

Psalms: Introduction
Psalms
ABC 4/9/21

Throughout history, God's people have sung His praises. When God brought His people out of Egypt & delivered them from Pharaoh's army they sang (Ex 15:1). When God gave Israel victory over their enemies under Deborah & Barak, they sang (Jdgs 5). When David brought up the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, there was much joy & singing (1 Chron 15:25-28). When King Hezekiah restored the temple worship, the Levites sang praises to the Lord (2 Chron 29:30). At the end of the Lord's Supper, Jesus & His disciples sang a hymn (Mk 14:26) from the psalms. When Paul & Silas were thrown into jail, they sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25). Since those days, God's people have continued to sing. In 112 AD, Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan that reported Christians sang hymns to Christ as God. In 1415, Jan Hus sang praises to God as he was burned at the stake. During the Reformation, Martin Luther promoted music in the church. The 1st book published in America was the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640), used for worship. The great revivals under the Wesley's were also marked by singing. & one day in heaven, we'll all be gathered around the throne of God, singing praises to the Lamb that was slain (Rev 5:9; 14:3; 15:3). God's people have always been known for their singing. It should come as no surprise, then, that the OT book quoted most frequently in the NT is a book of songs, the book of Psalms.¹ God loves to hear His people sing His praises & He sovereignly included 150 Psalms as a part of His inspired Word. Psalms has occupied a place of importance among God's people through the centuries. It's said there was a time when as a requirement for admission to the priesthood it was mandatory the candidate be able to recite the entire book!² More than any other portion of Scripture, Psalms have influenced the public worship & private devotions of God's people, leading them to seek Him more diligently, to love Him more deeply, & to trust Him more fully. Psalms is a book of prayer & praise, written by several authors. It isn't a chronologically arranged story like we find in the historical books. It has no continuous unifying teaching or train of thought. The book is an anthology, a collection of 150

¹ HC Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms*, p 4

² *ibid*, p 5

different prayers, praises, or songs. Each psalm is a unit of expression, composed during a moment of need or desire. Each has a unique purpose, although many can be grouped in categories, broadly as laments & praises.³ Today is an overview of the Psalms as an introduction to our summer of Psalms series in the weeks ahead. Today's message gives some basic information to help us benefit from our study & from your own reading of the Psalms. But in addition to imparting information, I hope to motivate you to read & meditate on the Psalms more than you currently do.

VIDEO

1. Title The word, *Psalms*, comes from the Greek word meaning a song to be sung to a stringed instrument. Every Psalm, except Ps 88, contains praise. While we no longer know the tunes, we need to remember they were all set to music.

2. Arrangement, Authorship, Date, Features The 150 Psalms are arranged into 5 books as we saw in the video. There are many theories as to how & why they were collected this way with no definitive answer. We do know the book of Psalms, as we have it today, was the result of a process spanning about 1,000 years. It began with individual Psalms, the earliest being Ps 90 written by Moses (1400 BC). About ½ were written by David (1000 BC). Then the individual Psalms were grouped into collections of books for corporate worship, & finally the books were arranged into the final book about the time the captivity ended, probably around 444 BC & Ezra's may have been the one to compile them & write some of them. Each of the 5 books concludes with a doxology, signifying the completion of the collection. & Ps 150 serves as the final doxology to the entire Psalter.

Many Psalms contain a superscription, which sometimes identifies the author, the historical setting, or other features. For example, Ps 3 begins, *A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom*. These titles are a part of the Hebrew text (& are vs 1 in Hebrew, thus making the Hebrew numbering of vss different in many places from ours). From these titles, we learn that David wrote many of them. Some titles indicate technical names to designate the type of Psalm. There are also

