

1. Let me start with the title: "How and why we praise God as a group". To understand that title, we need to review where we left off in the psalms.
 - a) The last 15 psalms were a group that described a spiritual journey to draw close to God. Those psalms were traditionally sung by the Israelites as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate certain holidays. These psalms from the last few lessons in effect ended on a question. They ended with a short psalm encouraging all believers to praise God as a group for all the good things He has done for our lives as believer.
 - b) That ending, naturally leads to another question: How and why do we praise God?
 - i) Does it mean I have to follow the specific patterns taught in these psalms in order for say, our church or our group to praise Him? Of course not.
 - ii) These next three psalms simply give us reasons why we should praise Him.
 - iii) Further, these psalms teach us what to focus on as we praise God as group.
2. As usual, let me summarize the psalms in this lesson and show how they tie to the title:
 - a) Psalm 135 literally lists specific groups that should praise God and then recites some of Israelites' history and some of the good things God has done for the Israelites.
 - i) Obviously, most of us are not Jewish. Remember that we as Christian believers were not the original intended audience of these psalms. They were written for Jewish people to remember their history.
 - ii) The point for us Christians is simply that if God can do these great things for believers "back then", then collectively we can and should trust that God can and will do great things in our lives as well. In summary, what we can do when we gather collectively to worship God is recall how He has worked to help believers in the past. Recalling how God has worked in the past shows us patterns of how He can and does work to bless our lives now in the present and in the future.
 - b) Psalm 136 is another history lesson. Psalm 136 appears to be designed so we could recite it or sing it in harmony. The first part of each verse gives us a reason to collectively praise God and then second part of every verse states how His love endures forever.
 - i) Psalm 136 is similar in theme to Psalm 135, but this one focuses more on the Israelites being rescued out of Egypt and the events that happened soon after that.
 - ii) Most of us know by now that the Israelites leaving Egypt is symbolic of leaving our old life in order to be separated to live for Him. What this psalm does is think about that drawing close to God in "group form". In other words, it is not just you and I as individuals being separated for God, but our Christian group collectively. It is about how we as a group are separated to worship Him.
 - c) Psalm 137 is very different. It requires a little explanation as to why it is here. In effect it is about the suffering the Israelites felt under the Babylonian captivity. It ends with a strange request to murder the children of their captives. You have to admit that doesn't sound very Christian like and requires an explanation. The point of that last verse and in effect the point of that whole psalm is collectively the Israelites suffered terribly under the Babylonian captivity. It is a cry for God's justice. In that sense, it is a history lesson, just like Psalms 135 and 136 are both history lessons.
 - i) The underlying point of Psalm 137 is to believe in God does mean one has to suffer in this life. However, God is still watching over for us and it is God Himself who will avenge the wrongs done to us simply because we believe in Him.
 - d) Putting all three of these psalms together, the idea is that God is watching over us as a group, God is guiding our lives as a group and God is protecting us a group. With that said, I'm actually ready to start going over the psalms.

3. Psalm 135, title, "none".
 - a) None of the three psalms in this lesson have a title. Therefore, in this lesson, I won't mention any titles, or lack of titles, but just focus on the text itself. Onto Verse 1.
4. Verse 1a: Praise the LORD.
 - a) This phrase, which is the Hebrew word Hallelujah is used seven times in this psalm.
 - b) Let me discuss what that term means here, and then I won't have to repeat it again in this lesson. That phrase or that word Hallelujah can be used as simply as yelling out praise to God for how He has blessed our lives both as individuals as a group for the good things He has done in our lives.
 - i) I remember my wife had an old friend who thought nothing of publicly yelling out "Hallelujah" wherever she went. I remember how she would turn heads as she said it. No, I am not saying we have to embarrass ourselves with that expression. At the same, time we should not be so ashamed of our faith that we are afraid to either publicly or private praise God for the good things He has done for our lives.
 - ii) In context of this psalm, know that it is describing a group praising God together. Therefore, the purpose of this word "Hallelujah" being used here is to remind us when we collectively praise God: We do it when we get together with other believers. No that is not the only time we should praise Him. The point is one reason we collectively praise Him is to show others not how great we are, but to encourage group worship and encourage each other to praise Him as well.
 - iii) With that speech out of my system, ☺ I'm read for the rest of this verse.
5. Verse 1b: Praise the name of the LORD; praise him, you servants of the LORD, ² you who minister in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God.
 - a) The next thing the psalm asks us to do is to praise God's name. To understand why we praise His name, we should first remind ourselves what His name means.
 - i) Know that there are many names or titles for God. Each one describes a different aspect of God and what He has done in our world. The most holy of God's titles, is the word transliterated "Jehovah". The actual pronunciation is not known. When one sees the word "LORD" in all capitals in this NIV translation, it is literally "Jehovah". There are no vowels and it is technically "JWTH". The reason it is put in all capitals is to remind us how special it is and not to take that title lightly.
