

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Leader's Guide, Lesson Three

PSALM 16

The Holy One Who Would Not See Decay

Lesson at a glance

Psalm 16 is a quiet psalm of confidence written by a man in danger. David says that the LORD is his portion, that he has set the LORD always before him, and that God will not abandon him to Sheol or let His holy one see corruption. On the day of Pentecost, Peter takes the last four verses of that psalm and builds on them the first gospel sermon ever preached. His argument turns on a fact everyone in the crowd could verify before sundown: the tomb of David was still there, with David still in it. Therefore the psalm's promise reached past David to Someone else. Paul preaches the same psalm the same way at Antioch in Pisidia. This is the resurrection lesson of the series, and the class should leave it with two things: a clear grasp of Peter's logic, and a settled hope about their own bodies.

Goals for this session

First, that each person would be able to state Peter's argument from Acts 2:29 to 31 in their own words, without notes.

Second, that the class would understand what Sheol meant to an Old Testament believer, and would learn to be content with what Scripture says and stop where it stops.

Third, that the class would see the resurrection of Jesus not only as evidence about who He is, but as a promise about their own bodies (1 Corinthians 15:20 to 23; Romans 8:11).

Fourth, that anyone in the room who has not obeyed the gospel would hear Acts 2:38 the way the crowd first heard it, as an answer to the question "what shall we do."

Preparing to lead

Read Psalm 16 every day this week, out loud if you can. It is only eleven verses. Then read Acts 2 whole, not just the section the lesson covers, so that you can feel how Psalm 16 sits inside the sermon and how Psalm 110 finishes it in verses 34 to 36.

Read Acts 13:16 to 41 in full. Paul's synagogue sermon at Antioch runs the same line of argument that Peter ran at Pentecost, and having read them side by side will let you show the class two independent witnesses instead of one.

Look up Numbers 18:20, Genesis 37:35, Job 14:13, Psalm 6:5, Psalm 88:10 to 12, and Psalm 89:48 before class. Then pray for the people in your group who have buried someone this year. Ask God to make this lesson pastoral and not merely technical.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Recent grief. A lesson on the grave will find whoever in your class is carrying a fresh loss. Watch faces during the section on Sheol. You do not need to fix anything; you need to slow down, speak gently, and end the hour with hope rather than with a puzzle.

Curiosity about the intermediate state. Someone will ask where the dead are right now, whether they know what is happening here, and what Jesus was doing between Friday and Sunday. These are natural questions, and the Bible says less about them than we wish. Bring the group back to what is written. Say plainly that Scripture gives us enough to trust God with our dead, and that guessing beyond the text is how error gets started. Luke 16:19 to 31 and 2 Corinthians 5:8 are the passages people will reach for; handle them without building a system on them.

Acts 2:23 and the charge of guilt. Peter tells the crowd, "you crucified and killed" Jesus. Some in the class have heard that verse used to slander Jewish people. Head that off before it starts. Peter is speaking to the very people who were in Jerusalem that Passover, he is Jewish himself, and his aim in verse 38 is their forgiveness, not their condemnation. Note that verse 23 also names God's definite plan and the hands of lawless men, and that all of us have a share in the sin that put Him there.

The throne of David. Acts 2:30 to 36 will bring up the question of Christ's kingdom. Some in your community have been taught that Jesus will one day sit on a rebuilt earthly throne in Jerusalem. Peter settles it in the same sermon: God swore to set one of David's descendants on his throne, and Peter says that promise was kept when God raised Jesus and exalted Him to His own right hand, where He now reigns as Lord and Christ. Make the point calmly and from the text. There is no need to name groups or to argue.

People who have never obeyed the gospel. Question 15 asks directly. Do not press an individual in front of the class. Say once, warmly, that anyone who wants to talk about baptism can stay afterward or speak with an elder this week, and then leave the door open.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Psalm 16 aloud in full before you pray.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask each person to name one thing they own or enjoy that they would find hardest to lose, then read Psalm 16:5 without comment.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 5 and 6 (Sheol and what David meant), 8 (Peter's argument from David's tomb), 9 (what the crowd was told to do), and 13 (Romans 6 and Romans 8). If time runs short, do not skip 8. Everything else in the lesson leans on it.

Notes on key questions

Question 5. Verse 9 gives three things: a glad heart, rejoicing, and flesh that dwells secure. Verse 11 gives the path of life, fullness of joy in God's presence, and pleasures forevermore at His right hand. On the Old Testament passages, be careful and be honest. Psalm 6:5 and Psalm 88:10 to 12 describe Sheol as a place of silence where the praise of God has stopped and God's steadfast love is not declared. Psalm 89:48 says no one can deliver his own soul from its power. What the Old Testament believer knew was that God is Lord even there and that God can be trusted. What he did not have was a clear picture of life beyond it. That is exactly what 2 Timothy 1:10 says was brought to light later, through the gospel.

