

The Reformation And The Psalms



Psalms

INTEGRATED BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

The Reformation & The Psalms

How to get best value out of these studies...

Welcome to a new series of Bible studies that look at 'The Reformation' through the eyes of some of the Psalms.

If you're using these Guides in a Small Group, it is vital that you have done preparatory work **before** you get to your meeting. This will be of great benefit not only to you, but to the other members of your group.

If you're doing these studies individually, make sure you let someone know you are doing so, and arrange a time to meet with them when you've finished (or even before) to let them know how your life is being changed by God's Word.

Always surround your time looking into God's Word with **prayer**, asking God to change your heart and life so that you – with God's people – might become more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction

The year was 1517. For hundreds of years, the gospel of salvation through the forgiveness of sins won by Christ at the cross had largely been lost to the Christian church. Instead, the path to salvation required penance: a gruelling confession of one's sins to a priest, followed by some visible sign of contrition - which would hopefully lessen the time you spent paying for your sins in 'purgatory', after you died. The majority of priests were illiterate, many were corrupt and immoral. The Pope was all powerful. All church services were conducted in Latin - a language unfamiliar to Europe's uneducated masses. To raise money for the building of St Peter's Basilica in Rome, the Pope had offered for sale 'indulgences', which promised (upon payment) the freedom of the souls of your deceased ancestors from purgatory without the requirement of repentance.

Enraged by this scandal, on the 31st of October in 1517, a young and pious German monk named Martin Luther (pictured on the front page of this study guide) - who had rediscovered the gospel of grace - wrote 95 theses (objections) to the Roman Catholic church, and nailed them to the church door at Wittenberg. Luther's theses of Protest were quickly seized upon,

printed and disseminated, starting an uprising against the papacy. Thus began the movement now known as the Protestant Reformation, which sought to reform the church back into line with the gospel message, which had, at its heart, four distinctive slogans about salvation - that salvation was:

- Sola Scriptura:** by Scripture Alone (and not according to the obscure teachings of the Roman Catholic church)
- Sola Gratia:** by Grace Alone (and not dependent upon one's meritorious works)
- Sola Fide:** through Faith Alone (in Jesus Christ, and not some combination of faith plus good works)
- Solus Christus:** in Christ Alone (and not the Pope, as Christ's representative here on earth).

This much is well known. What is not well known is that crucial to Luther's own conversion was his preaching through the Psalms as well as the book of Romans and Hebrews. Importantly, both Romans and Hebrews derive much of their material from the Psalms themselves.

The present series of Bible Studies aims to look once again at the Reformation, and to do so through the eye of the Psalms. Each study will look at one of the Reformation slogans which defined the movement to which we still belong.

My hope and prayer is that through these studies, God would take you once again back to the free and liberating gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ, and remind you of what makes the gospel of Jesus Christ so wonderfully distinctive.

Chris Jolliffe, 2007.

Study I **Sola Scriptura - Scripture Alone**

Psalm 19

Reflect: How did you first hear the gospel?

On the Eve of the Reformation Martin Luther had found salvation not through the words of the Pope or church teachings or his own musings but through the scriptures. He wrote:

'Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly ... I was angry with God ... Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul (in Romans 1:17) ... At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live."' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely, by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith ... Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself.'

By his own experience, Luther had discovered the truth to which the scriptures themselves bear witness: that salvation is by scripture alone.

Psalm 19 declares why this is so by contrasting God's two modes of revelation: his **general** revelation of Himself through creation (vv1-6), and His **special** spoken revelation of Himself through His word (vv7-14).

I. God's general revelation through creation (vv1-6)

Read verses 1-6

- What is the content and scope of this revelation?
(Romans 1:18-20)
- What do people do with such revelation?
(Romans 1:21-32, Acts 14:14-18)
- What is the purpose of this revelation? (Romans 1:20, 10:14-21)
- Why is there a need for an extra, special revelation of the gospel?

2. God's special revelation through scripture (vv7-14)

Read verses 7-14

- the words 'laws', 'statutes', 'precepts', 'commands', 'ordinances' are used in vv7-8 to describe the whole of God's revelation available to David at the time of writing (the Torah). What do the scriptures do?