 - ii) Religious Jews consider that name so special they refuse to even say it. In my correspondence with one Jewish friend, I will write "G-d" to talk about God out of respect for his beliefs. My personal view is that if I am glorifying God by telling what His name means, then I am respecting that name.
 - iii) My favorite religious Jewish radio speaker (Dennis Prager, if you know who he is) will say the name "Jehovah" out loud if it is used in a respectful way. I figure it is ok for him to say it, then it is also respectful for me to talk about it the same way.
 - b) Now that we know someone is praising God here, let us discuss the "who's" of this verse.
 - i) First, the verse asks that the servants of God praise Him.
 - ii) Then it asks those who minister in the house of the God praise Him.
 - iii) Finally it asks those in the courts of the house praise Him.
 - iv) Think of all three of these groups as everyone at a church service. That would include those in charge; those working behind the scenes and of course, those who are attending church all praise Him.
 - v) Bottom line, everyone who is there, should take that moment to praise Him.
 - vi) We will get to the "why" in a matter of verses. Here we have the who's listed.
 - c) Is there a difference between "servants" and those who "minister" in God's house?
 - i) While there can be a legal difference, I've come to the conclusion that the issue is not so much different classes of servants, but simply that anyone and everyone who gets the privilege of worshipping God should take moments to praise Him.

6. Verse 3: Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praise to his name, for that is pleasant.
- a) OK John, so far we have established in effect that "God is good". Why I should sing that point out loud? Since God is perfect, I assume He doesn't need to hear it. Why do this?
 - i) As I have stated in previous lessons, I am convinced that having joy in one's life and having gratitude are intertwined concepts. We don't praise God because He needs to hear it. We praise God because it benefits our lives with joy when we acknowledge God as the source of the joy of our lives.
 - b) Remember that the reason we get together in church settings is not that God needs to hear us sing out to Him. It is for our benefit. Life is difficult enough as it is. Taking a little time to give God the credit for our lives not only gets our focus on Him, but also gives us the strength to help us face the rest of our weeks. That is the idea being singing out to God as a congregation and why it is beneficial to our lives.
7. Verse 4: For the LORD has chosen Jacob to be his own, Israel to be his treasured possession.
- a) Now we start to get into reasons why we praise God. It is because He has chosen the nation of Israel to be His chosen people. "Jacob" in this context is another title for the nation of Israel. When "Jacob" is used to describe the Nation of Israel, it is usually a reference to Israel prior to forgiveness. It is like saying, I know you are a sinful person by nature, but I still love you and I will rename you "Israel" because you are forgiven.
 - i) Let me explain this historically. The grandson of Abraham was named Jacob. If you read Jacob's life in Genesis, he was far from a perfect person to put it mildly. Despite those mistakes God choose him to be "one of His". God renamed Jacob "Israel". That word "Israel" literally means to struggle with God. The idea is that we are forgiven, but still struggle with trying to please Him with our lives.
 - b) What does all of this history have to do with you and me? The idea is that despite the sins we commit, despite the fact that we struggle in our own relationships with God, He has chosen us to be with Him forever. How do we know we are chosen? That's the easy part. If you are trusting in Jesus for the complete payment for sins, you are chosen.
 - i) We too can use the word "Israel" to describe ourselves, in that we too struggle with God in that it is our desire to please Him, but we know we make mistakes and sin and we know those sins are displeasing to Him. God simply desires we confess our sins and move on. We depend upon God to change our lives as opposed to trying to fix things ourselves. That is how we struggle with Him.
 - c) Now instead of describing these terms from our perspective, let's look at this from God's perspective. The verse says "Israel" is God's treasured possession. The way I view it is if God can love Jacob despite all of his faults, then God can and does love me as well despite all the sins I have committed in my life. I am not saved because I am a good person. I am not saved because my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds. I am saved simply because I am trusting in His complete forgiveness of our sins. Yes that sounds basic, but every now and then it is good to remind ourselves of that thought as we praise Him.
8. Verse 5: I know that the LORD is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods.
- a) Remember that the land of Israel was a small country and all around them where people worshipping other gods. Singing verses like this reminded them that the God they worshipped was greater than all the surrounding "so called" gods.
 - b) Let me modernize this: Other "gods" are more than just other religions. It could be things that we value more than God. As I have learned the hard way, "God does not want to be #1 on a list of 10 things. God wants to be #1 on a list of 1". That doesn't mean we can't have hobbies or interests. It just means we "take God with us" in those things we enjoy.
 - c) So why sing out that God is greater than the false gods? For starters, remember that the Israelites went into Babylonian captivity because collectively they turned from Him. Know that if God can punish that whole nation for turning from Him, He can and is willing to go to extreme measures to keep us individually or collectively focused on Him.

