

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

GOD'S INSPIRED HYMNBOOK

Various Psalms

By

Steven J. Cole

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2008-09 Psalms: Lesson 1

God's Inspired Hymnbook Various Psalms

Throughout history, when the hearts of God's people have been right before Him, they have sung praises. When God brought His people out of captivity in Egypt and delivered them from Pharaoh's pursuing army, Exodus 15:1 records that they sang a song to the Lord. When God gave Israel victory over their powerful enemies under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, they sang (Judges 5). When David brought up the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem, there was much joy expressed through singing and music (1 Chron. 15:25-28). When King Hezekiah restored the temple worship in Jerusalem, the Levites joyfully sang praises to the Lord with the words of David and Asaph the seer, and the whole assembly bowed down and worshiped (2 Chron. 29:30).

At the conclusion of the Lord's Supper, just before Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives where He would be betrayed and arrested, they sang a hymn (Mark 14:26), which commentators agree was the Hallel (Psalms 113-118). When Paul and Silas were unjustly thrown into jail in Philippi, with their backs laid open from being beaten and their feet in the stocks, they sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25).

Since the days of the New Testament, God's people have continued to sing. In A.D. 112, Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan that reported, among other things, that the Christians sang hymns to Christ as God. In 1415, the Bohemian Reformer Jan Hus sang praises to God as he was burned at the stake. During the Reformation, Martin Luther promoted music in the church. A century and a half later, the Pietist movement under Spener and Francke was characterized by singing and hymn writing. The great revivals under the Wesley's in the 18th Century and Moody and Sankey in the 19th Century were also marked by an upsurge in hymn writing and singing. And one day in heaven, we will all be gathered around the throne of God, singing praises to the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5:9; 14:3; 15:3). Whenever God's people have their hearts right before Him, there is joyful singing.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the longest book in the Bible, the Old Testament book quoted most frequently in the New Testament (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 4), is a hymnbook, the book of Psalms. God loves to hear His people sing His praises, and so He sovereignly superintended the inclusion of the Psalms as a major part of His inspired Word. The Book of Psalms has occupied a central place of importance among the Lord's people down through the centuries. There was a time when as a prerequisite for admission to the priesthood it was mandatory that the candidate be able to recite the entire book (*ibid.*, p. 5)! In addition to other Bible reading, I always read consecutively through the Psalms. There is no other book in the Bible where I have personally found more help in the crises of life. If I could only take one book of the Bible with me to a desert island, it would be the Psalms.

Today I want to give you an overview of the Psalms as an introduction to our study of many specific psalms in the months ahead. (This message is a slightly modified version of one that I gave on April 25, 1993. In this series, I will not repeat the 30 or so Psalms that I preached on in the earlier series.) Today's message gives some basic information that you need to gain maximum benefit from our study and from your own reading of the Psalms. But in addition to imparting information, I hope to motivate you to meditate on the Psalms regularly for the rest of your life.

1. Title

"Psalms" comes from the Greek word meaning a song sung to a stringed instrument. The book is also called the Psalter. The Hebrew title, *Tehillim*, means "praises." Every Psalm except Psalm 88 contains praise. (By the way, when you refer to an individual psalm, use the singular, as in Psalm 23; when you refer to the whole book or to more than one psalm, use the plural, as in Psalms 23 and 24, or the Book of Psalms.) While we no longer know the tunes, we need to remember that the Psalms were set to music.

2. Arrangement, Authorship, Date, Features

The Psalms are arranged into five books: Book 1 (Psalms 1-41); Book 2 (Psalms 42-72); Book 3 (Psalms 73-89); Book 4 (Psalms 90-106); and, Book 5 (Psalms 107-150). Each of the five books concludes with a doxology, signifying the completion of the

collection. For example, Psalm 41:13 ends Book 1: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen." The entire Psalm 150 serves as the final doxology to the entire Psalter.

No one knows for sure what theme was followed in arranging the five books. They seem to have been compiled somewhat independently and then brought together into one collection at a later date. There is some duplication: Psalm 14 in Book 1 is repeated as Psalm 53 in Book 2; a portion of Psalm 40 in Book 1 is repeated as Psalm 70 in Book 2; and the latter halves of Psalms 57 and 60 in Book 2 are combined as Psalm 108 in Book 5.

