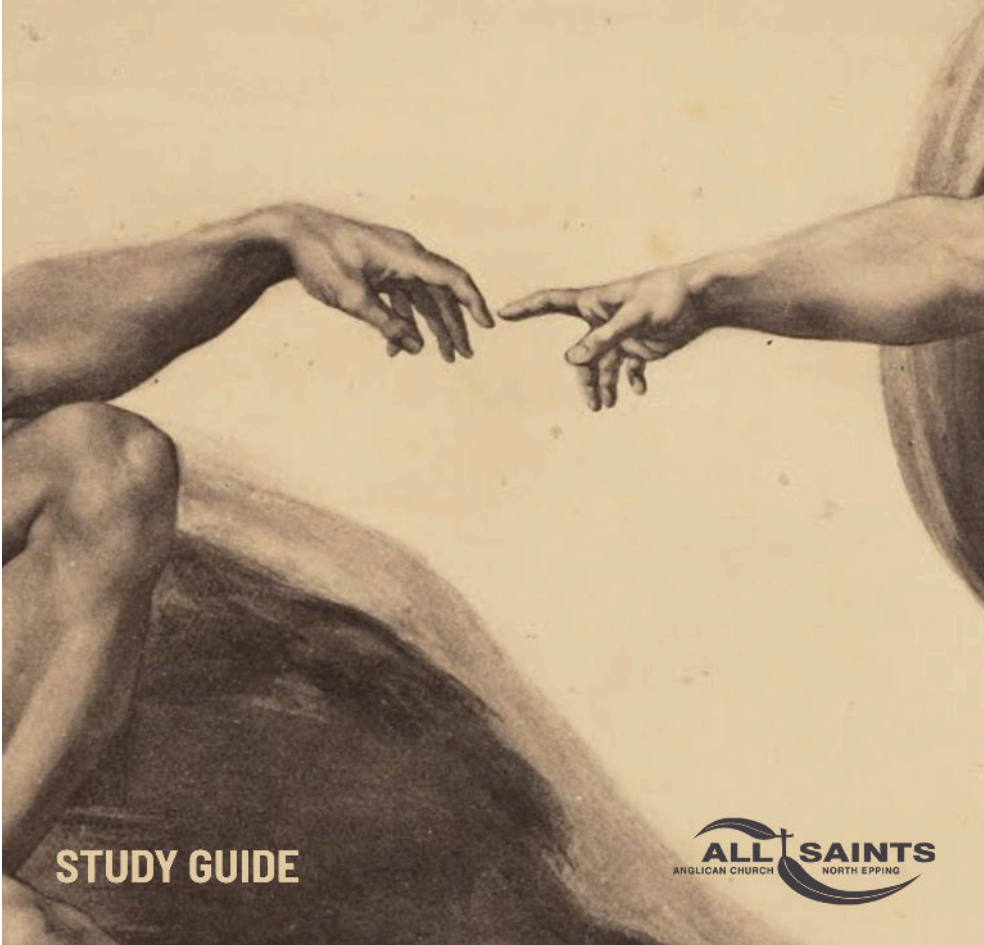


# humanity

*from dust to glory*



*“What sort of freak then is man! How novel, how monstrous, how chaotic, how paradoxical, how prodigious! Judge of all things, feeble earth-worm, repository of truth, sink of doubt and error, glory and refuse of the universe... Man’s greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness!”*

*Blaise Pascal 1660*

**STUDY GUIDE**



## Introduction: Humanity in the Psalms

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*The book of Psalms is a unique part of the Bible. In other Bible books we have God's word spoken to us (in various genres), but in the psalms we find words given by God for us to speak back to him. Their poetic form engages our hearts as well as our minds.*

*The psalms exist primarily to be sung or spoken by the people of God, rather than to be studied and analysed. They call each individual to make a decision about whether to add our voice to the choir. "The psalms open for us a window into a world of praise and prayer. They invite us not simply to look through the window, to observe and perhaps admire; we are called to enter through this window into this world, and to live in it."<sup>1</sup>*

*Because of the way they give voice to human experience, the psalms give us a rich picture of the human self – "endowed with glory and honour, yet afflicted with finitude and suffering"<sup>2</sup>. John Calvin referred to the Psalms as "an Anatomy of the Soul; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror."*

*So, to complement our sermon series on the biblical doctrine of humanity, in small groups we'll be looking at some psalms which explore and diagnose the human condition. We'll also follow the threads that lead us from the psalms to Jesus and some New Testament passages.*

*These studies don't correspond to individual sermons, and they don't form a complete biblical treatment of the doctrine of humanity. But they will invite us to learn from the psalms' language of experience, and to join the psalmist in bringing our highs and lows, our triumphs and our frustrations, to the throne of the God who made us human.*

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Ash, *Teaching Psalms Vol. 1*. Scotland: Christian Focus 2017

<sup>2</sup> William Brown, *Psalms*. Nashville: Abingdon. 2010.