³ Kay Arthur & Pete De Lacy, [Praising God through Prayer & Worship: Psalms](#)

some terms that are unknown such as *Selah* which seems to be a musical notation & may mean pause, reflect, or to lift up your voices. *Maskil* may refer to a contemplative or educational Psalm. The meaning of *Miktam* is even more uncertain & appears 6 times. 50 Psalms are addressed, **for the choir director** (e.g., Ps 4, 5, 6). There are other notations describing the kind of instrument to be played as accompaniment (Ps 4, 5, 6) or the tune the song is sung to (Ps 9, 22, 45, 46, 60). Some Psalms have titles instructing the worshiper as to the intended use of the Psalms in worship. For example, Ps 92 was **for the Sabbath day**. Ps 100 is **for Thanksgiving**. Ps 120-34 are labeled, **Songs of Ascent** & were probably sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the various feasts.

3. Hebrew poetry The Psalms are poetry & we need to understand something about Hebrew poetry to understand & appreciate the Psalms. There are at least 3 elements of Hebrew poetry to keep in mind as we study the Psalms:

A. Parallelism Instead of rhyming words, as our poetry often does, the Hebrews *rhymed* ideas or thoughts. There are several main types of parallelism:

1) Synonymous is probably the most common. The 2nd line is similar to the 1st. Remember this nursery rhyme? *Old King Cole was a merry old soul, & a merry old soul was he*. Ps 3:1 is an example: **LORD, how my enemies have increased! Many are rising up against me.** Ps 49:1 is similar in that the same thought is expressed in different words in successive lines. **Hear this, all peoples; Listen, all inhabitants of the world.**

2) Synthetic or Connecting Here the 2nd line takes up & develops a thought begun in the 1st line. For example, Ps 22:4 says, **in You our fathers trusted; they trusted & you rescued them.** Or Ps 95:3, **For the Lord is a great God, & a great King above all gods.** The 2nd clause completes & expands the thought of the 1st line.

3) Climatic Here the 2nd line takes up some words from the 1st & adds to or completes them. For example, Ps 29:1-2 says, **Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to the Lord glory & strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in holy array.**

4) Emblematic With these one line presents an image, simile, or metaphor which the other line clarifies or applies. An example is Ps 42:1 which says, **as the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, God.** It paints a picture for us.

5) Opposing The 2nd line contrasts with the 1st. Ps 1:6, **For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.**

B. Figures of Speech Hebrew poetry is loaded with figures of speech, & we must recognize that fact to understand them. For example, Ps 18:7-15 describes the power of God as seen in a thunderstorm. It describes God in anthropomorphic terms. Literal interpretation of the Bible doesn't mean we interpret such figures of speech literally. God doesn't have smoke coming out of His nostrils or fire coming from His mouth (Ps 18:8). We understand that, just like we understand Jesus isn't truly a door or a vine (Jn 10, 15).

C. Acrostics Acrostics are alphabetical Psalms, where each vs or stanza begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Ps 119 is a prime example. We have to remember the Psalms are poetry & must be read as such. If you coldly analyze them, you'll miss the flavor. They're full of emotion & figurative language. The Psalmists were trying to draw forth not just an intellectual response, but also an emotional one. John Calvin wrote of the Psalms,

I have been accustomed to call this book ... 'An Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul'; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.⁴

4. Themes There are many themes running through the Psalms. Let me mention a few:

A. God's Character God's attributes are frequently exalted in the book: His righteousness, power, sovereignty, mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, etc. The Psalms reveal a God who is gracious & compassionate to His people but who will impartially judge the wicked. They teach us about who God is. Not as we wish Him to be, but who He really is. He's the almighty Creator who made the heavens by the word of His mouth (33). He's the Shepherd who leads His people to green pastures & still waters (23). He's the mighty rock & fortress who's worthy to be praised (46). He gives His

⁴ *Commentary on the Psalms*, pp xxxvi-xxxvii

people His perfect law to enlighten the eyes & make wise the simple (19). He's a God of vengeance who will rise up to judge the earth & repay the proud with what they deserve (94). He's also our Redeemer who forgives our iniquity & crowns us with steadfast love & mercy (103). One author says the theme of the book is *God's goodness & unfailing love for the righteous*.⁵ Rather than praying to a weak god that we create in our own minds, the Psalms show us the true King of kings to whom we direct our prayer, worship, & lives. Knowing the character of God should cause us to praise & worship Him more & more.

