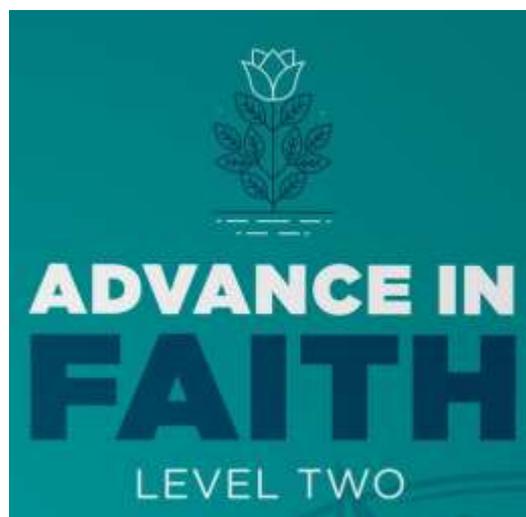


The Psalms: In Honour of our King

Week 1 — How to approach the Psalms



Approaching the Psalms

Everybody loves the Psalms. What is it about the Psalms that makes them so special to you?

.....

Which Psalms stand out to you? Any favourites?

.....

What would you like to learn about the Psalms in the next 6 weeks? Anything you find confusing? Any questions you'd like us to address?

.....

Tonight we'll survey the Book of Psalms as a whole, and then dive into Psalm 1. In coming weeks, we'll generally look at 2 Psalms per week, so we'll only cover about 10 Psalms. After these examples, you'll be able to take the questions we use and apply them to any of the 150 Psalms.

The Psalms help us to worship and give thanks. They help us survive 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 grieving, shouting with joy, struggling with depression, silently meditating.

Three simple questions can give you insight into the depth of the Psalms. Rather than just what it means for me, these questions reveal a 3D perspective—what the Psalm has meant over time:

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?

Israel used the Psalms to honour the heavenly sovereign who reigned over their nation. They used specific Psalms in festivals, in worship, on Sabbaths, in coronation, in victories, in defeats, in teaching Torah, in expressing complaints about life under God's kingship. To understand a Psalm, we begin 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?*

Once we understand what the Psalm meant for Israel, and what it means in light of Jesus, we can then ask, *What does it mean for us?*

Overview of the Psalms

No other Bible book has anywhere near 150 chapters!