9. Verse 6: The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths. ⁷ He makes clouds rise from the ends of the earth; he sends lightning with the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.
 - a) The topic changes a little in Verse 6. To paraphrase the transition from Verse 5 to Verse 6, it is saying, "God is our God and we trust in Him. He is also the God who is in charge of the weather. Does that mean whenever we go through a bad weather storm (physically or other wise), does this mean this storm is God ordained? What about the really bad storms where people die from horrible weather. Is God behind that?
 - i) First of all the purpose of these verses is to teach us that God is in charge and we have to accept that fact even when we watch the weather.
 - ii) Next, the world we live in is cursed by sin. Nowhere in the bible does it say that the believer gets to live a specific number of years on earth. Throughout history many God-fearing people have suffered due to bad weather. That doesn't mean God is cruel or doesn't care about those people. It just means that He allows those storms ultimately to keep our focus on Him and remind ourselves that He and He alone is our source for eternal life no matter what happens to us in this lifetime.
 - b) Speaking of bad things happening to people, ☺ let's take a look at Verse 8.
10. Verse 8: He struck down the firstborn of Egypt, the firstborn of men and animals. ⁹ He sent his signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants.
 - a) Here we have a short summary of what happened to Egypt in the Exodus. When God called the Israelites out of Egypt, He killed the firstborn Egyptians in all of their families.
 - b) OK, why that punishment? If you think about it, God could have ordained it so that the Israelites just left and a "magic wall" prevented the Egyptians from stopping them. My point is simply, "Why inflict all that pain on the Egyptians? One reason is to show that He is greater than all other so-called gods and an eternal punishment to pay for messing with "His people" and trusting in those other false gods.
 - i) Another reason for the great and dramatic exodus is to teach us that when God separates believers from nonbelievers, He is showing the world as well as the believer the price to be paid for ignoring the true God.
 - c) OK John, we all know the Exodus story. Why do we as Christians living thousands of year's later, give praise to God for this event? It is to remind us that just as He separated those Israelites to serve Him, so God has separated us from nonbelievers in order that we can serve God in our lifetime. Does this mean that God will strike down those who have harmed us before we turned our lives over to Him? To put it mildly, I won't want to be in the shoes of those who refuse to trust in Him on judgment day.
 - i) The point is about appreciation. Just as we learn how God has separated the Israelites for the purpose of a relationship with Him, so He desires that we separate ourselves in order to have our own relationship with Him.
 - ii) OK, how do we separate ourselves? It starts with our simple trust that God exists, He did die for our sins and trust that He is guiding our lives. Then we regularly pray, seek Him for guidance and read His word as to see how He wants us to live.
 - d) John, this is all pretty basic stuff. The point is it is easy to wander away from God if we simply stop doing all of this stuff. The reason we should regularly worship Him and trust in Him is that is too easy for us to wander away from Him and His desire for our lives.
11. Verse 10: He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings-- ¹¹ Sihon king of the Amorites, Og king of Bashan and all the kings of Canaan-- ¹² and he gave their land as an inheritance, an inheritance to his people Israel.
 - a) Here we have more ancient history being reviewed. This describes how the Israelites defeated a bunch of kings and groups after they left Egypt. God lead them to give to give them the land of Israel by defeating all the people who lived in that area.

- b) I like to point out every now and then that God did not call on the Israelites to kill all nonbelievers. The conquering of these specific groups was a specific punishment on those nations. I've read archeologists who have studied these cultures and said in effect, "If you understand how corrupt these people were, it is amazing that God waited as long as He did in order to judge these nations." For example, they were guilty of child sacrifice and having sex with animals as the tip of the iceberg of the things that they practiced.
 - i) In fact, many centuries later, when the Israelites started to commit some of the same sins as the nations they conquered, God "kicked them out of the land" in effect to give His own people similar punishment to that of these other nations.
 - c) OK John, once again, you are slipping into ancient history. Explain to me why I should care about any of this ancient history as I worship God? First of all, it is not that God expects us to recite these battle victories as part of our prayer life. The important idea is that God is more powerful than any and all battles that we can face in life. If God could lead the Israelites to victory over all of these nations, so He can and does lead His people to victory over any and all issues that we face in our own lives.
12. Verse 13: Your name, O LORD, endures forever, your renown, O LORD, through all generations. ¹⁴ For the LORD will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.
- a) Speaking of not just focusing on ancient history, I present these two verses. They say in effect that God's name endures through all generations. Verse 14 goes on to say that God will vindicate (think defend and protect) those who trust in Him.
