

Nearing a Far God

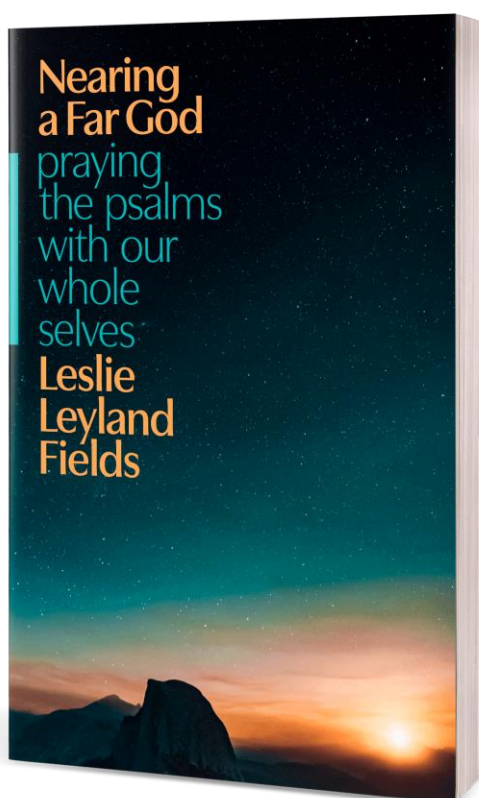
praying
the psalms
with our
whole
selves

Leslie
Leyland
Fields

Leader's Guide

NEARING A FAR GOD

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Learn more about [Leslie Leyland Fields](#).

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DEAR READER,

I'm excited that you've chosen to read and lead others through *Nearing a Far God: Praying the Psalms with Our Whole Selves*. It is a book that's meant to be shared: the Psalms themselves have drawn God's people together, joining their voices into a choir of laments and praises for nearly three millennia. But they're not ancient outdated words. The Psalms are more relevant and more needed today than ever because for many, even for long-time believers, at times, God can feel far away. Here are just a few of those struggles:

How do we love and attach to a God we cannot see?

Our highest call as believers is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with you're your strength and with all your mind." But we've focused so much on "knowing God" and Bible study, we've often reduced the Christian life to head knowledge of the scriptures than love for the Lord of the Scriptures. The Psalms, unique in all the Bible, leads us into whole person and attachment to our Father.

Many of us are intimidated by prayer.

How do we pray? When? With what words? Do we pray spontaneously or through structured formalized prayer? Do we wait until we feel the right feelings or do we just pray anyway? Do we pray in silence or out loud? Do we dare speak our true mind? How do we know God hears? The Psalms address and remove our deepest fears, doubts, and insecurities about prayer.

We all need to hear from God but He often seems silent.

Some give up on prayer because it seems God doesn't respond. Throughout the Scriptures, God speaks to his people, his children, and the Psalms show us that he invites and even inspires us to speak back. As we write and speak inside the Psalms to our Father, no matter how painful, angry, accusatory, doubt-filled our words, He speaks back. The Psalms lead us into intimate right-now holy dialogue with our loving Father.

This book started nearly twenty years ago, when I was isolated on a wilderness island in Alaska. Through my need, and through the Psalms, I discovered these deeper ways to engage with my Father. I realized we are not meant to stay distant, mere observers or passive listeners to stories and information about God. Rather, through the Psalms, we're invited into holy conversation with a Father who has sacrificed even his own son to bring us near. I've been engaging in these Psalm practices ever since and leading others in the same. I've witnessed already the many palpable ways God comes near as we trust Him with our deepest cries and prayers. You will have many more witnessings to share as each one in your group learns to draw near to their Heavenly Father.

My vision is that this book is not read in solitude but together with others—your neighbors, your friends, your small group, your home group, your Sunday School class, your book club.

I have tried to make it as easy as possible so people with busy lives can find a way to gather around this message. This leader's guide is for any leader, even if it's your first time. There are helps for planning and getting started, discussion and reflection, and even a bunch of graphics that you can use to promote your group or keep people engaged in between your times together.

Know that I come to you with open hands, and I am praying that we can help each other along the way. You can find me at leslieleylandfields.com and connect with me on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).

Together, may we draw near to God who's given everything to dwell with us.