B. God's Kingdom The concept of God's ruling on the earth in justice & righteousness through His anointed King also runs throughout the Psalms (2, 96-99, 110).

C. God's Messiah Closely connected with God's kingdom is God's Messiah. Many Psalms are *messianic*, meaning they point to Christ & His coming & rule (2, 8, 22, 41, 45, 72, 110). Jesus Himself tells us the Psalms speak of Him, along with the law & prophets (Lk 24:44-45). Jesus frequently quoted the psalms & taught His disciples to interpret the Scriptures in the light of His coming. From the apostolic use of the psalms, it's clear that they figure prominently in the preaching & teaching of the early church. The apostles established Jesus' suffering (Ps 22; 35; 41; 55; 69; 109), messianic claims (Ps 2; 72; 89; 110; 132), priestly ministry (Ps 95), His being the Son of Man (Ps 8; 16; 40), & the coming judgment & redemption (Ps 18; 50; 68; 96-98; 102) by appealing to the psalms.⁶ Luther called the Psalter *a little Bible*, saying, *The Psalter ought to be a precious & beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ's death & resurrection so clearly.... In it is comprehended most beautifully & briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.*⁷

D. God's Worship The Psalms put a great stress on both personal & corporate worship of God. There are frequent individual declarations of praise (5:11-12; 9:1-2) as well as references to the sanctuary, the temple, & corporate worship (5:7; 9:14; 84, 122). Both are important.

E. Curses The imprecatory psalms always bring questions. Many psalms call on God for help as the faithful are threatened by enemies. In a number of places, the requested help is that God would

⁵ W. Robert Godfrey, *Learning to Love the Psalms*, p 16

⁶ Willem A. VanGemeren, "[Psalms](#)," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms*, vol 5, pp 26-27

⁷ Quoted by Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, p 94

punish these enemies. With the NT teaching & example of Jesus (Mt 5:38–48; Lk 23:34; 1 Pt 2:19–23), we may wonder what to make of those curses. How can it be right for God’s people to pray in this way? Some general principles will help in understanding these passages.

1st, one must be clear that the people being cursed aren’t enemies over trivial matters; they’re people who hate the faithful because of their faith; they mock God & use ruthless & deceitful means to suppress the godly (Ps 5:4–6, 9–10; 10:15; 42:3; 94:2–7).

2nd, it’s worth remembering that these curses are in poetic form & can use extravagant & over the top expressions. We have to remember the fulfillment is left to God.

3rd, these curses are expressions of moral indignation, not of personal vengeance. These psalms are prayers for God to vindicate Himself, displaying His righteousness for all the world to see (Ps 10:17–18). They are prayers that God will do what He said He’ll do.

4th, the OT ethical system forbids personal vengeance (Lev. 19:17–18; Prov. 24:17; 25:21–22), a prohibition that the NT repeats (Rom 12:19–21). We must always keep as our deepest desire, even for those who mean us harm, that others would come to trust in Christ & come to love His people (Lk 23:34; Rom 9:1–3; 10:1; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pt 3:9). Hence, when we pray for God to protect His people against their persecutors, we should always be asking God to lead such people to repentance.

