

PSALMS

Finding Hope and Refuge in God

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Storms are inevitable. Storm clouds of betrayal, attack, rejection, sin struggles, loss, war, and death are raw elements of living on this fallen planet we call earth. But how will you handle the thunder, lightning, hail, and waves when they come crashing down upon your life?

A PATHWAY TO PRAISE THROUGH THE STORMS OF LIFE...

Intro Essentials

Author: Who Wrote It?

Each book of the Bible was written by the inspiration of God, the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16). And yet, God chose to write His Word through moving upon human authors (more than 40) to pen the very words of God – without any error (cf. 2 Peter 1:21; John 17:17). They wrote with their own personalities, perspectives, and language ability. Therefore, each book of the Bible is incredibly unique yet amazingly united with every other book, together representing the one story of God throughout the ages.

The book of Psalms is comprised of five smaller books (see diagram on page two), each ending with a distinct doxology (41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48; and 105:1-6). Among these five books, at least seven authors can be identified. King David wrote approximately 76 psalms (73 noted in the superscriptions and three more are recognized as such in the New

Testament, cf. Acts 4:25; Heb. 4:7. Three other psalms may have also been written by David, as interpreted from 1 Chron. 16:7-36). Asaph, a head of one of three families of Levitical singers/musicians during the reign of David, wrote twelve psalms (cf. 1 Chron. 25; 2 Chron. 29:30). The sons of Korah, a group of composers and singers who directed temple worship, authored ten psalms. King Solomon wrote approximately two psalms. Moses penned one psalm. Ethan, or “Jeduthun,” wrote one psalm. And Heman, a wise man and musician in Solomon’s court, also authored one psalm. The remaining 43 (approx.) psalms are anonymous, however, tradition attributes some of these to Ezra and David.¹

Date: When Was It Written?

By observing the wide range of authors for the Psalms, the date of writing also becomes obvious. Moses was the earliest writer (c. 1410/1400 B.C.) and the latest psalms were written upon Israel’s return

from exile (known as the “postexilic community” under Ezra and Nehemiah; c. 450/430 B.C.). Therefore the Psalms were written over a span of nearly 1,000 years. Historic tradition holds that the psalms were compiled into a single, ordered volume after the Israelites return from Babylon.²

Setting: What is the History?

Due to the wide date range in authorship, the historical setting of each psalm also varies. The faithful interpreter must carefully ascertain the context, if noted by a superscription or the direct content of the psalm. However, if no historical indicators are given, a loose reconstruction of a supposed historical setting is unwarranted. In keeping with a post-exile date of compilation, “when there was no Davidic king on the throne...the psalms [especially the ‘royal psalms’] are to be read not looking back at past kings of Israel but forward to the coming of the anticipated son of David, the messianic King [Jesus Christ].”²

WARNING: GRAPHIC AND EMOTIVE LANGUAGE

The psalmists seek to evoke a serious heart response to overwhelming life-crises, especially the psalms of David. Their strong – sometimes shocking – language may seem uncomfortable to our modern sensibilities and rather cool, calm, and collected spirituality. We are all too prone to easy “pat” answers to the complex storms of life. So be warned, there is no polite cover up for pain. Anger and frustration are not held behind theatre curtains. Bold, emotional language is not pacified. The Psalms do not offer a flimsy theological re-interpretation of “life on the edge.” *The book of Psalms walks us right through the eye of the storm and into the light of God’s truth, where lasting hope and refuge our found.*

Intro Essentials Cont.

Genre and Structure

The book of Psalms is the largest and, likely, the most well known book in the Bible. Most people are quite familiar with the beautiful poetic lines of Psalms 1, 19, 23, 51, and 150, and many others. The Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is *Sepher Tehillim* – literally “Book of Praises,” which indicates the genre – Hebrew lyric poetry.³ Most of the Psalms were written to be sung and accompanied by musical instruments. However, Hebrew poetry is markedly different than forms of modern English poetry. Rather than being composed of rhyming patterns, biblical poetry utilizes several different elements to express symmetry, rhythm, and thematic emphasis.

First, the Psalms are filled with vibrant, poetic language. Word pictures, metaphors, and symbols abound (e.g. “...they are like the chaff which the wind drives away” (Psa. 1:4b). “...under His wings you may seek refuge...” (Psa. 91:4b).