Leslie Leyland Fields

OVERVIEW

The psalms tell a story. Yes, it's a collection of prayer-songs, but they all tell a story. It's a story that begins in the garden of Eden—and ends in Revelation. And the path between is the story of God rescuing his people—from slavery, from sin, from despair, from loneliness, from confusion, from death. The Psalms are the soundtrack of God's people on that pilgrim path as they cry out to God along the way.

But this is not simply a story from ancient history. It's an ongoing story that we're invited into. Each of those cries and shouts and prayers and songs is from the same road we are walking--- along the valley of the shadow of death, into green pastures and miry pits, on to the holy mountain of God. But often, along the way, God feels distant, for so many human reasons. (The Psalmists are deeply honest about this, thank God!) But God IS near. When we learn to call out to him, as the Psalms lead us, we'll find Him near and fully present.

Nearing a Far God has the following features built into the book, making it ideal for group use. Each chapter ...

- begins with my own story, then opens into the Psalmist's story, then into God's story. This approach echoes the Psalms themselves and the reality that we're moved and impacted more deeply by Story than by straight instruction. It also prepares the reader to share their own story in the exercises at the end of each chapter.
- treats a different kind of psalm. The chapters are stand-alone, so it's possible to change the order, if desired.
- includes, at the close, a list of other psalms in that particular genre for further reading and engagement.
- ends with "Draw Near," providing several Psalms to explore and utilize. The acrostic NEARING is presented, providing seven ways to personally engage in the chosen psalm. Suggested group activities to Express each person's psalm is there as well.

You will find this leader's guide, a variety of graphics for promoting your group read, memes to share, and downloads are available [here](#) and [here](#).

In summary, entering the Psalms in this whole-person, whole-body way transforms us from passive recipients of God's word to active participants in God's living word:

- We'll discover how the Psalms can draw us into dialogue with God no matter our pain, struggle, or doubt.
- We'll practice transformative writing and prayer exercises that engage and impact the whole brain and the whole self.
- We'll reclaim ancient practices of movement and bodily postures to heighten our worship and deepen attachment to God.

Nearing a Far God is available at your favorite bookstore. Bulk discounts are available at navpress.com. Free shipping for orders over \$50. Based on \$16.99 retail price. Email csresponse@tyndale.com for ministry and retail discounts.

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PLANNING

FORMAT

As you think about hosting/leading this class, here are a few tips to help you:

- **Start by praying about who to invite to your group.** Consider someone you might not normally think would be interested—maybe your favorite barista, or someone in the neighborhood you’ve been wanting to connect with. How can you love your neighborhood and reach out to strangers through this group? You never know where people are at; so many just want to be invited. Be brave and ask people to join you!
- **Decide on a regular place and time** for your gathering and how many chapters you will discuss in each meeting. There are eight chapters, so your group could choose to do one a week. This is optimum, given that each week will immerse in a different type of psalm. A six-week class can work, though you will likely need to skip a chapter or two. (It’s not feasible to treat more than one kind of psalm per class.) Or, if time is limited yet further, you could do a sampling of the psalms through a four-week class.
- **Meeting in person is ideal, particularly for this content but** we’ve all discovered that meeting virtually, on zoom or another platform, does not hinder God’s ability to move, speak and grow hearts closer to him. Follow the needs of your group.
- **Communicate the details** to your group. Include:
 - Dates and times (start and end)
 - Location (or link for virtual meeting)
 - Expectations. Let people know you’d like them to read each chapter before class, but make it clear that their presence, whether they’re prepared or not, is the greatest good. (I’ve led many Psalms groups where people came into each session “cold.” It was no barrier to the Spirit’s work.)
 - The facilitator(s)
- **Include an attractive journal** as part of the class, or ask each one to bring their own dedicated Psalms Journal. The goal is to create and establish a life habit of writing into and out of the Psalms well after the class and book ends.
- **Consider planning a fun gathering** so that people can get to know each other prior to your first session together.
- **It is helpful to have two facilitators**, whether you share duties or one person leads and the other serves as backup in case the lead facilitator cannot make it. Two facilitators also provide a sounding board for support and to troubleshoot issues that may arise.

CLASS TIME AND TIMELINE

There are a variety of ways to structure your group experience.

For this content, engaging deeply with the psalms, the ideal length of class is 75 – 90 minutes. This allows for time to read the psalm/s, to understand it, to write into/out of the psalm and to share it with others. An hour class is possible, though it may feel a bit rushed.

