

IN HONOUR OF KING YAHWEH: The Book of Psalms

Week 1 — How to approach the Psalms



Approaching the Psalms

It seems like everybody loves the Psalms. They help us worship and give thanks. They help us get through difficult times where God seems distant. They are some of the most intimate and personal expressions anywhere in Scripture. Whatever your emotions, you'll find them in the Psalms—singing and dancing, crying and mourning, shouting with joy, struggling with depression, or silently meditating.

Come with us on a journey exploring the richness and diversity of these amazing songs that still resonate within us, 2000 – 3000 years after they were written.

Most significantly, the Psalms are a revelation of the character of God. That's what they were for Israel in Old Testament times: **Israel** used them in festivals, in worship, on Sabbaths, in coronations, in victories, in defeats, in teaching Torah, in expressing complaints. They were the songs in which Israel encountered God. We need to begin reading any Psalm by asking, "What did this mean to Israel?"

When Israel's God came to walk among them in the person of **Jesus**, he gave them a more complete revelation of himself. When we re-read the Psalms in light of Jesus, they take on a whole new level of meaning beyond what they meant in Old Testament times.

Consequently, the Psalms are favourites for Christians too. Our next question is therefore, "What does this Psalm mean in light of Jesus?"

Only when we have understood what the Psalm meant for Israel, and how it reads in light of Jesus can we really understand what it means **for us**.

So, we will use these questions as we approach the Psalms:

1. What did the Psalm mean for Israel?
2. What does it mean in the light of Jesus?
3. What does it mean for us?

Overview of Psalms

The word *psalm* comes from the old English (*p*)*sealm*, via ecclesiastical Latin, from the Greek word *psalmos* 'song sung to harp music'.¹

There are 150 Psalms—far more chapters than any other Bible book. It's not easy to get an overview of what the psalms are: different types and styles and emphases, and how they fit together. (We need some kind of Psalms Explorer to give us the big picture.)

A book of books

The Book of Psalms contains **5 books** (perhaps like the Pentateuch):

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

¹ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Each book ends with a marker that is not strictly part of that Psalm:

41:13 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.

72:20 The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.

89:52 Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.

Other psalms were written that are not in our Bible, e.g. you will find Psalm 151 among deuterio-canonical books of a Catholic Bible.

Genres

There are several literary types within Psalms. The Psalms of a genre tend to have the same elements in the same order (similar structure).

The genres are:

- a) **Lament** (justice complaint—59 psalms):
 - communal: Psa 14, 36, 44, 60, 74, 79–80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 137.
 - individual: Psa 3–7, 9–10, 12–13, 17, 22, 25–28, 31, 35, 38, 56, 62, 69, 88, 102, 109, 139, 140–143.
- b) **Praise** (41): Psa 8, 29, 33, 46–48, 65–68, 76, 81, 84, 87, 92, 95–100, 103–106, 108, 111, 113–115, 117, 135, 136, 138, 145–150.
- c) **Hymn** (17): Psa 15, 24, 120 – 134.
- d) **Royal** (10): Psa 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 144.
- e) **Wisdom** (9): Psa 1, 19, 37, 49, 50, 73, 78, 112, 119.
- f) **Thanksgiving** (8): Psa 30, 32, 34, 40, 75, 107, 116, 118.
- g) **Trust** (6): Psa 11, 16, 23, 62, 63, 91.

To determine the genre, ask:

- What's happening? Complaint? Praise? Thanksgiving?
- Who's speaking? *I* (individual), *we* (community), or both?
- Is the king mentioned?

Titles

Titles (headings before verse 1) were added to provide some background as the psalms were collated. Examples:

- Who the psalm was written by or dedicated to:
 - David (74): e.g. Psa 3–41; 51–71; 108–110, 138–145
 - Sons of Korah (choir—12): Psa 42–49; 84–85; 87–88
 - Asaph (worship leader—12): Psa 50; 73–83
- The collection the psalm belonged to:
 - Songs of Ascent: Psa 120–134
 - Hallelujah: Psa 146–150
- Other information:
 - type: *psalm* (50), *song* (30), *maskil* (contemplation?—13)
 - musical instructions: *for stringed instruments*, *for flutes*, *selah* (musical rest?)
 - historical notes, tying the psalm to an event (e.g. Psa 51)
 - liturgical purpose, e.g. *petition*, *for the Sabbath*

Purpose

The five books of psalms were used by the Jewish community for worship: at the temple, in synagogues, for the annual festivals, on Sabbaths, and in daily life (since songs are memorable).