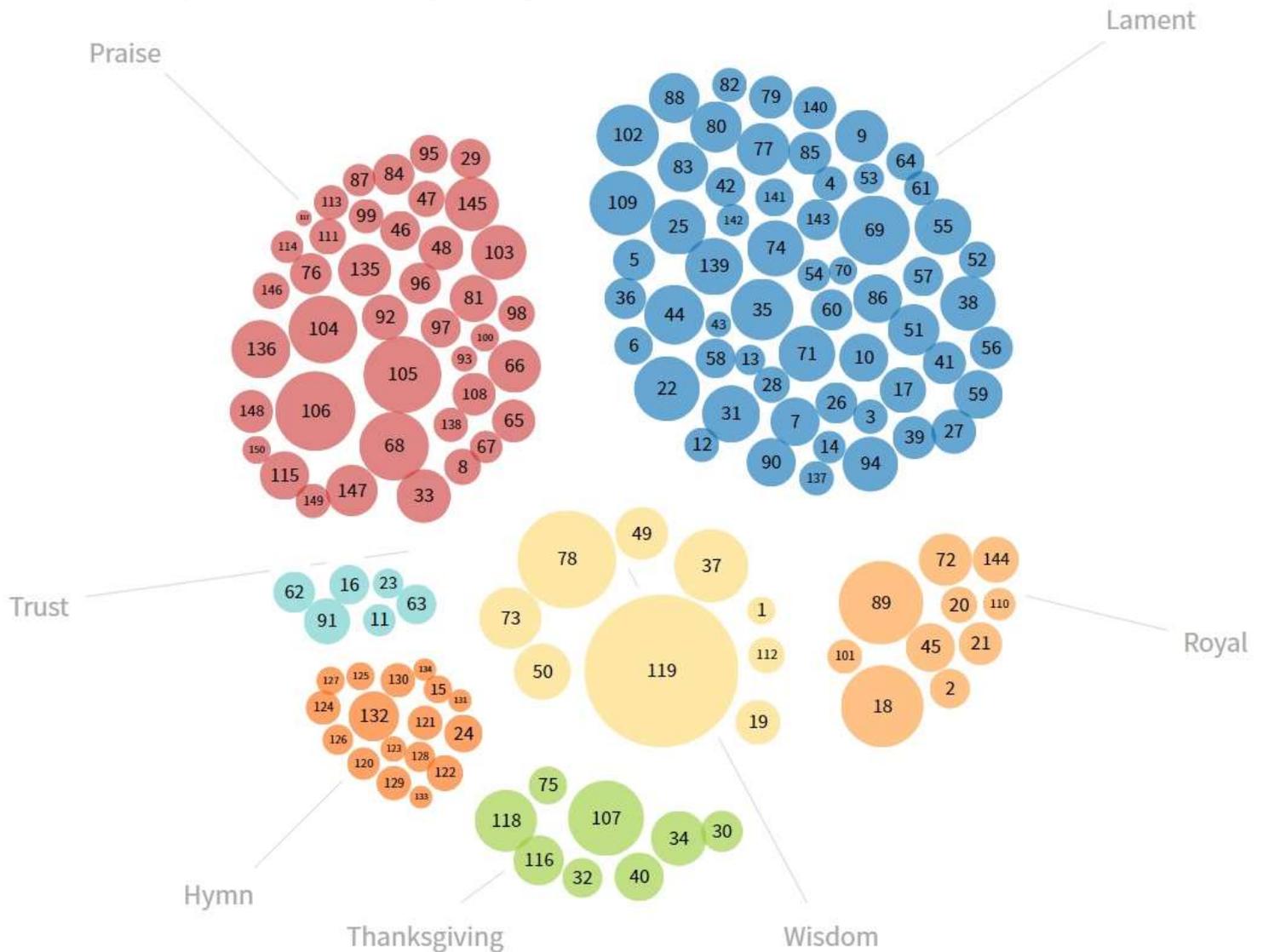
How do you wrap your head around the Psalms?

One way is to recognize what kind of Psalm it is— its genre.

By Genre

Laments are the biggest group, followed by Praise songs and Hymns.

Royal songs mention the king. Wisdom Psalms teach the wisdom of following God's Law, including the longest Psalm (119).¹



These are the genres of the Psalms:

- **Lament:** 59 Psalms complain about injustice (life's not fair):
Psalms 3–7, 9–10, 12–14, 17, 22, 25–28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 44, 56, 60, 62, 69, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 88, 90, 94, 102, 109, 137, 139, 140–143.
- **Praise:** 41 Psalms give honour to God (as sovereign):
Psalms 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.

¹ Diagram from David Witthoff et al, *Psalms Form and Structure*. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2014.

- **Hymn:** 17 Psalms are hymns to God:
Psalms 15, 24, 120 – 134.
- **Royal:** 10 Psalms celebrate the king (representing God as king):
Psalms 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 144.
- **Wisdom:** 9 Psalms teach the wisdom of following God’s Law:
Psalms 1, 19, 37, 49, 50, 73, 78, 112, 119.
- **Thanksgiving:** 8 Psalms give thanks to God:
Psalms 30, 32, 34, 40, 75, 107, 116, 118.
- **Trust;** 6 Psalms call us to trust God:
Psalms 11, 16, 23, 62, 63, 91.

By Title

Before verse 1 in many of the Psalms is a title to help us understand it.

Individual Psalms were written at different times in Israel’s history. Some are from the time of the kingdom, when David and his descendants ruled as king. Others were written after Babylon invaded and terminated the Davidic kingship (586 BC).

