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Basic Bible References

Psalms

- 1 The Two Ways³
- 13 Prayer for Deliverance from Enemies
- 16 Song of Trust and Security in God
- 21 Thanksgiving for Victory
- 24 Entrance into the Temple
- 30 Thanksgiving for Recovery from Grave Illness
- 78 God's Goodness and Israel's Ingratitude
- 84 The Joy of Worship in the Temple
- 95 A Call to Worship and Obedience
- 100 All Lands Summoned to Praise God

Word List

tehillim
psalmos
Zion
mismor
selah
Writings

Summary

The book of Psalms is a unique anthology of hymns, prayers, poems, and liturgies that emerged out of the religious life of the people of Israel from the time of David until after their return from exile. Psalms is the featured volume among the third collection of books in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Writings.

Although Psalms is traditionally attributed to David, others have contributed to its composition. The 150 psalms reflect a wide variety of personal and social settings and a wide variety of perspectives, from those of individuals to those of the larger community. There are many different literary types in Psalms, and each type expresses a special relationship to and an understanding of God.

Psalms is the one book of the Bible everyone can find easily, and hardly a person in or out of the church is not familiar with the words, *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want*. However, there are many psalms and many aspects of Psalms as literature with which few of us are familiar. With more information about the book as a whole, as well as particular psalms, we will find Psalms nurturing our spirits in a more profound, helpful way.

In this chapter we will look at Psalms as a whole and explore ten different types of psalms. If you have not read the section "Beginning Words" on pages 1–4, do so now in order to have a sense of how each of these chapters is organized, what is expected of you, and what you can expect of this Resource Book.

³ Several study Bibles that use the text of the New Revised Standard Version include these headings for the Psalms.



1

THE BOOK OF PSALMS: AN OVERVIEW

Praying with the Psalmist

At the beginning of each chapter there will be two or more verses from a psalm that will serve as a prayer for the week. There are several ways you can use this prayer: 1) Pray the words each day of the week. 2) Use the psalm as a prayer before you begin reading the Resource Book and Psalms. 3) Pray the psalm again just before you leave home to attend the class. 4) Memorize a line or two from the prayer so that you will be able to recall the words anytime during the week. The prayer for this week is from Psalm 25.

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.

O my God, in you I trust ...

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;

teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth, and teach me,

for you are the God of my salvation;

for you I wait all day long. Amen (Psalm 25:1–2a, 4, 5)⁴

Opening the Book of Psalms

Open your Bible to Psalms. (I remember in Sunday school the teacher said, “Hold the Bible on its side, put your fingers right in the middle of the pages, and open the Bible. There is Psalms.” Most of the time it works that way.) What is one of your favorite psalms? Find one of your favorites and

⁴ The verses selected for these opening prayers will usually be an address to God that expresses personal prayer. Only a few verses will be selected from a particular psalm.

read it and reflect on a few questions before you read any further. When do you remember first hearing or reading this psalm? What special experiences do you associate with it? What would you like to share with others about your reasons for remembering it as a favorite?

Turn to the beginning of Psalms. If your Bible has an introduction to Psalms, read the article, which will give you a brief overview of this important book. Look at the first page of Psalms. In most translations you will notice three things immediately: 1) The title of the book is PSALMS or THE PSALMS. 2) There is a designation above Psalm 1 which reads BOOK I. 3) Each psalm is written in the form of verse.

The Hebrew title of Psalms is *tehillim*, which means “songs of praise.” *Tehillim* is formed from the same root (h-1-1) as the word *hallelujah*. The English title, Psalms, finds its origin in the Greek word *psalmos*, which is a translation of the Hebrew word *mismor*. *Mismor* appears in the preface, or superscription, of fifty-seven of the psalms (see Psalm 3 as an example, “A Psalm of David ...”). In the original Hebrew this would read “A *Mismor* of David ...” and in Greek it was translated “A *Psalmos* of David ...” The Greek *psalmos* means a song sung to the accompaniment of stringed instruments. In the New Testament, there are several specific references to Psalms, which suggests that by that time the book was already known as Psalms.⁵

The collection of 150 psalms is usually divided into five sections or “Books” as follows:

Book I	Psalms 1–41
Book II	Psalms 42–72
Book III	Psalms 73–89
Book IV	Psalms 90–106
Book V	Psalms 107–150

There is no clear rationale for this division. The books are not equal in length; Book V (1037 verses) is more than three times as long as Book IV (327 verses). While there is no unifying theme for one book as compared to another, there are more psalms of lament in Books I and II than in other books, and more psalms of praise in Book V. Since the five books of the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) are attributed to Moses and Psalms is attributed to David, tradition suggests that David also must have five books. There is one characteristic that the five books have in common. Each concludes with a doxology, a declaration of praise of either one or two verses, or a whole psalm, as in Psalm 150. When the psalms were organized into five separate sections or books is unknown.

⁵ Luke 20:42; 24:44; Acts 1:20; 13:33, 35; Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16.

The psalms were written, and therefore are printed, in the form of poetry. Any translation of the Bible that does not present the psalms as poetry will not be very helpful for this course of study. Even without the designation of verse numbers, it is clear where the beginnings and endings are for most of the lines and verses. In Hebrew poetry there is no intent to rhyme words in one line with the next. Rather, there is a matching of thoughts or concepts with one or more lines. We will work in more depth with the poetry of the psalms in Chapter 2.

Noticing a Few More Details

Turn to Psalm 2:11–12. You will notice a footnote in the NRSV after the word feet. Some Bibles have more footnotes than others. In every instance these notes are important. One's understanding of the text is enhanced by paying attention to them. The footnote in Psalm 2:11–12 is representative of others you will find. In the NRSV it reads, "Cn: Meaning of Heb of verses 11b and 12a is uncertain." To understand the two abbreviations *Cn* and *Heb*, turn to the page at the beginning of the Bible where the explanations of the abbreviations are given. In the New Oxford Annotated Bible you will find ...

Cn = Correction; made where the text has suffered in transmission and the versions provide no satisfactory restoration but where the Standard Bible Committee agrees with the judgment of competent scholars as to the most probable reconstruction of the original text.

Heb = Hebrew of the consonantal Masoretic Text of the Old Testament.

If you compare two or more translations you will see a variety of ways these two verses have been translated. Even expert biblical scholars have differences of opinion as to how the original Hebrew text should be rendered in English.

A second type of footnote found in some Bibles provides cross-references between psalm verses and other passages in the Bible. For instance, look at Psalm 22:1. Does your Bible have a note to direct you to Matthew 27:46 and/or Mark 15:34? In several chapters we will work with some psalms that lead us to other places in the Bible.

Look at Psalm 3. This psalm, like 116 others, has a title or superscription: *A Psalm of David, when he fled from his son Absalom*. Of the 117 there are seventy-two psalms that are attributed to David, and of those there are thirteen that refer to specific historical events in David's life. Psalms are attributed to other persons as well: *of the Korahites*, (a guild of Temple singers) twelve times, see Psalms 44–49; *of Asaph*, (a contemporary of David, one of three families

of Temple musicians, 1 Chron. 25:1–2) twelve times, see 73–83; *of Solomon*, two times, see 72 and 127; *of Ethan the Ezrahite*, Psalm 89; and *of Moses*, Psalm 90.

Something else you will notice in Psalm 3 is the word *selah* appearing after verses 2, 4, and 8. It appears seventy-one times in thirty-nine different psalms. Even though the term appears often, its meaning is not clear. Bible scholars do not agree on how to interpret it. Most of them concur that the term designates some sort of musical or liturgical cue for singers, musicians, or other leaders of worship. *Selah* could suggest an interlude during which something else was to be sung or played. Or if *selah* is derived from the Hebrew root (s-l-l), “to lift up,” it may suggest lifting up one’s voice to sing louder or lifting up the sound of the music to play or sing louder. A third possibility is that *selah* is derived from an Aramaic⁶ root (s-l-h) which means “to turn, to bend, or to pray.” This may have been a cue for the worshipers to kneel, bow, or to fall prostrate in humble, respectful submission to God. Since there is no consensus as to the meaning of *selah*, we may consider all three options as appropriate responses of worshipers who use these particular psalms. When reading aloud the psalms that include *selah*, the word is usually not spoken.

Identifying Psalms by Types

Ever since the pioneering work of the German scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932), students of the Bible have been working with Psalms not as a single literary piece but as a collection of poems and hymns that represent a variety of literary types. The psalms originate from many different settings. Some reflect personal life experiences and others encompass a national or community situation. Some psalms are clearly presented as prayers to God while others are more didactic in presenting concepts about God. Gunkel identified four psalm types: hymns, laments, thanksgivings, and royal psalms. Another scholar, Claus Westermann,⁷ suggests that there are only two psalm types: songs of praise and lament. In a sense this may be true, since one can find the element of lament or praise in every psalm. Walter Brueggemann⁸ has classified psalms according to spiritual experiences of one’s life: psalms of orientation, psalms of disorientation, and psalms of new orientation. Bernard Anderson, on the other hand, once identified seventeen different psalm types.⁹

6 A language closely related to Hebrew.

7 *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (John Knox Press, 1981).

8 *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg Publishing House, 1984).

9 *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Westminster Press, 1983).

For the purposes of this course we will use the list of types suggested in the Introduction to Psalms in the New Oxford Annotated Bible. These ten psalm types are: hymns of praise, enthronement hymns, songs of Zion, psalms of lament, songs of trust, sacred history psalms, royal psalms, songs of thanksgiving, wisdom psalms, and liturgies. I have found that it is more helpful to work with a larger variety of types rather than with fewer. When we can identify the characteristics of a psalm we are better able to gain a sense of its intent and meaning. In Chapters 2 and 3 we will include psalms of a variety of types. Chapters 4 to 7 will each explore in depth one psalm type.

In one sense, classifying psalms may be seen as a personal, arbitrary process. There are no clear-cut rules or guidelines to follow. Those who study the psalms carefully will determine their own criteria for identifying various types. There are several factors to keep in mind, however: 1) All psalms cannot be classified neatly into one type or another. Aspects of two or more types are often present in one psalm. 2) The common elements used to identify a particular type are not always found in the same order in all the psalms of that type, nor are all the elements always present. 3) It is not necessary for everyone in a Bible study group to agree with the designations that are given in this Resource Book or in other resources that are used. After all, biblical scholars themselves don't always agree with one another.

Describing Ten Psalm Types

In order to gain some familiarity with the ten types, we will now describe each briefly. Several examples of each type are given in footnotes. Read some of the psalms from each list to become somewhat familiar with each type. One relatively short psalm, representative of each type, is suggested in the text. The daily readings for this chapter (pages 14–15) indicate the type of psalm being read.

Hymns of praise¹⁰—Key words are *rejoice, praise, sing, glory, joy, joyful*. The praise is always directed toward God in honor and recognition of who God is and what God has done on behalf of the people. Psalms praising God as Creator of the world are often identified as a distinct type. However, for this course they are included among the hymns of praise. The element of thanksgiving is also present in many psalms of praise. Read **Psalm 100**.

Enthronement hymns¹¹—The New Oxford Annotated Bible identifies eight enthronement psalms. Each psalm in one way or another calls the believers to praise and worship God

¹⁰ Examples of hymns of praise are: Psalms 8, 33, 66, 100, 104, 111, 145, 146, 148, and 150.

¹¹ Examples of enthronement hymns are: Psalms 29, 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, and 99.

who is Lord, King of the universe, of the world, of the nations, and of the people whom God has chosen. God's enthronement is *forever* (29:10), *over the flood* (29:10), *over the nations* (47:8), *from of old* (93:2), *over all the earth* (95:4, 5; 97:9), *as judge of the world* (96:13), and *in Zion* (99:2). Read **Psalm 95**.

Songs of Zion¹² — Zion is a word of uncertain origin that was used frequently as a synonym for Jerusalem, which was also called the *city of David*. Jerusalem was set high on a hill and was identified as God's *holy hill*. It was a stronghold, a fortress that served as the capital city of the nation Israel. It was a holy city, for it was here that the Temple was built. *For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his habitation.* (132:13) Read **Psalm 84**.

Psalms of lament¹³ — More psalms are classified as laments than any other type (about a third of the book). There are two sub-types: individual laments and community laments. The psalms of lament are expressed as grievances or complaints against God and/or against the enemy. Almost all of the more than fifty laments include other elements such as petition, expression of trust, questioning God, remembering God's past actions, and vows of praise. Read **Psalm 13**.

Songs of trust¹⁴ — Almost all of the psalms of trust are written in the first person as prayers or affirmations of faith and confidence in God. They express an absolute dependence upon the Creator, Redeemer, God. The content of these psalms transcends all of the intervening centuries so that the words may be read and prayed today without regard to the particular circumstances that prompted their writing in the first place. Read **Psalm 16**.

Sacred history psalms¹⁵ — The psalms of this type are also called psalms of the mighty acts of God and salvation history psalms. These psalms are all very long. They recount in chronological order many of the mighty acts of God in the forming of the people and in delivering them from their bondage. Elements of many other psalms make reference to God's mighty acts on behalf of the people. Read **Psalm 78**.

Royal psalms¹⁶ — In royal psalms the focus is on the reigning king of Israel, not God. These psalms describe or refer to different situations in which the king is involved: thanksgiving for victory over enemies (18), prayer for the king's safety before battle (20), thanksgiving for protection during battle (21), the occasion of the king's marriage (45), the king's ascent to the throne (2, 72, 110) and a series of vows made by the king to God (101). Read **Psalm 21**.

12 Examples of songs of Zion are: Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122, and 132.

13 Examples of psalms of lament are: Psalms 3, 12, 13, 22, 31, 39, 42, 57, 80, 85, 88, 90, 94, and 137.

14 Examples of songs of trust are: Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27:1-6, 62, 63, 91, 121, and 131.

15 The five psalms of sacred history are: Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, and 136.

16 Examples of royal psalms are: Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, and 110.

Songs of thanksgiving¹⁷ —The words *thanks* and *thanksgiving* appear in thirty-two psalms. However, not all these psalms are included in the category of songs of thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is an aspect of some psalms of praise. Even in some psalms of lament there are expressions of thanksgiving when the psalmist realizes that God is able to bring deliverance from whatever it is that provokes the lament. There are community psalms as well as individual psalms of thanksgiving. The thankfulness of the psalmist arises in response to a good harvest, healing of disease, victory in battle, deliverance from enemies, trouble and danger, and God's wondrous deeds. Read **Psalms 30**.

Wisdom psalms¹⁸ —This type is not easily identified. Many of the wisdom psalms can be classified with other types. They are much like proverbs with short, memorable sayings of common wisdom. Often light is contrasted with darkness, good with evil, and the righteous with the wicked. For our study we will also include as wisdom psalms those that focus on the Law. Read **Psalms 1**.

Liturgies¹⁹ —Though all of the psalms have been used in the worship life of God's people, there are several that are associated with festivals or other special worship experiences in the Temple. Some liturgy psalms are related to a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Temple (122). Others are entrance liturgies that were used as the worshipers stood outside the Temple gates awaiting entrance (15 and 24). Psalm 136 was included among the sacred history psalms. However, because the second line of each verse begins with the repeated response ... *for his steadfast love endures forever*, this psalm very possibly was used as a litany during congregational worship. Read **Psalms 24**.

Closing Prayer

Now that you have completed reading in preparation for Session One it is appropriate to be guided in prayer by other words of the psalmist from Psalms 62:5–7.

*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.
On God rests my deliverance and my honor;
my mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Amen.*

¹⁷ Examples of songs of thanksgiving are: Psalms 30, 34, 67, 92, 107, 118, 124, and 138.

¹⁸ Examples of wisdom psalms are: Psalms 1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133.

¹⁹ Other examples of liturgies are: Psalms 24, 68, 82, 115, and 134.

Reading Psalms for Devotions and for Study

Several psalms were suggested as the Basic Bible References for this chapter of *Discovering the Psalms*. Part of your commitment to participate in the course includes reading the Bible and the Resource Book in preparation for each week's session. What follows is an outline that is intended as a guided reading of the Basic Bible References. There are ten psalms for this week. All but Psalm 78 are quite short. The reason for the ten is to have one example of each of the types that were mentioned in the material above.

Day One:

Read Psalm 1 An introduction to the book and a wisdom psalm.
Notice the contrast between the wicked and the righteous.
How do you meditate *on the law of the LORD*?
Pray that God will lead you in the path of righteousness.

Day Two:

Read Psalms 13 & 16 Psalm 13 is a lament and 16 is a psalm of trust.
Notice the differences in emphasis between the two. Which psalm reflects the state of your spiritual journey today?
Pray, expressing your trust and confidence in God. Or pray a lament expressing your grievance to God.

Day Three:

Read Psalms 21 & 24 Psalm 21 is a royal psalm where the king celebrates victory.
What victories have you celebrated?
Psalm 24 is a liturgical psalm for entry into the Temple. What is your prayer as you prepare to worship God?

Day Four:

Read Psalm 30 This is a psalm of thanksgiving for healing.

Notice the contrasts, the ups and downs of the psalmist's experiences. Which of the lines are your prayer as well as the psalmist's?

Day Five:

Skim Psalm 78 Read verses 1–8. What is the purpose for remembering this sacred history of God's dealings with the people of God?

Skim the rest of the psalm. Notice the acts of the people in contrast to the acts of God.

Pray that you may remain faithful to God's way.

Day Six:

Read Psalm 84 This is a song of Zion with references to the Temple.

Identify ways in which your church is a dwelling place for God.

What is your favorite verse of this psalm?

Pray for God to meet you in the sanctuary of your church.

Day Seven:

Read Psalms 95 & 100 Psalm 95 is an enthronement psalm and 100 is a psalm of praise.

Notice the similar emphases in the two psalms.

What reasons does the psalmist suggest for praising God?

Pray or sing your own prayer or song of praise to God.