

WNBS: Foundations & Formation

Wisdom Psalms Study Guide

Focus: A wise life is rooted in reverence for God, shaped by His instruction, and expressed through faithful choices, even when life feels unfair.

I. What are Wisdom Psalms

Wisdom Psalms are teaching poems about faithful living. They consider righteous and wicked conduct, suffering, human limitations, and trust in God. Scholars differ on which psalms belong in this category. Our main texts are Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, and 112, with Psalm 119 as a closely related Torah psalm, a psalm centered on divine instruction.

II. Authors and traditional attributions

Psalm	Attribution in the heading	Focus
1	Unnamed	God's instruction and two ways of life
37	David	Trust and patience amid injustice
49	Sons of Korah	Wealth, mortality, and hope in God
73	Asaph	Envy, struggle, and renewed trust
112	Unnamed	Reverence expressed in conduct
119	Unnamed	Learning and obeying God's Word
127 and 128	127: Solomon; 128: unnamed	Dependence, work, and household life

These are traditional textual attributions, not independent proof of historical authorship. Not all psalms were written by David.

III. Understanding structure and theology: Recognizing the poetry

Wisdom Psalms do not follow one fixed outline. Their literary features help us notice and remember their teaching.

Feature	What to notice	Example
Contrast	Different choices and their outcomes	Psalm 1
Instruction	Commands to trust, wait, and do good	Psalm 37
Imagery	Concrete pictures of spiritual realities	Tree and chaff in Psalm 1
Repetition	A recurring saying or idea	Psalm 49:12, 20
Testimony	A struggle and a change in understanding	Psalm 73
Acrostic	Lines or sections following Hebrew letters	Psalms 37, 112, 119

Psalm 119 has 22 sections of eight verses. Within each section, each verse begins with the same Hebrew letter. This arrangement invites sustained attention to God’s instruction.

IV. What these psalms teach about God

- 1. God is the source of wisdom:** Reverence for Him is the foundation for faithful understanding and conduct (Psalm 111:10).
- 2. God teaches His people:** His instruction shapes our desires and daily decisions (Psalms 1:2; 119:33–40). Torah can mean law or instruction.
- 3. God is just:** The apparent success of evil does not establish its lasting worth or final outcome (Psalm 37:35–40).
- 4. God sustains us:** His presence remains our strength when our understanding and personal resources fail (Psalm 73:23–26).
- 5. Faithfulness affects other people:** Generosity, compassion, and fairness belong to righteous living (Psalm 112:4–9).

The psalms affirm God’s justice while acknowledging experiences that make it difficult to see. Blessing is not a formula guaranteeing immediate wealth or a life without suffering. Hardship is not proof of weak faith.

Reflection: Where do I most need God’s wisdom in this season?

How can we encourage someone to trust God while taking their suffering seriously?

V. Studying the Wisdom Psalms

A. Psalm 1: Be intentional about what shapes you

Read: Psalm 1:1–6

Structure: Verses 1–3 describe a person nourished by God’s instruction; verses 4–5 contrast the wicked; verse 6 names the outcome of the two ways.

Central message: Delighting in God’s instruction gives life rootedness and direction. The tree and chaff portray contrasting stability. This psalm invites us to examine the influences we welcome and the habits we cultivate.

Observe: What differences do you notice between the tree and the chaff?

Application: Which voice or habit is shaping my choices? What needs to change?

B. Psalm 37: Keep doing good while you wait

Read: Psalm 37:1–9, 16–17, 23–24, 39–40

Structure: An alphabetic collection of instructions and contrasts. The opening calls for trust and patience; later sections compare the future of the wicked with God’s care for the righteous.

Central message: Another person’s apparent success in wrongdoing should not determine our conduct. God calls us to trust Him and continue doing good. Waiting includes faithful action. The psalm’s assurances should never be used to blame people for poverty or hardship.

Observe: What actions does the psalm call us to take while waiting?

Application: Where has comparison or frustration begun to affect my obedience?

C. Psalm 49: Recognize what wealth cannot provide

Read: Psalm 49:1–9, 15–20

Structure: Verses 1–4 invite everyone to listen; verses 5–12 address the limits of wealth; verses 13–20 contrast misplaced confidence with hope in God.

Central message: Wealth cannot ransom human life from death or provide ultimate security. The psalm directs confidence toward God’s redeeming power. Its challenge concerns what we trust, not simply how much we possess.

Observe: What can money not accomplish, according to this psalm?

Application: What do my spending, saving, and giving reveal about my trust?

D. Psalm 73: Bring difficult questions before God

Read: Psalm 73:1–3, 13–17, 21–28

Structure: Verses 1–3 introduce the struggle; verses 4–14 describe envy; verses 15–17 mark a turning point; verses 18–28 express renewed perspective and trust.

Central message: The psalmist struggles with the prosperity of the wicked. Entering God’s sanctuary changes his perspective. God Himself becomes his lasting portion. The psalm makes room for honest questions within a relationship of faith.

Observe: What changes in the psalmist’s perspective after verse 17?

Application: What unresolved question do I need to bring honestly before God?

E. Psalm 112: Let reverence shape your conduct

Read: Psalm 112:1, 4–9

Structure: An alphabetic poem beginning with reverence for God, developing a portrait of righteous conduct, and ending with the frustration of the wicked.

Central message: Reverence for God becomes visible through compassion, generosity, justice, and steadfast trust. Spiritual growth changes how we handle resources and how we treat people. Faith has a public and practical expression.

Observe: Which qualities or actions characterize the righteous person?

Application: Who benefits from the spiritual growth taking place in me?

F. Psalm 119: Remain teachable

Read: Psalm 119:9–16, 33–40, 105

Structure: Twenty-two alphabetic sections combine meditation, commitment, prayer, and requests for help to understand and obey God’s instruction.

Central message: God’s Word guides the whole of life. The psalmist seeks understanding and the help needed to obey. Maturity includes a continuing willingness to be taught, corrected, and formed by God.

Observe: What does the psalmist ask God to do in verses 33–40?

Application: In what area do I need to become more teachable?

VI. Putting wisdom into practice

“Before God builds something through us, God builds something in us.” As we grow in wisdom, God forms the way we live, serve, and care for others. Use the coming week to put one lesson into practice each day.

Seven-day reading and reflection plan

Day	Read	Reflect and respond
1	Psalm 1	Notice your influences. Choose one passage to meditate on.
2	Psalm 37:1–9, 23–24	Name an unresolved concern and one faithful action.
3	Psalm 49:1–9, 15–20	Examine what gives you security. Review one money decision.
4	Psalm 73:13–28	Bring an honest question before God in prayer.
5	Psalm 112	Practice generosity or fairness toward another person.
6	Psalm 119:33–40, 105	Ask for understanding and record a step of obedience.
7	Psalms 127 & 128	Consider dependence on God in work, household, and community life.

Study references

Primary readings: Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 111:10, 112, 119, 127, and 128. Read complete psalms when possible to keep selected verses in context.

Background: Yale Bible Study, “Wisdom Psalms – Study Guide,” Yale Divinity School.

<https://yalebiblestudy.org/courses/psalms/lessons/wisdom-psalms-study-guide/>

Additional textual notes: USCCB, Psalms 37, 73, 112, and 119. <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/psalms>