

How to Study the Psalms:

“The delightful study of the Psalms has yielded me boundless profit and ever-growing pleasure; common gratitude constrains me to communicate to others a portion of the benefit, with the prayer that it may induce them to search further for themselves.” Charles Spurgeon

Introduction: The Psalms are located at the heart of the Bible – both physically and spiritually. They give voice to the heart and emotions of God’s people and yet also, in an amazing way, the heart of God, and they convey the message of the Bible through poetry that sings and sighs, praises, prays, and ponders God’s work in creation and the establishing of His kingdom on earth.

The Psalms touch the core of our being by challenging sin, stirring our emotions and imagination, and by giving us hope when all hope seems lost. Yet, they are also a microcosm of both the Old Testament story and the New Testament hope of the coming Messiah. Athanasius, a fourth-century theologian, called the Psalms “an epitome of the whole scriptures.” In the same century, another ancient sage, Bishop Basil of Caesarea, stated that the Psalms were “a compendium of all theology,” and Martin Luther even got in on the act as he described the Psalms as “a little Bible, and the summary of the Old Testament.”

Closer to our time, C.S. Lewis added his observations that the Psalms “are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons.” While this is true, the Psalms are rich with theology, and there is nothing better to sing than good theology! The Psalms represent to us a vibrant “prayable” and “singable” theological treatise that has helped, encouraged, and challenged saints throughout the ages. They contain the central message of God’s story. Tremper Longman summarizes the Psalms when he states: “They give us a theology written in intimate relationship with God and in close touch with life.”

The Psalms express a wide variety of emotions and go from tearful laments to triumphant thanksgivings and have helped the godly in every age to express their emotions. They have provided a vehicle for God’s people to pray and praise as God has worked to preserve a people who will worship, love, and obey him.

Overview: There are 150 poems in Psalms, and they were written over many years. Seventy-three of them were written by King David, and one-third of the others are anonymous. Initially, they were used extensively by temple choirs and sung and prayed through by God’s ancient covenant people, the Israelites. The arrangement of Psalms is very intentional – although they may seem random to us!

There is both an introduction and conclusion to Psalms. Psalms 1 and 2 introduce the book, and Psalms 146-150 conclude it. Psalms has five large sections – labeled as “Books.”

Introduction (Psalms 1 and 2): King David is the author of these introductory Psalms. Psalm 1 speaks about the person who meditates on Torah (the Law) day and night. The Torah is the first five books of Moses. The Psalms have five main parts too, and they represent the Torah teaching people lifelong devotion to Yahweh through prayer as the only way to keep the first commandment.

Psalm 2 promises King David that God will one day install his Messianic King on Mount Zion over the nations, and all those who take refuge in him will be blessed.

Together these introductory Psalms inform us that Psalms is to be the prayer book of God's people throughout the ages as they obey the commands of the Torah and wait for the future Messianic King.¹

Book 1 (Psalms 1-41): Davidic Psalms – This section opens and closes with a call to covenant faithfulness. Most of Book 1 is authored by David and is personal reflections on his life and faith. The theme of many of these Psalms is the trials of the righteous and God's deliverances as his people cry out to him. David represents the future Messianic King, and God's people are taught to trust through difficulties by praising and loving God in challenging circumstances.

Book 2 (Psalms 42-72): Historical Psalms – Many of these Psalms are songs remembering historical deliverances that God has accomplished for his people. The future reign of the Messianic King over the nations is the focus of Psalm 72, which includes echoes from other Old Testament prophetic passages (Isaiah 11, 45, 60, and Zechariah 9). These passages point to the future Messianic King fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that God would bless all the nations through his people.

Book 3 (Psalms 73-89): Liturgical Psalms – Many of these poems capture the challenging circumstances God's people find themselves in. Still, they also include rays of sunshine between the clouds with reflections on the promises God gave to King David. Even though God's people are in exile, there is still hope. The Psalmists remind God of his promises to David that there would always be a king of his lineage on the throne.

Book 4 (Psalms 90-106): Other Pre-Captivity Psalms – These psalms center on the crisis of the exile. The first psalm in this section returns to Israel's roots. It is called the "Song of Moses" and reminds God's people of their roots as they plead for God to show mercy to his covenant people. These poems encourage singers and prayers to remember that God is faithful to his promises. The center of this section includes poems that announce God's reign as the true king of creation, and they celebrate the day when God establishes his kingdom and justice over the whole earth.

