



Introduction to the Psalms

I. What Are the Psalms?

The Psalms are a beautiful collection of Hebrew lyrical poetry. The poems express the emotions of the writers as their thoughts were stirred by God and their prayers directed to God. The psalms deal with the writers' contemplations of Israel's history, present conditions, and prophetic hope. Martin Luther called the psalms "a little Bible and the summary of the Old Testament."

Many of the Psalms are powerful, emotional expressions of worship. They are so rich, so well written, and so divine that their usefulness can never be exhausted! They show that the people of Israel were a profoundly religious people, that they were worshipers of God, and that they had a sound sense of right and wrong. In his commentary on the Psalms, Matthew Henry writes, "the Book of Psalms brings us into the sanctuary, draws us off from converse with politicians, philosophers, or disputers of this world, and directs us into communion with God, lifting up and letting out our hearts towards Him. Thus may we be on the mount with God."

The Hebrew title of the book was *Tehillim*, which means *Praises*. The name *Psalms* has been derived from *Psalmoi*, which is the title of the book in the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Old Testament. *Psalmoi* means *songs of praise*.

The Psalms contain timeless messages of universal truth, much of which is expressed in word pictures. They contain pastoral language because Israel was a nation of farmers and shepherds. They also contain military language because Israel was involved in numerous wars as a result of God's discipline. The structure of many psalms contains parallelism or "sense rhythm."

As you read and study, watch for couplets where the thought of the first line is repeated or amplified in the second. Or sometimes the second line will present a contrasting thought which clarifies or confirms the first. For example,

*Lord, how they have increased who trouble me!
Many are they who rise up against me* (Psalm 3:1),
and
*O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger,
Nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure.* (Psalm 6:1).

II. Who Wrote the Psalms?

The Psalms are spiritual songs which were inspired by the Holy Spirit of God. He is the one true author. Most of

the psalms have a title or superscription which allude to the human writer. There are forty-nine psalms, known as "orphan psalms," which mention no human writer. The writers mentioned in the psalms are:

A. David

Seventy-three psalms bear the name of David, the son of Jesse, anointed by God as king, and sweet psalmist of Israel (2 Samuel 23:1). However, in some cases the psalm may have been written about David, for David, or simply in the style of David.

B. Solomon

Two psalms (72 and 127) were written by (or about) Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:24 and 1 Chronicles 3:5). He succeeded his father as King of Israel and ruled from 965-925 B. C.

C. Moses

Psalm 90 was written by Moses, whom God appointed as deliverer, wilderness leader, lawgiver, and prophet of Israel.

D. The Two Ezrahites

Psalm 88 was written by Heman the Ezrahite, and Psalm 89 by Ethan the Ezrahite. Both were leaders of worship music (1 Chronicles 6:33), and both were known for their wisdom (1 Kings 4:31).

E. Asaph

Asaph is the author of Psalms 50 and 73-83. Asaph was a Levite, the son of Berachiah of the family of Gershon (1 Chronicles 6:39). He was a prophet, a poet (2 Chronicles 29:30; Nehemiah 12:46) and a prominent musician, appointed by David as chief minister of thanks and praise to the Lord God of Israel (1 Chronicles 16:4-5). Because some of the psalms attributed to Asaph appear to have been written at a later date, it is probable that his sons, who were musicians in the temple (1 Chronicles 25:1), were the authors of such psalms as 74, 75, and 79.

F. The Sons of Korah

The sons of Korah authored psalms 42; 44-49; 84, 85 and 87. They were from a family of Levites who ministered before the Lord in various capacities. It is probable that they were choral singers.

III. When Were the Psalms Written?

The Psalms were written over the period of history from Moses (Psalm 90), around 1445 B.C., to the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon in 536 B.C. (Psalm 126). Many were written during the time of King David, around the years 1020-971 B.C. At least one was written during the captivity in Babylon (Psalm 137).

IV. How Are the Psalms Presented?

A. Division into Five Books

The Psalms were arranged by ancient editors into five books. Book 1 encompasses Psalms 1-41; Book 2, Psalms 42-72; Book 3, Psalms 73-89; Book 4, Psalms 90-106; and Book 5, Psalms 107-150. Some believe that the five books of the Psalms are meant to correspond to the five historical books of the Jewish Torah, the first five books of our Bible.

B. As a Spiritual Progression

Many commentators see the Book of Psalms as a definite spiritual progression beginning with entry into the presence of God in Psalm 1 and building to the highest praise and worship in Psalm 150. The last five psalms constitute a closing doxology, or praise to God, and benediction to the book. Each book also has its own doxology and benediction.

The names of God appear differently in each of the five books. In Book 1, *Jehovah*, (*YHWH*) is the predominant name. It means *I am who I am*, and *I will be who I will be* and indicates God as the Helper of His people. It is translated as LORD. In Book 2, *Elohim*, denoting God as the one supreme being who is the only true God, is predominate. Book 3 uses the combined name LORD God (*Jehovah Elohim*), and this book stresses God's covenant. In Book 4, *Jehovah* appears in every psalm. Book 5 uses *Jah*, a contraction of *Jehovah* to sound the perfect note of praise "*Hallelu-jah*," and also the singular form of *Elohim*, *El*, which signifies God's mighty power.