 - b) Stop and think of all the religions that have come and gone through the millennia. When this was written, Judaism was a small religion observed a relatively obscure group of people. Now millennia later, it still exists despite the multitudes of other religious groups that have come and gone. Further, through the spread of Christianity, the worship of the God who created the world has spread to billions around the world.
 - c) With that speech completed, the point of these verses is in effect, "God will be worshipped throughout all generations. He will always call His chosen people from all generations. Further, God cares about those who worship Him and He has compassion on us."
 - i) OK, how does God vindicate His people? Throughout history there have been lots of martyrs who suffered horrible things just because they trusted in God. Given that fact, how do you explain God "vindicating" His people? First of all the bible never says He vindicates us in this lifetime. It is about the eternal rewards being given in exchange for trusting Him in this lifetime.
 - ii) What always amazes me is to watch the peace that believers can have through the worst of suffering one can imagine. I have met believers dying of cancer who trust God through their pain and generally have a wonderful outlook. That is the type of joy that God wants us to have despite whatever situation we face.
 - d) Getting back to vindication, there are many times where God has rescued believers out of horrible situations and in effect all we can do is praise Him for that rescue. Whether we live or die, if we are trusting in Him for salvation, we are being vindicated whether or not it happens in this lifetime or the next one. The assurance comes through studying His word, and reading how God has rescued people in the past. That is why the bible spends so much time reciting ancient history. It is to remind us that God can and does work in great ways today just as He has done in ancient times.
13. Verse 15: The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. ¹⁶ They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; ¹⁷ they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths.
- a) Speaking of learning from ancient history, I present these verses. One has to know that in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel, they would make statues of the gods that they worshipped. Even though they are called gods, they have no power.

- b) OK John, once again, it is time for you to explain how all of that ancient history affects my life. I haven't seen any statues made to other gods in my neighborhood. ☺
 - i) I heard a sermon recently about a Christian believer who traveled to the United States from a remote part of Africa. This woman came from a culture where people routinely sacrificed animals to their false gods. Her comment about America was that she couldn't stand being around all of the false gods being worshipped here. She was referring to all of the monuments built to sporting events and those built to the stars of the entertainment industry.
 - ii) So does this mean I can't go to a sporting event or say a movie? No. Remember how I said "God wants to be #1 on a list of 1". It is about taking God with us to enjoy what we enjoy. I also add a word of caution here if that event is a weakness to our relationship with Him, then for us, and maybe nobody else, we have to avoid certain locations or hanging around certain people.
 - iii) A false god is essentially anything that draws our lives away from worshipping the true God. The question we all need to ask is, "Are we trusting in God and what else?" If there are any "else's" in our lives, then know that God wants to be in charge of those aspects of our lives as well.
- 14. Verse 18: Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.
 - a) The really sad thing about false gods is that people become like what they worship.
 - i) Show me a person that idolizes say, Hollywood stars, and I will show you a person that eventually becomes as meaningless as those idols. Show me a person that only lives to make a living and I will show you a person who becomes "cold and ruthless" as the money that they worship. Show me a person that only trusts in his or her own ability to get through life and I will show you an empty life.
 - b) These last few verses are here it remind us of the danger of worshipping false gods.
- 15. Verse 19: O house of Israel, praise the LORD; O house of Aaron, praise the LORD; ²⁰ O house of Levi, praise the LORD; you who fear him, praise the LORD. ²¹ Praise be to the LORD from Zion, to him who dwells in Jerusalem. Praise the LORD.
 - a) OK, after spending a number of verses warning of the dangers of turning away from the true God of the world, the psalm ends on a positive note encouraging all of us to praise Him in effect from wherever we physically are at the moment.
 - b) So why the dramatic change in focus here? The idea of this whole psalm is to get us to appreciate how much God has done for our lives and at the same time reminds us of the dangers of turning away from Him. This whole psalm can be summarized as, "There are great rewards in this life and for eternity for trusting in God now, and there is also punishment in this life and for eternity for ignoring the God who has called us."
 - c) After all of those statements of rewards and punishments regarding our relationship with God, it is logical then that this psalm ends with more praise to Him.
 - d) Notice the list of people praising God is based on rank:
 - i) The first group encouraged to praise God is the "House of Aaron". Essentially this is the family of the High Priest.
 - ii) The second group is the Levites. This is one of the 12 tribes of Israel that was specifically singled out to serve God. The way I describe them is, "if you were born a Levite, you will go off to seminary whether or not you want to be a priest."
 - iii) The third and final group is anyone who trusts and fears God.
 - iv) This does not mean our pastors should praise God more than us. The point for us is the closer we are called to serve God, the more we should appreciate Him. The more we realize the good He has done for our lives, the more we should thank Him. That is why this psalm begins and ends with praise.
 - v) The final word of this psalm is the same one it started with "Hallelujah". Since I already explained that means "Praise God", I'll just move on to the next psalm.