Book 1 is dominated by psalms of David and consists mostly of personal psalms that arose out of his own experiences. Book 2 was probably compiled by Solomon and exhibits more of a national interest. Book 3 was probably compiled soon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., since Psalms 74, 79, and 89 all have references to this event. David may have compiled Book 4, which focuses more on corporate worship than Book 1 does. Book 5 is also liturgical, but contains several postexilic (after the exile in 586 B.C.) psalms. It probably came into being after the return of 537 B.C. Then a scribe, perhaps Ezra (444 B.C.), probably wrote Psalms 146-50 as a conclusion and Psalm 1 as an introduction and compiled the five books into one.

In other words the Book of Psalms as we have it today was the result of a process spanning about 1000 years. It began with individual psalms, the earliest being Psalm 90 by Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.). More than half were written by David (ca. 1000 B.C.). Then the individual psalms were grouped into collections of books for corporate worship, and finally the books were arranged into the final book, probably around 444 B.C. (Ezra's time).

Many psalms contain a superscription, which sometimes identifies the author, the historical setting, and other features. For example, Psalm 3 begins, "A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom." These psalm titles are a part of the original Hebrew text (they are verse 1 in Hebrew, thus making the Hebrew verse numbering differ in many places from the English) and are just as inspired as the rest of the psalm.

From these psalm titles, we learn that David wrote at least 73 psalms. (From Acts 4:25-26 and Hebrews 4:7 we learn that he also wrote Psalms 2 & 95. From 1 Chron. 16:8-36, we can surmise he also probably wrote Psalms 96, 105, & 106.) Two Levitical clans wrote 22 psalms: Asaph (and his descendants, 12 psalms: 50, 73-83); the Sons of Korah (10 psalms: 42, 44-49, 84, 87, & 88). Solomon wrote two (Psalms 72, 127). Ethan the Ezrahite wrote one (Psalm 89). Moses wrote one (Psalm 90). The other 51 psalms do not specify any author.

Some psalm titles indicate technical names to designate the type of psalm. *Psalm* emphasizes stringed accompaniment (57 psalms have this title). *Song* indicates a joyful melody (12 have this label, e.g., Ps. 46). *Maskil* may refer to a contemplative or didactic psalm (13 have this label, e.g., Ps. 32). The meaning of *Miktam* is uncertain (six psalms: 16, 56-60). *Prayer* labels five psalms (Pss. 17, 86, 90, 102, 142). Psalm 145 has the title, *Praise*. And there are a few lesser-used titles (Pss. 7; 38 & 70; 100).

Fifty psalms are addressed, “for the choir director” (e.g., Pss. 4, 5, 6). There are other notations describing the kind of instrument to be played as accompaniment (Pss. 4, 5, 6) or the tune that the song is sung to (Pss. 9, 22, 45, 46, 60).

Some psalms have titles instructing the worshiper as to the intended use of the psalm in worship. For example, Psalm 92 was “for the Sabbath day.” Psalm 100 is “for Thanksgiving.” Psalms 120-34 are labeled, “Songs of Ascent.” They were probably sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the prescribed feasts.

The familiar term, “Selah,” which occurs 71 times in the body of 39 psalms (e.g., Ps. 3:2, 4, 8), probably is a musical notation informing the worshipers either to pause and reflect, or else to lift up their voices. It is not to be read aloud.

3. Hebrew poetry

The psalms are poetry, and you need to understand something about Hebrew poetry to understand and appreciate the psalms. There are three elements of Hebrew poetry to keep in mind as you read the Psalms (and other poetical books such as Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations):

A. Parallelism

Instead of rhyming words, as our poetry does, the Hebrews rhymed ideas. One of the key features of Hebrew poetry is the idea of parallelism. As many have pointed out, this makes Hebrew poetry easier to translate than poetry that rhymes words. There are several main types of parallelism:

Synonymous—This occurs frequently. The second line is similar to the first. Every verse of Psalm 114 has synonymous parallelism. Note 114:1-2, “When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became His sanctuary, Israel, His dominion.”

Synthetic—The second line takes up and develops further a thought begun in the first line. For example, Psalm 95:3, “For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.” (See also, Ps. 19:7-9.)

