



# 1

## THE BOOK OF PSALMS: AN OVERVIEW

### *Background from the Author*

With this session we begin the adventure of exploring Psalms in order to discover the beauty, wisdom, and power of this wonderful book for God's people throughout the ages, as well as for our lives today. No doubt you as leader, as well as the participants in your group, are familiar with many psalms and find them to be a great inspiration in your spiritual journey. We could approach an in-depth study of Psalms in several ways. One is to take a historical-critical approach and consider the views of various biblical scholars, drawing upon their careful analyses of the whole collection as well as individual literary pieces. Another is to approach Psalms as a great example of religious literature. A third way is to come to Psalms devotionally, reading and reflecting on the book to receive and share whatever inspiration and insight will nurture our spiritual lives. Or we could deal with the individual psalms one at a time, focusing on our favorites or on those that show promise to provide for a most fruitful study. In this course we will combine aspects of all these approaches.

We approach Psalms with some familiarity. Yet many members of the group will not be aware of all the important details that contribute to a greater appreciation and understanding of the book as a whole and of individual psalms. This session and the next, more than the other five, will focus on many of these general details. It is true that Psalms can be appreciated without much attention to such information. However, when persons become familiar with the details, they will be able to read and pray the psalms with more awareness and sensitivity to the richness present in these deep expressions of faith in God.

As you work with the group in the first half of this session, looking at several distinguishing features of Psalms, be sensitive to the participants' levels of interest in the details. Don't spend so much time on these that participants become overwhelmed. Try to help them feel that they are engaged in a "guided tour" of familiar territory, where they will be discovering things they may not have noticed before. Be sure to welcome the sharing of impressions and experiences the group members bring with them from previous studies of Psalms and to affirm each one's offerings. Make the review of the details lively and fun.

In preparing this course I used the New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV. You do not need to have this particular study Bible, but it will be helpful for you, as well as the participants, to have a study Bible. Many times during the course it also will be good for everyone to have access to a copy of the NRSV in addition to whatever other translations they bring to the study. I believe that participants will find their study of Psalms enriched by new insights and discoveries if they read the book in more than one translation. *A word of caution:* if any group members bring the New Living Translation or *The Message*, encourage them to use an additional translation of the Bible, preferably the NRSV. These versions of Psalms are excellent for devotional reading, but will not be very helpful for the type of study we will be doing in this course.

In the second half of this session we will identify ten different types of psalms. In the Resource Book I have suggested that there are many ways to classify psalms. I have chosen to use the categories suggested in the notes of the New Oxford Annotated Bible. Be sure to be flexible on this matter. If a different way of classifying one or more psalms is suggested, encourage the participant to explain why he or she sees it that way and affirm that there are many ways to identify types of psalms. Depending on which verses in a psalm one considers, it is often possible to place a psalm in a different category from the one suggested by this activity. The scholarly literature contains much debate about the value of classifying psalms by types. Despite the debate, I continue to find it helpful to recognize that the psalms are not all the same, that some psalms have features in common, and that classifying them by type helps to unlock some of the specialness of particular psalms.

## *Session Plans*

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### **Learning Objectives**

It is intended that this session will enable the participants to

1. recognize most members of the group and begin to feel comfortable sharing their ideas, feelings, and experiences related to Psalms;
2. describe the place of Psalms in the whole Bible;
3. list some of the features of particular psalms that can be seen throughout Psalms;
4. identify selected psalms according to various literary types;
5. make connections between the words of psalms and their own journeys of faith; and
6. commit themselves to reading and praying psalms on a daily basis, using a second translation in addition to the one they use regularly.

### **Resources You May Need**

- Materials for making name tags
- Several translations, versions, and paraphrases of Psalms
- Worksheets 1A, 1B, 1C, and 1D
- Sheets of newsprint and colored markers or chalkboard and chalk
- A computer and a projector and projection screen to view the slide presentation
- A DVD player and TV monitor, or projector and computer, and the DVD disk, Session 1

### **Leadership Strategy**

#### SETTING THE STAGE

■ Project the slide with the title for the course and then the slide with the session title.

1. In this first session several things should be accomplished as quickly and effectively as possible so that participants will become comfortable with one another and with the subject of the study. If anyone in the group does not know everyone else, provide nametags and ask the members of the group to introduce themselves by sharing their names plus brief stories about when they received or purchased the Bible they brought with them.

2. The opening prayer is Psalm 95:1–7. This psalm was selected because it is probably familiar to most of the group and it sets a tone of praise and worship.

■ Project the slide of the doorway looking to the sea. The words over the doorway are from Psalm 95:5, *The sea is his, for he made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed.* Then ■ project the two slides with words of Psalm 95:1–7 or provide copies of Worksheet 1A.

