Psalms

Psalms: (Information borrowed from the ESV Study Bible)

Title

The book of Psalms, or Psalter, has supplied to believers some of their best-loved Bible passages. It is a collection of 150 poems that express a wide variety of emotions, including: love and adoration toward God, sorrow over sin, dependence on God in desperate circumstances, the battle of fear and trust, walking with God even when the way seems dark, thankfulness for God’s care, devotion to the word of God, and confidence in the eventual triumph of God’s purposes for the world.

The English title comes from the Greek word psalmos, which translates Hebrew mizmor, “song,” found in many of the Psalm titles and simply translated as “psalm” (e.g., Psalm 3). This Greek name for the book was established by the time of the NT (Luke 20:42; Acts 1:20). The Hebrew name for the book is Tehillim, “Praises,” pointing to the characteristic use of these songs as praises offered to God in public worship.

Theme

The Hebrew label for the psalms, “Praises,” may have originally reflected the idea, readily found today, that adoration and thanks to God are the primary acts of worship; but it would be better to learn from the title of the entire Psalter that the whole range of the psalms—from adoration and thanks to the needy cry for help (even the desolate moan of Psalm 88)—praises God when offered to him in the gathered worship of his people.
The individual psalms come from diverse periods of Israel’s history: from the time of Moses (15th or 13th century B.C.), to that of David and Solomon (10th century), down to exilic and postexilic times (e.g., Psalm 137). A number of factors clearly indicate that the book of Psalms in its present form is the product of a process of collecting (and possibly of editing) from a variety of sources; such factors include:

- The division into five books and the affinity groupings, e.g., Psalms 1–2; 113–118 (the Egyptian Hallel; see notes on Psalms 113–118); Psalms 120–134 (the Songs of Ascents); and the final Hallelujah of Psalms 146–150 (see discussion of Structure);
- the existence of the almost identical Psalms 14 and 53;
- the notice in 72:20 about the end of David’s prayers (while there are still plenty of Davidic psalms to follow).

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm</th>
<th>Incident</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>David flees from and battles Absalom</td>
<td>2 Samuel 15–17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The words of Cush, a Benjaminite (persecution by Saul?)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>David delivered from enemies and from Saul</td>
<td>2 Samuel 22</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Dedication of the temple</td>
<td>Nothing in David’s lifetime; cf. 1 Kings 8:63</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>David delivered from danger by feigning madness in the presence of King Achish of Gath</td>
<td>1 Sam. 21:12–22:1</td>
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<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Nathan confronts David about his adultery with Bathsheba</td>
<td>2 Samuel 11–12</td>
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<td>52</td>
<td>Doeg the Edomite tells Saul that David went to the house of Ahimelech</td>
<td>1 Sam. 22:9–19</td>
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<td>54</td>
<td>The Ziphites tell Saul that David is hiding among them</td>
<td>1 Sam. 23:19</td>
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<td>56</td>
<td>The Philistines seize David in Gath</td>
<td>1 Sam. 21:10–11</td>
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<td>57</td>
<td>David flees from Saul into a cave</td>
<td>1 Sam. 22:1 or 24:3</td>
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<td>59</td>
<td>Saul sends men to watch David’s house in order to kill him</td>
<td>1 Sam. 19:11</td>
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Key Themes

The Psalter is fundamentally the hymnbook of the people of God at worship. The Psalms take the basic themes of OT theology and turn them into song. Thus, themes common throughout the OT (see The Theology of the Old Testament) reappear in the Psalms and include the following:

1. Monotheism. The one true God, Maker of heaven and earth and ruler of all things, will vindicate his own goodness and justice, in his own time. Every human being must know and love this God, whose spotless moral purity, magnificent power and wisdom, steadfast faithfulness, and unceasing love are breathtakingly beautiful.

2. Creation and fall. Though God made man with dignity and purpose, all people since the fall are beset with sins and weaknesses that only God’s grace can heal.

3. Election and covenant. The one true God chose a people for himself and bound himself to them by his covenant. This covenant expressed God’s intention to save the people, and through them to bring light to the rest of the world.

4. Covenant membership. In his covenant, God offers his grace to his people: the forgiveness of their sins, the shaping of their lives in this world to reflect his own glory, and a part to play in bringing light to the Gentiles. Each member of God’s people is responsible to lay hold of this grace from the heart: to believe the promises, to grow in obeying the commands, and to keep on doing so all their lives long. Those who lay hold in this way are the faithful, as distinct from the unfaithful among God’s people; they enjoy the full benefits of God’s love, and they find boundless delight in knowing God. Each of the faithful is a member of a people, a corporate entity; the members have a mutual participation in the life of the whole people. Therefore the spiritual and moral well-being of the whole affects the well-being of each of the members, and each member contributes to the others by his own spiritual and moral life. Thus each one shares the joys and sorrows of the others, and of the whole. The faithful will suffer in this life, often at the hands of the unfaithful, and sometimes from those outside God’s people. The right response to this suffering is not personal revenge but believing prayer, confident that God will make all things right in his own time.

