Notes from the Workshop on the Psalms

**An Introduction to the Psalms**

I’m excited about what God is going to say and do among us as a church in 2021. 2020 was very difficult for many people. And 2021 has begun with some of the same struggles we experienced last year. But, I believe God has new and good things in store for us this year. And the Psalms I hope will help us as we journey together with God in the first half 2021.

Most Christians have appreciated the Psalms throughout the ages, though some struggle to understand them. The Psalms are songs and poetry. And some of us more so than others appreciate and understand the imagery and the ideas poetry communicate. Scholars suggest that 1/3 of the OT is written in poetry. Poetry is often used in Scripture for the same reasons it’s used today in contemporary writing and songs. Our everyday speech at times just doesn’t do justice to some of the ideas, thoughts, concepts that we want to communicate.

God inspired the writers in the Bible to use stories, others song and poetry to explain truths about Himself and they can help us express praise, our sorrow, our raw human emotions. King David wrote many of the Psalms and he used song and poetry to express his love for God, and his anger at the injustices he saw in the world around him, and even his disappointment with himself and with God. The Psalms give us permission to express our feelings to God.

I think many of us wish we could better express our feelings, our emotions, or our thoughts. The Psalms can help us. These Psalms can become our songs, our praises to God and they can gives us words to our emotions; feelings of frustration, or adoration, or confusion, or anger with ourselves or with the brokenness and unfairness of the world around us.

The title “Psalms” comes from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the OT) where it originally referred to stringed instruments such as the harp, lyre and lute. Later the title Psalms referred to songs sung to these instruments. The English title of the book means “Book of Songs” while the Hebrew title is “Book of Praises”. No single word can encompass the variety of the Psalms.

The Psalter is a collection of collections of Psalms that were written over a period of centuries. The Psalter has been called the prayer book and the hymnbook of Israel. But the Psalms are more than a collection of songs and prayers. They also give instructions in faith and what it means to be a godly person. The collections of prayers and songs include ‘The prayers of David”, the songs of the Sons of Korah (Ps. 42-49; 84,85,87,88), the psalms or songs of Asaph (Ps. 50; 73-83) and the songs of ascents (Psalms 120-134).

The Book of Psalms has been used by both Jewish and Christians followers of God for centuries. The Passover fellowship would have traditionally begun with reading/singing Psalms 113-114. Then, as Jesus finished His Last Supper and prepared to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, He and His disciples would have sung Psalm 118 (Matt. 26:30). Many of the psalms were written by David; others were written by Levites whom he put in charge of worship. King Solomon wrote two (72 and 127) and Moses even wrote one (90). Of the 150 psalms, 116 have titles or superscripts.

It is interesting to note that many psalms have headings that give context or authorship for the psalm, such as Psalm 3, “a Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.” Some titles contain musical information (Ps. 4,5), others contain worship information (Ps. 38, 100) while others designate the type of psalm it is (hymn or song e.g. Ps. 32, 120,145). These headings or inscriptions are part of Scripture inspired by the Holy Spirit and not simply a later editor’s note.

**Purpose of the Psalms**

Each psalm expresses the deep feelings of its composer, tapping into the depths of our hearts, our emotions, and our experiences. It’s easy to identify with the range of emotions covered in the psalms: frustration and worry, thanksgiving and worship, begging for help or crying out for forgiveness, wondering at God’s Word and His wisdom, anger at God’s enemies, or jubilant praise. They help give expression to our human experiences and struggles and lead us, hopefully, into the arms of God’s.

Understanding the Genre of Biblical Poetry – How to Read the Bible

The Psalms reflect a genre (type) of literature called poetry. Poetry was an important way for Israelites to express human feelings, prayers, praises, wisdom, and lament.

* **The Art of Biblical Poetry (5 minutes 22 seconds)** [**https://youtu.be/q9yp1ZXbsEg**](https://youtu.be/q9yp1ZXbsEg)

The Psalms are divided into 5 books (perhaps your Bible mentions this). You may ask why is this? It is uncertain why Psalms is divided into five books. Some suggest five reflects the five books of [the Torah](https://www.gotquestions.org/what-is-the-Torah.html) (Genesis to Deuteronomy). The division of the Psalms is not based on authorship or chronology; several authors composed the Psalms, and their Psalms are mixed throughout the various collections. David is listed as the author of 73 psalms, Asaph of 12, and the sons of Korah of 11.

1. Book I – Psalm 1-41
2. Book II Psalm 42-72
3. Book III Psalm 73-89
4. Book IV Psalm 90-106
5. Book V Psalm 107-150

At the end of each book a concluding doxology is given:

* Psalm 41:13 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.”
* Psalm 72:18-19 “Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds.19Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.”
* Psalm 89:52 “Praise be to the Lord forever! Amen and Amen.”
* Psalm 106:48 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the Lord.
* Psalm 150 “Praise the Lord.Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens.2Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness.3Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre,4praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe,5praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.6Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.”

Despite the Psalter seen as a collection of many groups of Psalms, grouped into 5 books, the whole of the Psalms can also be seen as one collection having an introduction (Psalms 1 & 2) and a conclusion (Psalms 146-150). The next video we look at will illustrate this. But, before we look at the second video a few more points:

Psalm Types

Some people have tried to group the psalms into different types, and though these types can overlap (one Psalm can include more than one type), these classifications may help you better understand the content of the psalms.

The psalm types include:

1. Prayer of individuals (e.g. Psalm 3-7)
2. Praise of an individual for God’s saving help (e.g. s. 30, 34).
3. Prayers for the community (e.g. Ps. 12,44,79)
4. Praise from the community because of God’s saving help (e.g. Ps 66,75)
5. Hymns of praise of God’s majesty and character (e.g. Ps 8, 19)
6. Hymns celebrating God’s universal reign (e.g. Ps 47, 93-99)
7. Songs about Zion, the city of God (e.g. Ps. 46,48)
8. Pilgrimage songs as people made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate various festivals (e.g. Ps. 120-134)
9. Liturgical songs – songs to be sung at public worship services (e.g. Ps. 15, 24, 68)
10. Didactic – instructional songs (e.g. Ps. 1,34)

Psalms are very much poetry. The Psalms use language that is passionate, vivid illustrations are used throughout the psalms. They are full of simile & metaphor (symbolism, imagery, allegories). The writers of the psalms frequently make use of repetition to help create the picture they are trying to communicate and to emphasize a point.

Though English poetry often includes rhyme, Hebrew poetry does not rely on this. Hebrew poetry does however make use of parallelism - **parallelism** is making parts of a sentence grammatically similar to the previous sentence, often repeating a specific word, phrase, or idea. This repetition creates a connection between the ideas discussed.

• Metaphor in Biblical Poetry (5 minutes 11 seconds) <https://youtu.be/L9W5afjndtU>

Parallelism in the Psalms & Why the Psalms are written with breaks between verses

Traditional English poetry commonly uses two distinctive methods to communicate an idea; meter and rhyme. Meter has to do with the number of ‘beats’ in a line and rhyming usually involves ending two parts of a sentence with words that sound similar. For example:

Mary had a little lamb, it’s fleece was white as snow,
(And) Ev’rywhere that Mary went, her lamb was sure to go.

Each line has thirteen beats and the words snow and go rhyme.

Hebrew poetry was different. It appears to sometimes use meter, but it doesn’t use rhyme. What Hebrew poetry uses is called ‘parallelism.’ This is not only found in the psalms but in all of the wisdom and prophetic literature of the Bible (Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and the messages of the prophets).
Parallelism involves using relatively short sentences usually made up of two ‘parallel’ parts. Sometimes a line has three brief clauses.

The most important kind of parallelism is where every term or phrase in a clause is parallel to an equivalent term or phrase in a second clause. Some examples are:

**1. Synonymous parallelism** is where the same thought is repeated twice in different but synonymous ( ‘nearly the same’) words. For example:

The cords of death encompassed me;
 the torrents of destruction assailed me; (Psalm 18.4)

Note how each of the words in the first line corresponds to a similar word in the second line. Synonymous parallelism simply involves saying something twice.

**2. Contrasting parallelism** is where the two lines balance one another or contrast a thought.

For you save a humble people,
 but the haughty eyes you bring down. (Psalm 18.27)

These two lines are parallel (each word or phrase corresponds to a word or phrase in the other line) but instead of saying the same thing twice the psalmist expresses the opposite or contrasting idea in the second line.

**3. Comparative Parallelism** The thought expressed in one line is compared to that of the other, as in:

As a father shows compassion to his children,
 so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him. (Psalm 103.13)

Here a human father is compared to the LORD in his compassion for his children.

So in parallelism the second section echoes (synonymous parallelism), contrasts (antithetic parallelism) or compares the first idea. **And the NIV Bible will slightly indent the second and third lines to show this idea.**

Superscriptions or Titles

One hundred and sixteen of the 150 Psalms have a title or superscription. These superscriptions can include the Psalm’s author, the name of the Psalm collection, the type of psalm it is, musical or notations and or brief indications about the occasion for the composition of the psalm. When it comes to author, the superscription can mean “belonging to” or “concerning” or “for the use of” or“dedicated to”. So the person’s name given in the superscription may not be the author of the psalm. The name may refer to the title of a collection of Psalms that have been gathered under a certain name. For example, “Of Asaph” or “Of the Sons of Korah”.

The word “Selah” is found in 39 psalms. Scholars are uncertain what the word means, but most believe it is a liturgical (public worship) notation such as a brief musical interlude or a brief liturgical response by the congregation.

Who was Korah and the Levite Psalm Writers?

Korah would have been a song leader. The Korahites were one of the families of the priestly tribe of the Levites. There were a number of Levites that King David assigned as worship leaders in the tabernacle choir, according to [1 Chronicles 6:31–32](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Chron%206.31%E2%80%9332). Asaph was one of these men ([1 Chronicles 6:39](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Chron%206.39)). Asaph’s duties are described in detail in [1 Chronicles 16](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Chron%2016). According to [2 Chronicles 29:30](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Chron%2029.30), both Asaph and David were skilled singers and poets. Asaph is also mentioned as a “seer” or prophet. The “sons of Asaph” are mentioned in [1 Chronicles 25:1](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Chron%2025.1), [2 Chronicles 20:14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Chron%2020.14), and [Ezra 2:41](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Ezra%202.41).

Putting the Book of Psalms Together

The Book of Psalms is not merely a random compilation of Psalms, but instead they were collected and ordered to retell the entire story of the Bible. There is a reason why the Psalms are put into the order they are in. This video will explain more about this.

• The Book of Psalms (5 minutes 29 seconds) https://youtu.be/dpny22k\_7uk

Theology In the Psalms

The Psalms are prayers and songs of praise. But they also teach. They teach the way of godliness or godly living. This instruction in godly living is one of the main purposes of the whole Psalter and this is shown by the way the Psalter is organized. The first 2 psalms are really an introduction to the book of Psalms and these two psalms teach about what it means to live a life that pleases God, a life of faith in God. – (note Ps. 1:1-3; Psalm 2:10-12) – the one who delights in and meditates on God’s law is the one who is blessed. Blessed is the one who serves God and submits to (“kiss the Son”) and seeks refuge in the Lord.

Though the Psalms do teach and give us an understanding of God (Theology, simply defined is our understanding of God) their teaching is not abstract ideas, but instead very practical teaching about right living for God.

Major Theological themes found in the Psalms:

1. God is the centre of life. He is at the centre of history, of the whole of creation; and He is meant to be at the centre of each individual person’s life. God is the one in whom we place our trust, our hope. He is the one whom we serve and worship. God is king over all of creation. God created, orders, sustains and maintains all of His creation. E.G. Psalm 8, 19:1-4a
2. God is sovereign, good, wise, righteous, faithful, merciful. He is great!

E.G. Ps. 99:1-5; Ps. 111:1-5

1. Because God is the only true God He will not, ultimately, tolerate any worldly power that opposes or denies or ignores Him. One day He will rule the nations and all will acknowledge Him. God’s righteous kingdom will come and when it does all opposition to Him, all rebellion against Him, will be done away with.

E.G. Ps. 2

1. God opposes the proud, those who rely on their own resources. The humble, the poor and needy, those who acknowledge their dependence on God, are those in whom God delights. The “fear of the lord” – a humble trust in and obedience to God, is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). Those who embrace these truths will inherit the earth. E.G. Ps. 111:10-112:10
2. Because God is the Great King He will execute justice. The Lord is the defender of the defenseless and those who have been treated unjustly. God listens to the prayers of those who cry out to Him. God knows the secrets of every heart so no one can mislead His judgments. And as the good and faithful Judge He will deliver those who are oppressed or wrongly accused. E.G. Ps. 18:1-6
3. As the Great king over all the earth God has chosen Israel to be His servant people. God has delivered them from powerful nations and He has given them a land and made His covenant with them. Israel was meant to live among the nations, trusting in Him, and only worshiping Him. Israel was meant to sing his praises to the whole world, pointing every nation to the Lord.
4. God chose David as His royal representative on earth. God’s covenant with David His servant is eternal, and ultimately we know this was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The kingdom of God on earth is linked to David and his descendants. God’s anointed king will govern his people with righteousness, delivering the oppressed, defending the defenseless, suppressing the wicked, bringing peace and prosperity. He was to be an intercessor between God and God’s people calling the nation to worship the Lord. In Psalm 110 the king was not only a king, but also a priest. E.G. Ps. 110:1-4
5. God not only chose to make an eternal covenant with the house of David, but He also chose Jerusalem (the City of David) as the earthly seat for His throne. Jerusalem (Zion) was the earthly capital of God’s kingdom on earth. The city’s temple was where God dwelled on earth with His people. Jesus makes it clear to the women at the well in John 4:21-23 that now, in the era of the new covenant, Jerusalem and the temple mount are no longer the place we must go to meet with God. Instead true worshippers now can worship the Father anywhere in spirit and truth – filled with God’s Spirit made possible through faith in God the Son who is the truth.

God’s kingship is central to the psalms. All of creation belongs to God. We are all created to be part of His kingdom, under His rule. To be human is to be under God’s rule and to be dependent upon God. To proudly deny our dependence upon God and to refuse Him as King, and, according to the psalmist, is the root of all wickedness, and that wickedness fills the whole earth today.

God has broken into this world, chosen Israel, Abraham’s descendants, as His witnesses to a world that is in rebellion to Him. In the end human pride will be humbled, justice will prevail and every wrong made right. The humble will inherit the earth and God’s righteous kingdom will prevail.

Many of the psalms point to Jesus, the messianic king, and the kingdom he brings. Jesus fulfills the covenant God makes with King David, a covenant promise that one of David’s descendants would sit upon his throne. The psalms are quoted throughout the NT. The writers of the NT show how Jesus has fulfilled the words of the OT.

When the psalms speak of righteous sufferers – righteous in that they are innocent of wronging their adversaries - those who humbly trust God, who cry out to God (Ps. 22; 69), the Psalms are giving voice to all of God’s people who suffer in this world. The prayers in the Psalms therefore become our prayers. E.G. Ps. 22:1-5; Ps. 69:1-3

When Jesus came into the world he became God’s righteous servant, sharing in our sufferings. The prayers in the psalms became his prayers (Look at Ps. 22 – My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’). Jesus experienced this suffering and thousands of people after David have been able to use this prayer to express their own suffering. These prayers continue to be our prayers as we take up our cross and follow Jesus today. When we read in the Psalms of God’s people, of the city of God and of the temple in which God dwells, the Psalmists are ultimately speaking of Christ’s church – His body, the people of God. Therefore the Psalter is not only the prayer and praise book of the people who lived during biblical times, but also the prayer and praise book for all of God’s people. What has changed is that God has now revealed his redemption in Jesus Christ; Jesus has come and we await His return.

The NIV Study Bible titles the 150 books that make up the Psalter. “Instruction in the Godly Life under the Reign of God”. This title reflects the emphasis in the Psalms on godliness and that this world and everything in it is ultimately created to be under God’s reign as the true king over His kingdom.