

The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is a grand compendium of divinely inspired Hebrew poetry, eclectic in its scope of topics, varied in its human authorship and diverse in its original purposes. These psalms served purposes in ancient Jewish worship and are foundational in terms of the music used in New Testament worship.

By biblical standards, the book is large. Many of the ideas expressed are duplicated in various psalms. For this reason, undertaking a chapter by chapter, verse by verse study, from beginning to end, seems overwhelming and potentially tedious for most students.

Therefore, this study will attempt a different approach, hoping in its methods to whet the appetite of students for even deeper study of this important portion of Scripture.

This workbook's goals are to:

- Introduce the place and uses of psalmody in the Bible, and in the history and worship of God's people.
- Explain in a relatively simple way the basic nature of Hebrew poetry, as distinguished from English poetry.
- Explore in a general way the structure, historical settings, human authors and likely manner of forming the collection now found in this book.

- Study the various types of psalms, spending time with specific examples of each type in the psalm library.
- Encourage students to use the psalms for daily devotional meditation and for learning to express righteous emotions, share deep concerns and better learn the highest manner of worship.

To make this study practical and demonstrative of the values available for the church today, we'll be suggesting that classes studying this material:

- Sing aloud some of the psalms. Some songbooks facilitate this by providing psalms set to familiar tunes used in other more contemporary songs.
- Create their own psalms, trying to adapt Hebrew poetry characteristics to English.
- Learn the central role of the Psalms in Messianic prophecy pointing to Christ and the Lord's fulfillment and use of the Psalms in His own life and work.

From the outset of this endeavor, the author has recognized the impossibility of exhaustively presenting all that some students might desire to learn about the Psalms. On the other hand, there

may be more than some are ready to digest in the explanations of various aspects of Hebrew poetry. It is hoped students will make the most they can of what is presented. And, for those wanting more, the bibliography at the end of this workbook may be of value.

I cannot end this preface without noting that poetry has greater appeal to some people than to others. Some of us gravitate toward the rational, factual and highly logical presentation of precepts, perhaps best illustrated in the treatises of the apostle Paul. Others are more drawn to an expression of divine truth that permits and instills strong emotional feeling that moves first the heart and then the life to action.

Scripture contains both of these manners of presentation, suggesting strongly that all of us need both. It is my prayer that students learn as much as I have in the preparation of this study.

—Randy Blackaby

The Book of Psalms contains 150 songs of praise, prayer, and descriptions of every kind of human experience. These psalms may be the best known portion of the Old Testament among Christians. The book is the longest in the Bible. The psalms often are added to Bibles that otherwise contain only the New Testament, emphasizing their perceived value for Christians.

The great importance of the psalms to Christians further can be seen in the sizable use of them in the New Testament itself. These psalms are the most quoted part of the Old Testament within the New Testament. One commentary has stated that of 219 Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, 116 are from the Psalms.

Jesus made mention of the psalms speaking of Him. He said, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44).

The psalms were written over a period of about 1,000 years, with Moses (ca. 1300-1400 BC) being perhaps the earliest of psalm authors. Others may have been written



as late as the time of Israel’s captivity in Babylon or the days when a remnant returned to Jerusalem (see Pss. 85, 126, 137). Therefore, the book should be understood to be a compilation of writings, not the

work of a single human author at a specific point in time. Thus, the Psalms contain some of the earliest and some of the latest literature in the Old Testament.

The psalms may be the oldest collection of ancient poems in the world, certainly older than their

heathen Greek and Roman counterparts.

The Hebrew psalms differ primarily and dramatically from the Greek, for example, in subject matter. While the psalms seek to advance the moral condition of men, Greek poets, as Adam Clarke has noted, had subjects that “were either a fabulous theology, a false and ridiculous religion, chimerical wars, absurd heroism, impure love, agriculture, national sports, or hymns in honor of gods more corrupt than the most profligate of men.”

The Hebrew title for this portion of Scripture is *sepher tehillim*, meaning “book of praises.” The Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint) bears the title *Psalmoi*, from which we get the English “Psalms.”

Older Poetic Psalms or Songs

The book of Psalms does not reflect the oldest of poetic writings. The “Song of Moses,” an ode of triumph after the Red Sea crossing from Egypt, is recorded in Exodus 15:1-15.

Read Deuteronomy 32:1-43 and 33:1-29 in a version showing the poetic nature of these passages. These songs encourage Israel to keep the law after entering Canaan.

See also the “Song of Deborah” in Judges 5 and Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2.

Why Study the Psalms Today?

Twice the apostle Paul pointed to the value of Old Testament Scriptures for Christians. In Romans 14:4 he wrote, “For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” And, in 1 Corinthians 10:11, he said, “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

In writing to Timothy, the same apostle referenced the importance of the old covenant Scriptures to the young evangelist, saying, “But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly

equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:14-17).

Peter used the Psalms of David in preaching the first gospel sermon after the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:25-28, 34-35). We’ll further examine this use of the psalms when we look more closely at those which are messianic in nature.