After return from exile, they collated the 150 psalms, adding the titles to help us make sense of them. The titles include:

- **Attribution:** 74 are “Davidic” (3-41; 51-71; 108-110, 138-145).
12 are Levitical (“Sons of Korah”: 42-49; 84-85; 87-88).
12 are of the worship leader (“Asaph”: 50; 73-83).
- **Collection:** Psalms 120–134 are a group, “Songs of Ascent.”
Psalms 146–160 are a group with the heading, “Hallelujah”
- **Type:** 50 Psalms are labelled “Psalm.” 30 are labelled “Song.”
13 are called “Maskil” (a Hebrew word, perhaps meditation).
- **Historical Note:** Some titles indicate a historical setting for the Psalm (e.g. Psalm 51).
- **Musical Instructions,** e.g. “for stringed instruments”, “for flutes,”
“selah” (possibly a musical rest?)
- **Liturgical Purpose:** Some titles provide information on how the Psalm was used (e.g. “A petition” or “For the Sabbath.”)

By Book

The collators arranged the Psalms into five “books”:

- **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

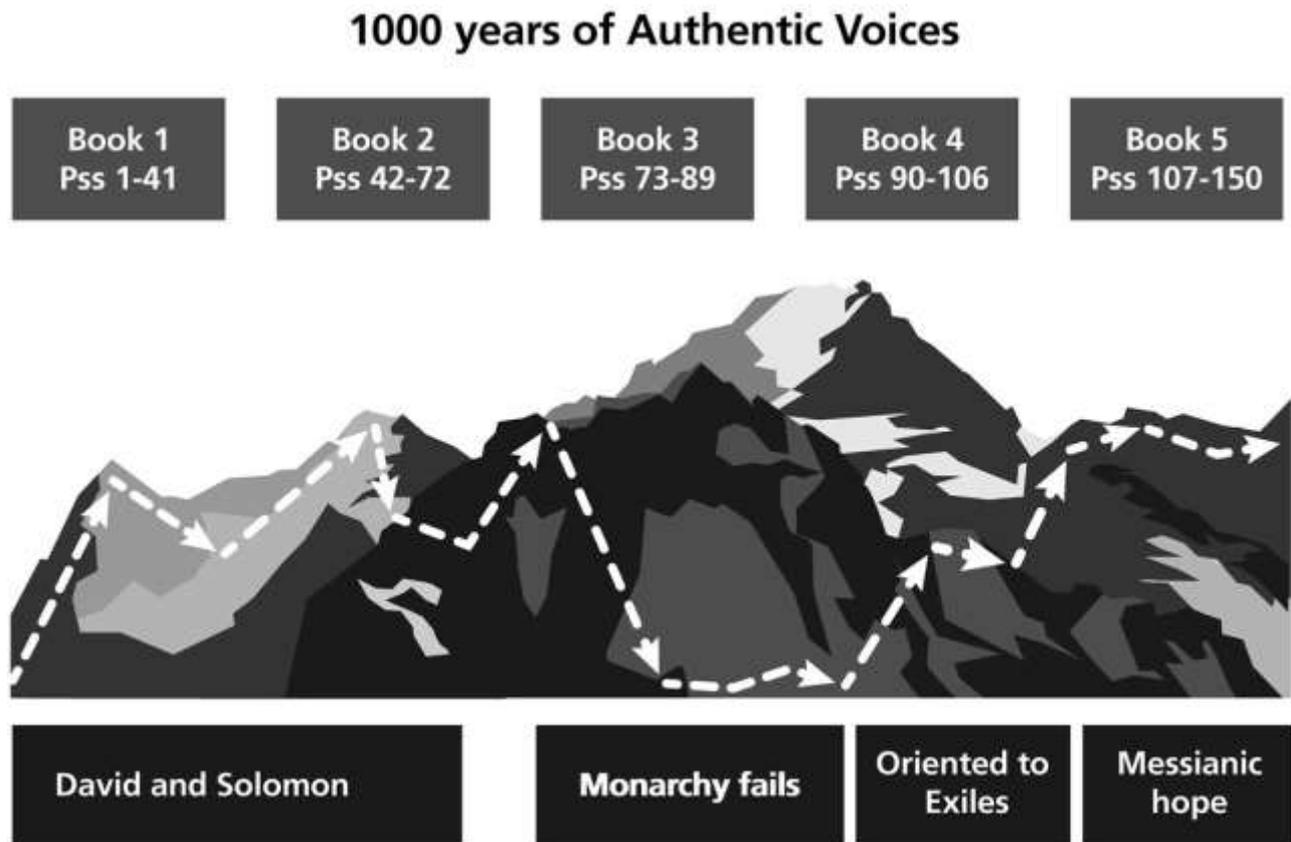
Each book ends with a marker that is not strictly part of that Psalm:

- 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.
- 106:48** Praise the LORD.