F. Man’s Experience Many Psalms flow out of real-life situations & express the inward thoughts & feelings rather than the outward circumstances of the author. They’re dominated by emotions & feelings & not an explanation of doctrine. The authors didn’t sit down on a beautiful day without a worry & write a clever poem. As one commentator puts it, *The Psalms are often wet with the tears & the blood of the writer.*⁸ The enemy is in hot pursuit as David cries out to God for help. God responds & delivers him against overwhelming odds. After he catches his breath, he recounts the situation & out of the overflow of his emotions, he writes a poem praising God’s greatness (3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142). When we can’t express the feelings we have during a period of life, we can often turn to the Psalms & find that same sentiment or emotion captured well there. To appreciate the Psalms, you’ve got to *fee*/with the life-situation of the Psalmist. They

⁸ Leupold, p. 28

reflect the full gamut of human emotions including fear (3:6; 27:1-3); shame (25:2-3); guilt (32:3-4; 38; 51); depression (42-43); feeling abandoned by God (13); helplessness (18:4-6); being betrayed & attacked by those you trusted (55; 57:3-4); as well as great joy, contentment, & delight in God (103; 145). Luther said that these hymns enable us to look directly into the heart of God's saints, & he was right.⁹ The psalms take us through the spectrum of human experience, & shows us that no matter what we go through, God listens to those who call on Him. He walks beside us, goes before us, encamps around us, reigns above us, & dwells among us. In much of the Scriptures, we're given the stories of events. We see Moses leading the people across the Red Sea. We see David fleeing & hiding in caves from King Saul. But the Psalms take a different perspective; in them we're shown the personal struggle the people of God go through in the midst of these stories. We're invited into the cave with David to see him pray to God: **Give Your attention to my cry, For I have been brought very low; Rescue me from my persecutors, For they are too strong for me** (142:6). We see Moses's private prayers as he leads Israel through the wilderness: **Do return, LORD; how long will it be? & be sorry for Your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with Your graciousness, That we may sing for joy & rejoice all our days** (90:14). We also get to see David's joy when he is delivered: **I waited patiently for the LORD; & He reached down to me & heard my cry.... How blessed is the man who has made the LORD his trust** (40:1, 4). In the psalms we join the various authors at their lowest & their highest, in times of trouble & triumph, tribulation & ease, desperation & prosperity. & we're instructed to sing & pray along.

5. Lessons We'll learn many things from the psalms, including...

A. Praise is Important The Psalms are filled with praise & with exhortations to praise God & worship Him for His attributes & actions. To praise God we must come to know Him as revealed in His Word & we must be involved with God in our personal lives through prayer & trusting Him so we experience His all-sufficient help. The psalmists knew God in this way. We need to remember to praise & worship God at all times.

⁹ Leupold, p. 27

B. Prayer is Important Many of the Psalms are prayers, cried out to God from the crucible of life. They show us that no experience in life is too high or too low to exclude God. We're to call on Him when we're in the pits & on the peaks. J. Sidlow Baxter observed, *Again & again, in individual Psalms, we see how sighing is turned into singing through praying.*¹⁰

C. Corporate Worship is Important It's not enough to praise God individually. We also need to worship God corporately & sing His praises together. There's something about the corporate aspect of worship that's satisfying to God & to us. The Psalms are God's divinely inspired song book.

Here are a few action points:

1. Read the Psalms Devotionally Continually & repeatedly meditating on the Psalms will help guard, sustain, & deepen our hearts before God. Remember, the main author, David, was a man after God's heart!

2. Memorize the Psalms The Psalms were often on Jesus' lips. He cited from Ps 118 to identify Himself as the stone the builders rejected, which became the chief cornerstone (Mk 12:10). He quoted from Ps 110 to confound the Pharisees, showing He was both David's son & David's Lord (Mk 12:36). On the cross, He cited Ps 22:1, **My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?** (Mk 15:34). His last words (Lk 23:46) were from Ps 31:5, **Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.** After His resurrection, He taught the disciples from the Law of Moses, the Prophets, & the Psalms to tell of Himself (Lk 24:44). So Jesus knew & used the Psalms. Many Psalms are worth the effort of memorizing. If you struggle with depression, memorize verses on joy & praise. If you struggle with anxiety, memorize verses on peace, freedom from fear, & trusting God.

3. Sing the Psalms Many of the Psalms have been given modern tunes (website). Singing them & listening to them is a good way to memorize them. If you have a musical bent, work at putting some of the Psalms to music yourself.