Yahweh is king! That is the foundational theme of all the Psalms, as it was the foundation of Israel's life. It underpins all genres:

- **Royal** psalms declare and celebrate his kingship.
- **Hymns** give honour to the one who reigns.
- **Praise** psalms give thanks for the king's provision and actions.
- **Wisdom** psalms teach obedience to the king's laws (Torah).
- **Thanksgiving** psalms express gratitude for the king's actions.
- **Trust** psalms invite his subjects to trust the king's protection.
- **Laments** are requests for the king's attention to cases where a community or individual experiences injustice, where life is not working out as it should under his reign.

The Psalms are all about the relationship between the divine monarch and his subjects.

Questions to ask

As you study a Psalm, ask:

1. What **genre** is it? (See the list of genres above)?
And how is it **structured**? (We'll explain this as we go.)
2. What did the psalm mean for the **Jewish** people of OT times?
3. How should we read the psalm in the light of **Jesus**?
4. How does the psalm apply to **us**?

Let's see how those questions help us read one we all know,

Psalm 23:

1. *Genre?* Trust (inviting us to trust heavenly king's protection).
2. *What did the psalm mean for the Jewish people?*
"Shepherd" meant a ruler—the king or high priest who cared for the people on YHWH's behalf. As King David mused over how he must rule Israel, he realised it was exactly as YHWH ruled him and the other sheep: with understanding, provision, right management, protection, supervision, as his household.
3. *How should we read the psalm in the light of Jesus?*
Jesus is the anointed king descendant of David, our shepherd king. As Jesus faced evil for us, imagine what it would have meant for him to pray, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death ..."
4. *How does the psalm apply to us?*
The Lord is my shepherd ruler, and I will trust him wherever he takes me—beside still waters and through death's dark valley. He's been there: he knows how to take us through.

These simple questions can really open up the Psalms.

Do you have questions or thoughts at this stage?

Understanding Hebrew songs

Parallelism

The Psalms don't look very much like our English poems or songs. Hebrew poetry had rhythm like ours do, but the cadence gets lost in translation. Our songs usually rhyme, e.g.:

Australians all let us rejoice, For we are young and free;
 We've golden soil and wealth for toil; Our home is girt by sea;
 Our land abounds in nature's gifts Of beauty rich and rare;
 In history's page, let every stage: Advance Australia Fair.

Roses are red,
 Violets are blue.
 Most poems rhyme;
 This one doesn't.

There's no meaningful connection between "free" and "sea" — it just sounds like the words match. (The same goes for "rare" and "fair.")

The Hebrews did not usually write songs with matching sounds. They wrote with matching ideas—expressing the same thing in a different way. It's what we call it parallelism.

Let's see how this works in Psalm 1.

Psalm 1

Once you start to recognise parallelism, the meaning and structure of the Psalms make so much more sense, so let's learn by doing one:

Psalm 1	Parallelism
<p>¹ Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,</p>	<p><i>Similar expressions (the bad way):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • keeping step with the wicked • standing in the way of sinners • keeping company with mockers
<p>² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.</p>	<p><i>Similar expressions (the good way):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • delighting in Yahweh's Torah • constantly meditating on Torah
<p>³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.</p>	<p><i>Developing expressions (a meaningful life):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • securely rooted into the source of life • consequently, fruitful • and always verdant • and so prosperous
<p>⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.</p>	<p><i>Developing expressions (a meaningless life):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not planted • consequently, blown around aimlessly
<p>⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.</p>	<p><i>Similar expressions (bad outcomes):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wicked won't survive • sinners won't have a place
<p>⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.</p>	<p><i>Contrasting expressions (different outcomes):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • those who do right are protected • those who do wrong are destroyed

We saw three forms of parallelism here:

- a) *synonymous*: expressing the **same** idea in other words: v. 1
- b) *antithetical*: contrasting the **opposite** idea: v. 6; Prov 15:1.
- c) *synthetic*: **developing** the previous idea: v. 3; Psa 23:1.

Note that the parallels are not just in one verse. The whole Psalm consists of parallels:

- The bad way (v.1) is contrasted with the good way (v.2) — antithetical.
- The meaningful life (v.3) is contrasted with the meaningless life (v.4) — antithetical.
- The meaningless life (v.4) is developed further re the bad outcomes (v.5) — synthetic.
- The bad outcomes (v.5) are developed into two possible choices (v.6) — synthetic.
- The final verse has therefore developed the thoughts of the whole Psalm (the two ways).

Practice recognising the parallels. We won't be explicitly analysing the parallelism of each Psalm over the next few weeks, as it could become tedious. Hopefully you can absorb it as we go. Once you get it, the Psalms feel like a richly textured Van Gogh where the individual brush strokes build up thick paint to form a masterpiece.

Now let's apply our four questions to Psalm 1.

Q1 Genre and structure

Psalm 1 is **wisdom** teaching. The Jewish people believed that YHWH had blessed them by giving them the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) as the foundational principles for a good life. Wisdom teaching was therefore instructing people to follow Torah as a way of life. The wisdom Psalms are meditations on how life is so much better for those who fear God by following the way of life he prescribed. All 176 verses of Psalm 119 are parallel ways of making this same point. The book of Proverbs also instructs people to follow Torah wisdom.

Q2 Meaning for the Jewish people

Psalms 1 and 2 serve as an introduction to the entire Psalter. They have no titles at the top, for they are the heading over the Book. YHWH is the king (Psalm 2). He makes the laws, and those who follow his Law are the most blessed of people (Psalm 1).

Q3 Meaning in light of Jesus

Actually, Jesus was not a very good example of Psalm 1. He was constantly getting into trouble for hanging out with sinners, e.g.:

Mark 2 ¹⁵ Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners. (There were many people of this kind among Jesus' followers.) ¹⁶ But when the teachers of religious law who were Pharisees saw him eating with tax collectors and other sinners, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with such scum?" (NLT)

What was he doing? Why didn't Jesus live by this Psalm?

Jesus certainly knew the first Psalm, and would have agreed that obedience to Torah and doing life with those who are obedient to Torah was the best way to enjoy God's blessing. But Jesus had another agenda: he was not seeking to get the best life he could get for

himself. Instead, he wanted to connect with the people who were missing out—those who were outside of God’s blessing—and to bring them back into the life of connection with God! It was a conscious choice to step out of the blest space and identify with the rejects!

That’s a far deeper wisdom, and one that certainly eluded the Pharisees.

Q4 Meaning for us

The best life you could have is walking in God’s ways. You never gain by cheating or compromising your integrity, because you are giving up too much.

Nevertheless, Jesus calls us to “take up our cross”—to identify with people who are broken and rejected, “sinners” and outcasts. You will be hurt doing that. It’s worth it. That’s how God brings the broken world back to himself.

The wisdom of Psalm 1 stands. But Jesus shows us how to live with a deeper wisdom that calls us to join suffering people, to reconcile the world to God.

Conclusion

As you read Psalms, look for the central message that YHWH is king.

Ask these questions:

1. What **genre** is it?
2. What did the psalm mean for the **Jewish** people?
3. How should we read the psalm in the light of **Jesus**?
4. How does the psalm apply to **us**?

Recognise the parallels (synonymous, antithetical, synthetic), so you understand how the lines of the Psalm contribute to its meaning.

Of course, the Psalms are much more than an intellectual exercise. They express the intimacy of a God who is personally involved in our lives, and how we respond to him. We are invited to join in: to sing and dance and worship, to ponder and meditate God’s awesome majesty, to give voice to our fears and our faith, to express our struggles and our inadequacies. Most of all, we are encouraged to focus on God, to interact with the one who rules heaven and earth.

Memory verse

Psalm 1:6 (NIV)

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Resources

Here are some suggestions to help with your study of the Psalms.

Free on-line:

- <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/treasury-of-david/>
- <http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/>
- <https://www.biblegateway.com/>

Commentaries you can buy:

- Craig C Broyles. *Psalms*. UBCS. (Baker, 2012)
- John Goldingay. *Psalms for Everyone, Part 1: Psa 1-72 & Part 2: Psa 73-150*. (SPCK, 2013, 2014)
- Tremper Longman. *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*. TOTC. (IVP, 2014)
- D A Carson et al. *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*. (IVP, 1994)

The last one above gives you a single volume on the whole Bible.

Note: commentaries based on the Hebrew text (MT = Masoretic Text) number Psalms differently:

- In Hebrew, **Psalms 9 and 10** are combined into one, and **Psalm 147** is split into two. So, our Psalm 11 is Psalm 10 in Hebrew; our Psalm 12 is their Psalm 11, and so on.
- In Hebrew, the **title** above verse 1 in our translation is treated as verse 1. So, our verse 1 is their verse 2, and so on.

Take home exercise

Read Psalm 2. Can you identify examples of the three types of parallelism?

Apply the four questions we suggested to Psalm 2. It's a royal psalm. Think about what it would have meant to Israel, and then its meaning for the Messiah, before you ask what it means to us.

Did you come across the central message of all the Psalms, that YHWH is king?

Did these questions help you appreciate what the Psalm was about?

We'll dive further into Psalm 2 next week.

Notes for *Foundations 315* will be available on this page:

<http://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/watch-listen/podcasts/foundations-3.html>