This arrangement of Psalms is not arbitrary. How a Psalm fits in this arrangement is part of its context. The five books reflect Israel’s story as God’s representative kingdom on earth:

- Book 1:** David’s kingship (representing God’s rule on earth)
- Book 2:** David’s kingship continuing in Solomon (his son)
- Book 3:** The failure of the kingdom (to Assyria and Babylon)
- Book 4:** Trying to make sense of God’s kingship after exile
- Book 5:** Hoping for the restoration of God’s kingship.

Karen Dabaghian diagrams it like this:²



² Dabaghian, Karen. *A Travelogue of the Interior: Finding Your Voice and God’s Heart in the Psalms*. Colorado Springs, CO: David C Cook, 2015.

Theme of the Psalms

The Psalms celebrate God: his sovereignty over creation, and how he leads the covenant people who represent him on earth. The theme is:

God reigns!

The 5-book structure indicates how the Psalms capture this unresolved story of God's reign:

- **Book 1:** As God's anointed, King David represented God's reign on earth, through all the ups and downs.
- **Book 2:** The Davidic kingship continued to represent God's reign on earth in subsequent generations (Solomon etc.)
- **Book 3:** This all fell apart when Israel fell to Babylon. As the nation represented God's kingship on earth, they had failed.
- **Book 4:** Even in their failure, they still declare God's kingship (e.g. "YHWH reigns!" — Psalm 97:1).
- **Book 5:** They recalled God's reign and yearned for it to be restored on earth, through his anointed son of David.

God's kingship is the heart of all genres:

- **Praise** psalms give honour to the King.
- **Thanksgiving** psalms offer gratitude to the King.
- **Wisdom** psalms celebrate the Sovereign's wise Law.
- **Laments** are justice complaints: things are not working out as they should, but Lament psalms still affirm God's reign.
- **Royal** psalms recognize and pray for the Davidic king, the anointed representative of the heavenly king on earth.

The first two Psalms introduce the message of the whole book:

- **Psalm 1** describes life as it is meant to be under God's reign, when God's people respect and follow his Law.
- **Psalm 2** describes how the human kings (David's descendants) were intended to represent God's kingship on earth.

The Psalms are all about communal relationship with God:

God as king, with his covenant people living as his kingdom.

So here's what the Book of Psalms is all about:

Psalm 2 goes on to give us an overview of the message of the book of Psalms, and that message is: **our God is king**, or in other words, the Lord reigns. Jake Clinton McCann has said, "While Psalm 1 orients the reader to receive the whole collection as instruction, Psalm 2 makes explicit the essential content of the instruction—the **Lord reigns!**"³

³ Mark D. Futato, *CM328 Preaching the Psalms*, Logos Mobile Education (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

Psalm 1

Is this Psalm a favourite? What does it mean to you? Discuss.

Structure

Before explaining what it means, let's see how Hebrew songs work.

We won't do this in detail for each Psalm, but it helps to see how the Psalm fits together. The NIV divides Psalm 1 into three **stanzas**:

- Verses 1-3: the stable life in submission to God's kingship.
- Verses 4-5: the unstable life of those who don't.
- Verse 6: the punchline, summarizing the contrast.

Within each stanza, the song is divided into **lines**.

Verse 1 announces blessing on 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*

Those three lines express the same idea in parallel ways.

Verse 2 has two lines, with parallel thought:

² *but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.*

What we're seeing here is called **parallelism**. Hebrew songs don't rhyme. We're used to the sound at the end of each line rhyming, but the lines of Hebrew songs have **rhyming ideas**, not rhyming sounds.

This parallelism is the richness of the Hebrew songs. Each verse has its own parallels. Then verse 1 and 2 are contrasts as well: the negatives (verse 1) parallel the positives (verse 2).

Verse 3 then takes the thoughts of verse 2, and extends them into a powerful word picture:

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.*

So verse 3 contains four parallel expressions, and together these thoughts are an extension of verse 2. Verse 3 grows out of verse 2 (the positives).

In the same way, Verse 4 grows out of verse 1 (the negatives):

⁴ *Not so the wicked!
They are like chaff that the wind blows away.*

Verse 5 then converts the negative images of verse 4 into a clear statement:

⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

Finally, verse 6 pulls together everything that has been said—both the positive and the negative sides—and wraps it up as the contrast that is the message of the whole Psalm:

⁶ *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

Recognizing the parallelism strongly enhances our capacity to understand what the Psalm is saying. It also helps us avoid traps (such as looking for a difference between parallel statements).

In summary, there are three **forms of parallelism** to recognize:⁴

- a) **synonymous**: expressing the *same* idea in other words,
e.g. in the lines of verse 1 are synonymous.
- b) **antithetical**: contrasting the *opposite* idea,
e.g. verse 2 is the antithesis of verse 1.
- c) **synthetic**: *developing* the previous idea,
e.g. verse 3 extends the ideas of verses 1 and 2.

Meaning for Israel

Psalms 1 and 2 were regarded as the introduction to the entire Psalter. They have no titles: in effect they are the title over the whole Book.

Verse 2 talks about delighting in “**the law of the LORD.**” Christians often equate this with the Bible, so to “meditate on his law” is to mediate on the Bible. While meditating on Scripture is a good idea, that’s not quite what this text is saying.

The Hebrew word is *Tôrāh*. Torah refers to the foundational books of the Jewish faith: Genesis – Deuteronomy. These five books are the Law given by God as instruction for Israel’s life.

Notice also that the word *LORD* was written in small-capitals. The translators are telling us it’s the Hebrew word YHWH—the divine name revealed to Israel in the Sinai covenant relationship.

“The law of the LORD” is literally “the Torah of YHWH.” YHWH is king, and therefore law-giver. By giving them his law, YHWH constituted Israel as a nation that operated under his kingship (under his law).

Since Israel’s identity was derived from YHWH’s kingship, each Israelite was duty-bound to walk in step with YHWH, not in step with the wicked. They were to find delight in living a life congruent with his expectations as expressed in the Torah (the law of the LORD). To treat his kingship (his Law) as irrelevant would be to mock God.

⁴ There are other forms of parallelism too, but they are generally combinations of these three.

Verse 6 explains the consequences of submitting to or resisting God. As their king, God oversees matters of justice in his nation (“the LORD watches over the way of the righteous”). The rebellious—those who refuse to live under his kingship—end up destroying themselves (“the way of the wicked leads to destruction”).

The final book of the Law of the LORD (the Torah of YHWH) is Deuteronomy. Structured as a covenant document, it concludes by spelling out the consequences of obeying or disobeying the covenant.⁵

The impact of the Torah on people’s daily life comes into sharp focus in Deuteronomy 27-28—the blessings and curses they could expect:

- Those who obeyed YHWH’s Torah would experience blessing.
- Those who disobeyed the covenant would experience trouble.

The whole of the rest of the Old Testament is built on this contrast, the two possible ways to respond to YHWH’s Torah:

- It’s the double-edged message of the **Prophets**:
 - warning of disaster as a consequence for disobedience,
 - declaring blessing/restoration when they turn back to God.
- It’s the heart of **wisdom teaching**, the contrasting ways found in Proverbs and the wisdom Psalms (such as 1, 119).

That’s why Psalm 1 has pride of place, at the head of the Psalter.

Meaning in light of Jesus

Psalm 1 does not sit well with the life of Jesus. He was constantly accused of walking with the wicked, standing with the sinners, and eating with those whose lifestyle made a mockery of YHWH’s Torah.

Mark 2¹⁵ While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. ¹⁶ When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

Jesus was scandalous. I can imagine a good Jewish parent saying, “No, you certainly cannot go out with Jesus tonight. I don’t want you going to the places he goes to, or hanging around with that sort.”

Why wasn’t Jesus living in accordance with Psalm 1?

