

Lesson 2

Structure and Form of the Book of Psalms

If viewed as a single book, the Psalms are the largest composition in the Old Testament. The book contains 150 psalms. Viewed in this way, the poetical songs can seem an overwhelming volume to study. The book is difficult to logically outline, most chapters having a different subject from the one preceding and following.

But, like the Pentateuch or five books of the Law of Moses, the Psalms actually are five books of poetry, rather than a single volume. Many scholars and students have sought to find an explicit explanation for the division, but have met with only limited success.

The division is most obvious by the way each section or book ends. Each ends with a doxology (*hymn or words of praise for God*), which doesn't appear to be an integral part of the last psalm in each section but rather a marking of division.

The five books are as follows:

- **Book One:** *Psalms 1-41*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel From everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.” All of the psalms in this section are ascribed to David, except 1, 2, 10, and 33, with the

possibility existing that David also wrote those.

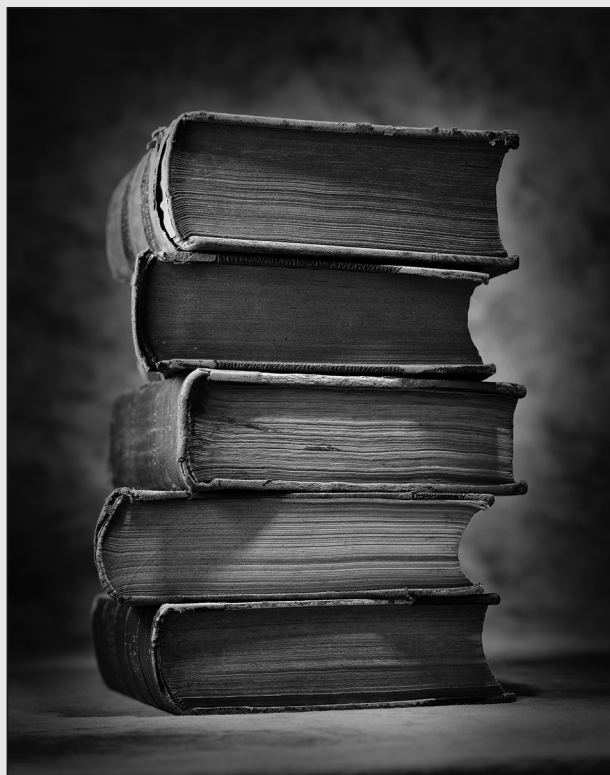
- **Book Two:** *Psalms 42-72*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD God, the God of Israel, Who only does wondrous things! And blessed be His glorious name forever! And let the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen and Amen. The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.” Inscriptions (*see more on these below*) indicate several authors wrote the psalms in this book or section.

- **Book Three:** *Psalms 73-89*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD forevermore! Amen and Amen.” This volume contains no psalms written by David except for Psalm 86. (See notation at end of Psalm 72.)
- **Book Four:** *Psalms 90-106*, ending with “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel From everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, ‘Amen!’ Praise the LORD!” All of the psalms in this volume are by anonymous writers, except for 90, which is ascribed to Moses, and 101 and 103, which are said to be the work of David.
- **Book Five:** *Psalms 107-150*. All six verses of Psalm 150 are a praise of God and thus serve as an appropriate doxology to the entire five books. The psalms in this final section are varied in their character; appear to be designed for public worship and to be a collection of psalms not finding a logical place in the other volumes. Some of these are ascribed to David, the remainder anonymous.

Some Bible students think they see in the five books a direct parallel to the five books of law, with the arguments in favor of this view easier to see in some books than in others, and there appear to be exceptions to the logic of this approach. Its advocates see the following parallel:

Genesis section: *Book One*, dealing with issues related to *man*

- “Blessed is the *man* Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, Nor stands in the path of sinners, Nor sits in the seat of the scornful” (1:1).



- “What is *man* that You are mindful of him, and the son of *man* that You visit him?” (8:4).
- “Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good; Blessed is the *man* who trusts in Him! (34:8).

Exodus section: *Book Two*, involving the themes of *national ruin* and *redemption* or *deliverance*

- “Vindicate me, O God, And plead my cause against an ungodly nation; Oh, *deliver* me from the deceitful and unjust man!” (43:1).
- “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will *deliver* you, and you shall glorify Me” (50:15).
- “*Deliver* me from my enemies, O my God; *Defend* me from those who rise up against me” (59:1).

