

BIBLE SURVEY: OT WISDOM

WEEK 2: PSALMS I

INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

- In this 6-week series, we are going to go through the Old Testament wisdom and poetry books.
- Our schedule for the next 6 weeks will be:
 - November 13th: Introduction and Job
 - **November 20th: Psalms part 1**
 - November 27th: Psalms part 2
 - December 4th: Proverbs
 - December 11th: Ecclesiastes
 - December 18th: Song of Solomon

INTRODUCTION TO PSALMS¹

- There are 116 psalms that have superscriptions or “titles.” The Hebrew text includes these titles with the verses themselves.
- From the divine perspective, the Psalter points to God as its author. Approaching authorship from the human side one can identify a collection of **more than 7 composers**. King David wrote at least 75 of the 150 psalms; the sons of Korah accounted for 10 (**Pss. 42, 44–49, 84, 85, 87**); and Asaph contributed 12 (**Pss. 50, 73–83**). Other penmen included Solomon (**Pss. 72, 127**), Moses (**Ps. 90**), Heman (**Ps. 88**), and Ethan (**Ps. 89**). The remaining 48 psalms remain anonymous in their authorship, although Ezra is thought to be the author of some. The time range of the Psalms extends from Moses, ca. 1410 B.C. (**Ps. 90**), to the late sixth or early fifth century B.C. post-Exilic period (**Ps. 126**), which spans about 900 years of Jewish history.
- The backdrop for the Psalms is twofold: **1)** the acts of God in creation and history, and **2)** the history of Israel. Historically, the psalms range in time from the origin of life to the post-Exilic joys of the Jews liberated from Babylon.
- Thematically, the psalms cover a wide spectrum of topics, ranging from heavenly worship to earthly war. The collected psalms comprise the largest book in the Bible and the most quoted OT book in the NT.

¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/bible-introductions/MSB19/psalms>

- Psalm 117 represents the middle chapter (out of 1,189) in the Bible. Psalm 119 is the largest chapter in the entire Bible. Through the ages, the psalms have retained their original primary purpose, i.e., to engender the proper praise and worship of God.

On Another Note²

- There is a traditional belief that **Psalm 118:8** “It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to trust in humans,” is the middle verse of the Bible. However, this is not correct. There are 31,102 verses in the Bible (KJV). Since the count is an even number, there is no single middle verse of the Bible. **Psalm 103:1–2 are the two middle verses of the Bible, with 15,550 verses before them and 15,550 verses after them.**
- The middle verses of the Bible say **Psalm 103:1-2** “Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise His holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all His benefits.”
- **Psalm 117** is the middle chapter of the Bible. But, since there are numerous chapters that contain a significant number of verses prior to Psalm 117, the middle verses of the Bible are pushed to **Psalm 103:1–2**
- **Ultimately, there is no spiritual significance to the middle verse of the Bible.** It is interesting information to know, and it can help you win Bible trivia games, but it won’t help you grow in your relationship to God. Still, a passage that focuses on praising the Lord being in the exact middle of the Bible seems fitting.

Historical and Theological Themes

- The basic theme of Psalms is living real life in the real world, where two dimensions operate simultaneously: 1) a horizontal or temporal reality, and 2) a vertical or transcendent reality.
- Without denying the pain of the earthly dimension, the people of God are to live joyfully and dependently on the Person and promises standing behind the heavenly/eternal dimension.
- Psalms presents a broad array of theology, practically couched in day-to-day reality. The sinfulness of man is documented concretely, not only through the behavioral patterns of the wicked, but also by the periodic stumbling’s of believers. **The sovereignty of God is everywhere recognized, but not at the expense of genuine human responsibility.**
- Life often seems to be out of control, and yet all events and situations are understood in the light of divine providence as being right on course according to God’s timetable. Assuring glimpses of a future “God’s day” bolsters the call for perseverance to the end. This book of praise manifests a very practical theology.
- A commonly misunderstood phenomenon in Psalms is the association that often develops between the “one” (the psalmist) and the “many” (the theocratic people). Virtually all the cases of this occur in the psalms of King David. **There was an inseparable relationship between the mediatorial ruler and his people; as life went**

² <https://www.gotquestions.org/middle-verse-of-the-Bible.html>

for the king, so it went for the people. Furthermore, at times this union accounted for the psalmist's apparent connection with Christ in the messianic psalms (or messianic portions of certain psalms).

- The so-called imprecatory (curse pronouncing) psalms may be better understood with this perspective. As God's mediatorial representative on earth, David prayed for judgment on his enemies, since these enemies were not only hurting him, but were primarily hurting God's people. Ultimately, they challenged the King of Kings, the God of Israel.

The Uniqueness of Hebrew Poetry

- It is helpful to recognize certain recurring genres or literary types in the Psalter. Some are: **1)** the wisdom type with instructions for right living; **2)** lamentation patterns which deal with the pangs of life; **3)** penitential psalms (mostly dealing with sin); **4)** kingship emphases; and **5)** thanksgiving psalms.
- The comprehensive literary characteristic of the psalms is that all of them are poetry par excellence. Unlike most English poetry, which is based on rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry is essentially characterized by logical parallelisms. Some of the most important kinds of parallelisms are: 1) synonymous (the thought of the first line is restated with similar concepts in the second line, e.g., Ps. 2:1); 2) antithetic (the thought of the second line is contrasted with the first, e.g., Ps. 1:6); 3) climactic (the second and any subsequent lines pick up a crucial word, phrase, or concept and advance it in a stair-step fashion, e.g., Ps. 29:1, 2); and 4) chiasmic or introverted (the logical units are developed in an A ... B...B' ... A' ... pattern, e.g., Ps. 1:2).
- **Psalm 119** stands out as the most complete example of this device, since the first letter of each of its 22, 8-verse stanzas move completely through the Hebrew alphabet.

