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## Preface

I have loved the Book of Psalms for a very long time. The first encounter I remember having with it was somewhat memorable, as, at about the age of 11, my class at school was required by one of the teachers to learn Psalm 1 as homework. I failed to do this and had my first painful experience of corporal punishment. How I would have felt if I had known that the Cistercian monks at Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire had to recite the whole Book of Psalms – in Latin – before being allowed to pass on from the novitiate, I hate to think! When I began serious Bible study after making a personal commitment to Christ at the age of twenty, it was one of the first books of the Old Testament to which I became strongly attracted. Over many years I have preached from it more than from any other book of the Bible and have taught it at the Glasgow Bible College (now incorporated in the International Christian College), the Scottish Baptist College and in several other settings. What it means to me as a Christian is beyond calculation.

It is exciting to be a student of the psalms at the present time, because there is currently an interest in it among Old Testament scholars that is probably without precedent. This is almost entirely due to a new emphasis on the book as a whole, with a desire to understand why its structure has been shaped in the way it has and to enquire as to the theological implications of this structure. Quite properly, there is concern that proper objective criteria should be established for this study, as it could easily degenerate into undisciplined speculation or even become a focus for the views of theological cranks. Much excellent work has been done, however, and I have tried to indicate some of the chief gains of this approach. No doubt more research needs to be done, but what has been discerned so far has great value.

I give thanks to God for the opportunity of engaging in this work. I also want to thank Dr Don Carson for a number of helpful suggestions for its improvement, and the Reverend Derek and Mrs Joy Guest (my niece and her husband), who kindly read much of the work in manuscript to check particularly on matters of clarity and pastoral value. My wife, Eva, as ever, gave me a great deal of patient support. I have profited very much from the work of other writers, but want particularly to mention that gracious Christian gentleman, the Reverend Derek Kidner, sometime Warden of Tyndale House, Cambridge, whose commentaries on the Book of Psalms demonstrate so clearly that careful scholarship and warm devotion are not enemies but good friends, and that a theologically perceptive commentary may be written with both beauty of style and economy of language.

The Book of Psalms is an inexhaustible, inspired resource for the Christian church in every age, but its message is of special importance today. Some modern churches are facing reducing numbers and feel that they have their backs to the wall. The psalms of praise and thanksgiving will lift their eyes to the living God in all his greatness and grace and emphasize for them the glorious certainties of his plan and purpose for his people. Other churches are growing numerically, but some of these are in danger of triumphalism and tendencies towards a mild but disturbing form of Prosperity Theology. This makes it very important that they take the psalms of lament seriously, for intercession and pastoral care must always engage with the needs and sufferings of others, and worship should always be a preparation for living the Christian life in the real world and not simply a means of temporary escape from it.