Leviticus section: *Book Three*, focused on God’s house or *sanctuary* and worship

- “Until I went into the *sanctuary* of God; Then I understood their end” (73:17).
- “Your way, O God, is in the *sanctuary*; Who is so great a God as our God?” (77:13).
- “And He built His *sanctuary* like the heights, like the earth which He has established forever” (78:69).

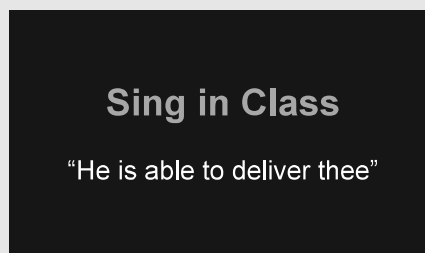
Numbers section: *Book Four*, exploring issues of peril, protection, and *wandering*

- “For forty years I was grieved with that generation, and said, ‘It is a people who go astray in their hearts, and they do not know My ways’” (95:10).
- “The people asked, and He brought quail, and satisfied them with the bread of heaven” (105:40).
- “Therefore He raised up His hand in an oath against them, to

overthrow them in the wilderness” (106:26).

Deuteronomy section: *Book Five*, revealing and praising the word or law of God

- “The works of His hands are verity and justice; all His *precepts* are sure. They stand fast forever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness” (111:7-8).
- “Praise the LORD! Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who delights greatly in *His commandments*” (112:1).
- “All Your *commandments* are faithful; They persecute me wrongfully; Help me!” (119:86)



Time Perspective in the Psalms

The Book of Psalms shares with other portions of God’s word the extraordinary ability to draw instruction and learning from a multi-directional time scale. At times the psalms look back (history’s lessons). At other times they reflect on man’s present (lessons from experience). Yet other psalms look to the future (prophecy) to help readers or singers make good judgments now in light of judgment and events yet to transpire.

This discovery, in itself, is profoundly instructional, in that it describes the three-fold nature of all learning.

Inscriptions, Superscriptions, titles, or Directions?

All but thirty-four of the 150 psalms have words written at their

beginning that are variously called inscriptions, superscriptions, titles, or directions for use. Those without an inscription are described in Jewish commentary (Talmud) as “orphan” psalms.

These inscriptions should not be confused with topical guides of modern origin, inserted into some of the newer translations of the Bible. The inscriptions are quite ancient, being found in all Hebrew manuscripts, and they are found in Septuagint manuscripts (Greek translation) as far back as two centuries before Christ.

It is an open question as to who authored these titles or superscriptions. Whether it was the individual authors, one or more people collecting the psalms into a body of writing for use in worship, or some others persons is unknown.

The purpose of these headings or directions is varied, sometimes clear as to purpose, sometimes not so clear. Some of them ascribe to the psalm the name of its supposed author. In some cases the ascription may speak of a person to whom it was addressed. (For example, some say a “psalm of Solomon” or “for Solomon.) Other special instructions may be directions to the song leader as to type of instruments to be used, the tune, or the occasion for which it was designed. Yet others may describe the historical circumstances under which or for which the psalm was written.

The meaning of some of the terms used in these inscriptions has been lost over time. Even the Septuagint (Greek translation) of the second century BC at times just copies the Hebrew word without attempting a translation, suggestive that the translators didn’t know what it meant.

Selah

Interspersed in a number of the psalms is the word “selah.” While the exact meaning appears to have been lost, it generally is believed to be some sort of musical punctuation or direction. It has been variously suggested that it is equivalent to *forte* or calls for a pause or the beginning of some instrumental accompaniment.

An alternate view is that it was inserted as a sign for an audience hearing the psalm-song to respond with a doxology (praise of God) or a call to think and meditate on the message.

The word appears seventy-one times in the Psalms and three times in Habakkuk 3. Scholars of the Hebrew language are uncertain about the root word from which it is derived. Some have speculated it to be an acronym or the like.

While the exact meaning remains obscured, scholars lean heavily toward it being some sort of musical notation because in thirty-one of the thirty-nine psalms with the caption “to the choir master” the term “selah” appears (*JewishEncyclopedia.com*).

If the guesses are correct and it is a musical or worship form notation, it bears little impact on our understanding of the message of the psalms in which it is found.

Types or Styles of Psalms

To better understand the various purposes of the psalms, it is possible to divide them into several groups, based on type or style.