C. The Different Genre

Another way of dividing the psalms is by genre or type, on the basis of their content, purpose, or structure. Just as there are different types of literature in general, such as novels, biographies, poetry, short stories, and so on, there are different types of psalms. However, the lines of division are not hard and fast so it is necessary to be flexible when speaking of a psalm's genre. For example, Psalm 136 is a thanksgiving psalm, but also a psalm of remembrance and a praise psalm. Matthew Henry, in his Commentary, wrote, "Let good Christians divide them (the Psalms) for themselves, so as may best

increase their acquaintance with them, that they may have them at hand upon all occasions and may sing them in the spirit of understanding."

This study will focus on a sampling of psalms according to genre or type. This will give a broad overview of the psalms and help to give you an understanding of the psalms. In this study we will *taste and see that the Lord is good* (Psalm 34:8). May this study make the psalms, more readily available to your mind and heart so that you may meditate upon them and sing them in the spirit of understanding.

In this study, the psalms will be divided into seven genres: wisdom, thanksgiving, lament, confidence, royal, remembrance, and praise. Remember as you study that some psalms may logically fit more than one genre. Subtypes under these seven genres will also be mentioned in this study.

1. Wisdom Psalms

Wisdom psalms are closely connected with the same themes as the books of Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes: everyday living in relation to God and the consequences of various ways of life. The wisdom psalms open our eyes to God and help us to see what is pleasing in His sight. Some wisdom psalms are 1, 15, 19, 36, 37, 49, 73, 112, 127, 128, 133.

2. Thanksgiving Psalms

Thanksgiving psalms thank and praise God for His acts of deliverance, restored relationships, or answered prayer. Some thanksgiving psalms are 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 40, 65, 66, 67, 75, 92, 107, 108, 116, 118, 124, 136, 138.

3. Laments

Lament psalms are distress calls to God. The writers of the laments open their hearts to God in expressions of sorrow, fear, or anger. Most end with an expression of confidence in God. Nearly a third of the psalms fall into the category of laments. They can be divided into two types: personal laments 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 36, 39, 41, 42, 43, 53-57, 59, 61, 64, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 120, 139, 141, 142 and national laments 12, 44, 51, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 102, 123, 126, 129. The penitential psalms, 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143 and the imprecatory psalms, 35, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140 are also included under the laments.

4. Confidence Psalms

Confidence or trust psalms are usually quite short and portray the psalmist's attitude toward God's power and

goodness. Confidence psalms include 11, 16, 17, 23, 27, 62, 121, 125, 126, 128, 131.

5. Royal Psalms

Royal psalms speak either of God, the King of the universe, or the human king, usually David. The two are closely related because the earthly king was to be a reflection of the heavenly king. Royal psalms include 2, 18, 20, 21, 29, 45, 47, 72, 93, 95-101, 110, 144.

6. Remembrance Psalms

Remembrance psalms all reference God's great redemptive acts, giving overwhelming reason to praise Him! Remembrance psalms include 77, 78, 89, 105, 106, 132, 136.

7. Praise Psalms

Praise psalms praise God for who He is and for His works of mercy and power. They are hymns of worship to God. Praise hymns include 8, 19, 24, 29, 33, 36, 47, 48, 96, 103, 105, 111, 113, 117, 135, 136.

V. Why Study the Psalms?

There are many reasons to study the Book of Psalms. Here are a few:

A. To Understand the Ancient Faith of Israel

"The Psalms mirror the faith of Israel. In them we receive windows that enable us to look out on our brothers and sisters in the faith of more than twenty-five hundred years ago. The Psalms invite us to experience how God's people in the past related to Him," (William A. VanGemeren, The Expositor's Bible Commentary). What we learn from the psalmists also helps us in approaching the throne of grace. When we are too distraught to pray, we may confidently visit the Book of Psalms to find words and thoughts that are an acceptable offering to God.

B. To Better Understand the New Testament

Familiarity with the psalms helps better understand New Testament truths by lyrically bringing us within the veil, so to speak. This is because more than 400 psalms are quoted by New Testament writers, more than any other book of the Old Testament. Jesus, Himself, quoted from the Book of Psalms (See Matthew 21:16 and 42.)

C. To Learn How to Praise God

The psalms also teach us how to offer praise and glory to God. Matthew Henry believes that they teach us "how to order our conversation aright, so as that, in the end, we may see the salvation of God" (The Matthew Henry Commentary).

It is well to study the psalms and learn many by heart so we may fulfill the apostle Paul's admonition in Colossians 3:16 to *Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs.*

D. To Learn More About God and Your Relationship to Him

The psalms teach us about God, about ourselves, and how we are to live in relation to Him. We gain insight into the hearts, minds, and souls of the Old Testament saints, and we discover that their thoughts, their longings, their joys, their problems, and their failures are the same as ours. The psalms span the ages and show us that although times may change, human nature does not, and of course, our Lord remains the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Most importantly, the psalms teach us to yearn for God over and above every created thing. They vividly affirm that the living God with His sovereign power, grace, and mercy is the true center of the universe -- not we ourselves. The psalms may turn your world upside down: but only if you have already turned it downside up. They will teach you the truth of what is most important in your brief life here on planet earth.

Will you joyfully take up your Bible to learn what God wants to teach you through this study of the Psalms? Will you open your ears and mind to receive God's truth? Will you open your heart to any changes God may be calling you to make in your life? Will you humbly submit your soul to your Creator that He may use this study to purify, mold, and make you into the man or woman He desires you to be?