16. Psalm, 136, Verse 1: Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. *His love endures forever.*
- a) This psalm gives more reasons why we should praise God. It is similar to Psalm 135 in that it gives reasons why we should praise Him and like Psalm 135, recalls points in Israel's history to remind us that just as God has worked great things in the past so He can and does work great things in our lives if we are willing to trust in Him.
 - b) Let us also remember that the psalms are poetry and they were designed to be sung. Even though the music is long gone, even in this English translation, one can sense how this particular psalm was designed to be sung: That is because the last sentence of every verse in this psalm is the same: "His love endures forever". It is as if one person or one group sings out the reason God's love endures forever and then the "choir" repeats back that phrase to remind all of us of just that "His love endures forever".
 - c) Let's discuss why this phrase is so important. It is so easy for us as people to get our focus on our own lives. Because we can't physically see God, it is important if not essential to remind ourselves that He is there and He loves us. That is why the Israelites regularly recited parts of their history. It is not just to learn history, but also to remind themselves that God is still watching over them.
 - i) To paraphrase "His love endures forever", think of it in terms of "God did not create people and this world "in vein". What I mean by that is when God created this world, He didn't waste His time, as He knew that some people would be willing to acknowledge His existence and freely love Him the way He loves us.
 - ii) As I like to say every now and then, I can't explain all the tragic things that happen in this world. I just know the only way life would be fair would be if there is a next life and there is a God who judges things fairly. That is why I trust in Him and that is why I too, need psalms like this to remind myself that His love does endure forever. That includes the idea that despite the tragedies of our lives and despite all the people who reject His love and reject His guidance for their lives.
 - d) With that speech out of my system, let me now tackle the first half of this verse. It says, give thanks to the LORD for He is good."
 - i) To give thanks to God, is about acknowledging that He exists, and He is in charge of our lives. It is about reminding ourselves that God "is who He is". He was not created and He is always there no matter what happens in our lives.
 - ii) So why give thanks? Again, what about the tragedies of our lives and our world? It is about remembering the fact that He exists and through His love and His justice that is the only way life would be fair. In other words, it is not just giving thanks for the good things of our lives, but about the good things that God does in this world in effect because it is "His". To say it another way, "This is God's world and this psalm reminds us of that fact." God is not here to do our will, but we are here to do His will. We give thanks because His will is the best thing for our lives.
17. Verse 2: Give thanks to the God of gods. *His love endures forever.* ³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords: *His love endures forever.*
- a) These two verses appear to be fairly similar. One is to give thanks to God because we realize that He is greater than all the "gods" that are created by people. Verse 3 then says something similar, but instead of "God", the word "Lord". Notice "Lord" is in title case.
 - i) The word "God" is about realizing who has the true power over this world and over our lives. The word "Lord" (not in all upper case) is about realizing who is in charge of our lives. Someone or something can be "lord" of our lives, but we don't worship them or it as God. If have some sort of sinful addiction, that addiction can be the "lord" (it controls us more than we control it) of our lives. However, if we acknowledge God as our Lord and not our problems, we realize He is true Lord over our lives. My point is the word "God" and "Lord" can be distinct terms in our minds, but the point is the God is in charge whether we realize that or not.

18. Verse 4: to him who alone does great wonders, *His love endures forever*. ⁵who by his understanding made the heavens, *His love endures forever*. ⁶ who spread out the earth upon the waters, *His love endures forever*. ⁷who made the great lights-- *His love endures forever*. ⁸ the sun to govern the day, *His love endures forever*. ⁹the moon and stars to govern the night; *His love endures forever*.
- a) Sometimes it is better to read bible verses in context of the surrounding verse. This is why I put these five verses together to be read.
 - b) Know that in the original Hebrew text, the phrase *His love endures forever* is not in italics. It is put that way in this particular English translation to emphasize that it was designed to be repeated as a response to the good things God has done for our lives.
 - c) The idea of these verses is to consider the world that God has created. This comes back to the idea that our world is in actuality "God's world". He created it and He designed so that this world could bring Him glory by people living to make a difference for Him.
 - d) In many ways, these verses echo "Genesis Chapter 1". It repeats some key facts about how the world as we perceive it was created. The point of this psalm is not just to restate how this world was created, but why it was created: In order for God Himself to get the glory for this creation. Let me explain further:
 - i) First of all, let's assume the type of person who reads and studies the psalms is already a person who believes in God's existence. So if we already believe God created this world, why think about it? In other words, how do these ancient facts about how God created this world remind us that His love endures forever?
 - a) The answer is it puts our "short term lives" (whatever length that is) in the perspective of eternity. God's love endures before we were born and will continue long after we are with Him in heaven.