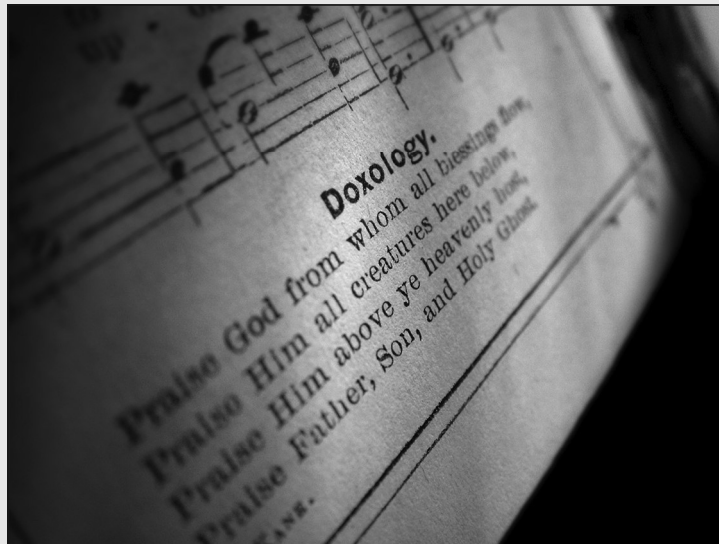
1. Didactic. These are psalms largely intended to teach or instruct God’s wisdom.

2. Worship. These are designed for specific use during worship, sung by a choir, perhaps responded to by other worshippers, etc.

3. Meditation. This group of psalms calls for serious consideration of certain divine truths and consideration of practical applications.

4. Praise and devotion. Like many of our hymns today, these extol God’s greatness and voice the worshipper’s commitment.

5. Prayer and petition. These entail actual messages the writer and, later, the reader/singers communicate to God.



Other Groupings or Categories

The Book of Psalms also can otherwise be categorized, based on unique characteristics that certain of the psalms share. As this study proceeds, we will be looking more intently at these categories.

Acrostic or alphabetic

These psalms are unique in that each line begins with one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in sequential order. Psalm 119 is an example.

Royal

The kingship of God is the focus of these psalms. They use terms

like “the Lord reigns.” Closely associated with these are the Messianic psalms, focusing on the reign of God’s “anointed” or Christ. See Psalms 93 and 97 as exemplars.

Ethical

Moral principles are taught in these. Psalm 15 is a good example.

Hallelujah

These are praises of God with the words “Hallelujah” or “Praise the Lord” beginning or ending them. See Psalm 103 as an example.

Historical

In these the history of God’s people is brought to remembrance as teaching, edification, or admonishment. Psalms 105 and 106 are illustrative.

Thanksgiving

God is praised and thanked for His provisions. Psalms 86 and 100 would be examples.

Messianic

These are of great interest to Christians because they point forward to the work, life, and words of our Lord Jesus, sometimes di-

rectly, sometimes indirectly. Psalm 53 would exemplify this form, as well as Psalm 2.

Songs of Ascent or Songs of Degrees

The exact purpose of these is not positively known, but many believe they were used on the feast day pilgrimages up to Jerusalem. Psalms 120-134 compose this group.

Penitential or Confession

These express repentance or laments for sins committed. The 51st psalm is the most famous, where David sorrows over his sin with Bathsheba. Others speak of the sins of the community of Israel.

Suffering

Psalm 102 is typical of this genre, where the cries of those suffering are verbalized to God.

Imprecatory

In these songs, God is asked to curse or bring evil or judgment

upon the enemies of God and God’s people. Psalms 35, 55, and 69 are examples.

Series or Complimentary

For example, some Bible students see in Psalms 22, 23, and 24 a series of psalms that speak of the

suffering Savior, the living Shepherd, and the exalted Sovereign, respectively. While each psalm differs in focus, together they picture the various roles of the Christ that was to come.

Homework and Questions

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

1. Look up the term “doxology” and see if you can find an expanded definition, as well as any description of its usual use in literature and song. Then, see if you can find any examples of such in the New Testament writings. After this research, write in a sentence or two why you believe the authors felt compelled to express such sentiments when and where they did. _____

2. List something new that you have learned from this lesson about the biblical psalms. How do you think this will benefit your understanding and use of this book of the Bible? _____

3. Look up the word “meditation” in a reference book or dictionary and write down its meaning. _____

Now, taking that general idea, write an explanation of how you think a Christian should go about meditating on God’s word. Be specific, perhaps even suggesting a methodology for accomplishing the meditation. Be ready to share your ideas in class. _____

4. Find an example of each of the following types of psalms:

Didactic (teaching): _____

Worship: _____

Meditation: _____

Praise: _____

Prayer: _____

5. Compose your own four-line psalm or poem, focusing on thanksgiving to God.