- Why do we need the scriptures personally (vv12-14. Also Romans 3:19-20, 2 Peter 1:3-4, 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

- What is gained by God's special revelation of himself in the scriptures over God's general revelation of himself?

- Could the church add anything to this message to achieve salvation? Why? Why not?

3. Application:

What are the implications for the following people?

- A Hindu who is convinced the path to enlightenment is through reading the Upanishads.
- A neighbor who says that God is found in creation, not at church.
- A Christian friend who has stopped reading the Bible.
- Yourself, given your own attitude to the Bible.

Think: Now that you know God's special revelation of himself to you what positively can you see in God's revelation of himself in creation?

4. Pray:

Spend time thanking God for his general and special revelation of himself. Pray for yourself, and specific people who you thought about in the course of the study.

Study 2 **Sola Gratia - Grace Alone**

Psalm 145

It would be true to say that of all the Reformation slogans, none distinguishes biblical Christianity from any other religion or our own natural tendencies as a means of salvation more than the 'Grace Alone' slogan.

All religion addresses the question of 'What must I do to be saved?', with the accent on 'Do'. Even with Christianity, when Christians take their eyes off the cross, and grow sloppy in their bible reading, one almost immediate consequence is for them to doubt whether they're truly saved. Doubts rise in our heads: 'I'm not good enough for God', 'I must try harder', 'God would not be pleased with me.' These were certainly the thoughts that plagued the mind of the young Martin Luther prior to his conversion. He was an earnest young monk, seriously troubled by the depth of his sinfulness. Luther wrote:

'I tried to live according to the rule (of the monastery) and I used to be contrite, to confess and enumerate my sins; I often repeated my confession and zealously performed my required penance. And yet my conscience would never give me assurance but I was always doubting and said, 'You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.'

'I often made my confession to Dr Staupitz, not about women, but about the real snags. He replied, 'I don't understand!' Later I went to another confessor, and the same things happened to me. In short there was not a single father confessor who knew anything about it. So then I thought: 'No one but you undergoes this temptation and trial.' I became like a dead body ... I was so sad and depressed that I thought that God was not gracious to me On one occasion, my father confessor said to me when I was constantly bringing stupid sins to him: 'You are a fool! God does not rage at you, but you rage at him; God is not angry with you, but you are with him!' A precious, mighty, and noble word, even though he said it before the light of the gospel broke!'

Without Christ, Luther was right to understand God as angry with his sin. For someone with a troubled conscience who saw his sin ever clearly - as did Luther - without the cross, there were no grounds for comfort, only fear. God's mercy to Luther was to enable him to see from the scriptures that he was indeed gracious in character and that his graciousness was tied to his saving deeds. Both are necessary: without God's gracious character, there would be no saving deeds. Without the saving deeds, God may be gracious to others, but how do I know whether he'd be gracious to me?

Psalm 145 ties together God's character and his deeds. And the result is a marvellous hymn of praise to God.

Read Psalm 145.

1. What aspects of God's character does David extol? (vv1-7, vv8-9)

2. What will be the result? (vv10-12)

3. Verses 13-16 are a magnificent depiction of life in God's kingdom. What are its particular features? What parts of this depiction are echoed in the New Testament? (Luke 1:46-55)

4. In what two ways is the Lord's righteousness shown? (vv17-20)

5. The Psalm concludes with the desire that 'all flesh' bless his holy name eternally. David was obviously looking beyond his day when the Lord's saving graciousness was limited almost exclusively to the people of Israel. But with the coming of the greater Son of David, Jesus Christ, the Lord's saving graciousness could be available to Gentiles, as well as to Jews.
- Step back for a moment. This Psalm is a Praise Psalm. Who is the object of this praise? Is there any sense that people are praised for God's salvation of them?
 - What, in the Psalm, is the basis for people's salvation? What, in the Psalm, is the outcome of God graciously saving people? (What does God deserve?)
 - What then is the implication for God of those who think that God's salvation of them depends on their own efforts?
6. Spend time Praising God for his gracious character. Remind yourself of the gospel of God's grace. Thank him for it. Praise him for it. Exult in it.

