

Overview of the Psalms (Handout)*

“Psalms is a collection of 150 poems that express a wide variety of emotions, including: love and adoration toward God, sorrow over sin, dependence on God in desperate circumstances, the battle of fear and trust, walking with God even when the way seems dark, thankfulness for God’s care, devotion to the word of God, and confidence in the eventual triumph of God’s purposes in the world. From tearful laments to triumphant thanksgivings, these expressions of emotion serve as patterns to shape the emotions and actions of the godly of every age.” (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

St. Ambrose defined the Psalms in this way: “A psalm is the blessing of the people, the praise of God, the commendation of the multitude, the applause of all. ... It softens anger, it gives release from anxiety, it alleviates sorrow; it is protection at night, instruction by day, a shield in time of fear, a feast of holiness, the image of tranquility, a pledge of peace and harmony” (cited in Jinkins, 2008, p. 64).

Michael Jinkins noted, “the Book of Psalms gives expression to a remarkably broad range of praise, thanksgiving, and lamentation. In addition to its variety of voice, the Psalms hold a particularly unique place in the Bible because of their variety of function. First and foremost, the Psalms are prayers, and they are some of the most beautiful poetry ever penned; but the Psalms are also Holy Scripture through which God speak to us” (Jinkins, 2008, p. 13).

Eugene Peterson emphasized that the psalms are prayers. He wrote:

“Untutored, we tend to think that prayer is what good people do when they are doing their best. It is not. Inexperienced, we suppose that there must be an ‘insider’ language that must be acquired before God takes us seriously in our prayer. There is not. Prayer is elemental, not advanced, language. It is the means by which our language becomes honest, true, and personal in response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God.” (Peterson, 2012, Kindle Locations 152-156)

He has stated that prayers are “the primary tools that God uses to work his will in our bodies and souls. Prayers are tools that we use to collaborate in his work with us” (Peterson, 1989, p. 2). He asserted that the Psalms are the “best tools available” for working out our faith.

Date and Historical Background

“The individual psalms come from diverse periods of Israel’s history: from the time of Moses (15th or 13th century BC), to that of David and Solomon (10th century), down to exilic and postexilic times (e.g., Psalm 137). One hundred and sixteen of the psalms have titles. According to those titles, David is the most common author: he appears in 73 titles, and the New Testament adds two more (Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2; and Heb. 4:7 for Psalm 95).” (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

“Other authors include the Sons of Korah (11 psalms), Asaph (12 psalms), Solomon (possibly two psalms), and Moses (one). Other psalms do not identify the author at all. For a number of David’s psalms we are given the context for the penning of a particular psalm (e.g., Psalm 3 was written after David fled from and then battled Absalom, see 2 Sam. 15–17). However, the historical context of most of the psalms is unknown or vague, which allows for an elastic application to every reader at all times everywhere.” (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

Types of Psalms

Early in the 20th century, biblical scholar Hermann Gunkel (1862-1932) developed a method known as form criticism (McCann, 1996, pp. 641-677. Form criticism provides an approach to classifying each psalm by type, based on common features such as wording, structure, and social or religious life setting. Gunkel analyzed the content of the Psalms and attempted to categorize them according to the literary forms he discerned. Over time, other scholars added more types and subcategories to Gunkel’s original list (Jenkins, 2008, p. 73). Not all scholars agree on how some of the psalms should be classified. Following are a few examples of classification types:

Hymns or Songs of Praise – Psalm oriented exclusively toward praise

Community Laments – Prayer offered by the community

Individual Laments – Complaint or prayer for help

Individual Psalms of Thanksgiving – Offering of praise by an individual

Royal Psalms – Psalms dealing with the Israelite or Judean king of the monarchy

Wisdom / Torah Psalms – Psalms consisting of pious reflections

Penitential Psalms – Crying out for God’s mercy and asking forgiveness

Songs of Trust – Individuals expressing certainty of being heard

Imprecatory Psalms – Crying out to God for vengeance or destruction of an enemy.

Hymns

Hymns are songs of praise. They reveal what the psalmist feels then the relationship with God is tranquil. Examples include Psalms 8; 19; 29; 33; 104; 105; 111; 113; 114; 117; 135; 136; 145-150.

Laments

Laments are prayers offered to God when the person or group is hurting – feeling upset, betrayed, or abandoned.

- Communal laments (e.g., Psalms 12; 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 90; 126)
- Individual laments (e.g., Psalms 3; 5; 7; 17; 25-27; 38; 39; 56; 59; 62; 69; 88)

Thanksgiving (Individual)

Thanksgiving psalms celebrate God for hearing a lament and answering a prayer. Individual Psalms of thanksgiving include Psalms 30; 32; 34; 66; 92; 107; 116; and 138.