In addition to these general uses, we are instructed to use either the old psalms or similar lyrics in New Testament-era endeavors. Paul wrote, “speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Eph. 5:19) and “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). And James wrote, “Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms” (5:13).

The King James Version Is Not Best for Poetry Reading

The King James Version doesn’t set the poetry sections in lined form, whereas the New King James, New American Standard and many other newer translations, do set the text in poetic line. So, students are encouraged to at least compare other translations with the KJV.

pray. It teaches us how. The same is illustrated in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, where He showed His disciples how to pray. The psalms serve as a help in expressing our praise and worship to God. And besides, they explain the way of righteous living and tell us what to do when we fail. Songs and poetry long have been recognized as a superior medium for expressing human emotions. Every Christian finds times when he or she is excited and joyful; other times when he is sad, discouraged, or otherwise troubled. For all these emotions and more there is recorded a psalm to which we can relate.

The Poetic Nature of Psalms Needs to Be Appreciated

As we undertake a study of the Psalms we must realize that we are dealing with a different type of biblical literature. Unlike most of the Pentateuch and writings of the prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Job, Song of Solomon, and Lamentations are Hebrew poetry.

While students may find it difficult to find a good explanation of the difference between prose and poetry, it is observable that somewhat different goals are achieved by each.

Poetry is designed, not to convey facts alone, but to formulate a concentrated, imaginative awareness of experience in language

Purposes of the Psalms

- Teach moral principles
- Praise of God, devotion
- Historical remembrance of God’s dealing with man
- Confession, sorrow for sin
- Prophetic; pointing to the Messiah
- Offering thanks to God, prayer
- Expressing sorrow, pain of human affliction
- Meditation
- Invoking God’s wrath on rebellious sinners; asking His protection

Note: We’ll be looking at these in more detail in future lessons.

A Hymn and Prayer Book

The Book of Psalms served as both the hymn book and the prayer book of ancient Israel. They used these songs or poems as a part of their worship. The psalms serve a host of functions. They help us learn how to pray. The Bible does not assume that we are able, instinctively, to

chosen and arranged to create a specific emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm. It often uses compression of thought, a heightened vocabulary, and a different or free syntax. Its emotional content often is expressed through a variety of techniques, from direct description to symbolism, including extensive use of metaphors and similes.

John Goldingay has written that, “The Psalms make it possible to say things that are otherwise ‘unsayable.’”

Poetry can be somewhat exaggerated in expression in an effort to express human emotions, but a reader of the Psalms will miss a great deal if he or she only sees in them human expression. They also are a Divine expression, inspired, codified messages to mankind, as well.

We shall see in our study of the Psalms that they, indeed, express emotional responses to such diverse things as the majesty, sovereignty, and wisdom of God, the joy of salvation, and the despair of human failure and sin. As such, this poetry gives human emotion and feelings divine guidance and regulation.

While God’s word must be intellectually understood and rationally applied, it also is important not to so intellectualize our faith that we minimize our relationship with God. Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, declared that the greatest of all the commandments is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all our strength” (Matt. 22:37-40). The Psalms help us to appreciate and make verbal expression of our relationship with God. As a husband’s words of honor and adoration are important to his re-

lationship with his wife, so are our expressions to and about God.

A musician, Don Wyrzten, has suggested that the biblical psalms must be perceived on two levels:

1. **Form:** How something is said, its style
2. **Content:** What is said, its substance

More will be said about the specific nature of Hebrew poetry, which is different than our English poetry, in **Lesson 3**.

Singing the Psalms
 Sing the following in class
 after reading appropriate
 psalms at home

“The Lord My Shepherd Is”
 based on 23rd Psalm

“Psalm 19”

Designed for Use with Stringed Instruments

The biblical psalms originally were written for Israel, the Jews, and in accordance with the Law of Moses, they were designed to be used with the accompaniment of stringed instruments. The Greek root word for “psalm” is *psalmos*, which is derived from the Hebrew word *zamar*, meaning “to pluck” or take hold of the strings of an instrument with the fingers.

Franz Delitzsch, in his commentary on the Psalms, noted, “Psalms are songs for the lyre, and therefore lyric poems in the strictest sense.” David, as well as other writers, wrote for accompaniment by a harp.

In the New Testament we are commanded to sing and make the melody in the “heart” (Eph. 5:19). The phrase “make melody” in that

passage comes from the Greek word *psallontes* and means, literally, to “pluck the strings of the heart.”

The New Testament speaks numerous times of Christians “singing,” but never commands or gives an example of Christians playing instruments in worship. And, secular history shows the early church did not use such.

Authorship

A common misconception is that David wrote all the psalms. He is generally believed to be identified as the writer of seventy-three psalms and is described in 2 Samuel 23:1 as “the sweet psalmist of Israel.” Another forty-eight psalms are anonymous as to author, although David is potentially the unnamed author of some of these.