This is the reason Jesus had so much trouble from the Pharisees. By New Testament times, Israel no longer existed as a free nation. Because of their disobedience to the Torah covenant, God had sent them into exile, and they were still under foreign rule.

⁵ Meredith Kline. *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012.

The Torah promised God would restore them:

Deuteronomy 30 ² When you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.

But they had not been restored. They'd been oppressed for more than 600 years (587 BC – AD 30). The Pharisees concluded that they had not yet returned to God with all their heart. Their task was therefore to call the people to do better, to no longer “walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers” (Psalm 1:1).

That approach put the Pharisees on a collision course with Jesus. What on earth was Jesus doing? Why didn't he live by Psalm 1?

Jesus certainly knew the first Psalm. He would have agreed that blessing comes to those who obey YHWH's Torah, and trouble comes to those who don't. But Jesus had another agenda. He wasn't seeking to get the best life he could get for himself.

Instead, Jesus chose to do life with those who were suffering, the people who were missing out, the people who were living outside of God's blessing. His mission wasn't to get everyone to be more obedient to YHWH's Torah: it was to bring everybody back under YHWH's kingship.

Jesus was the one God anointed to restore his kingship on earth. Instead of announcing curses on those who disobeyed God's Torah, Jesus stepped outside the blessed space of Torah obedience, taking on board the suffering of those who were hurting for their Torah disobedience. Instead of the Torah blessing, Jesus chose the Torah curse on behalf of the rejected people (compare Galatians 3:10).

The Pharisees tried to save Israel by publicly shaming the “sinners,” to make them shape up or ship out. Jesus doesn't want to sacrifice the sinners to save the nation; he's sacrificing himself to save them:

Matthew 9 ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”

¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.

That's a far deeper wisdom, a redemptive wisdom, a wisdom that eluded the Pharisees.

Meaning for us

Having looked at Psalm 1 in light of Jesus, it won't do to just say, "Well, I'd like to have the blessed life that comes from obedience to YHWH's Torah."

We're not living under the Torah that God gave to Israel (e.g. Numbers 15:32-36). We're under a different covenant, a life marked by renewed hearts and knowing God (Jeremiah 31:31-34). God's Anointed has fulfilled the requirements of Torah for his people (Matthew 5:17). He is now the king of God's kingdom—the king to whom we give our allegiance (faith) and obedience.

This is the best life we could have. Those who are deeply rooted in Christ are like a tree planted by streams of water: drinking from this sustaining presence, fruitful and productive, still flourishing even in dry times.

It is not so for those who refuse to submit to King Jesus because they think they'll have a better life by dominating others, cheating on their business clients or their marriage partners. Their life will be unstable, as unsatisfying as chaff that gets blown away by the wind.

So the wisdom of Psalm 1 still works for the new covenant. But we're not merely called to the best life we can have for ourselves. We're called to lose our life for our King and his regal purposes (Matthew 10:39). If I keep my life for myself, I lose it.

Jesus calls us not to ostracise wicked people, but to suffer for them, to "take up our cross" also, to identify with people who are broken and rejected, treated as "sinners" and outcasts. It will hurt. It's worth it. This is how God brings the broken world back to himself.

Christians are not called to a safe life where we experience God's blessing while others suffer. We're called to be the community that suffers without taking revenge, responding to mistreatment with blessing, overcoming the evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).

Our King is still overseeing his covenant people, and calling us to act redemptively for the sake of those who are losing out:

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

The wisdom of Psalm 1 stands. But Jesus leads us into a deeper wisdom: the wisdom of the cross. It's how God reconciles the world to himself.

Conclusion

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

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

Ask these questions:

1. What did the psalm mean for **Israel**?
2. How does it mean as we re-read it in the light of **Jesus**?
3. How does it apply to **us** today?

Of course, the Psalms are much more than an intellectual exercise. They're the voice of intimacy with God, a God who is personally involved in our lives. They guide our responses to him.

The Psalms invite us 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, the Psalms lift our eyes up to our heavenly sovereign, encouraging us to be the community that represents his reign.

