

PSALMS

IN GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH SONGS AND PRAYERS



Purpose

The book of Psalms is a compilation of many songs, by many authors, over a long span of time. The book of Psalms is a book of songs and prayers for God's people. The psalms provide us with the vocabulary of God's people for worship. How do we approach this holy, awesome, and terrifying God? What words can we use to express our love, joy, praise, sadness, anger, frustration, doubts, need for forgiveness, and loneliness to God?

Because the psalms are poems, they have a wonderful way to express the deepest emotions of our hearts. Whether in times of suffering and sadness or joy and celebration, the psalms have been close to God's people at all times and places. Poetry relies on heightened language and powerful images. The psalms are terse and beautiful. They say much with a few words and can express deep feelings that are not easily spoken.

Psalms

The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, calls this book *psalms*, which refers to stringed instruments that accompany songs. The word *psalms* is also used to translate the Hebrew word *mizmor* meaning "songs." The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *tehillim* which means "praises."

Psalms is also a book of instruction. It might not be coincidence that the psalms are divided into five books, just like the Pentateuch, a book that instructs us what it means to be God's people. However, unlike the Pentateuch, the psalms do not give instructions about how to pray and praise God. Rather, like Jesus did when his disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, the psalms show us how to do it. As the fourth-century theologian Athanasius famously wrote, "Most of Scripture speaks to us; the Psalms speak *for* us."

Finally, the psalms express God's people's longing for the coming of the Messiah. God had promised through his prophets that a descendant of King David would always sit on the throne of Israel. The promise of this anointed King, the Messiah, became one with God's other promises to restore and redeem his people and the world. Although the psalms are not prophecies in the same sense as the prophetic books, they do anticipate, so they speak prophetically about the coming of the Messiah. The New Testament quotes or alludes to many psalms in connection to Jesus.

Outline

1. Book 1 (Psalms 1–41)
2. Book 2 (Psalms 42–72)
3. Book 3 (Psalms 73–89)
4. Book 4 (Psalms 90–106)
5. Book 5 (Psalms 107–150)



David Playing the Harp by Jan de Bray

Background

Author: The book of Psalms is a collection of collections. These collections were put together at different times and for purposes we might never know. However, when the songs and prayers were put together, along with an introduction (Ps. 1) and a conclusion (146–150), the book of Psalms became a learning tool for God's people.

One hundred and sixteen psalms have a title. It is not certain if the titles were part of the original writing or were added at later dates. However, they do provide important and helpful information. In general, the titles give information about the psalm's author, historical background, melody, use during worship, and a few other items. According to the titles, some of the named authors of psalms were: David (73 times), Asaph (12 times), the sons of Korah (11 times), Solomon (2 times), Jeduthun (4 times), and Heman, Etan, and Moses (1 time each).

Date: Dating of individual psalms is difficult. The poems were collected over a long period. Most were composed between the time of David (around 1000 BC) and the time of Ezra (450 BC).

Psalms 1–150

Five Books	I	II	III	IV	V
	(1–41) Prayers of lament and expressions of confidence in God dominate this book.	(42–72) Communal laments dominate the prayers in this book. The book ends with a royal psalm.	(73–89) In this book, the prayers of lament and distress are more intense and bleak.	(90–106) This book presents the answers to the bleakness of book III. The theme of “The Lord Reigns” dominates this book.	(107–150) This book declares that God is in control, will redeem his people, and praises God’s faithfulness and goodness.
Two Main Collections	First Collection (2–89)			Second Collection (90–145)	
	Collections within the Collections: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction: Torah Psalms (Ps. 1) 2. Two Davidic Collections (3–41 and 51–72) 3. Two Collections of Temple Musicians Korah (42–49; 84–85; 87–88) Asaphat (50; 73–83) 			Collections within the Collections: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. “The Lord Reigns” (93–100) 2. Hallelujah Psalms (111–118) 3. Songs of Ascent (120–134) 4. Davidic Collection (138–145) 5. Conclusion: Hallelujah Psalms (146–150) 	

Genres in the Psalms

Genres are different kinds of writings—or paintings, for example—that share specific elements of content and form. Most of the time we read the psalms in a devotional way. This kind of reading is refreshing for our spirits and leads us closer to God and other fellow believers. However, other times we may want to explore a psalm deeper. In those times, knowing about their genres will help us in our spiritual exploration. Each genre lists a sample of representative psalms for each of the following main genres in the book of Psalms.

The Hymn. The beautiful and glorious songs of praise to God characterize the psalms. These hymns highlight God’s character and deeds like his goodness, majesty, and virtue (Ps. 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 100, 145), or his righteous Kingship over all of creation (47, 93–99).

The Lament. Curiously, the psalms of lament outnumber any other type of psalm. This fact might reflect the messiness of life, the many reasons for suffering and

sadness. However, the psalms do not typically end in lament. They move from lament to praise, from grief to joy. The conclusion of the psalms, the magnificent hallelujah songs 146–150, reflect that with God, all tears will be dried, all sufferings will turn to joy, and all injustices will receive the proper and righteous response. There are individual prayers of lament (13, 22, 31, 42–43, 57, 139, etc.) and community laments (12, 44, 80, 85, 90, 94). These prayers provide us with the language to ask God to intervene in our favor. They might include a plea to God for help, the specific cause of the suffering, a confession of faith or innocence, a curse of the enemies, confidence in God’s response, and a song of thanksgiving for God’s intervention. Prayers of lament may include one or more of these elements.

Songs of Thanksgiving. These songs focus on thanking God for his answer to a specific request. The request is not always explicit in the song, though it seems that they are connected to laments. Songs of thanksgiving can also be individual (32, 34, 92, 116, 118, 138) or communal (107, 124).

Songs Related to the Temple. Some songs were to remind the community of their covenant with God (50, 81). Other songs, royal psalms, make mention of King David or his descendants (2, 18, 110). Songs of Zion celebrate God’s presence with his people (46, 84, 122). It appears that the singing of these psalms took place during the worship at the temple in Jerusalem.

Teaching Psalms. Songs have a unique way of teaching the people who hear and sing them. The wisdom psalms use traditional wisdom themes to guide and shape the view of those singing them (37, 49, 73). Closely related to them, other psalms praise the wonders of God’s law and encourage God’s people to obey it and delight in it (1, 19, 119).

Themes

The Lord Reigns. This is the main claim of the book of Psalms—and the whole Bible. No matter who or what claims control over creation, God is the rightful and just ruler of all. Psalms 47, 93, and 95–99 offer a splendid and beautiful account of the claim that the Lord reigns.

Creation. One of the best examples of God’s rule over all is creation. God created everything and sustains it with his power, wisdom, and justice (93, 104, 29).

Salvation. The Lord reigns because he has already defeated evil and has redeemed his people (47, 68, 98, 114).

Judgment. The Lord reigns because his judgment is worthy, righteous, wise, and universal (50, 82, 94, 96, 97, 105).

God’s People. God’s people are “the people of his pasture, the flock under his care” (95:7; 100:3). God redeemed them (74) and has intervened in their history with power and grace (44, 74, 77, 80).

The King. Unlike other cultures surrounding ancient Israel, the kings were not

worshiped or held in higher esteem than other Israelites (see, for example, the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21). The importance of the kings, however, was that God chose them to work through them to carry on his divine purposes. Toward the end of Psalms, the focus is more on the future king who is to come, who will restore and redeem Israel. This promised King, the Messiah, became the emphasis of Israel's hope and longing.

Key Verses

O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.—Ps. 8:1

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.—Ps. 23:1

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.—Ps. 51:1–2

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.—Ps. 100:1–2

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.—Ps. 121:1–2



Being God's People

Then: God promised to be with his people. In times of suffering and troubles, it always seems that God has turned his face away from his people. However, the songs of petition, lament, and praise show that God has always been faithful to his word. He answered the requests of his people because he is a good, powerful, and compassionate God. Humanity's ultimate plight, sin and death, will be finally answered through the Messiah, the son of David, that the psalms anticipate with much longing and faith.

Now: The Messiah has come and has defeated sin and death! But we still live in a world filled with trials, temptations, and suffering. However, the songs of petition, lament, and praise in Psalms invite us to trust that God is always present, that he reigns over all, and he will intervene in the perfect time and with the perfect answers to our needs.