4. Pray the Psalms One writer laments, *We are in danger of losing the Psalter in our churches; indeed, many have already lost it, & so it is no accident that many people in our congregations do*

¹⁰ *Explore the Book*, 3:87

*not know how to pray.*¹¹ As you read the Psalms & come to a part that's a prayer, turn it into your own prayer: **Make me know Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths** (Ps 25:4). Or perhaps the Psalm points out a lack in your life. Turn it into prayer: **Let all those who seek You rejoice & be glad in You; Let those who love Your salvation say continually, 'The Lord be magnified'** (Ps 40:16). Pray, *Lord, I don't rejoice in You enough. Help me to magnify You in my life!*

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with this profound statement: *Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true & sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God & of ourselves.*¹² The Psalms will take us deeper in both of those aspects of wisdom. Let's ask God to teach us about Himself & about ourselves as we study the Psalms in the coming months. Hopefully, this introduction doesn't ruin the Psalms for you. Ultimately they find their highest use in inspiring believers to trust in God in spite of the tough times we go through. Some of the psalms have done this for 3,000 years, & they still do today. But primarily, the psalms are about God & His relationship to His creation, the nations of the world, Israel, & His believing people. He is seen as a powerful God as well as a tenderhearted Father, a God who keeps His promises & lovingly cares for His people. The psalms also reveal the hearts of those who follow Him, their faith & doubts, their victories & failures, & their hopes for the glorious future God has promised. In this book, we meet all kinds of people in a variety of circumstances, crying out to God, praising Him, confessing their sins, & seeking to worship Him in a deeper way. In the Psalms, we meet the God of creation & learn spiritual truths from birds & beasts, mountains & deserts, sunshine & storms, wheat & chaff, trees & flowers. The psalms teach us to seek God with a whole heart, to tell Him the truth, & to worship Him because of Who He is, not just because of what He gives. They show us how to accept trials & turn them into triumphs, & when we've failed, they show us how to repent & receive God's gracious forgiveness. The God described in the Psalms is both transcendent & immanent, far above us & yet personally with us in our pilgrim journey. He is *God Most High & Immanuel—God with us.*¹³

¹¹ Elizabeth Achtemeier, cited by Willem VanGemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 5:6

¹² ed. by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, p 35

¹³ Warren W. Wiersbe, [Be Worshipful](#), pp 9–10

Let me close with this story: On Oct 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg & ignited the spark that began the Reformation. In the years preceding that, Luther was chiefly studying & teaching 2 books of the Bible. Almost everyone associates Luther with the book of Romans, particularly Rom 1:17 which reads, *The just shall live by faith*, (KJV). But Luther was converted not only by his study of Romans but also by his study of Psalms. On Aug 16, 1513, he began lecturing on the 1st book of Scripture he'd ever taught, the Psalms. These 2 books, Romans & Psalms, radically changed the direction of his life. While Romans formulated Luther's doctrinal convictions about the gospel, Psalms gave him the courage to proclaim these truths fearlessly. His personal study of the Psalms instilled within him such a high view of God that he developed a boldness to stand alone against the world for the truth of the gospel. The Psalms gave Luther an unconquerable spirit & indomitable will to trust God, no matter what happened to him. In his later years, during the traumatic days of the Reformation, Luther often became discouraged, suffering bouts of despair & depression. The entire world, he felt, was against him. But in those dark & difficult hours, he would often turn to his coworker & say, *Come, Philip, let us sing the psalms*. They would often sing a version of Ps 46 set to music. We know this song today as *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. A masterpiece of heart-moving truth written by Martin Luther, drawn from Ps 46. *We sing this psalm*, Luther reflected, *because God is with us & powerfully & miraculously preserves & defends His church & His Word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, & against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, & sin*.¹⁴

¹⁴ As told by Bobby Earls, <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/89724-psalms-an-introduction>