Study 3 Sola Fide - Faith Alone

Psalm 32

1. It was Blaise Pascal who said that there are only ever two types of people in the world: the righteous who think they are sinners, and the sinners who think they are righteous.

Which one best describes the way you think of yourself?

(Are you a person whose sin is constantly before you so that you have difficulty believing you're forgiven, or someone who is rarely aware of your own sin and thus your need for forgiveness)

2. Background:

You may not have realised it, but the first two Reformation slogans (Scripture Alone; Grace Alone) make an assumption about our own sinfulness: that our minds are so fallen that we naturally turn from what we know about God to idolatry and need a specific revelation of God in the gospel to turn us around; and that all of our works - even our best ones - are tainted with the stain of sinful and selfish pride, so that they cannot be meritorious.

As we've seen, Martin Luther understood this deeply and personally as being true in his own life. One man who helped him see this (and the solution!) was Augustine. Augustine had lived 1100 years prior to Luther and was the first real giant of Christian thought. At a time when the Creeds had not yet been written Augustine almost single-handedly held new emerging heresies at bay and trained up many church leaders in right teaching and practice. Not that he was always so saintly: Augustine was converted as an adult after he'd had an immoral relationship with a mistress for several years and had fathered an illegitimate child. Not surprisingly, his most famous work was entitled 'Confessions'. Luther drew heavily from Augustine's writings.

Augustine understood that, at the end of the day, there is only one question which remains supreme for every person alive: What is the nature of my relationship with God? That is, is God favorably disposed towards me? Or am I to be the object of his wrath and punishment forever? Are we friends? Or are we enemies? As we've seen, this was the chief question to which Martin Luther was seeking an answer.

- When does this question loom large for you?

- On a scale of 1-10, how important is it for you at the moment?

At the time of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church held that salvation was by faith in Christ AND a series of good works, described as penance. Yet Luther knew that if the requirements of salvation included his own works (which were riddled with sin), he could have no peace. Psalm 32 speaks of the peace and blessedness which Luther so ardently sought.

Pray that God would speak to your mind and your heart in this Psalm.

3. Read carefully verses 1-2: these are the topic sentences for this Psalm. On his deathbed Augustine had the first two verses of Psalm 32 written on the wall beside his bed so that these could be the object of his final thoughts and meditations before he died.
- What sort of person - in the end - is blessed?
 - What does this assume about the core problem facing us all, and our own capacity to deal with it?
 - What might it mean to have a spirit in which there is no deceit in this regard?
4. Verses 3-4 describe someone in whose spirit there is deceit - someone who chooses not to face their own sin but to live in it or chooses to ignore that it's there, or pretends that they are righteous when, in fact, they are not.
- What is the effect on the Psalmist of living under this cloud of guilt that has not been dealt with?
 - Relationally, does this happen to you in your own relationship with God when sin is not faced or confessed?

5. Coming Clean:

- What is the only way to deal with guilt? (verses 5-6).

- What specifically do you notice about his confession that is helpful for us?

- What is assumed in verses 6 and 7?
(c.f. Hebrews 9:27, Acts 17:30-31).

6. Learning from God (vs. 8-11):

In verses 8-9 it is now either God speaking to David, or it is David speaking to those who are listening. Either way, here are the lessons of forgiveness:

- Horses tend to bolt without thinking. Mules are much the opposite, they stubbornly refuse to move. In dealing with unconfessed sin, what errors are referred to here? Which is more likely in your case? What then, is God saying to you?

- What is it that - in the end - makes someone righteous?
(Romans 3:21-25, 4:6-8)

- Go somewhere where you can be alone and undisturbed. Close the door and confess your specific sins to God. Use this time to come clean and reflect as Augustine did, on verses 1-2 once more.