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

Free on-line:

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

One book with background on all the Bible's books:

- Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. (Zondervan, 2002).

Non-technical commentaries:

- Craig C Broyles. *Psalms*. UBCS. (Baker, 2012)
- John Goldingay. *Psalms for Everyone (2 volumes)* (SPCK, 2013, 2014)
- Tremper Longman III. *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*. TOTC. (IVP, 2014)

Technical commentaries (using the Hebrew text):

- Nancy deClaisse-Walford et al. *The Book of Psalms*. NICOT. (Eerdmans, 2014).
- Peter Craigie, Marvin Tate, and Leslie Allen, *Psalms (3 volumes)*. WBC. (Nelson, 2004).

Note that some commentaries are based on the Hebrew text (MT = Masoretic Text), where the Psalms are numbered 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

In preparation for next week, read Psalm 2.

Can you identify examples of the three types of parallelism in this Psalm?

Apply the questions we suggested to Psalm 2. It's classified as a royal psalm. Think about what it would have meant to Israel, and then its meaning for the Messiah, and then what it might mean to us.

We suggested the central message of the Psalms is, God is King. Did you come across that message in Psalm 2?

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

We'll dive further into Psalm 2 next week. Next week's notes will become available here. Scroll down to unit 214:

<https://www.riverviewchurch.com.au/media/courses>

Finally, this quotation addresses the core theme of the Psalms. Many Calvinists recognize “God reigns” as the theme, but they always focus on the sovereignty of God. Here’s a Methodist (so an Arminian) who agrees that God’s reign as the theme of the Psalms:

Although the psalms are quite diverse, one theme pervades them all: **God is King**. His dominion extends throughout the universe because He created and sustained it. This reign will never end because He is eternal and all-powerful.

In His sovereignty, this Great King chose Israel to be His people. He revealed himself to them by a special name, Yahweh, and linked Israel with himself by a covenant. Initiated with Abraham (see Genesis 12, 15, 17), God expanded this covenant with Moses (Exodus–Deuteronomy). In essence, Yahweh promised to serve as a faithful king over Israel in return for its worship and obedience. With such a promise and such a King, it is no wonder praise predominates in the psalms.

The Great King chose Jerusalem for His royal city and the Temple for His palace. In the covenant, He revealed His will for His subjects. Those psalms which praise Jerusalem, the Temple, and the Law, in reality, praise the God who chose them.

“The primary function of an earthly king is to administer justice within his realm, protect the weak from exploitation, and ensure security to his subjects. Precisely so is it with God, the King of the earth.” Confident of God’s rule, Israel went to Him for justice, asking Him to vindicate Israel’s cause and punish the wicked. Because the Israelites knew He was a compassionate and good King, they pled for protection from their enemies.

At that time, only Israel acknowledged God’s sovereignty. This would change, however, and ultimately all the earth would worship Yahweh as King (Psalm 22:27–28); Israel would become the premiere nation. The gods of the surrounding nations (which the psalmist knew were not gods at all) would have to admit that Yahweh ruled. What prevents this from being merely propaganda is the nature of Israel’s mission. This nation was chosen by God, not merely to serve Him, but to serve as a light to the nations, bringing them to God (see Genesis 12:3; Isaiah 49:6). Israel’s victory (Psalm 2) meant that purpose was closer to being accomplished.

Although God was King, He chose to appoint, as His earthly representative, Israel’s king (see Psalm 2), specifically David and his descendants (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89). The earthly king was to be righteous and obedient to God’s Law (Deuteronomy 17:18–20). He should act like God, administering justice, protecting the weak, and ensuring security and blessing to his subjects. Thus, some of the descriptions of the king’s rule picture him in terms larger than life (see Psalm 45:2–5; 72).

After the Babylonian exile terminated the monarchy, Israel read these royal psalms in a more idealistic way. They came to expect from God another king, an Anointed One in the line of David who would lead Israel to the victory God had promised. Such passages informed and fueled the Jewish hope for the Messiah. Jesus’ coming was understood by many as the fulfillment of this hope. Consider Zechariah’s description of Him as “a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:69).⁶

⁶ Stephen J. Lennox, *Psalms: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999), 21–22.