Jesus in Psalms

When Jesus said that all of the Scriptures spoke of him he specifically mentioned the psalms (Luke 24:44). The New Testament writers quote many of the psalm texts in connection to Jesus being the promised Messiah. In Acts 4:11, the apostle Peter cites Psalm 118:22, "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone," as he explained the identity of Jesus. Psalms 2, 16, 22, 69, and 110 are the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. All of them anticipate and explain the identity of the promised King.

LORD, TEACH US TO PRAY

Jesus' disciples had seen him pray many times. Sometimes he prayed all night and sometimes his prayers were just one sentence. But Jesus' followers made the connection between his intense prayer life and the power he showed in every aspect of life. They must have realized that prayer was the link. Finally, one disciple asked Jesus to teach them how to pray. Jesus gave them a deceptively simple, childlike prayer which has come to be known as the Lord's Prayer. This prayer is recorded in Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-13. Matthew's version highlights seven key parts:

*Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us
from the evil one.*
—Matthew 6:9-13

In this pattern, Jesus provided his followers with guidelines for prayer based on the attributes or characteristics of God.

The two main sections of the prayer divide with the words "your" and "our."

1. The first part centers on God, putting God in his rightful place in our priorities. Only by focusing on the patient and loving Father can we find the attitude that puts our own needs in perspective.
2. The second part focuses on our needs—body, soul, and spirit—and the needs of others. In just three brief requests, Jesus targets all of human behavior and character and reminds us that we always need him. It's been said that if these three requests are prayed properly, nothing more need be said. Only in moment-by-moment dependence on God will we experience the good things God wants to provide.

The Lord's Prayer is a dangerous, life-changing prayer. Jesus' enemies eventually killed him for asserting his close tie to God through addressing God as Father. Until Jesus gave his followers the right to be called children of God, this would have been blasphemy.

Twenty-first-century Christians may take the privilege for granted, but the prayer is still a dangerous one. We do, in one sense, "take our lives in our hands" and offer them up again and again as sacrifice to the One who gave us all in the first place, receiving all of life in return.

GOD'S ATTRIBUTE

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

SCRIPTURE

APPLICATION

Hallowed be your name (NIV)
Hallowed be thy name (KJV)

GOD'S HOLINESS

To *hallow* means to make holy. To hallow God's name means to honor it as holy and sacred. When we pray, we enter the presence of God with reverence, worship, and thanksgiving. We thank God not only for what he has done, but also for who he is. God's greatness and glory alone are worthy of praise and thankfulness. Thanksgiving recognizes that everything we have belongs to God, whether it be our talents, possessions, jobs, or children.



*Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain,
for the LORD our God is holy.* —Psalm 99:9

You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
—Exodus 20:7

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.
—1 Corinthians 10:31

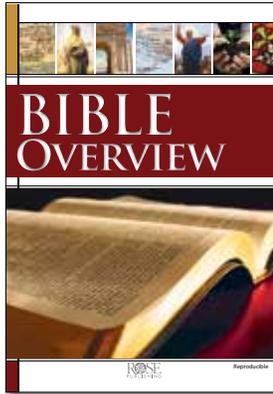
The earth is the LORD'S, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.
—Psalm 24:1

Traditionally, God's people, the Jews, never said or wrote the name of God. To do so was considered not keeping the name of God holy. God's name represents his character, his plan, and his will.

We often think of cursing as a common misuse of God's name, but what about attitudes of the heart? Lack of respect or indifference by one who professes love for God may be just as much a sin. Revelation 3:15-16 shows God's attitude toward indifference: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot

nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Jesus encouraged his followers to use God's name in honorable ways and for purposes that deepen and endear our bonds to him. Part of showing reverence for the holy name of God is thanking him for who he is and for what he has done. Many psalms praise and worship God's holy name (see Psalms 100 and 148). Our greatest reverence, though, is shown by the stories our lives reveal. Our Father's name is most hallowed when we live in ways that attract others to him (Matt. 5:16).



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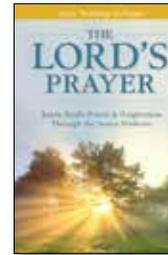
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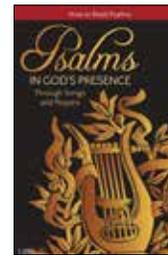


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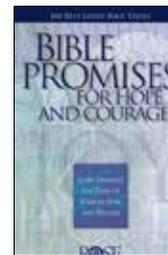


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