the memory of the time of disorientation: "To you, O Lord, I cried... 'be gracious to me'" (vv. 8,10), keeping God's deliverance fresh and keeping us mindful of those who have not yet been delivered.

For those of you who want to continue to study the psalms, I recommend the following resources:

Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship* and J. Clinton McCann, "Psalms," found in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IV. These are commentaries treating each of the 150 psalms. McCann's commentary is much more detailed. Davidson gives you a good general overview of each psalm. For those who want to sing the psalms, see Carl Daw and Kevin Hackett, *A Hymn Tune Psalter*, using familiar tunes for each psalm, and Joachim Braun, translated by D. Scott, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written, and Comparative Sources*, and J. Philip Newell, *Sounds of the Eternal: A Celtic Psalter: Morning and Night Prayer*.

If you enjoyed these sessions, I hope you'll consider taking another Wesley Ministry Network course. You'll find information about all of our classes at www.WesleyMinistryNetwork.com.

May the amazing surprise of new life, exemplified in and empowered by Easter, draw us into the new world that God intends for us, a world even now coming into being. How full of wonder that is! Hallelujah!

Denise