Book 5 (Psalms 107-150): Psalms of the Captivity and Return – This section opens with hopeful poems affirming that God hears the cries of his people and that one day the promised Messianic King will defeat the powers of evil and usher in God's kingdom. There are two larger collections in this section. One section is called "Hallel" (Ps. 113-118), and the other being the "Song of Ascents" (Ps. 120-136). Each of these mini-sections concludes with a Messianic Kingdom psalm. Both sections fuel the hope of God's people that God is faithful to his promises and that there will one day be a second exodus as God releases his people from captivity, and they can return to their homeland. Torah and Messianic Kingdom themes are noticeable throughout Book 5.

Conclusion (Psalms 146-150): Each psalm begins and ends with "Hallelujah" – a command for all of creation to praise Yahweh. They are a final declaration of the goodness of God and, God's people praise him because he has saved and comforted them and fulfilled his promise!

How to Read the Psalms: Each poem in Psalms was created to be read or sung, and each psalm is located within the book for a specific reason. Psalms retell God's story and have been likened to a literary temple. When the people of God were exiled, there was no temple, no central place and focus of worship, no art or imagery, no priests or singers, no place dedicated for prayer or praise. The Psalms can be likened to that temple. The Psalms are a literary temple where God is proclaimed as faithful, all-

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8&ab_channel=BibleProject

sufficient, powerful, and ready to act on behalf of his people. They provided a substitute for the temple – a place where God’s people could connect with Yahweh and where God could speak the assurance and hope of the coming Messianic Kingdom to his people. Psalms have been described as a virtual prayer book designed for exiles to enter and worship, a place where the people of God can hear the story of God’s kingdom sung back in poetry.²

One of the challenges in reading Psalms is that there are lots of kinds of poems. However, it is helpful to remember two broad categories. Psalms can be broadly categorized as a *Poem of Lament* or a *Poem of Praise*.

Poem of Lament – themes of pain, confusion, anger dominate these psalms. They express the pain and sin that permeates the world, drawing attention to the problems faced by the righteous and plead with God to act. Lament is an appropriate response to sin and suffering.

Poem of Praise – these are Psalms of joy and celebration. They celebrate what is good and draw the reader’s attention to what God has done and express thankfulness and praise for his faithfulness.

Many biblical themes can be identified as you read Psalms. Here are some broad themes to help us to understand and categorize psalms:

1. Torah and Messiah
2. Lament and Praise
3. Faith and Hope

As we spend time slowly reading, pondering, reflecting, and memorizing the Psalms of lament and praise, they gradually become our own and voice the most profound emotions of our heart and experience. Our fears, questions, and struggles are described in accurate detail. Our highest praise, wonder, and amazement are articulated, and we are reminded of the standards of the Holy God and the future hope of the coming Messiah. The Psalms, both now and then, are poems for exiles “who are learning to live by God’s wisdom and seek God’s justice in the world as they hope for the coming Messiah and the Kingdom of God.”³

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpny22k_7uk&ab_channel=BibleProject

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Psalms Overview Questions:

1. Psalms are divided into five “books.” Read the final verses of each of the five books (Ps. 41:13, 72:18-20, 89:52, 106:48, 150:6). What do these verses tell you about the overall theme of the book of Psalms?
2. The Psalms cover a wide variety of poetic forms or types (genres) – laments, hymns of praise, hymns of thanksgiving, hymns celebrating God’s Law, wisdom psalms, songs of confidence, historical psalms, and prophetic hymns. Read included definitions and identify the genre of the following Psalms: 1, 9, 103, 135
3. Jesus taught us to read our Bibles with him in mind – “everything written about *me* in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44). The Psalms bear witness to Jesus (John 5:39) and so can “make [us] *wise* for salvation” (Tim. 3:15). The Psalms are quoted by more New Testament authors than any other Old Testament book. One-fifth of Paul’s Old Testament quotes are from the book of Psalms! And in Paul’s sermons in Acts, he often quotes the Psalms. Look at his Acts 13:16-41 sermon. Note especially verses 33 and 35. Which two Psalms does he quote? Then ask yourself, based on these Psalms, what does Paul affirm about Jesus?