Study 4 Solus Christus - Christ Alone

Psalm 110

Luther's 95 theses quickly set him on a course of confrontation with the Papacy. By December 1520, the Pope issued a proclamation calling on Luther to renounce his teachings. Luther burnt it. In January 1521 he was officially excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church and in April of that year was tried at an ecclesiastical parliament which (ironically enough) was called the 'Diet of Worms'. Luther feared for his life, knowing that the punishment for heresy was burning. Under great pressure, Luther was again asked to recant from the views expressed in his published works. He is recorded as saying, with great emotion, "Here I stand, I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Luther had come through. He had rejected the Pope's authority and submitted himself to the rule of Christ alone. From this point Luther was outlawed and each German state was forced to take sides on this question of the reformation, declaring themselves either for or against.

At issue was whether Christ alone was the sole mediator between God and men. Luther understood that the Roman Catholic dogma concerning the Pope as Christ's representative head of the Church on earth, the concept of meritorious works and the Catholic idea of a treasury of the merits of saints denied that Christ was the sole route through which a sinner could come to God. As before, the seeds for Luther's stand lie in the scriptures and in particular - the Psalms, and what they said about Jesus Christ.

Psalm 110: Jesus Christ: The Supreme and Only Mediator

Pray that God would help you see Jesus more clearly through Psalm 110.

1. Read verse 1 carefully.

- Who is writing here?

- Which two 'lords' are being spoken about?
(c.f. Matthew 22:41-46)

- How long will Jesus sit in this position of ultimate power and authority? (1 Corinthians 15:22-28)

- From Matthew 22, which authorities is Jesus greater than? What point is being made about Jesus? What are the implications for all other church authorities and saints?

2. Read verses 2-3, and 5-7.

- What new image is given of Christ?

- What moment could v3 be speaking of?
(vv5-6, Revelation 2:26-27, 19:11-21)

- How does the final image of Christ refreshing himself in v7 relate to the image of him as a soldier?

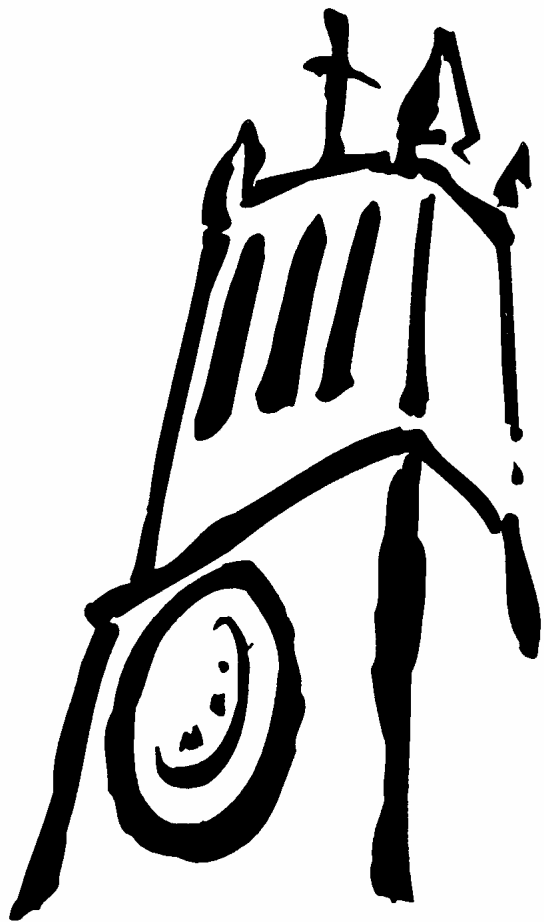
- What is the implication of this for a sinner contemplating other mediators? (Psalm 2:10-12)

3. Read verse 4

- What third image is given of Christ?

- What is the significance of God's swearing of an oath?
(Hebrews 7:20-22)

- What is the significance of God making Jesus a priest 'forever'? (Hebrews 7:11-21)
 - How is Christ established as the sole mediator between God and people?
 - Is there anything extra to be gained through seeking God through Mary, or a saint, or the Pope, or a priest?
4. Jesus taught us to approach God in prayer 'in Jesus' name'. Is there any other way that we could approach God? Why? Why not?
 5. Spend time praising God for his supreme Son, Jesus Christ, our great high priest and King. Come to him with your sins, and with your needs, and lay them before him in trust.



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