4 week format: This timeline does not allow for readers to engage in every type of psalm explored in the book (wisdom, lament, praise, thanksgiving, confession, creation). However, there may be groups for whom this is the only option. Rather than try and cram two kinds of Psalms into each class, it’s better to choose the chapters that will be most essential for your groups’ needs. (I recommend the chapters on lament, praise, thanksgiving and confession.)

6 week Format: This allows more breathing room and more attention on each type of psalm. You may need to skip a chapter or two.

8 week format: This format allows a week per chapter, which gives time/space for an Introduction and to immerse in each type of psalm. This is the ideal length.

Eight-Week Format

| DATE | PURPOSE | DETAILS |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Eight Weeks Prior | Initial leaders’ meeting | Choose dates, time, location; create online registration |
| Four Weeks Prior | Announce group | Encourage sign-ups |
| Two Weeks Prior | Order books (on their own or in bulk. | The best bulk discounts are at navpress.com). |
| One Week Prior | Email group | Provide details of group |
| Launch Week One | Introduction & The Open Gate | Hand out books (if buying in bulk) Intro and Chapter One |
| Week Two | Crying Out in Lament | Chapter Two: Lament |
| Week Three | Asking for Wisdom | Chapter Three: Wisdom |
| Week Four | Resting in Trust | Chapter Four: Trust |
| Week Five | Honesty in Confession | Chapter Five: Confession |
| Week Six | Beholding Creation | Chapter Six: Creation |
| Week Seven | Rejoicing in Thanksgiving | Chapter Seven |
| Chapter Eight | Offering Praise | Chapter Eight |

Possible Six-Week Format

(Based on skipping two chapters to fit the time-frame)

| DATE | PURPOSE | DETAILS |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------|--|
| Eight Weeks Prior | Initial leaders' meeting | Choose dates, time, location; create online registration |
| Four Weeks Prior | Announce group | Encourage sign-ups |
| Two Weeks Prior | Order books (on their own or in bulk. | The best bulk discounts are at navpress.com). |
| One Week Prior | Email group | Provide details of group |
| Launch Week One | Introduction & The Open Gate | Hand out books (if buying in bulk) Intro and Chapter One |
| Week Two | Crying Out in Lament | Chapter Two: Lament |
| Week Three | Resting in Trust | Chapter Four: Trust |
| Week Four | Honesty in Confession | Chapter Five: Confession |
| Week Five | Rejoicing in Thanksgiving | Chapter Seven: Thanksgiving |
| Week Six | Offering Praise | Chapter Eight |

Possible Four-Week Format

| DATE | PURPOSE | DETAILS |
|-------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Eight Weeks Prior | Initial leaders' meeting | Choose dates, time, location; create online registration |
| Four Weeks Prior | Announce group | Encourage sign-ups |
| Two Weeks Prior | Order books | Arrange pickup spot or have them buy on their own |
| One Week Prior | Email group | Provide details of group |
| Launch Week One | Intro & Through the Gate | Intro and Chapter One |
| Week Two | Resting in Trust | Chapter Four |
| Week Three | Crying out in Lament | Chapter Two |
| Week Four | Offering Praise | Chapter Eight |

PREPARATION

STRUCTURE YOUR TIME

There are so many ways you could structure your time together. Here are a few ideas:

- Welcome and fellowship. You might share a meal, a snack, or a drink.
- Open in prayer.
- Start by sharing an overview from the chapter so that those who didn't have a chance to read it will get the benefit of that content. (Be careful not to over-emphasize reading each chapter as homework. Some will feel guilty and not attend if they weren't able to read it beforehand.). Invite others to present their highlights from the chapter.
- Go through the Draw Near section of the chapter, focusing on the relevant psalm/s and the chosen activity. Handwriting a psalm, identifying, amplifying, these activities are particularly powerful. If you only have an hour, either choose shorter psalms to write into and out of, OR use just part of the psalm. (Beware of cutting out the ending however, as the ending is important for the journey of each psalm.).
- Before you start, allow for discussion and response to the activity before you start to make sure everyone understands what you're doing.
- In most of the sessions, make time to write a psalm in class, following whichever of the exercises fit best. Depending on the length of your class time, allow for 15-20 minutes for the writing exercises. If there's room in the building, allow people to spread out or to find a quiet corner to write alone. (But this can also cause a sense of "scattering," eroding group focus. Follow the needs of your group.)
- Emphasize that writing our own psalm-prayers is not about "good writing;" it's about seeking God, coming before Him in honesty. God cares most about our heart, not our sentence structure.
- Allow time for sharing, expressing, processing their psalm-writing experience. This can be done in small groups of 2 – 4 . (Be aware: the larger the group, the longer it takes to share.) If your class is already small and personal, you may be able to share around the room. Make it clear as well that sharing is always optional. You'll want to schedule at least 15 minutes for this impactful sharing time.
- Be willing to go first and share your own just-written psalm as an icebreaker when needed.
- During the Draw Near activity in each class, ask your group if they prefer silence or soft instrumental worship or praise music as they write their psalm. Music can often help us relax and enable us to better access emotions, memories and words. (But instrumental music only). Each group will have a different preference. And some weeks might be better suited to silence; others to music.
- Close in prayer.

CHAPTER NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS

As you go through the chapters, in whatever format you choose, (the 4, 6 or 8 week format) here are some highlights, cautions and suggestions to consider for each chapter.

Introduction & Chapter One

At the start of each session, remind people of these two essential guidelines:

1. Make sure people understand that as they write their own prayer-psalms, they are not writing or re-writing Scripture. Go over the hermeneutical principles on page ____
2. Emphasize that writing into the psalms is not about the “writing.” No one need be a “writer.” There will be no critique, editing or judgment of anyone’s words. All that is needed is honesty and a willingness to bring one’s heart and life before the Lord.

*As a warm-up and overview of the psalms, ask people to share one of their favorite psalms and/or how they’ve used the psalms in their lives.

*Do the Psalm One exercise. This is effective in setting our intentions, of walking through the gate of the Psalms and choosing to walk the Psalm One path (which leads to our lives as a tree planted by the river: an image that takes us both to the Tree of Life in Genesis and the tree in Revelation, the New Jerusalem.)

Be aware of this question: Does Psalm One ask us to disassociate with “sinners”? Didn’t Christ seek out sinners? Didn’t he come to “seek and save those who are lost”? Yes indeed. And we are called to the same. Make it clear that God’s word doesn’t contradict itself. Both concepts are true: that Christ came to rescue sinners (which is all of us!) and he desires us to love and serve “sinners.” But what is the direction of our lives, what is the pattern of our walk? Are we walking in sympathetic company with those who are mockers? Are we following the path and pattern of the “wicked,” those opposed to God’s love and reign, those who are headed to destruction? God asks us to choose. The pattern and directionality of our lives will determine where we end up at the end of our days.

Chapter Two: Lament

At the start of each session, remind people of these two essential guidelines:

1. Make sure people understand that as they write their own prayer-psalms, they are not writing or re-writing Scripture. Go over the hermeneutical principles on page ____
2. Emphasize that writing into the psalms is not about the “writing.” No one need be a “writer.” There will be no critique, editing or judgment of anyone’s words. All that is needed is honesty and a willingness to bring one’s heart and life before the Lord.

This is an intense chapter. Given the personal nature of this material, you may want to reorder the chapters and save this one for later in the course, when openness and trust is well established.

We all have circumstances, relationships, and wounds that need to be brought before the Lord and his healing love. Your group may be open to exploring, exposing and bringing healing to these areas through the lament psalms. Or they may be more reserved. Make it clear that they are in charge of what they write about! Don’t pressure them to write into their greatest pains while in class together. This may be something they need to do when alone. However, they are also free to follow the prompting of the Holy Spirit. When we open our deepest wounds to our Father, he’ll meet us there in those wounds, those words and that pain. And we, the body of Christ, will meet one another there as well.

Because of the personal nature of the lament psalms, consider inviting people to find a quiet alone nearby space to write.

Be sure and briefly address the matter of the imprecatory psalms, and the nature of the enemies most of us deal with. The lament psalms will speak to all of us when we have a larger understanding of the “enemies” and battles we face.

After people have written their lament psalm, give them an opportunity to speak it aloud, in people are willing. This may be done in small groups of 2,3 or 4. Or if the group is small, you might invite each one around the room to read, as they choose. (Reading yours first is always the best way to start!)

Chapter Three: Wisdom

This chapter is straightforward. In the Draw Near section, I've had great success with people teaming up (3-5 in a group) and following the pattern of the acrostic: starting each verse with the same chosen letter. (See the list of suggested letters.) It's challenging, it's fun, and it also gives a deep sense of appreciation for the crafting of Psalm 119 and what that crafting represents: a means of "meditating," focusing intently on God's word, and tethering every aspect of our lives to Him.