## Study 1: Humanity Commissioned

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1. Optional Warmer Question: Can you think of an occasion when you have given someone a clear task to do? How did it go?

### **Have one person read Psalm 8 aloud**

*(Suggestion: The whole group could say the first and last verse all together)*

1. Look at verses 1-3. What truths about God are portrayed?
2. Verse 4 raises a question. Considering the previous verses, what feeling do you think goes with this question?
3. Verses 5-8 describe the place of humans in God's world.
  - a. How would you summarise this picture in just a few words?
  - b. How does this assignment make you feel?
  - c. How do you feel this role is working out in your everyday life?

### **Have one group member read Psalm 148 aloud, with gusto**

*(Suggestion: The whole group could say verses 5-8 and 13-14 all together)*

4. In this psalm, who is speaking, and who is being spoken to?
5. What does this psalm show us about humanity's role in the universe?

## Notes & Prayer Points

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6. What are some specific things we can do to fulfill this calling in our lives? What do you do already? What could you grow in? What can we do together?

### Read Hebrews 2:5-13

*(If you're reading the NIV84 or ESV, verses 6-8 use "him" to refer to "man[kind]" in general. NIV11 uses "them" to capture the generalised meaning.)*

7. According to the writer of Hebrews, Psalm 8 describes something which is not currently the case. What "problem" do we see "at present"?
8. How does Jesus solve the "problem" that was identified?
9. In the light of everything we've looked at in this session, why is belonging to Jesus so important?

### Pray

Read Psalm 8 aloud again as a prompt for prayer. Praise God for his greatness, give thanks for our high calling, and pray for our pursuit of it under the headship of Christ.

## Study 2: Humanity falls short

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1. Optional warmer question: "People are basically good". Where have you seen this idea expressed or implied recently? Do you agree?

### Read Psalm 14

2. How would you summarise this psalm's diagnosis of humanity?
3. In this psalm, what's the relationship between thoughts and actions?
4. Do you agree with the diagnosis? Do you include yourself in it?
5. Where does this psalm look for hope?

### Read Psalm 15

*This psalm describes the kind of person who may live in God's presence, the place of security.*

6. Are there any parts of the description which surprise you?
7. By these criteria, do you think you could live in God's presence?
8. What does this psalm imply about what God desires for humanity?

### Read Hebrews 4:14-16 and 7:26-28

*A "high priest" is a chief representative who approaches God on behalf of his people.*

10. In what ways is Jesus the same as every other human?
11. In what way is Jesus different to every other human?
12. Why is Jesus' unique humanity good news for us?

### Pray

Read Psalm 15 aloud again as a prompt for prayer. Confess to God the ways we fall short of this picture in the way we live. Give thanks to Jesus for being the perfect human who can approach God for us and usher us safely into God's presence.

## Notes & Prayer Points

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## Study 3: Fragile and Limited Humanity

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1. Optional Warmer Question: What's the most fragile object you can think of? Is there something that turned out to be more fragile than you first thought?

### **Read Psalm 90 aloud**

*Suggestion: While one group member reads aloud, the rest of the group close their eyes and consider this psalm as a prayer.*

2. What characteristics of God are named in this psalm?
3. What aspects of human existence are portrayed in this psalm?
4. In this psalm, what is God's stance towards humanity? What has brought this about?
5. What feelings towards God does this psalm express? Which of them resonate the most with you?
6. What does this psalm hope for?

## Notes & Prayer Points

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### Read Psalm 103

7. How is humanity portrayed in this psalm?
8. What characteristics of God are named in this psalm?
9. What feelings towards God does this psalm express? Which of them resonate the most with you?

### Consider the two psalms together

10. Are these two psalms contradictory? How do they fit together?
11. Do you feel able to say “amen” to both these psalms? Why or why not?
12. Is there something that one of these psalms says about humanity which you find hard to believe about yourself? What is it, and why?