 - ii) So what does God want us to do with this information? It is a reminder to live to make a difference for Him, both individually and collectively. If this is His world, we remind ourselves of that fact in order to keep our focus on what is the "goal": Living to be a witness for Him in this world.
 - e) Let me put all of this creation talk another way: Jesus said the two most important commands in the bible in effect are to love God as much as possible and to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. (See Luke 10:27 or Mark 12:30-31).
 - i) If we are to love God "with all that we have" and put the needs of others before our own needs, we are showing honor to His creation. Think of other people as God's creation. He made this world so that people could honor Him. By loving God and reminding ourselves that He is in charge, that is how we get the energy to do "Part 2" which is about putting the needs of others over our own needs.
 - f) Getting back to these verses, reciting and recalling how God created this world, remind us that first of all, it is His world, and second that He created it so that people could bring glory to Him in this world. The reason "His love endures forever" is part of these verses is the reminder to us that God's love goes on throughout time and throughout His world.
 - i) Let me put it another way: God's love goes on, whether we choose to get involved in that love relationship or not. If we in effect refuse to acknowledge God's love for this world, He will find (allow) others to "love others and love Him as much as He has loved us". It is our free will to choose to love Him back and love others.
 - ii) By remembering this world belongs to Him, it puts our own lives into perspective of the eternal. We can choose to use our lives to try to better our lives and ignore the lives of others around us or we can choose at any moment to use our lives to make a difference for Him. We remind ourselves that God created this world and that He created it so that we who trust in Him can use our lives to honor Him and make a difference for Him in this world.
 - g) Yes, I admit I skipped the specifics of how God did all of this. I'll let people smarter than me focus on the "how" question, while I continue to focus on the "why" issue.

19. Verse 10: to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt *His love endures forever.*¹¹ and brought Israel out from among them *His love endures forever.*¹² with a mighty hand and outstretched arm; *His love endures forever.*¹³ to him who divided the Red Sea asunder *His love endures forever.*¹⁴ and brought Israel through the midst of it, *His love endures forever.*¹⁵ but swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea; *His love endures forever.*
- a) In this next section of the psalm, the writer wants us to think about how God went to this great dramatic effort to separate the Israelites from the Egyptians. The historical point is being emphasized is that even when the Egyptians chased after the Israelites leaving their country, God wiped out the Egyptian army in the same sea that the Israelites crossed.
 - b) I could spend a day going over all the historical details, but I suspect you the reader are already familiar with these details. It is interesting how the bible over and over again, comes back to the story of the Egyptian exodus as a key point in history: That is because it is only time in history where God worked on a dramatic large scale in order to show how God separates His people from nonbelievers. Yes the key point is that just as He has separated that group of Israelites thousands of years ago, so in effect He has separated you and me to make a difference for Him in our lifetime.
 - c) Let's put this in context. Why jump from the creation story of Genesis 1, to the exodus story of the second book of the bible? What does the psalmist want us to focus on. Let me put it this way:
 - i) The first part of this psalm focused on the fact that this is "God's world" and He created it in effect to give Him glory.
 - ii) The second part of this psalm (this section) focuses on the fact that God has chosen specific people to be His representatives in this world. How do we know if we are God's representatives? Easy. If you are trusting in Jesus complete payment for your sins, then whether you realize it or not, you have been called by God to be His representative in this world. Of course it is up to us to choose to live that way, but we have been called to that duty over our lifetimes.
 - iii) The effective point here is that "God has our back". Yes it is up to us to make that difference for Him, but if we are willing to commit our lives that way, He in effect promises to guide our lives and protect us so we can make that difference for Him.
 - d) OK John, I get the big picture. If I know God has called me out of the world and He is guiding me, what do I do next? Well we start by worshipping Him and acknowledging Him as our God. That is why this psalm of praise is here.
 - i) Then, as I like to say, think about what you enjoy doing and use that "thing" to make a difference for Him. The key is to let God lead us. Pray about how God wants to use our lives. It is amazing to watch how God answers those prayers over time. Pray about what steps to take next. Yes we still have lives to live and other people we are accountable to. I have discovered that if we are willing to trust Him with every aspect of our lives, He does guide and protect us and He does lead us over time down the path He desires for our lives.
 - e) This leads me back to these verses. Just as God guided the Israelites out of Egypt and God stopped the Egyptians from going after the Israelites, so God wants to guide your life and my life so that we can make a difference for Him. To repeat what I said earlier, God has not separated us "in vein". Just as God did not create this world in vein, so this section of the psalm reminds us that God did not create us in vein. What I mean by that is that God created each of us with a purpose. We seek Him in order to discover what is that purpose that He desires for our lives.
 - i) We then live to make that difference for Him. God uses not only our good qualities but also our mistakes in order to teach us what it is He desires of us.
 - ii) In other words, it is up to us to "follow" and not lead and do it on His timing.