After introducing the psalm, lead the group in the prayer. There are several ways to do this:

- Pray in unison.
- Pray antiphonally with each half of the group reading alternate lines.
- As leader, read one line at a time and ask the group to respond after each line with *The LORD is a great God!*

3. 📺 View the video clip for Session 1. This clip contains two sections. In the first one I share some personal experiences related to Psalms (6 minutes). In the second I mention our approach to this study (3 minutes).

**and**

Take a few minutes to summarize my comments about this course and call attention to my experiences related to Psalms in general and to the writing of this course in particular. This will help set the stage for inviting participants to share some of their personal experiences with Psalms.

4. Invite those who are willing to share their experiences with Psalms. Don't pressure someone to share if he or she is unwilling. Instead of going around a circle allow for what I call a "popcorn approach," which means that individuals speak up when they are ready. We are trying to help everyone "get on board" with the subject of Psalms. In this brief time of sharing you, as the leader, will get some clues regarding each participant's experience and familiarity with Psalms. Choose among the following questions, or devise some of your own, to accomplish this purpose of opening up the subject.

Q1. What is the first memory you can recall of hearing psalms?

Q2. What are some examples of psalms being used in worship?

Q3. Do you recall having memorized a psalm? Which one?

Q4. When have you turned to Psalms to read them?

Q5. What are some impressions you have of Psalms?

Q6. Have you participated in a previous study of Psalms?

■ Project the slide with the six questions listed above and indicate which ones you have decided to use, or post the questions you chose on the board or newsprint.

or

Instead of having a time of sharing guided by one or two of the above questions, it may be just as valuable to invite each participant to share a favorite psalm and to speak briefly about why it has become a favorite. This activity will be most appropriate if the group is composed of veteran Bible readers and you are reasonably assured that most of them will have a favorite psalm.

### EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. Refer to some of the things that have been shared in the previous activities in order to move into exploring Psalms in more depth. In this activity you will serve as a tour guide leading the group into some of the byways of Psalms.

■ Project the slide of Psalms 1–3 and distribute Worksheet 1B, “The Psalms.” This will be your “guidebook” for this activity. It is a page on which Psalms 1–3 from the NRSV are reproduced with a number of footnotes represented by small, bold superscript letters **a – g**. Encourage all participants to keep their own Bibles open to these three psalms so they can see the similarities and differences between their Bibles and what is presented on the worksheet.

The information you will need for your remarks can be found on pages 7–10 in the Resource Book. Introduce your presentation by commenting that you are going to take the group on a quick “tour of a familiar neighborhood.” Together you are going to look closely at some things in Psalms that perhaps were not noticed before. If the participants received their Resource Books ahead of time and have read Chapter 1, invite them to share something that was new or surprising from their reading as you guide them on the tour.

Here is a list of points to make for each footnote on the slide or Worksheet 1B.

- a. The placement of Psalms is between Job and Proverbs, as represented by the page number. Speak about Psalms being included in the collection of Writings in the Hebrew Scriptures.
- b. The English title of the book is Psalms or The Psalms. The title in the Hebrew Scriptures is *tehillum*, which means “songs of praise.” In the Greek Septuagint, *psalms* means “a song sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.”

- c. Book I ... Comment briefly about the five books of Psalms.
- d. The poetic format of psalms. The extra space between verses 3 and 4 indicates the break between stanzas. Don't take time to deal with poetry in detail, because we will focus on this aspect of Psalms in the next session.
- e. Look at Psalm 2:11–12. There are several points to make here.
  - 1) Mention that footnotes are to be found throughout Psalms as well as the whole Bible.
  - 2) Parts of verses are referred to as "a" and "b."
  - 3) Find the page in the introductory pages of the Bible that explains the abbreviations "Cn" and "Heb." Psalm 2:11–12 is an excellent place to compare translations. Since the original Hebrew is uncertain for this passage, it is translated in a variety of ways in various versions of the Bible.
- f. Point out the title or superscription of Psalm 3. There are several points to make here.
  - 1) One hundred sixteen additional psalms have titles.
  - 2) Seventy-two psalms are attributed to David.
  - 3) Other psalms are attributed to various persons and groups.
  - 4) Thirteen psalms have specific references to events in David's life.
- g. Notice the word *Selah* after Psalm 3:2. Review possible meanings of the word as mentioned in the Resource Book and emphasize that we do not read the word when reading in public worship or other settings.

Invite questions and comments from the group members. However, don't get sidetracked because there is another major part of the session to be accomplished.

■ Project the slide of David dictating Psalms.