Question 6. Expect a range of answers, and welcome them. The plain sense for David is deliverance from a present danger: God will not let me die here. Do not let the class treat the psalm as a coded message that meant nothing to David and nothing to Israel for a thousand years. At the same time, Acts 2:31 says David "foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ," so this is more than a happy coincidence that Peter noticed. The honest answer holds both. David spoke out of his own situation and out of the covenant God had sworn to him, and the Spirit carried his words further than his own life could reach.

Question 7. Verses 22 to 24 give a compressed gospel: Jesus of Nazareth was attested by God with mighty works and wonders and signs, delivered up according to God's definite plan and foreknowledge, crucified by the hands of lawless men, and raised by God. On verse 24, "not possible" is strong language. It was not possible because God had sworn an oath to David, because God had spoken by the psalm, and because death has no claim on a holy one who never sinned. God's promise and God's character make the grave a temporary address.

Question 8. This is the heart of the lesson. Peter's argument depends on a fact anyone could check: David died, was buried, and his tomb "is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). If the psalm were only about David, it failed, because David's body did decay. So Peter reasons that David spoke as a prophet, on the strength of God's oath to seat a descendant on his throne (2 Samuel 7:12 to 13; Psalm 132:11), about the resurrection of the Christ. Push the class to notice what kind of preaching this is. Peter did not ask the crowd for a feeling. He gave them a public fact, in the city where it happened, weeks after it happened, and invited them to check it. Point out that the same sermon offers a second checkable fact in verse 32: "of that we all are witnesses."

Question 9. Peter says they are witnesses of the resurrection, and then in verses 33 to 36 he moves to Psalm 110 and the present enthronement of Jesus as Lord and Christ. Verse 37 is the reaction: cut to the heart, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Verse 38 is the answer: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Let the class see the shape of it. Faith came first, since they were already convicted; then repentance and baptism, for the forgiveness of sins. This is the plainest conversion account in Scripture, and it is worth reading verse 41 as well: about three thousand souls were added that day. Do not turn this into a debate. Just read it and let it stand.

Question 10. The three quotations are Psalm 2:7 in verse 33, Isaiah 55:3 in verse 34 ("the holy and sure blessings of David"), and Psalm 16:10 in verse 35. Paul's argument in verses 36 and 37 is one clean contrast: David served God's purpose in his own generation, died, and saw corruption; the One God raised did not see corruption. The value of this section for the class is the independence of the two sermons. Peter preached in Jerusalem to Jews at Pentecost; Paul preached in Asia Minor years later. Neither one invented the reading; they had it from the Lord and from the same Scriptures.

Question 13. Romans 6:3 to 5 locates our share in Christ's death and resurrection at baptism: we were buried with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised, we too might walk in newness of life. Romans 8:11 promises that God, who raised Jesus, will also give life to our mortal bodies. Draw the line clearly between the two passages. Baptism is where a person is united with the death and resurrection of Jesus; the resurrection of the body is where that union finally arrives. Guard against two errors in the discussion, the idea that baptism is a mere symbol added on later, and the idea that our future hope is only a soul floating somewhere. Scripture promises raised bodies.

Question 15. Handle this gently and only once. If someone in the class has never been baptized, the natural moment is right here, since the lesson has just walked through Acts 2:38 and Romans 6. Offer, do not press. Say that you or one of the elders would be glad to sit down this week, and then move on to question 16 without looking at anyone.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in Lesson Three. Reading a Quotation Back in Its Original Context is the habit that makes this entire series work: whenever the New Testament quotes a psalm, go read the psalm. Peter quotes four verses of Psalm 16, not one, and he expects the whole flow of David's confidence to come along. Telling the Difference Between Direct Prophecy and Type is the interpretive tool the class will need every week from here on. Make sure they understand that both are legitimate, that most of the psalms in this series work by pattern rather than by prediction, and that Psalm 16 is one of the clearer cases where an apostle argues for prediction outright. Teaching this now will save confusion when the class reaches Psalm 69, where the psalmist confesses folly that could never be true of Jesus.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, You are our portion and our cup. Thank You for putting the words of Psalm 16 in David's mouth, and for carrying them further than he could see. Thank You that You did not abandon Your Holy One to the grave, and that His body never saw decay. Thank You that the tomb in the garden is empty and that death has lost its sting. Teach us to set You always before us, so that we are not shaken. Comfort those in this room who have stood at a graveside this year, and give every one of us a settled hope for the day when You give life to our mortal bodies. In the name of the risen Christ we pray. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson Four

Next week is Psalm 22, and it is the hardest and richest lesson in the series. It is the psalm Jesus quoted from the cross. Ask the class to read Psalm 22 all the way through several times before class, and then to read Matthew 27:32 to 54, Mark 15:22 to 39, and John 19:16 to 30 with the psalm open beside them. Warn them that the psalm does not end where the crucifixion accounts leave off. Verse 22 turns a corner, and by verse 31 the whole world is worshiping. Encourage them to come having read the whole psalm, not just the first line.