Climatic—The second line takes up some words from the first line and adds to or completes them. For example, Psalm 29:1, 2, “Ascribe to the Lord, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name; worship the Lord in holy array.” (See also, Ps. 22:4.)

Emblematic—One line presents an image or metaphor which the other line clarifies or applies. Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” (See, also, Pss. 42:1; 44:22; 103:13).

Antithetical—The second line contrasts with the first. Psalm 1:6, “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (See also, Ps. 90:6.)

B. Figures of Speech

Hebrew poetry is loaded with figures of speech, and you must recognize that fact in interpreting various passages. For example, Psalm 18:7-15 describes the power of God as seen in a thunderstorm, which apparently was sent in answer to David’s prayer in battle. It describes God in anthropomorphic terms. Literal interpretation of the Bible does not mean that you interpret such figures of speech literally. God doesn’t have smoke coming out of His nostrils or fire coming from His mouth (Ps. 18:8)!

C. Acrostics

Acrostics are alphabetical psalms, where each verse (or in Psalm 119, each verse of successive stanzas) begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Pss. 9-10 [together = one acrostic], 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145, and Lamentations).

Keep in mind that the psalms are poetry and must be read as such. If you coldly analyze them, you'll miss the flavor. They're full of emotion, art, beauty, and figurative language. The psalmists were trying to draw forth not just an intellectual response, but also an emotional one. John Calvin wrote of the Psalms, "I have been accustomed to call this book ... 'An Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul'; for there is not an emotion of which any one 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 Psalms* [Baker], pp. xxxvi-xxxvii).

4. Themes

There are many themes running through the Psalms. Let me outline just five:

A. The character of God

God's attributes are frequently extolled in the psalms: His righteousness, power, sovereignty, mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, etc. (see Pss. 25:8, 10; 63:2-3). The psalms reveal an almighty God who is gracious and compassionate to His people, but who will impartially judge the wicked.

B. The Kingdom of God

The concept of God's ruling on the earth in justice and righteousness through His anointed king runs throughout the psalms (e.g., Pss. 2, 96-99, 110).

C. The Messiah of God

Closely connected with the kingdom is God's Messiah. Many psalms are "messianic," meaning that in whole or part they prophesy of Christ and His rule (Pss. 2, 22, 45, 72, 110).

D. The Worship of God

The psalms put a great stress on both personal and corporate worship of God. There are frequent individual declarations of praise (Pss. 5:11-12; 9:1-2) as well as references to the sanctuary, the temple, and corporate worship (Pss. 5:7; 9:14; 84, 122).

E. The Experience of man

Many psalms flow out of real-life situations. The authors did not sit down on a beautiful day without a care in the world and write a clever poem. As one commentator puts it, “[The psalms] are often wet with the tears and the blood of the writer” (Leupold, p. 28). The enemy is in hot pursuit. David cries out to God for help. God responds and delivers him against overwhelming odds. After he catches his breath, he recounts the situation and out of the overflow of his emotions, he writes a psalm extolling God’s greatness (see, Pss. 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142).

Because of this real-life birthplace of the psalms, God is personal and immediate. God is not some abstract theological idea to the psalmist. These authors knew what it meant to connect with the living God in the midst of their overwhelming crises (see Pss. 56, 57, 59, 60, 63). Even if the situation is not stated, many times you can pick up the circumstances of the author from the context.

This means that to appreciate the psalms, you’ve got to *feel* with the life-situation of the psalmist. The psalms reflect the gamut of human emotions: fear (Pss. 3:6; 27:1-3); shame (25:2-3); guilt (32:3-4; 38; 51); depression (42, 43); feeling abandoned by God (13); utter helplessness (18:4-6); being betrayed and attacked by those you trusted (55; 57:3-4); as well as great joy, contentment, and delight in God (103; 145). Luther said that these hymns enable us to look directly into the heart of God’s saints (Leupold, p. 27), and he was right.

5. Main lessons

We will learn many lessons. Here are four main ones:

A. Praise is important.

The psalms are filled with praise and with exhortations to praise God. To praise God means essentially to extol God for His attributes and actions. Thus, to praise God we must come to know Him as revealed in His Word and we must be involved with God

in our personal lives through prayer and trusting Him so that we experience His all-sufficient help. The psalmists knew God in this way. We need to put more emphasis on praise in the Christian life.

B. Prayer is important.

Many of the psalms are prayers, cried out to God from the crucible of life. The psalms show us that no experience in life is too high or low to exclude God. We are to call on Him when we are in the pits and we are to call on Him when we're on the peaks. J. Sidlow Baxter observed (*Explore the Book* [Zondervan], 3:87), "Again and again, in individual psalms, we see how sighing is turned into singing through praying."

C. Corporate worship is important.

It's not enough to praise God all alone, as important as that is. We need to worship God corporately and sing His praises together. There's something about the corporate aspect of worship that is satisfying to God and to us. The psalms are God's corporate worship book.

D. Beauty and creativity are important.

Our God is infinitely creative and He delights in beauty. We see His handiwork in the natural world, and the psalms are full of appreciation for the beauty that God has created. As Psalm 19:1 declares, "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands." While inspired by the Holy Spirit, the psalms also reflect the creativity of the authors, and God is pleased with it. When we enjoy the beauty of good art, music, and literature, created by people who are created in God's image, we should praise God the Creator. But especially, we should praise God through the beauty of His creation all around us.

Conclusion

Here are a few action points:

1. Read the Psalms devotionally.

I read through Psalms and Proverbs separately from other Bible reading. I try to read one per day and when I finish, I start all over again, so that I read through them about twice per year. Continually and repeatedly meditating on the psalms will help guard,

sustain, and deepen your heart before God. Remember, the main author was a man after God's heart!

2. Memorize the Psalms.

The Psalms were often on Jesus' lips. He cited from Psalm 118 to identify Himself as the stone that the builders rejected, which became the chief cornerstone (Mark 12:10). He quoted from Psalm 110 to confound the Pharisees, showing that He was both David's son and David's Lord (Mark 12:36). On the cross, He cited Psalm 22:1, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34). His last words (Luke 23:46) were from Psalm 31:5, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." After His resurrection, He taught the disciples from the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms to tell of Himself (Luke 24:44). So Jesus knew and used the Psalms.

Many whole psalms as well as individual verses are worth the effort of memorizing. If you struggle with depression, memorize verses on joy and praise. If you struggle with anxiety, memorize verses on peace, freedom from fear, and trusting God. Jot them on 3 x 5 cards and read them often until you know them.

3. Sing the Psalms.

Many of the psalms are now coupled with modern tunes. Singing them and listening to them often is also a good way to memorize them. If you have a musical bent, work at putting some of the psalms to music.

4. Pray the Psalms.

One modern writer laments, "We are in danger of losing the Psalter in our churches; indeed, many have already lost it, and so it is no accident that many people in our congregations do not know how to pray" (Elizabeth Achtemeier, cited by Willem VanGemeren, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelin [Zondervan], 5:6). As you read the Psalms devotionally and come to a part that is a prayer, turn it into your own prayer: "Make me know Your ways, O Lord; Teach me Your paths" (Ps. 25:4). Or perhaps the psalm points out a lack in your life. Turn it into prayer: "Let all those who seek You rejoice and be glad in You; Let those who love Your salvation say continually, 'The Lord be magnified'" (Ps. 40:16). Pray, "Lord, I don't rejoice in You enough. Help me to magnify You in my life!"

John Calvin begins his classic, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles [Westminster Press], p. 35) with this profound statement: “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” The Psalms will take us deeper in both of those aspects of wisdom. Let’s ask God to teach us about Himself and about ourselves as we study the Psalms in the coming months.

[In addition to the sources cited in the message, I also relied on the introductory sections of *Psalms 1-72* [IVP], by Derek Kidner; and, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* [Victor Books], ed. by John F. Walvoord & Roy Zuck, “Psalms,” by Allen P. Ross.]

Application Questions

1. Some churches emphasize doctrine but downplay feelings; others tend toward emotion at the expense of doctrine. Where’s the biblical balance?
2. Is praise a command or something we only do when we feel like it? How can we develop sincere praise for God?
3. Jonathan Edwards argued that “true religion lies very much in the affections” and that we are to sing praises to God “to excite and express” our affections. Agree/disagree?
4. Will you make a commitment to read and meditate on the Psalms as a part of your regular time alone with God?

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