Royal Psalms

Royal Psalms were prayed at court. This grouping of psalms deal with monarchies. Coronations, royal weddings, and prayers for kings fall into this category. Selected examples include Psalms 2; 18; 20; 21; 45; 72; 89; 101; 132; 144.

Wisdom / Torah Psalms

These poems and prayers seek to teach. Selected examples include Psalms 1; 18; 19; 25; 33; 37; 73; 78; 89; 93; 94; 99; 103; 105; 111; 112; and 128.

Penitential Psalms

These are Psalms of Confession. These psalms express sorrow for sin. Here, the psalmist admits his or her guilt and leaves the situation with God. Examples include Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51; 102; 130; and 143.

Psalms of Trust

These psalms start out as laments but end in trust. Examples include Psalms 11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 63; 91; 121; 125; and 131.

Imprecatory Psalms

Imprecatory Psalms are those that cry out to God for vengeance or destruction of an enemy. Examples of these psalms can be found in Psalm 35; 69; and 137 and are sometimes called the "cursing psalms."

Superscriptions

"The superscriptions are editorial comments that appear under the psalm number and before the first line of the psalm itself. Some superscriptions give instructions for how a psalm is to be used in worship" (see Psalm 67). 'Some superscriptions refer to musical terms or musical instruments that had already disappeared from usage when the Psalms were translated from Hebrew to Greek' (see Psalm 81). 'Other superscriptions identify the author of the psalm text' (Of the more than one hundred superscriptions, seventy-three refer to David.)" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 29).

Selah

According to Eugene Peterson, the term *Selah*, which is strewn throughout the Psalms, is untranslated and untranslatable. "If its *meaning* is an enigma, its use is clear: *Selah* directed people who were *together* in prayer to do something or other *together*. ...Biblically, we are not provided with a single prayer for private devotions. The community in prayer, not the individual at prayer, is basic and primary" (as quoted in Jenkins, 2008, p. 121).

Figures in Psalms Superscriptions

Asaph

convener, or collector. (1.) A Levite; one of the leaders of David's choir ([1 Chr. 6:39](#)). [Psalms 50](#) and [73-83](#) inclusive are attributed to him. He is mentioned along with David as skilled in music, and a "seer" ([2 Chr. 29:30](#)). The "sons of Asaph," mentioned in [1 Chr. 25:1](#), [2 Chr. 20:14](#), and [Ezra 2:41](#), were his descendants, or more probably a class of poets or singers who recognized him as their master.

Korah

ice, hail. (1.) The third son of Esau, by Aholibamah ([Gen. 36:14](#); [1 Chr. 1:35](#)).

(2.) A Levite, the son of Izhar, the brother of Amram, the father of Moses and Aaron ([Ex. 6:21](#)). The institution of the Aaronic priesthood and the Levitical service at Sinai was a great religious revolution. The old priesthood of the heads of families passed away. This gave rise to murmurings and discontent, while the Israelites were encamped at Kadesh for the first time, which came to a head in a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, headed by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. Two hundred and fifty princes, "men of renown" i.e., well-known men from among the other tribes, joined this conspiracy. The whole company demanded of Moses and Aaron that the old state of things should be restored, alleging that "they took too much upon them" ([Num. 16:1-3](#)). On the morning after the outbreak, Korah and his associates presented themselves at the door of the tabernacle, and "took every man his censer, and put fire in them, and laid incense thereon." But immediately "fire from the Lord" burst forth and destroyed them all ([Num. 16:35](#)). Dathan and Abiram "came out and stood in the door of their tents, and their wives, and their sons, and their little children," and it came to pass "that the ground clave asunder that was under them; and the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up." A plague thereafter began among the people who sympathized in the rebellion, and was only stayed by Aaron's appearing between the living and the dead, and making "an atonement for the people" (16:47).

The descendants of the sons of Korah who did not participate in the rebellion afterwards rose to eminence in the Levitical service.

Source: <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/dictionaries/>

Organization of the Psalms

“The Book of Psalms is arranged into five sections, called books. Scholars contend this editorial arrangement parallels the five-book division of the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Each of the five sections of psalms ends with a doxology, a short praise that begins, “Blessed be the Lord” or “Praise the Lord” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 22).