Some scholars have suggested that some of the psalms, assumed by the titles to have been written by David, may, in fact, have been written “for” David or “about” David, or even in reference to the Davidic line of kings that culminates in Jesus.

Whatever the case with the psalms with David’s name in the titles, that leaves twenty-nine psalms which are attributed as follows:

- **Asaph**, a Levite and music director during the reigns of David and Solomon; twelve psalms (see 1 Chron. 16:4-5, 37; 15:19; 25:1-2; 2 Chron. 29:30)
- **Sons of Korah**, Levites who worked in the temple; twelve psalms
- **Solomon**, Psalms 72 and 127 within the book of Psalms, but known to have written many more. His writing of 1,005 songs is mentioned in 1 Kings 4:29-32.
- **Moses**, Psalm 90



The photo shows an ancient harpist playing his instrument. Perhaps David played an instrument similar to this one.

authenticated by at least two measures. Ancient Hebrew manuscripts attest to the antiquity of this portion of Scripture. More importantly, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament accepted them as authoritative and divinely prophetic.

Themes in the Psalms

There are many, many themes in the Psalms, but perhaps three are more predominant throughout. They are:

1. The portrayal of God. He is seen in the psalms as a Shepherd, Creator, King, Warrior, Judge, and “the hope” of mankind. He is presented as being great, eternal, powerful, patient, just, forgiving, loving, and good. Thus, the psalms give us a superb source of description of the otherwise “invisible God.”

2. A picture of man. Primarily on display are the emotions of mankind, ranging from love, joy and thankfulness to the lesser feelings of fear, shame, guilt, and impatience.

3. The need to practice righteousness. The psalms expressly and repeatedly present how men ought to conduct themselves before both men and God in righteousness.

When these three themes are then considered together, we observe the need of man to worship, glorify, and imitate God so that he can learn God’s ways and develop a spiritual condition that will allow access to the Divine Being and to avoid the judgment of God.

Irving L. Jensen, in his *Survey of the Old Testament*, notes the phenomenal repetition of certain key words that emphasize these combined themes. The words “righteous” and “righteousness” are repeated more than 130 times. “Sin” and “iniquity” are referenced at least 65 times, while “good” and “evil” are mentioned about 40 times each. Judgment and its cognates are used more than 100 times.

Practical Value of the Psalms

In the Bible’s library, the Book of Psalms provides two outstanding practical benefits for all who believe in God and seek to do His will.

1. It presents to us models of faith and devotion to God. David, in particular, serves this function. His life had many careers, from shepherd boy to servant of the king to warrior, fugitive, exile, and elderly man. He was sometimes poor and sometimes rich. He was at times hated and at other times loved. He was at times exemplary in faith and at other times a shameful example. We see him when joyful or penitent. Somewhere in David’s experiences we should be able to find ourselves.

2. This book also presents truth in terms of human experience, rather than abstractly. It is not merely the expression of what one ought to do, but expressions of results when human beings actually do as God directs. For instance, David expresses his understanding of the need for holiness after his great sin with Bathsheba. He literally felt the need to be cleansed and made holy. It wasn’t merely an abstract idea to him any longer.

- **Hemen**, a contemporary of David and Asaph, who is called “the singer”; Psalm 98 (see 1 Chron. 15:19; 25:5; 1 Kings 4:31)
- **Ethan**, a companion with Asaph and Hemen in the temple worship, Psalm 89 (see 1 Chron. 15:19; 1 Kings 4:31)

While the Book of Psalms does not attribute any authorship to Psalms 2 and 95, they are attributed in the New Testament to David (Acts 4:25-26; Heb. 4:6-7).

Authenticity and place in the canon

The place of the Psalms in the canon of the Old Testament is clearly

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. Scan through the Psalms and find three (3) examples of prayers within them. _____

Also list anything particular about prayer that you learn. _____

2. See what definitions and differences you can find for the following terms:

Psalms: _____

Hymns: _____

Spiritual songs: _____

3. Thinking of one of your happiest days as a Christian, write a four-line song or psalm to express your feelings to God about it. (**Note:** It doesn't need to rhyme.) _____

4. Explain why New Testament Christians should not use instrumental music in worship in spite of the fact that David and other Israelites used instruments during the Old Testament period. _____

5. Find psalms that express the following emotions:

Joy _____

Anger _____

Praise _____

Repentance _____

Trust _____

6. What difference in impact or effect do you see in the verbal speaking or singing of a divinely inspired message and the simple reading of the same material? _____

7. Research in your Bible some of the background development of singing and psalmody in the days of David.

- His early involvement prior to becoming king (1 Sam. 16:14-23; 18:10; 19:8-9)
- When he fled before King Saul (Pss. 18, 54, 57, 59, 63)
- Immediately after he replaced Saul as king (2 Sam. 1:17-27)
- His appointment of 4,000 Levite singers in 24 classes (1 Chron. 25; and 15:17-24, as well as 23:4-5)
- Other (2 Sam. 22 and 23:1-7)