Second, the Psalms use inclusio, otherwise known as “book-ending” to repeat the central idea or truth at the beginning, end, or sometimes even in the middle of the poem. (e.g. “How blessed is the man...” (Psa. 1:1) and “How blessed are all...” (Psa. 2:12). “O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth...” (Psa. 8:1) and “Oh LORD, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” (Psa. 8:9).

Third, the Psalms were constructed with parallelism. This important feature of all Hebrew poetry positions one idea or concept alongside (parallel to) another connected idea or phrase. There are three basic types of parallelism, although several other forms occur with far less frequency. Note: parallelism usually occurs with single lines (1 to 1) but sometimes in couplets (2 to 2), or in synthesis, building to 3 or 4 lines.

1. Synonymous Parallelism: a line followed by another line that communicates the same (synonymous) or similar concept.
2. Antithetical Parallelism: a line paralleled with another line with contrasting ideas, yet together emphasizing a central truth.
3. Synthetic Parallelism: a series of lines that build upon one another to present a single, full unit of thought.

Fourth, some Psalms utilize a beautiful acrostic structure that can only be seen in the Hebrew text. For instance, each stanza of Psalm 119 is built around a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each line of each stanza begins with the corresponding letter and all twenty-two stanzas complete the alphabet (from *Aleph* to *Tav*).

PENTATEUCH	PSALMS
Genesis: God's creation of mankind and sovereign election of Israel.	Psalms 1-41 (Book One): Songs of worship to God for His sovereign election and wonderful creation.
Exodus: God's deliverance and protection for His chosen people, Israel.	Psalms 42-72 (Book Two): Songs of worship to God for His protection and guidance.
Leviticus: God's specific instructions for holiness in corporate worship and everyday living.	Psalms 73-89 (Book Three): Songs of worship to God centered on corporate praise and instruction in holiness.
Numbers: God's loving discipline of the nation Israel during their 40 years of wandering in the desert.	Psalms 90-106 (Book Four): Songs of worship to God centered on His loving, fatherly discipline.
Deuteronomy: God's preamble to the fulfillment of His promised land to Israel and His preparations for them to enter.	Psalms 107-150 (Book Five): Songs of worship to God in anticipation of the final and ultimate fulfillment of God's promises.

(Above) The five books of the Pentateuch (Torah) paralleled with the five sub-books of the Psalms. Adapted from Wilkinson and Boa, *Talk through the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 151, and Wechsler, “Psalms” in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2014), 744.

Purpose or Disconnect?

Have you ever happily read halfway through a psalm and suddenly stopped mid-phrase because you have no idea what to do with the middle section or second half? Suddenly David is asking God to knock out the teeth of his enemies (Psa. 3:7) or violently destroy his foes (Psa. 35:5-8). We even find him swimming in a bed full of tears (Psa. 6:6)!

Vivid, emotional elements such as these may make us feel disconnected by either historical setting or lack of common experience. We may struggle with accurately interpreting the “difficult” portions of the Psalms and may be tempted to sugarcoat or allegorize our way out of an uncomfortable verse. However, the only way to accurately understand and apply the Psalms is not through sidestepping the unordinary or seemingly “unchristian” parts, but to walk with the psalmist down the path through each storm and arrive with him at the surprising, truth-guided conclusion.

The multivalent purpose of the book of Psalms is to draw the people of God to worship God in light of what He has sovereignly done in the past, who He is in the midst of our present circumstances, and what He will do in the fulfillment of all His grace-giving promises.

Keep in Mind...

- When the psalmists call upon God to enact judgment or destruction upon the wicked, they are not taking vengeance into their own hands but instead asking God to demonstrate

His justice and righteousness.⁴

- The Messiah, the “Anointed One” of God, who we now recognize as Jesus, is the centerpiece of the Psalms (see David’s words in 2 Sam. 23:1-7).

Notes for Today:

Selected Bibliography

¹ Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, *Talk through the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 152-153.

² Michael G. Wechsler, “Psalms” in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2014), 743.

³ Allen P. Ross, “Psalms” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: an Exposition of the Scriptures*. Old Testament ed. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 779-801

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007), 64-81

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: An Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).