 - iii) With that said, I'm ready to move on to the next section of this psalm.

20. Verse 16: to him who led his people through the desert, *His love endures forever.* ¹⁷ who struck down great kings, *His love endures forever.* ¹⁸ and killed mighty kings-- *His love endures forever.* ¹⁹ Sihon king of the Amorites *His love endures forever.* ²⁰ and Og king of Bashan-- *His love endures forever.* ²¹ and gave their land as an inheritance, *His love endures forever.* ²² an inheritance to his servant Israel; *His love endures forever.*
- a) When I started putting this lesson together, I didn't intend this to be a series of speeches on separate sections of this psalm, it is just came out that way.
 - b) Most of us Christians are more familiar with the parts of the Exodus story as told in the last set of verses then the details of what happens after the Exodus, so therefore, I'm going to cover a little bit of history here in order to explain the significance.
 - i) To describe this topic another way, most of us have seen the movie "The Ten Commandments". Most of us know that God lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and the Egyptian army was drowned in the sea. We also know that the Israelites made it to their own land. What many of us don't know is some of the biblical details between the time the Israelites left Egypt and arrived in their own land.
 - c) That little speech leads me back to these verses. As the Israelites worked their way from "Point A to Point B", they encountered armies that had to be defeated because these groups refused to let the Israelites continue on their way. Think of this journey in the sense that Satan refuses to quit. Just because the Egyptians lost, other armies were thrown at the Israelites in the hopes that they would not trust in God for their lives.
 - i) The point for you and me is not to know details of the Israelite ancient history, but to know that just because God has lead us to one set of victories never means that He is done guiding our lives. Just as He lead the Israelites out of Egypt and lead them to victories over other groups, so God will and does continue to lead us to more victories in life as we continue to trust in Him.
 - ii) The underlying point of these verses is about our continuing trust in God to guide our lives. That is why we give thanks in these particular verses. Just because God has guided us out of our own "Egypt", does not mean He is done with us. He also guides through our own battles we have to face once we are saved. That is the underlying message behind these verses.
 - d) Yes I can give you specifics of who were these specific kings. However, I don't design these lessons to just be history lessons. They are designed to teach us what we can learn from history. What we learn is that just as God continued to guide the Israelites, so He can and does continue to guide our lives ultimately for His glory.
 - e) On that positive thought, I believe I am ready to move on.
21. Verse 23: to the One who remembered us in our low estate *His love endures forever.* ²⁴ and freed us from our enemies, *His love endures forever.* ²⁵ and who gives food to every creature. *His love endures forever.*
- a) At this point, the psalmist stops focusing on ancient history and says in effect, "despite everything we are dealing with right now, God's love goes on forever.
 - b) Some people suspect this psalm was written after the Babylonian captivity as Verse 24 describes the Israelites being freed from their enemies. Whether or not this is true, is not relevant to this study. What I do want you to notice is the concept that God rescues us from whatever we have to deal with. That is the point of both Verses 23 and 24.
 - c) So why mention "food to every creature" in Verse 25? How does that fit in context?
 - i) The idea is that despite what we have to deal with, God still not only provides for us, but for all creatures. The idea is in effect, rain continues, plants still grow and all creatures still get to eat because God's world still continues.
 - ii) What that means in effect is despite our problems and our issues, life is still going to go on, because He is still in charge and He still cares for this world.

22. Verse 26: Give thanks to the God of heaven. *His love endures forever.*
- a) Wrapping up this psalm, it is saying that God's world "moves on". Yes He guides our lives and the lives of those that trust in Him. At the same time, God cares about the world He created and still provides for it. Therefore, we as those who trust in Him simply need to remember that His love for what He has created goes on forever.
 - b) So if God loves the "whole creation", how is that different from those He has called to be with Him forever? How does God's love of Israel separate from His love of all things?
 - i) First we have to remember that God is in charge and we are not. A perfect God by definition knows who will and will not respond to His love for us. Since we don't know who will respond to that love, our job is to make a difference for Him wherever and whenever we can. It comes back to the principal that we can only judge behavior and not salvation. This psalm reminds us that God's love endures through all of us who do and don't choose to respond to that love.
 - c) In summary, we remind ourselves of His love, not for His sake, but simply due to the fact that we "tend to wander away" and we have to remember that God is always there.
 - d) With that said, I'm going to sneak in one more short psalm in this lesson.
23. Psalm 137, Verse 1: By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
- a) Scholars debate many of the psalms about when they were actually written. This one is describes life during the Babylonian captivity. At the least, this psalm reminds us that all of the psalms were not organized as a single book until after that period of time.