Chapter Four: Trust

This is an exciting and comforting chapter. Who does not need the Trust psalms? Be sure and discuss metaphor, why it's so powerful. The Psalm 23 activity in the Draw Near section is one of the most profound and impactful of all the exercises in the book. Because of this, I recommend, upon completion, that each one around the room share their psalm with the group. If your group is too large for this, then break into groups of 5+. These psalms are often moving, humorous, affecting, inspiring as we see through metaphor the miraculous ways God has lead and rescued each one.

Chapter Five: Being Honest in Confession

Approach this chapter with enthusiasm, prayer, grace and anticipation. This chapter and session can bring deliverance and freedom to many! The topic of confession is seldom addressed in many faith communities. Yet all of us carry the brokenness of the world---through difficult relationships, hurts and harms from others, and our own proclivity to turn from God. Make sure the participants recognize that there's no "we Christians" and "you sinners." We all have events and attitudes to confess and turn from. We all long for relief from guilt and harm and the Psalms provide it! King David's example and words give us a marvelous process to experience full healing and restoration.

Chapter Six: Beholding Creation

This session brings a delightful time of rest and attentiveness to God's creation. Beginning the activity time with Psalm 139 is powerful: recognizing ourselves as God's wondrous hand-shaped creation. Ideally, if there is opportunity, it can be very fruitful as well to engage in the last Draw Near activity based on Psalm 104: sending people outside to observe and write their own psalm celebrating God's creation in their own environs.

Chapter Seven: Rejoicing in Thanksgiving

This session is refreshing and profound! All three of the activities in the Draw Near section are fruitful. Perhaps invite participants to choose among the three entry points to Thanksgiving that are given in the Draw Near section: through their rescue story from Psalm 107, through remembering answered prayer, through lament. Be sure to save time for people to express their psalms aloud to one another. Thanksgiving is intended to be a communal experience of remembrance and gratitude.

Chapter Eight: Offering Praise

This final session is all about celebration! The Psalm One path, which begins in Genesis, (the image of the fruitful tree beside the river) now ends in Revelation: the Hallelujah psalms sung and shouted before the throne of God. But we're not meant to wait before we give full-hearted praises to our Father. Neither do we have to wait to summon up these emotions on our own. Even when we are struggling, the Praise psalms give us countless reasons to speak God's goodness and attributes back to him. Doing so often frees us from the grip of apathy, distraction and even lament and grief. Giving praise to Yahweh can bring us deep joy because it aligns us with the grain and groove of God's universe.

In this last session, consider writing a praise psalm together in class and presenting it with music, movement, and postures. If the weather allows, you might take the group outside, blending your praises with Creation's praises, joining a choir that stretches beyond time and place. Do so confidently. As you draw near to Yahweh, your loving Father, he will draw near to you. He is as close as your next breath. How can you not rejoice?

MAKING AN IMPACT

You will want to create a safe space while keeping the activities and discussion moving forward.

Here are practices we recommend:

- **Make humility a non-negotiable and avoid judging others** (while missing the plank in our own eyes!). Remember that not everyone will be coming from the same background or share the same assumptions or starting place. Many of the psalms written and shared will be deeply personal. Maintain a loving safe supportive environment at all times.
- **Make a group covenant.** It needs to be articulated clearly, but it doesn't need to be formal. Consider spending a few minutes at your first meeting discussing some guidelines for your time together, such as confidentiality in what is shared and being a safe space free of judgment.
- **Ask everyone to read the chapter you will be discussing in advance.** Consider also choosing and assigning one of the Draw Near activities as homework. (But emphasize that this is a no-guilt class! Their presence is more important than their preparation.)
- **The cornerstone of most sessions will be the Psalms activity.** People may be intimidated at first, but the chapters lead participants gently, incrementally into the psalms-writing activities. In the final sharing time, make sure people feel free to share---or not.
- **Make sure everyone knows to share the talking time** (no talking-dominators, please), and gently redirect someone who may be preventing others from participating in the conversation.

Thank you, friend and fellow sojourner, for joining me in this mission, to help guide our sisters and brothers into a nearer dearer relationship with our loving Father. We're "singing a new song" together. Someday we'll sing and speak it face to face with our Father, who's been with us every breath, every step of our pilgrim path.

READER AND LEADER

Together, may we draw near to our Father, whose deepest heart is to dwell with His children.

Leslie

#nearingafargod