

Introduction to *The Psalms*

Living Hope Bible Church

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~"In what accents I addressed Thee, my God, when I read the Psalms of David, those faithful songs, the language of devotion which banishes the spirit of pride... How I addressed Thee in those Psalms! How my love for Thee was kindled by them! How I burned to recite them, were it possible, throughout the world, as an antidote for the pride of humanity..."~

Augustine

~"You may rightly call the Psalter a Bible in miniature, in which all things which are set forth more at length in the rest of the Scriptures are collected into a beautiful manual of wonderful attractive brevity."~

Martin Luther

~"There is no other book in which there is to be found more express and magnificent commendations, both of the unparalleled liberality of God towards his Church, and of all his works; there is no other book in which there is recorded so many deliverances, nor one in which the evidences and experiences of the fatherly providence and solitude which God exercises towards us, are celebrated with such splendor of diction, and yet with the strictest adherence to truth; in short, there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught the right manner of praising God, or in which we are more powerfully stirred up to the performance of this religious exercise."~

John Calvin

~"Whoever has begun to pray the Psalter earnestly and regularly, will soon give leave to those other, easy, little prayers of their own because they lack the power, passion, and fire, to be found in the Psalter."~

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The Value of the Psalms.

- The Psalms were essential to the worship of Ancient Israel.
 - Many of the Psalms were sung during the daily services of the Temple (24, 48, 82, 94, 81, 93, 92).
 - There were Psalms used for the pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the festivals (120-134).
 - Psalms 113-118 are known as the Hallel Psalms (“hymns of praise”) and also used during the Festivals.
- The Psalms were of the upmost importance to both Jesus and the Apostles.
 - Of the 283 direct quotes of the OT in the NT, 116 (41%) are from the Psalter.
 - Jesus alludes to the Psalms at least 50 times.
 - At least 129 of the 150 Psalms are quoted or alluded to in the NT.
- The Psalms have been essential to the growth of the Church throughout history.
 - Both the pre-Nicene Fathers and the post-Nicene Fathers gave prominence to the Psalms in their lives and writings.
 - Augustine preached on every Psalm over a period of three decades.
 - Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, argued that the Psalms should be the first book that a Christian reads.
 - It was standard in the monastic orders for the Psalter to be recited weekly.
 - The Second Council of Nicaea (787 A.D.) required all bishops to know the complete Psalter by heart.
 - Martin Luther’s first theology lectures at the University of Wittenberg in 1513-15 were on Psalms 1-126.

- Martin Bucer, who was uniquely involved in all the major movements of the Reformation (Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican, and Anabaptist), not only wrote a extensive commentary on the Psalms, he also set them to metrical hymnody for his congregation.
- John Calvin simply loved the Psalms. The first commentary he intended to publish was on the Psalms. He called the Psalms “the mirror of the soul,” personally identifying with them and finding in them a source of healing.
- Yet, the Psalms have somehow lost their place in the worship of the Church in the 21st century.
 - As various biblical scholars since the 17th century have questioned the Bible’s authority, approaching the Word of God with an apostate critical spirit, the Psalms, along with the rest of the Scriptures, have become nothing more than ancient hymns bound to their own cultural context.
 - A man named William Romaine, a 19th century Anglican, saw the rise of hymnody, pioneered by Isaac Watts, as the death of the Psalms for worship.
 - The Psalms teach us how to live in relationship with the LORD God during this period of the already but not yet.
 - Unfortunately, and to the Church’s detriment, the Psalms are rarely prayed, sung, or preached.
 - The Psalms must be restored to a place of prominence in the Church for her healthy instruction in prayer, praise, and preaching.

Overview of *The Psalms*.

I. Definitions.

- a. "Psalms" is from a Greek word meaning "Hymn."
- b. "Psalter" means "a printed collection of hymns."
- c. The Hebrew title for the Psalms literally means "book of praises."
- d. "Superscriptions" are the titles to individual psalms placed above the first verse in English Bibles (in Hebrew the superscription is actually verse 1).

II. Five Books: A series of theological poetry compiled at random? Or intentionally selected and placed?

a. Book One, Psalms 1-42.

- i. Psalm 1 & 2 are the introduction to the Psalter and are the only untitled psalms.

1. These two psalms are the glasses through which the rest of the Psalter is to be viewed.

2. These two psalms are intimately tied together.

- a. Compare Ps 1:2 and Ps 2:1: The word for "delight" and "plot" is the same word in Hebrew.

- b. "Blessed" begins Ps. 1 and ends Ps. 2. This is a figure of speech called "inclusio," a rhetorical device in which a literary unit begins and ends with the same word, phrase or clause. This serves to iterate the theme and emphasize the unity of the whole.

3. These two psalms both lack the *superscript*. This is rare: all other Psalms in Book One are labeled “A Psalm of David.”
 4. If we want to understand how to read the Psalms, we must have a grip on Psalms 1-2; they prepare us for what follows.
 5. Ps. 1 is the purpose of the Psalter, Ps. 2 the message. The Psalms are for instruction and the reign of the LORD is their message.
 - ii. Psalms 3-41 are all entitled “Psalms of David”: King David and the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7) play a central role in the Psalter.
 - iii. The story begins with the reign of David as God’s chosen anointed one.
 - iv. 23 out of 39 psalms are laments (59%); a striking beginning to a book entitled “Book of Praises.”
 - v. Psalm 41 closes this book with a hymn of praise. The first collection begins in lament, but ends in praise.
- b. Book Two, Psalms 42-72.
- i. Like Book One, this book contains mainly laments (20 out of 31, 65%).
 - ii. Unlike Book One, only eighteen psalms are attributed to David (58%).
 - iii. The story of King David continues, but new actors enter the stage:
 1. The Sons of Korah (Temple keepers and singers during the reigns of David and Solomon; 1 Chr. 6:31-37).
 2. Asaph (One of the Levitical singers and musicians who served at the temple during the reigns of David and Solomon; 2 Chr. 5:11-13).

- iv. Psalms 51-65 are at the heart of Book Two and again are Psalms of David that depict a very human king.
 - v. The book ends with the phrase, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended” (Ps. 72:20). David now moves into the background as his heirs take the throne (Ps. 72).
- c. Book Three, Psalms 73-89.
- i. A new scene begins as we move into the troubled times of the divided kingdom of Israel.
 - ii. King David is considerably absent, with only one psalm attributed to him (Ps. 86).
 - iii. The psalms of Asaph comprise 11 out of 17 psalms, the psalms of the Korahites 4 out of 17.
 - iv. Community psalms, both hymns and laments, are predominant.
 - v. Many scholars rightfully call this book, “the dark book of the Psalter.”
 - vi. Psalm 73 is a pivotal psalm; it reiterates the assertions of Ps. 1, but in light of the reality expressed throughout Books I-II.
 - vii. Psalm 89 concludes this book with the impression that the Davidic Covenant has “failed” and that God has abandoned His promises.
- d. Book Four, Psalms 90-106.
- i. At this point of the story the temple has been destroyed, the king has been dethroned, and Israel is in exile.
 - ii. There are two main characters in this Book, Moses and God.

- iii. Psalm 90 begins the Book with a psalm of Moses calling the people to remember the exodus (Ex.) and the wanderings in the wilderness (Num.).
 - 1. The exile was a “new wilderness.”
 - 2. The people must once again rely completely on the LORD for their survival.
- iv. There are a large number of psalms in this Book that have no superscription, 10 out of 17 (59%). What is the significance?
- v. Of the remaining 7 psalms, one is attributed to Moses (Ps. 90), two to David (Pss. 101, 103), and four have superscripts but are not designated to an individual or group (Pss. 92, 98, 100, 102).
- vi. Unlike the previous three Books, lament psalms do not dominate this Book. Out of the 17 psalms only 4 are laments (24%).
- vii. An important element of this Book is the Enthronement Psalms (Pss. 93, 95-99), which celebrate the enthronement of the LORD as king.
- viii. The Book closes with Pss. 105 and 106, which recount the history of Israel’s relationship with the LORD.
 - 1. Ps. 105 focuses on the LORD’s initiation in the relationship, while Ps. 106 focuses on Israel’s response.
 - 2. In response to Ps. 89: the Exile is a result of Israel’s sin and disobedience, not the LORD’s weakness or unfaithfulness to His covenant.
- e. Book Five, Psalms 107-150.

- i. In this scene Israel has returned to the land, the temple has been rebuilt, but the Davidic king has not been restored.
- ii. The emphasis of this Book is the LORD as king.
- iii. David now returns to a prominent role (14 out of 44 Psalms, 32%), leading Israel into the celebration of God as king.
- iv. Psalm 110 is one of the most Messianic Psalms in the entire Psalter and is the most quoted in the NT. What is the significance of this psalm being placed in Book 5?
- v. The beloved Ps. 119 sits at the heart, an indication that the Law of the LORD is the way in which God will rule over His people. In light of Jer 31:33 is this not true?
- vi. Praise is the dominant theme of this book.
- vii. Pss. 146-150 not only conclude this Book, but the entire Psalter (5 Books necessitate 5 doxologies).
 - 1. The praises of these psalms move from David (Ps. 146), to all Israel (Ps. 147), to creation (Ps. 148), to the unencumbered praise and total adoration of God's people (Pss. 149-50).
 - 2. The LORD sits enthroned upon the praises of His people.
- f. Each book ends with *doxology*: 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; 146-150.
 - i. The Psalms are filled with lament, but they move forward to praise.
 - ii. The Psalms do not deny pain, they move past it.
 - iii. The final reality for the people of God is not pain, but rather praise.