 - b) It's time for a little background on this captivity. Babylon was an ancient city in what is today Iraq. The leaders of that city were a mighty power in that region around the 6th Century BC. The reason they conquered the Israelites was in effect because God allowed it to happen. Many centuries earlier, God used the Israelites to conquer their own land, because the original residents were so corrupt they were committing child sacrifices and having sexual relationships with animals, as I have already stated.
 - i) By the time of the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites themselves had turned away from God so much, they were guilty of the same thing those original residents of the land were doing. Therefore God used the Babylonians to judge the Israelites and kick them out of the land for the same sins as those original residents.
 - c) This leads us to Verse 1. The Israelites as a nation were now relocated in the Babylonian Empire. What is interesting is while the Old Testament says a lot about this captivity, there is very little said about what happened to the Israelites during this captivity. This psalm gives us a few clues as to what life was like for the Israelites during this time.
24. Verse 2: There on the poplars we hung our harps, ³ for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- a) It's time for a little more background. "Poplars" were a type of tree. Israeli musicians carried harps. A rough equivalent would be the type of person who takes his or her guitar with them wherever they travel. The point here is the people who captured the Israelites said in effect, "Sing for us, whether you feel like it or not." The Israelites responded in effect with "We won't touch our harps because we are in captivity."
25. Verse 4: How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land? ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. ⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.
- a) Here is this group of Israelites taken captive. Visualize a thousand mile journey on foot as one was taken by force from Israel to Iraq. Now in Iraq, the captured Israelites are saying, "How do you expect me to forget about my homeland?"
 - b) The text says, "If I forget Jerusalem". The point of that phrase is that the center of the worship of God was in the City of Jerusalem. Therefore it is not so much the physical city that the Israelites are referring to, but the worship of God, above all other things.

- c) Those people who captured the Israelites wanted them to sing in order to entertain the people who captured them. The Israelites are responding to that request by saying in effect, "If I don't put God above all things, may I be struck silent".
 - i) This leads to the application of these verses. The idea is whether we are physically close to God or in a land that generally does not worship our God, we still must put Him before all things. Remember how I said, "God wants to be #1 on a list of 1?" Well, that applies wherever, we are including in a foreign land.
 - d) The reason this story is a psalm is not to learn about the Babylonian captivity. It is to remind us that wherever we are, we are still to make God a priority for our lives.
26. Verse 7: Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!"
- a) Just east of the nation of Israel was the nation of the Edomites. This was their traditional enemy. The point is the Edomites were happy when the Babylonians conquered them.
 - b) To put this in modern terms, a lot of people would be happy today if either the nation of Israel or the United States was ever destroyed. There are still many people who wish destruction on any nation that focuses their worship on the God of the Bible today.
 - c) Ok John, and how is any of this relevant to my life? The point is when we are down or hurt, there may be people cheering our downfall. Notice the psalmist takes the pain of how others are cheering their destruction and gives that pain to God. That's the point:
 - i) The point is we trust in God to deal with those who taunt us and cheer during moments of our downfall.
27. Verse 8: O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us-- ⁹ he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.
- a) Now come the toughest verses in the lesson. When the Israelites went into captivity, they were treated as slaves. In order to keep the Israelites "down", the Babylonians would kill some their babies so that population would not expand. They would probably kill the babies in front of the parents in order to drive home the point. Is that cruel? Yes, but that is why we trust in a God to be in charge of dealing with people this cruel.
 - b) The cry here for God to repay in kind for the way His people have been treated during this time. This comes back to the concept that God is a god of judgment as well as a god of love. The Israelites were unable to stop their captives from killing their children, but they could cry out to God for justice. There is no historical record in the bible of this incident other than this here in this psalm, so one has to simply accept it at face value.
 - c) OK John, this is sad, ancient history. How does it affect me? When we are in a situation where we are treated horribly, we need to trust in a God that will take care of problems for us when it is beyond our ability to do anything about the situation.
28. All of this leads me back to my opening theme of how and why we praise God. It is not just for the good things He provides in our lives, but also for His justice to be done. The reason this sad psalm comes right after two psalms that described the good He does for our lives, is to remind us that He is in charge. God never promises us this life will be wonderful all the time. He promises that He is in charge if we are willing to let Him be in charge. That means He is in charge of providing for us and even that He will take care of those who hurt us. He is a God of justice as much as a God of love. That is why these psalms are listed here in this sequence.
29. On that tough but truthful note, I'll wrap all this up in my closing prayer: Heavenly Father, we thank You for all the good things that You provide for our world and for our lives. At the same time, this world is full of cruelty due the influence of sin. We can't understand or explain all of the bad things that happen, we just trust in Your justice to right the wrongs of this world. Help us to remember that trust in You is the only way we can deal such tough situations. At the same time, we know You want the best for us and You want us to appreciate all the good things that You do for us as people. Help us to keep our focus on You as we use our lives to make a difference for You. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen.