

THE PSALMS

The Who, What, Where, When, and Why of our Most Famous Worship songs 5.10.2020

Helpful hint:

When you're learning to play music, or when learning any new skill, if you try to do it all at once you'll only be frustrated. This collection of writings is actually a music book. So, take the Psalms one note at a time. There may seem to be many nuances and patterns to understand in the Psalms, but study them one at a time, and you'll begin to learn the system.

1. Who?

Authors of the Psalms	Quantity written
David	73
Asaph	12
↑ King David's worship leader	
Sons of Korah	11
↑ musicians/singers	
Anonymous	50

Minor contributors:

Solomon, Moses, Ethan & Heman

2. What?

Content of the Psalms

Name:	<i>psalmoi</i> (Greek; "songs sung on a harp")
Form:	Musical lyrics, poetry
Tone:	Lament, praise
Theme:	Worship, emotion, prayer, prophecy

3. Where?

Geography of the Psalms

When?

Timeline of the Psalms

The Exodus (Egypt, Sinai desert)	circa 1440 BC
Kingdoms of Israel & Judah	1046 – 586 BC
Exile & post-exile (Babylon, Persia)	587 – 444 BC

4. Why?

Purpose of the Psalms

To understand the purpose of the Psalms, we must study their content (the what). And to do this, the Psalms should be understood as a collection of writings to be read in their entirety from end to end.

5. Collection

Arrangement of the Psalms

Books 1-4 all end with very similar proclamations:

“Praise the Lord, the God of Israel,
who lives from everlasting to everlasting.

...

Praise his glorious name forever!”

Organization

Book 1 psalms (1,2) 3-41

Book 2 psalms 42-72

Book 3 psalms 73-89

Book 4 psalms 90-106

Book 5 psalms 107-145 (146-150)

Focus

David (his kingship and desire for relationship with God)

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Exile (misery and slavery—sin)

Messiah (anticipation of God’s coming king)

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The final five chapters of Book 5 ends with the same command:

Praise the Lord! or Hallelujah!

hallel + Jah (Hebrew for “praise” + “Yah-weh”)

2 But they delight in the law of the Lord,
meditating on it day and night.

3 They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.

Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do.

Psalm 1

6 For the Lord declares, “I have placed my chosen king on the throne in Jerusalem, on my holy mountain.”

12 Submit to God’s royal son...

Psalm 2

- The “law” mentioned in Psalm 1 refers to the Torah, first five books of the Old Testament also known as the books of Moses, which outlined God’s intention for creation, the Exodus, and his teaching for human conduct. Notice the connection between the five books of Psalms, the five concluding commands of “Hallelujah!” at the end of Psalms, and the five books of the Torah.
- Also, notice how the tree in Psalm 1 doesn’t wither, it bears fruit, and it continually prospers. This is a reference to the Garden of Eden with its Tree of Life. What was the original command to humanity? To not eat of fruit from a specific tree. So, in this Psalm, the writer is calling people to obey God’s law, so that they might enjoy everlasting life.
- In Psalm 2, the writer describes how the nations of earth reject this admonition and desire to free themselves from God’s sovereignty. However, God mocks their foolishness and then in his anger, shatters their plans by establishing a king, which he names as his son. Therefore, this psalm is prophetically looking forward to the coming Messiah, the good king who will reign supreme.
- It’s critical that we understand that this collection of prayers revolves around honoring God’s law and anticipating a Messianic king.
- The Psalms are all about relationship with God, and specifically look forward to Jesus.

6. How do we read the Psalms?

Practical tools

There are five tools I recommend we consider to help us better understand the Psalms:

- Laments
- Praises
- Chiasms
- Imprecations
- Statements

Now, if you’re looking at this list and saying “I’ve spoken English my whole life, and I’ve heard of some of those words!” (Chiasms, Imprecations.) Don’t worry, these are merely specific *types* of Psalms. They can difficult to grasp their meaning until we understand their rules.

The Psalms generally fall into two major categories: lament, and praise. Of course, there are subsets of these categories, such as confession, thanksgiving, songs of ascent (meant to be sung while traveling on the road to Jerusalem), royal psalms for the king’s coronation, etc., but at their most basic level, all psalms can be characterized with some shade of sorrow or joy.

Tool 1 - Laments

- Prayers for help
- Expressions of sadness and desire
- Not laments for physical deaths
- More commonly found earlier in the Psalms
- These laments teach us it is acceptable to own our difficult emotions, to speak our doubts, angers, and griefs; and to share them with God.

1 O Lord, why do you stand so far away?
Why do you hide when I am in trouble?
Psalm 10

24 Why do you look the other way?
Why do you ignore our suffering and oppression?
Psalm 44

Tool 2 - Praises

- Prayers of exaltation
- Expressions of glory and worship
- Trend towards the end of Psalms, and outweigh the laments in quantity
- These praises teach us to be vocal and outward with our worship to God; and to project with hope for the Messianic glory which is not yet around us.