- 2. The second major focus of Session 1 is the matter of classifying psalms by various types. Introduce the subject by reviewing some of the information on pages 10–13 of the Resource Book and notes found in one or more study Bibles.

■ Project the list of ten psalm types.

After your general introduction, indicate that the group is going to focus on the ten different psalm types. Distribute copies of Worksheet 1C, "Matching Exercise to Identify Psalm Types." Each verse or two represents a particular psalm type. No trick items are intended. The exercise is not a test, but rather a way for participants to start distinguishing between one psalm type and another. Provide about ten minutes for the group to work in pairs to complete the exercise.

Then poll the pairs in order to compare their choices.

Because of limited evidence on which to make a judgment (verses rather than complete psalms), limited time, and limited knowledge about psalm types, neither the participants nor the leader should expect very many 100 percent correct matchings. However, it will be helpful to compare their choices with one another and to give reasons for their choices. The answers that I intended and the key words or phrases that provide clues for the matching are shown below.

1. = Song of Zion: *city of our God ... his holy mountain.*
2. = Psalm of Lament: *how long ... how long ... how long?*
3. = Enthronement Hymn: *The LORD is ... a great King above all gods.*
4. = Song of Trust: *my hope is from him ... I shall not be shaken.*
5. = Hymn of Praise: *Make a joyful noise ... worship ... with gladness.*
6. = Sacred History Psalm: *our ancestors ... wonderful works.*
7. = Royal Psalm: *the king.*
8. = Liturgy Psalm: (an entrance liturgy into the Temple)
9. = Wisdom Psalm: (two short proverbs)
10. = Song of Thanksgiving: *O give thanks.*

Remember, there may be legitimate reasons for different choices, so these “correct” answers may be challenged for good reason.

3. After completing the matching exercise, invite the group members to work in pairs to practice identifying the various types of psalms. Distribute Worksheet 1D, “Searching for Psalm Types.” There are two psalms for each type. Provide about ten to fifteen minutes for the pairs to skim four to six psalms to determine which types they think they represent. Divide the twenty psalms among the group members so that all of the psalms are dealt with. After the pairs have completed their work, take another ten minutes to review what they decided.

Here are the psalms on the list by type.

- |                          |                    |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Hymns of Praise       | Psalms 66 and 111  |
| 2. Enthronement Hymns    | Psalms 47 and 95   |
| 3. Songs of Zion         | Psalms 76 and 87   |
| 4. Psalms of Lament      | Psalms 12 and 42   |
| 5. Songs of Trust        | Psalms 23 and 121  |
| 6. Sacred History Psalms | Psalms 105 and 136 |
| 7. Royal Psalms          | Psalms 20 and 72   |

- |                          |                   |
|--------------------------|-------------------|
| 8. Songs of Thanksgiving | Psalms 30 and 92  |
| 9. Wisdom Psalms         | Psalms 1 and 119  |
| 10. Liturgy Psalm        | Psalms 15 and 122 |

**or**

If you have less than twenty minutes for the above activity, take the lead and work with one psalm at a time from each of the ten categories. You will need to prepare ahead of time by identifying the key words, phrases, or verses of each psalm that provide clues as to its classification.

### CLOSING

1. If you used Psalm 95:1–7 for the opening prayer, check your church's hymnal to find a familiar hymn based on this psalm. If you or someone in the group is able to lead the group in singing, this would be a prayerful way to conclude the session.

**or**

Instead of singing, read in unison the words of the hymn you have chosen.

**or**

Sing the Doxology. It is likely that all the members of the group will know the words to this hymn and will not need a hymnal.

### **Supplementary Readings**

*Out of the Depths*, Chapter 1 and Appendix B

Bible dictionary article on Psalms

Introductory articles on Psalms in one or more study Bibles



## **Looking Ahead**

In Session 2 we will be working with Psalms as prayers and poetry. Ask the participants to pay attention this week to their own prayers and to the prayers of others in Sunday worship. Encourage them to notice the names and/or titles by which God is addressed in these prayers.

Arrange to have a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures at the next session to illustrate the nature of acrostic poetry. Psalm 119 will serve as an excellent example.

In activity #1 in "Exploring the Scripture," it is suggested that you or a volunteer present a five-minute mini-lecture on the importance of names in the Old Testament and the significance of God's name. See the activity for further information. A Bible dictionary and pages 126–129 in Chapter 7 in *Out of the Depths* will provide helpful information.

## **OPENING PRAYER ... PSALM 95:1-7**

O come, let us sing to the LORD;

let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!

Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;

let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!

For the LORD is a great God,

and a great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth;

the heights of the mountains are his also.

The sea is his, for he made it,

and the dry land, which his hands have formed.

O come, let us worship and bow down,

let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture,

and the sheep of his hand.

Amen.

**455<sup>a</sup>**  
**The Psalms<sup>b</sup>**  
**BOOK 1<sup>c</sup>**  
**(Psalms 1 – 41)**

**Psalm 1**

- 1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice  
of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
- 2 but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law they meditate  
day and night.
- 3 They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.
- d**
- 4 The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked will not  
stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation  
of the righteous;
- 6 for the LORD watches over  
the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

**Psalm 2**

- 1 Why do the nations conspire,  
and the peoples plot in vain?
- 2 The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and his anointed,  
saying,
- 3 "Let us burst their bonds asunder  
and cast their cords from us."
- 4 He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the LORD has them in derision.
- 5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
- 6 "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."
- 7 I will tell of the decree of the LORD:  
He said to me, "You are my son; today  
I have begotten you.

- 8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations  
your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.
- 9 You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
and dash them in pieces like a  
potter's vessel."
- 10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
- 11 Serve the LORD with fear,  
with trembling, <sup>12</sup> kiss his feet, <sup>a</sup> **e**  
or he will be angry, and you will perish  
in the way;  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.

Happy are all who take refuge in him.

**Psalm 3**

*A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son, Absalom **f***

- 1 O LORD, how many are my foes!  
Many are rising against me;
- 2 many are saying to me,  
"There is no help for you in God." *Selah* **g**
- 3 But you, O LORD, are a shield around me,  
my glory, and the one who  
lifts up my head.
- 4 I cry aloud to the LORD,  
and he answers me from his holy hill. *Selah*
- 5 I lie down and sleep;  
I wake again, for the LORD sustains me.
- 6 I am not afraid of ten thousands of people  
who have set themselves against  
me all around.
- 7 Rise up, O LORD!  
Deliver me, O my God!  
For you strike all my enemies on the cheek;  
you break the teeth of the wicked.
- 8 Deliverance belongs to the LORD;  
may your blessing be on your people!  
*Selah*

<sup>a</sup> Cn: Meaning of Heb of verses 11b and 12a is uncertain.

## MATCHING EXERCISE TO IDENTIFY PSALM TYPES

Read the lines from Psalms in the left column. Look for the name of a psalm type in the right column that you think matches the quote. Place the appropriate number in the blank.

### Words from Representative Psalms

### Psalm Type

- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. <i>Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain ... is the joy of all the earth ...</i> (Ps. 48:1, 2b)   | ___ Song of Thanksgiving |
| 2. <i>How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul ...?</i> (Ps. 13:1–2a)  | ___ Sacred History Psalm |
| 3. <i>For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods. In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.</i> (Ps. 95:3–4)   | ___ Hymn of Praise       |
| 4. <i>For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken.</i> (Ps. 62:5–6)  | ___ Song of Zion         |
| 5. <i>Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing.</i> (Ps. 100:1–2)   | ___ Wisdom Psalm         |
| 6. <i>Our ancestors, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wonderful works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, ... Yet he saved them for his name's sake, ...</i> (Ps. 106:7–8a) | ___ Song of Trust        |
| 7. <i>In your strength the king rejoices, O LORD, and in your help how greatly he exults!</i> (Ps. 21:1)   | ___ Psalm of Lament      |
| 8. <i>Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the king of glory may come in. Who is the King of glory?</i> (Ps. 24:7–8a)  | ___ Royal Psalm          |
| 9. <i>Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD guards the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.</i> (Ps. 127:1)  | ___ Enthronement Hymn    |
| 10. <i>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever.</i> (Ps. 107:1)  | ___ Liturgy Psalm        |

### SEARCHING FOR PSALM TYPES

With a partner skim two to four of the following psalms to determine which type they represent. Note key words and phrases to help you decide and then write the name of the psalm type on the blank line.

Psalm 1	_____	Psalm 76	_____
Psalm 12	_____	Psalm 87	_____
Psalm 15	_____	Psalm 92	_____
Psalm 20	_____	Psalm 95	_____
Psalm 23	_____	Psalm 105	_____
Psalm 30	_____	Psalm 111	_____
Psalm 42	_____	Psalm 119	_____
Psalm 47	_____	Psalm 121	_____
Psalm 66	_____	Psalm 122	_____
Psalm 72	_____	Psalm 136	_____

**Psalm types from which to choose:**

Psalms of Lament, Hymns of Praise, Sacred History Psalms, Songs of Zion, Wisdom Psalms, Songs of Trust, Songs of Thanksgiving, Royal Psalms, Enthronement Hymns, and Liturgy Psalms