

The book of Psalms is not even remotely a “historical” book in the sense of being a record of history. It is poetry. Yet, the history of humanity and particularly of Israel is interwoven in various ways throughout the psalms. As one commentator has put it, “History is the soil in which literature grows.”

It is impossible to properly interpret many of the psalms without an understanding of both the Genesis record of man’s creation and the promises God made to Abraham. Further, a number of the psalms appear to be written in the context of certain historical experiences of Israel’s most important earthly king, David. (*Lesson 6 will focus more fully upon David.*)

### Sing

As you sing one or more of the following songs, notice how the historic events continue to provide instruction and helpful reassurance to Christians today.

“In the Desert of Sorrow and Sin”

“Rock of Ages”

“We’re Marching to Zion”

Israel’s religious experience and doctrinal blueprint were defined and accentuated by the history of God’s creation of mankind in His image, His covenant promises to Abraham, and the unfolding fulfillment of those promises. Thus, the Exodus from Egypt, the wilderness provision, the receipt of the Promised Land and God’s presence among them in the temple and rule over them via their king, were all integrally tied together with their worship, and the psalms, in part, served as an expression of that worship.

## Finding Israel’s Historical Roots in the Psalms

This may be a bit difficult for Western minds in America to fully appreciate. While we know that religion helped shape American history from the beginning, religion and history are not here as inextricably intertwined as it was in Israel.

As we continue to study the psalms we will see a historical backdrop in two ways:

1. General references and allusions to historical events of the past.
2. Specific historical events which form the context of a particular psalm.

Even as we emphasize the importance of history in interpreting the psalms, it is necessary to point out that readers often will have difficulty trying to determine the exact historical context of many, maybe most, of the psalms. This is due to the lack of clear historical markers in the psalms and the fact that poetry often utilizes an indeterminate means of expression. While prose seeks to be precise, poetry circumvents the general reality and states only the essential.

Event	Psalm
Creation of earth, man	104:1-4, 8
Flood	29:10
Covenant with Abraham	105:9-12, 42
Joseph’s trip to Egypt	105:17
Joseph’s imprisonment	105:18
Joseph’s deliverance, exaltation	105:20-22
Famine in Egypt	105:16
Israel’s bondage in Egypt	105:25
The plagues on Egypt	78:12, 43-51; 105:28-36
Deliverance from Egypt	81:6
Red Sea divided	78:13; 136:13-15
Wilderness journey	68:7
Water from smitten rock	78:15-16
Manna and quail given	78:24-29
Calf worship at Horeb	106:19-20
Inheritance of Promised Land	105:44; 136:21-22
Israel’s disloyalty in the land	78:55-58
Babylonian Exile	137

## Key Historical Characters Mentioned

A number of characters who played pivotal or consequential roles in Israel's history are mentioned in the psalms. These include Abraham, Melchizedek, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Lot, Moses, Aaron, and David

## Geographical Locations of Historic Importance

One of the ways past history emerges in the psalms is through reference to places of historic significance, such as Zion, Sinai, and Hermon; tribal regions such as Judah, Benjamin, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and troublesome areas surrounding the nation, like Moab, Philistia, Edom, Amalek, and Tyre.

## Historical Events Focused upon in Psalms

The following is an abbreviated list of events mentioned or alluded to in various psalms.

## Importance of the Historical Themes to Understanding Message of Psalms

Again, these historical events and the people who were involved in them are central to the message of the various psalms, whether they are psalms of praise, joy or worship, or of lament and pleadings for help. Even the Messianic messages are painted against the background of previous salvation experiences.

### Creation

God's creative power defines His nature, as well as the nature of His human creation. It is cause for praise, wonder, and glory. The heavens declare the glory of God (19:1). And the Israelite who wor-

## Historical Events Press Common Themes

The historical characters and events are not presented in the psalms as merely a reiteration of history but as evidence of God's love, mercy, and power to bring salvation, as well as His power to judge His people's enemies and correct those in Israel who forget Him.

By looking at God's past actions, individuals, as well as the nation, are encouraged to trust God to help in current and future travails.

These past acts also serve as a type and basis of faith in the coming salvation to be effected by the Messiah on the cross.

Three psalms are particularly full of historical allusions—78, 105, and 106.

ships Jehovah can see cause for thanksgiving and hope because his God is the Creator of heaven and earth and of man himself.

### Exodus

God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt, more than any other event, demonstrated the faithfulness of God to His covenant promise to Abraham. It is at once a salvation event and fulfillment of the promise to create a mighty nation.

But, it also serves as the basis of poetic laments accompanied by appeals for God to repeat an Exodus-like rescue and redemption (see Pss. 44, 77, 80).

In other psalms, remembrance of the Exodus is cause to break forth in praise of God and thanksgiving (see Pss. 66, 68, 114, 135, 136).

Three other psalms recount the Exodus story, historically, contrasting God's faithfulness to Israel with the nation's unfaithfulness to Him. The story of deliverance is retold to inspire repentance and a return to the Great Deliverer (Pss. 78, 105, 106).

### Sinai

Sinai is mentioned directly only in Psalm 68, but the events there are alluded to elsewhere in the book. This place is symbolic of many things central to Israel's existence as the people of God. There, God took up residence among His people in the tabernacle. There the law was given, worship patterns established and God's sovereignty established.

Read Psalms 78 and 99 and observe how events at Sinai play into them. Negative things happened at Sinai also.

Observe references to these sins in Psalm 106.

### The Wilderness Wandering

Psalm 95 offers the clearest assessment of the wilderness era.

*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."  
So I swore in My wrath,  
"They shall not enter My rest."*

Psalm 78 reflects upon Israel's rebellion throughout the wilderness sojourn, as well as on God's great patience and forbearance. The time in the wilderness was a period of instructing Israel for future generations, and so is used in some of the psalms. Several references are made to God's plagues and judgments on His people during the period.

### Conquest

Next to the exodus, the most frequently mentioned period of history in the Psalms is the conquest. Psalm 105:11 recalls God's covenant promise of the land to Abra-



### Mountains in the wilderness of Sinai

ham. The land was both a promise and a gift from God, as Psalm 44:2-3 illustrates. The placing of Israel in Canaan is compared to God planting them as a vineyard (80:8-11). That God was the conqueror of the land, and not Israel, is expressed in Psalm 78:54-64, and Psalms 135 and 136 recall how God struck down powerful kings to fulfill the second of His promises to Abraham.

#### Davidic reign

David’s reign as God’s servant or shepherd-king is also an important historical focus of the psalms. (*Lesson 6 will explore this further.*)

#### Exile and return

No historic event in Israel’s history was as devastating as the

exile in Babylon. But, it also served to initiate a reformation that would keep the nation viable and able to serve as the conduit for God’s final covenant promise to Abraham—a blessing for the whole world through the Messiah.

And, like the Exodus, the return prefigures the salvation to be brought by Jesus’ death for sin. The expressions of despair in Babylon create a physical pattern of the condition of sinful mankind in general. And, the voice of joy over deliverance anticipates the joy of salvation from sin.

Notice how the psalmist in Psalm 106 seems to appeal from bondage for God’s forgiveness and

deliverance. The cry is “save us!” Then, read Psalm 107 and hear the psalmist pour forth thanks in expectation of that redemption.

For an expression of the misery of the captivity, explore Psalm 137, and to hear the expression of joy upon release, read Psalm 126.

#### Summary

The above merely highlights the mountaintops of Israelite history as reflected in the psalms. But, notice how Israel’s history, from its beginnings as a nation to its post-exile restoration, is reflected upon and used in a wide variety of ways.

### Homework and Questions

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

1. How does the history of creation in Genesis teach us about God? \_\_\_\_\_  
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2. What does the history of the Exodus from Egypt teach us about God? \_\_\_\_\_  
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Also, can you think of anything or any ways in which the Exodus is a model or lesson for us today? \_\_\_\_\_  
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3. Mt. Sinai is a place in the southern Sinai Peninsula in present-day Egypt. But, when you think of this place— what are some of the thoughts that first rush to your mind? \_\_\_\_\_

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4. List six things that occurred during the wilderness wandering of Israel. Having done this, now list anything spiritual that may seem to you to be a parallel.

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5. What do you think is the key lesson we learn about God from the Bible’s historical record of the conquest of Canaan? \_\_\_\_\_

Although Christians don’t view the conquest of Canaan as part of *our* national history, we do draw images from that history which we apply in our faith. Give three examples? \_\_\_\_\_

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6. What does the historical event of Israel’s exile in Babylon teach you about God, sin, and God’s plan for man’s redemption? \_\_\_\_\_

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This tomb painting shows a man singing with his musical instrument.