5. Eschatology. The story of God’s people is headed toward a glorious future, in which all kinds of people will come to know the Lord and join his people. It is part of the dignity of God’s
people that, in God’s mysterious wisdom, their personal faithfulness contributes to the story getting to its goal. The Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, will lead his people in the great task of bringing light to the Gentiles.

**History of Salvation Summary**

Throughout history God has been fashioning a people for himself who will love and obey him, and who will express and nourish their corporate life in gathered worship. The Psalms served as a vehicle for the prayers and praises of God’s people in Israel, and Christians today, who have been grafted into the olive tree of God’s ancient people (Rom. 11:17, 24), can join their voices together with these ancient people in their worship. There are indeed adjustments to be made, now that Jesus has died and risen (see The Psalms as Scripture), and yet Gentile believers in Jesus may rejoice with the people of God of all ages. (For an explanation of the “History of Salvation,” see the Overview of the Bible. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ.)

**Structure**

The most basic structure of the Psalter is the easiest to see: it is a collection of 150 separate songs. It is possible that Psalms 42–43 are really two parts of one combined song, and Psalms 9–10 are companions (though not part of the same psalm; see note on Psalm 9).

The standard Hebrew text divides the Psalms into five “books,” perhaps in imitation of the five books of the Pentateuch. The psalm that ends each book finishes with a doxology (see note on Ps. 41:13), and Psalm 150 as a whole is the conclusion both of Book 5 and of the entire Psalter.

Book Psalms Psalms 1–2 have no titles that attribute authorship (but see Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2); they provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole. The remainder of Book 1 is made up almost entirely of psalms of David: only Psalms 10 (but see note on Psalm 9) and 33 lack a Davidic superscription. Prayers issuing from a situation of distress dominate, punctuated by statements of confidence in the God who alone can save (e.g., 9; 11; 16; 18), striking the note that concludes the book (40–41).
Reflections on ethics and worship with integrity are found in Psalms 1; 14–15; 19; 24; and 26.

Book Psalms 42–72

From the Davidic voice of Book 1, Book 2 introduces the first Korah collection (42–49, although 43 lacks a superscription), with a single Asaph psalm at Psalm 50. A further Davidic collection is found in Psalms 51–65 and 68–69, including the bulk of the “historical” superscriptions (51–52; 54; 56–57; 59–60; 63). Once again, lament and distress dominate the content of these prayers, which now also include a communal voice (e.g., Psalm 44; cf. Psalms 67; 68). The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 with the Psalms’ pinnacle of royal theology (72; cf. 45).

Book Psalms 73–89

The tone darkens further in Book 3. The opening Psalm 73 starkly questions the justice of God before seeing light in God’s presence; that light has almost escaped the psalmist in Psalm 88, the bleakest of all psalms. Book 2 ended with the high point of royal aspirations; Book 3 concludes in Psalm 89 with these expectations badly threatened. Sharp rays of hope occasionally pierce the darkness (e.g., Psalms 75; 85; 87). The brief third book contains most of the psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73–83), as well as another set of Korah psalms (Psalms 84–85; 87–88).
Book 4 Psalms 90 opens the fourth book of the psalms. It may be seen as the first response to the problems raised by the third book (Psalms 73–89). Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, reminds the worshiper that God was active on Israel’s behalf long before David. This theme is taken up in Psalms 103–106, which summarize God’s dealings with his people before any kings reigned. In between there is a group of psalms (93–100) characterized by the refrain “The LORD reigns.” This truth refutes the doubts of Psalm 89.

Book 5 Psalms The structure of Book 5 reflects the closing petition of Book 4 in 106:47. It declares that God does answer prayer (Psalm 107) and concludes with five Hallelujah psalms (146–150). In between there are several psalms affirming the validity of the promises to David (Psalms 110; 132; 144), two collections of Davidic psalms (108–110; 138–145); the longest psalm, celebrating the value of the law (Psalm 119); and 15 psalms of ascent for use by pilgrims to Jerusalem (Psalms 120–134).
FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

BIBLE STUDY FOCUS – “Blessed is the Man”

MAIN TEXT: Psalm 1

Instructions for Small Group Time:

Option 1: Send the main text to small group members so they can read it ahead of time.

Option 2: Read the text together when you meet

Basic Bible Study Practices:

1. As people read the text, ask them to pay attention to key words
2. As people read the text have them highlight key words, people, and places
3. As people read the text have them pay attention to repetition of key terms, ideas, and people
4. If people are given the opportunity to read the text ahead of small group time, have them read it at least twice so they become familiar with its contents.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Psalm 1 in its entirety. What are some of the key words found in the chapter?
2. Who do you think is “the man” mentioned in verse 1? Notice that the verse does not say blessed is “a man”… so who is the man?
3. Do you think the man of verse one is connected to Psalm 2?
4. Some scholars believe Psalms 1 and 2 are one Psalm. What difference does it make?
5. What does it mean to delight in God’s Word? And what does it mean to meditate on it day and night?
6. There is a clear contrast between the righteous man and the wicked man in Psalm one…talk about the differences and their ramifications for you and others.
Extra Resources

The Gospel Project: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8)

Sermon on Psalm 1: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7SDtthNBjE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I7SDtthNBjE)

Commentary on Psalm 1: [https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-1/](https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/psalm-1/)

Social Media Sharables: