

Hope Presbyterian Church
Women's Bible Study
Psalms Study Guide

Introduction to the Psalms

The book of Psalms is a treasure at the heart of the Bible. In many ways, these poems and songs functioned as the hymnbook of the Old Testament and yet were not limited to an Old Testament relevance: second only to Isaiah the book of Psalms is directly quoted over 400 times in the New Testament.

150 unique psalms written over many years, by a wide array of authors, and springing from a diversity of real-life circumstances unify to give us a full spectrum of what it means to bear God's image in a broken world and to relate to God authentically as broken people.

John Calvin in reflection upon the Psalms concluded:

"I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul;" for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or, rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated (Commentary on the Book of Psalms, xxxvi-ii)".

Martin Luther similarly wrote about the Psalms:

"And they that they speak these words to God and with God, this, I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life . . . Hence it is that the Psalter is the book of all saints; and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation Psalms and words that fit his case, that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better."

[The Psalms] *"teach us how to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies on the bottom of it. They instruct us to speak earnestly amid storms and winds of every kind."*

How the Psalms are Organized

The Psalms are divided into 5 "books" with a gesture towards the 5 books of the Pentateuch:

- ❖ Book 1 - Psalms 1-41:
- ❖ Book 2 - Psalms 42-72
- ❖ Book 3 - Psalms 73-89
- ❖ Book 4 - Psalms 90-106
- ❖ Book 5 - Psalms 107-150

While many folks benefit from that structure, for my purposes in reading, praying, and teaching the Psalms, I have found it much more readily accessible and useful to concentrate on the type of Psalm rather which "book" it has been classified in.

Knowing the genre of the psalm in play provides an interpretive strategy as well as guide for praying that psalm or singing that psalm.

Types of Psalms¹

The Psalms can be identified according to some basic categories:

Laments - which lay a troubled situation before the Lord, asking him for help. There are community (Psalm 12) and individual (Psalm 13) laments. This category is the largest by far, including up to a third of all Psalms.

Penitential Psalms - confessing sin and asking for mercy (Psalm 32, 51, 130)

Hymns of praise - which call God's people to admire his great attributes and deeds. Examples include Psalms 8; 93; and 145.

Hymns of thanksgiving - As with laments, there are community (Psalm 9) and individual (Psalm 30) thanksgiving psalms.

Hymns celebrating God's law (Psalm 119).

Wisdom psalms (Psalms 1; 37), which reflect themes from the Wisdom Books (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon).

Songs of confidence - which enable worshipers to deepen their trust in God amid difficult circumstances (Psalm 23).

Royal psalms - which present the Davidic monarchy as the vehicle of blessing for God's people. Some of these are prayers (Psalm 20), some are thanksgivings (Psalm 21). All relate to the Messiah, the ultimate heir of David, either by setting a pattern (Psalms 20–21) or by portraying the king's reign in such a way that only the Messiah can completely fulfill it (Psalms 2; 72), or by focusing on the future (Psalm 110).

Historical psalms - which take lessons from the history of God's dealings with his people (Psalm 78).

Prophetic hymns - which echo the Prophets, calling people to covenant faithfulness (Psalm 81).

Imprecatory psalms - psalms which ask for God to bring justice and execute accountability to the enemies of his people (Psalm 3, 137)

The Function of the Psalms in the Christian Life

❖ Covenant Relationship

The governing assumption of the book of Psalms is that Yahweh is the God who has brought his people out of Egypt with a mighty, gracious, and redemptive hand. He gathered them at the foot of Mount Sinai and entered into a covenant relationship with them there - promising to be their God and promising to make them into his people - solely on the basis of his mere good pleasure and steadfast love. Of course, the covenant was a renewal of the same promises he made to Abraham years before.

All that is to say the covenantal name of the 'LORD' animates and paces these songs of worship, lament, petition, imprecation, and trust. The psalms, therefore, are not songs to get God's attention or a performance to gain his favor. They are God's people relating intimately and authentically with this LORD who has made and kept his promises, whose love is steadfast, whose care is without question. The psalms as a whole and individually showcase a responsive faith and intimate relationship between God and his people.

¹ Thanks to the ESV Study Bible for some help with the various types of psalms we encounter.

❖ Honest Expression

The assured welcome and relationship that comes from being God's covenant people paves the way for his people to speak honestly and pointedly to God in prayer and in worship. Ewan Kennedy writes:

The Psalms have taught me that “worship is meant to consist of much more than singing happy and thankful songs. And ultimately, I had missed something about God himself – the fact that He is not afraid of our struggle, pain, confusion, or even our anger. More than that, he wants us to bring those things to Him in song, and He so intended to underscore this desire for us that He gave us more examples of tearful and pain-filled “praising” than he did jubilant and triumphant celebration . . . If Scripture regulates worship, as we believe, then it calls for something more daring, more poignant, and, yes, more costly than we would prefer to give. Again and again the message of the Psalms re-echoes: “To wrestle with God is worship. Bring your broken and turbulent heart with you.”

The psalms allow us to open up our hearts and pour out what lies on the bottom - through lament, through jubilant praising, through desperate pleas for mercy.

The psalms allow us to express our lives honestly before God's face because he cares for us!

❖ Hopeful Formation

While the psalms do liberate us to express honestly before God's face as God's welcomed children, they also serve a formative role for God's people. God puts on our lips the kinds of things he desires for us to pray and to sing.

Dan Doriani reflects upon this formative function of the Psalter: *“By meditating on the psalms we also learn to treasure gratitude, praise, humility, awe, justice, and righteousness. They invite us into a world that values something besides ceaseless activity . . . Songs and prayers of praise may be most likely to touch the emotions or the spirit (not that the cognitive element is absent), but they have a second effect. If it is true that people learn to value what they behold, it is truer that people value what they praise. If we praise God for his justice, we prize justice. If we praise him for his loving kindness, we cherish lovingkindness. By praising God for such qualities, we treasure them and are drawn to them ourselves (Putting the Truth to Work 92).”*

Some Resources for Encountering the Psalms

❖ Devotional Resources:

Dale Ralph Davis, *The Way of the Righteous In the Muck of Life*
Tim Keller, *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions in the Psalms*

❖ Commentaries on the Psalms

Derek Kidner, *The Psalms*
Kathleen B Nielson, *Living Word Bible Studies: Psalms Volume 1*
Mark Futato, *Transformed by Praise*

❖ General Psalm Resources:



O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*
Allender and Longman, *The Cry of the Heart*
David Taylor, *Open and Unafraid*