4 You thrill me, Lord, with all you have done for me!
I sing for joy because of what you have done.
5 O Lord, what great works you do!
And how deep are your thoughts.
Psalm 92

11 Why am I discouraged?
Why is my heart so sad?
I will put my hope in God!
I will praise him again—
my Savior and my God!
Psalm 42

Tool 3- Chiasms

- Contemporary readers expect a linear “A-to-B” progression of thought, resulting in a moral at the end
- Chiasms or chiastic psalms work up to the moral at the center of the poem, and backtrack the thoughts in reverse order (A-B-C-B-A)
- Look closely at the implication
- These Psalms are called chiasms or chiastic psalms because if we were to diagram the sentence and indent each separate thought like this—

A
 B
 C
 B
A

—it begins to look like one half of the Greek character χ chi; from where we derive our “X” letter in English

- Many Bible translations don’t indent lines like this anymore, for the practical purpose of saving physical space in the margins. Perhaps if you have older King James Version, you’ll notice this type of formatting. But once you know to look for the pattern, the formatting merely becomes a shortcut cheat to guide you to the central moral.
- In my teenage years, I spent a lot of time reading the Psalms, and I always felt like they were emotionally frustrating because it would seem the writer would spend half the Psalm developing this train of thought, systematically airing complaints before reaching this breakthrough of hope in declaring trust in God, and then he would immediately backtrack and slink back into the dark thoughts he began with. Well, technically, that is true, but this is where scripture is both artistic and instructive: not only are we supposed to pay attention to the central moral because of the writing technique, but this type of writing reminds us that in life often our revelations and mountaintop experiences do not happen more frequently than the difficult circumstances, and yet they are the key word we need to carry with us which sustains us across difficult times.
- Not all chiasms are negative in tone. Here is an easy one from chapter 8, which we read this week:

1 O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

Your glory is higher than the heavens.

3 When I look at the night sky and see the work of your fingers—
the moon and the stars you set in place—

4 what are mere mortals that you should think
about them, human beings that you should care for them?

7 the flocks and the herds
and all the wild animals,

8 the birds in the sky, the fish in the sea,
and everything that swims the ocean currents.

9 O Lord, our Lord, your majestic name fills the earth!

Tool 4 - Imprecations (Curses)

6 Make their path dark and slippery,
with the angel of the Lord pursuing them.
Psalm 35

8 May they be like snails that dissolve into slime,
like a stillborn child who will never see the sun.
Psalm 58

13 Destroy them in your anger!
Wipe them out completely!
Then the whole world will know
that God reigns in Israel.
Psalm 59

These are very dark prayers. And yes, they are in the Bible. These aren't even the most violent or disturbing imprecations in the Psalms; I'll let you read for yourself and discover them. How are we to handle these distressing prayers?

- Prayers for devastation, annihilation
- Cries for righteousness and justice amidst evil and suffering
- Imprecations are raw and emotional, from the soul; but are never personal. They are always about God mobilizing good against evil, beyond us.
- Consider the "Retribution Principle" which Audrey Kanagy shared with us some years ago. This is the idea that ancient Middle-Eastern societies held, including the Israelites, which posited that eventually good would be rewarded and evil would be punished. So, bear in mind that although we may hold a slightly different view, the theology of the Israelites was loosely formed around this idea. This principle constantly crashed into the reality of life, and is essentially the backbone of the Book of Job. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do evil people enjoy lives of success?
- Ultimately, the entire collection of Psalms is also a study in the Retribution Principle. It forecasts the coming of God's Messiah who would enact justice and righteousness, and would end all evil. And we are now living in faith of that movement in Jesus Christ.
- Of course, reading the ministry of Christ, this vision in us is transformed and we desire that people embrace forgiveness, reconciliation, healing instead of merely experiencing vengeance. But still we wrestle with this problem, because even today, humanity does wicked acts which causes tremendous suffering on each other, and just as often gets away with it (well, for the time being). And we cry out to God, "Lord do something!"
- Now, this doesn't mean just because we follow the Messiah King Jesus that we should pray disaster on our enemies. Remember, imprecations are more than just a desire to see evil end; they are a call for divine judgment with fury and violence. They are almost as if we asking God bring the righteous punishment of hell, designed for the devil, down

upon his most evil works that are carried out by wicked humans. Some theologians go so far as to equate praying imprecations as praying eternal damnation on someone's soul.

- As horrible as that sounds, sometimes our only choice is to beg God bring mercy and justice to us. And I certainly hope that none of us experience circumstances so bleak, so brutal that our only recourse is to beg God to destroy someone else. And yet at the same time, we must acknowledge that if we are truly to place ourselves in the hands of God, we must trust that he knows best and is absolutely qualified to make such decisions about life and death situations.
- Consider this: Even though in Luke 9 when Jesus rebukes his disciples for wanting to call down fire from heaven to burn up people who did not honor him, he also did teach his disciples to end what we call the Lord's Prayer with "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What do we think is going to happen when Jesus comes back? If we are to take the Psalms, the Prophets, and Revelation seriously, we need to understand that when Jesus Christ comes back he is coming as a victorious judge who will punish, not scold, I mean punish and destroy all works of darkness. Jesus tells very disturbing parables about what happens to people who do not mind the command for righteousness. And so even though we do not make a practice of explicitly praying damnation over evildoers' heads, know that there is a biblical precedent for it, and that every time we pray "thy kingdom come" we are essentially asking God to deliver this judgment on the earth.
- We do not need to feel guilty about this, but we do need to be careful in how we approach these types of prayers. They can be extremely damaging if used improperly.

Tool 5 - Statements

- These are not a certain type of Psalm, this is just something I recommend you look for as you read the Psalms
- These verses read like HEADLINES! to our souls
- Take note when these statements seem to pop out and command your attention
- These verses teach us wisdom and beliefs about God
- They are almost like Proverbs in their simplicity and meaning

4 Don't sin by letting anger control you.
Think about it overnight and remain silent.

10 In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, O Lord, will keep me safe.
Psalm 4

12 For he who avenges murder cares for the helpless.
He does not ignore the cries of those who suffer.
Psalm 9

7. Conclusion

So, as you read the Psalms, I encourage you to practice the diligence of reading them every day this spring and summer. There are many of them, with many varying topics, themes, styles, and messages. But ultimately—

Be brave. Be honest. Embrace the pain, joy, and glory. Let them drive your hope in Jesus.