Book 1: Psalms 1-41 (doxology Psalm 41:13)

“Psalms 1–2 have no titles that attribute authorship (but see Acts 4:25 for Psalm 2); they introduce the Psalms as a whole. The remainder of Book 1 is made up almost entirely of psalms of David: only Psalm 10 (but see note on Psalm 9) and Psalm 33 lack a Davidic superscription. Prayers issuing from a situation of distress dominate, punctuated by statements of confidence in the God who alone can save (e.g., 9; 11; 16; 18), striking the note that concludes the book (40–41). Reflections on ethics and worship with integrity are found in Psalms 1, 14–15, 19, 24, and 26.” (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

Book 2: Psalms 42-72 (doxology: Psalm 72:18-19)

“Book 2 introduces the first Korah collection (42–49, although 43 lacks a superscription), with a single Asaph psalm at Psalm 50. A further Davidic collection is found in Psalms 51–65 and 68–69, including the bulk of the “historical” superscriptions (51–52; 54; 56–57; 59–60; 63). Once again, lament and distress dominate the content of these prayers, which now also include a communal voice (e.g., Psalm 44; compare Psalms 67; 68). The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 with the Psalms’ pinnacle of royal theology (72; compare 45) (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

Book 3: Psalms 73-89 (doxology: Psalm 89:52)

“The opening Psalm 73 starkly questions the justice of God before seeing light in God’s presence; that light has almost escaped the psalmist in Psalm 88, the bleakest of all the psalms. Book 2 ended with the high point of royal aspirations; Book 3 concludes in Psalm 89 with these expectations badly threatened. Sharp rays of hope occasionally pierce the darkness (e.g., Psalms 75; 85; 87). The brief third book contains most of the psalms of Asaph (Psalms 73–83), as well as another set of Korah psalms (Psalms 84–85; 87–88)” (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

Book 4: Psalms 90-106 (doxology: Psalm 106:48)

“Psalm 90 opens the fourth book of the Psalms. It may be seen as the first response to the problems raised by the third book (Psalms 73–89). Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, reminds the worshiper that God was active on Israel’s behalf long before David. This theme is taken up in Psalms 103–106, which summarize God’s dealings with his people before any kings reigned. In between there is a group of psalms (93–100), many characterized by the refrain “The LORD reigns.” This truth refutes the doubts of Psalm 89 (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

Book 5: Psalms 107-150 (doxology: Psalm 150)

“The structure of Book 5 reflects the closing petition of Book 4 in 106:47. It declares that God does answer prayer (Psalm 107) and concludes with five Hallelujah psalms (146–150). In

between there are several psalms affirming the validity of the promises to David (Psalms 110; 132; 144), two collections of Davidic psalms (108–110; 138–145); the longest psalm, celebrating the value of the law (Psalm 119); and 15 “psalms of ascent” for use by pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem (Psalms 120–134)” (O'Donnell, 2014, Kindle Locations 124-220).

Sessions

Session 1 - Overview

Introduction to the Psalms. Coverage of Psalms 1-7

Session 2 - Hymns (Songs of Praise)

Hymns are songs of praise. They reveal what the psalmist feels then the relationship with God is tranquil. Examples include Psalms 8; 19; 29; 33; 104; 105; 111; 113; 114; 117; 135; 136; 145-150.

Session 3 - Laments

Laments are prayers offered to God when the person or group is hurting – feeling upset, betrayed, or abandoned.

Communal laments (e.g., Psalms 12; 44; 60; 74; 79; 80; 83; 85; 90; 126)

Individual laments (e.g., Psalms 3; 5; 7; 17; 25-27; 38; 39; 56; 59; 62; 69; 88)

Session 4 - Penitential Psalms

These are Psalms of Confession. These psalms express sorrow for sin. Here, the psalmist admits his or her guilt and leaves the situation with God. Examples include Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51; 102; 130; and 143.

Session 5 - Psalms of Trust

These psalms start out as laments but end in trust. Examples include Psalms 11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 63; 91; 121; 125; and 131.

Session 6 – Psalms of Imprecation

Imprecatory Psalms are those that cry out to God for vengeance or destruction of an enemy. Examples of these psalms can be found in Psalm 35; 69; and 137 and are sometimes called the “cursing psalms.”

Schedule

Topic	Facilitator(s)
Session 1 - Overview – Psalms 1-7	
<p>Session 2 - Hymns (Songs of Praise) Hymns are songs of praise. They reveal what the psalmist feels then the relationship with God is tranquil. Examples include Psalms 8; 19; 29; 33; 104; 105; 111; 113; 114; 117; 135; 136; 145-150.</p>	
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Sources

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