### Pray

- Ponder Psalm 90:12 and pray for wisdom in recognising that in this world we continue to live under the shroud of death and sin.
- Ponder Psalm 103:17 and give thanks for God’s love in which he forgives our sins and lifts us from the pit of death.

## Study 4: Troubled Humanity

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1. Optional Warmer Question: When you encounter an unexpected problem in life, who are you most likely to call first?

### Read Psalm 38

*This is a “psalm of David”, capturing the experience of the famous king of Israel. But the inclusion of these kinds of psalm in the book of psalms invites us to put ourselves in his shoes.*

1. What kind of human experiences are described in this psalm?
2. Which of these have you been through?
3. How is God portrayed in this psalm? What’s his stance towards David?
4. Where does David look for hope?
5. In the case of David, he’s aware that his troubles are caused by his sin. This isn’t the case for all human troubles at the individual level. However: in what ways does this psalm illustrate the human condition in general?

### Read Psalm 88

6. What kinds of human experiences are described in this psalm?
7. Are there parts of this psalm which resonate with experiences you’ve had?
8. There isn’t much hope in this psalm. But it’s significant that, in the pit of despair, the writer still calls out to God in “faithful complaint”. Psalms like this show us that God welcomes us voicing our raw emotions to him. Do you find it easy to complain to God? Is this an area for growth in your prayer life?

### Read (a) Matthew 26:38-39; (b) 26:69-75; (c) 27:39-44; (d) 27:45-50

9. Which of the dark experiences from the psalms has Jesus been through for us?
10. How does the suffering of Jesus, along with these two psalms, help us in responding faithfully to the experience of sickness and suffering?

### Pray

- Thank Jesus for descending to the lowest part of human existence and beyond
- Bring to God, in faithful complaint, sickness and trouble in your own life and those around you
- Close with Psalm 38:22

## Notes & Prayer Points

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## Study 5: Rescued Humanity

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1. Optional warmer question: Can you think of a particular moment when you clearly needed rescuing?

### Read Psalm 107:1-3

2. These verses are an introduction to the episodes that follow. Whose story is being told in this psalm?

### Read Psalm 107:4-9

3. What kinds of human trouble are pictured here? Have you had an experience that felt like this?

4. How does the Lord treat his people?

5. How would you fill in the blank, based on these verses?  
“As his people, we rely on God for \_\_\_\_\_”

### Read Psalm 107:10-16

6. What kinds of human trouble are pictured here? Have you had an experience that felt like this?

7. How does the Lord treat his people?

8. How would you fill in the blank, based on these verses?  
“As his people, we rely on God for \_\_\_\_\_”



**Read Psalm 107:17-22**

9. What kinds of human trouble are pictured here? Have you had an experience that felt like this?

10. How does the Lord treat his people?

11. How would you fill in the blank, based on these verses?  
 “As his people, we rely on God for \_\_\_\_\_”

**Read Psalm 107:23-32**

12. What kinds of human trouble are pictured here? Have you had an experience that felt like this?

13. How does the Lord treat his people?

14. How would you fill in the blank, based on these verses?  
 “As his people, we rely on God for \_\_\_\_\_”

**Reflect on what we’ve uncovered so far**

15. Which of the things named above do you find it hardest to rely on God for?

16. In which of these areas do you feel most thankful for God’s “unfailing love and wonderful deeds for mankind” ?

*The rest of Psalm 107 is a summary of the history of ancient Israel, leading to the conclusion in verse 43 “Let the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord”. In that spirit, we’ll turn now to the New Testament to see God’s “wonderful deeds for mankind” there.*

13. Psalm 107 had the refrain “**they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress**”. From each passage below, how does Jesus fit in to this picture?

<b>Mark 4:35-41</b>	
<b>Hebrews 5:7-9</b>	
<b>1 Corinthians 15:20-27a</b>	

14. What things can we do, as individuals or a church community, to express and deepen our reliance on Jesus?

**Conclusion**

*Here we reach the end of our sessions on humanity in the Psalms. As pointed out in the introduction, the Psalms exist primarily to be spoken or sung, rather than to be studied and analysed. So we’re going to finish with a psalm that we won’t study or analyse, but simply experience and inhabit.*

*The psalms invited ancient Israelites to take King David’s words on their own lips, and today they invite us to take King Jesus’ words on our own lips. Psalm 30 is song of praise by the king who has been rescued from death, so as those ‘in Christ’ we can make these words our own prayer.*

**Read Psalm 30 as a closing prayer**

*Suggestion: Read this aloud together (all from the same translation!)*

**Notes & Prayer Points**

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