Outline

- The 150 canonical psalms were organized quite early into 5 "books." Each of these books ends with a doxology (**Pss. 41:13; 72:18–20; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6**). Jewish tradition appealed to the number 5 and alleged that these divisions echoed the Pentateuch, i.e., the 5 books of Moses. It is true that there are clusters of psalms, such as 1) those drawn together by an association with an individual or group (e.g., "The sons of Korah," **Pss. 42–49**; Asaph, **Pss. 73–83**), 2) those dedicated to a particular function (e.g., "Songs of ascents," **Pss. 120–134**), or 3) those devoted explicitly to praise worship (**Pss. 146–150**).
- But no one configuration key unlocks the "mystery" as to the organizing theme of this 5-book arrangement. Thus, there is no identifiable thematic structure to the entire collection of psalms.

BOOK 1 (PSALMS 1-41) AND BOOK 2 (PSALMS 42-72)

Book 1 (1-41)³

- **Psalms 1–2 provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole.** Except for **Psalms 10** and **33**, the remaining psalms of Book 1 are psalms of David. **Most of them are prayers of distress.** Others are 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 are found in **Psalms 1; 14–15; 19; 24; and 26.**
- Psalm 1:1-6 “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! ²But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. ³He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers. ⁴The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. ⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”
- Certainly it [Psalm 1] stands here as a doorkeeper, confronting those who would be in the congregation of the righteous (5) with the basic choice that alone gives reality to worship; with divine truth (2) that must inform it; and with the ultimate judgment (5, 6) that looms up beyond it.⁴
- By two cycles of contrast, **Psalm 1** separates all people into their respective spiritual camps.⁵
- **1A.** By observation all people are separated ethically (vv. 1-4)
 - **1B.** A picture of the godly (vv. 1-3)
 - **1C.** Their inclinations: (vv. 1-2)
 - **1D.** Described negatively (v. 1)
 - **2D.** Described positively (v. 2)
 - **2C.** Their illustration (v. 3)
 - **2B.** A picture of the ungodly (v. 4)
 - **1C.** Their inclinations (v. 4a)
 - **2C.** Their illustration (v. 4b)
- **2A.** By outcome all people are separated judicially. (vv. 5-6)
 - **1B.** The failure of ungodly people (v. 5)
 - **2B.** The fruition of godly and ungodly lifestyles (v. 6)
 - **1C.** recognition (v. 6a)
 - **2C.** ruin (v. 6b)

³ <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-19-03/>

⁴ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 47.

⁵ George Zemek, *Road Maps for the Psalms*, Psalm 1.

- Psalm 23:1-6 “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters. ³ He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. ⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. ⁵ You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; my cup overflows. ⁶ Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, And I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”
- Depth and strength underlie the simplicity of this psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency: there is readiness to face deep darkness and imminent attack, and the climax reveals a love which homes towards no material goal but the Lord Himself.⁶
- Using some common ancient near-eastern images in Psalm 23, David progressively unveils his personal relationship with the Lord in 3 stages.⁷
- **1A.** in the 1st stage, he introduces both the theology of and his trust in the unique Shepherd King Host (v.1)
 - **1B.** He condenses his theology of the Lord
 - **2B.** He capsulizes his trust in the Lord
- **2A** in the 2nd stage he illuminates his theology of the unique Shepherd King Host (vv. 2-3b)
 - **1B.** He illumines it metaphorically (vv. 2-3b)
 - **1C.** God’s grace (v. 2a)
 - **2C.** God’s guidance (v. 2b)
 - **2B.** He illumines it metaphysically (v. 3)
 - **1C.** God’s grace (v. 3a)
 - **2C.** God’s guidance (v. 3b)
- **3A** in the 3rd stage he illustrates his trust in the unique Shepherd King Host (vv. 4-6)
 - **1B.** Personal peril is overcome by Personal Presence and Protection (v. 4)
 - **2B.** Personal pressure is overshadowed by Personal provision (v. 5)
 - **3B.** Personal privilege is obviated by Personal pursuit (v. 6)

Book 2 (42-72)⁸

- Book 2 introduces the first group of psalms by the “sons of Korah” (**42; 44–49; 50**). There are also more psalms of David (**51–65; 68–69**), including most of the “historical” psalms (**51–52; 54; 56–57; 59–60; 63**). Once again, lament and distress dominate these prayers, which now also include a

⁶ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 109.

⁷ Ibid. Psalm 23

⁸ <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-global-study-bible/chart-19-03/>

communal voice (e.g., 44; compare 67; 68). The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 with a look at God's ideal for Israel's kings—ultimately pointing to Christ as the final great King of God's people.

- Psalm 43:1-5 “Vindicate me, O God, and plead my case against an ungodly nation; O deliver me from the deceitful and unjust man! ²For You are the God of my strength; why have You rejected me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? ³O send out Your light and Your truth, let them lead me; Let them bring me to Your holy hill And to Your dwelling places. ⁴Then I will go to the altar of God, To God my exceeding joy; And upon the lyre I shall praise You, O God, my God. ⁵Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why are you disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, The help of my countenance and my God.”
- While each of this pair of psalms (42 & 43) can be sung by itself, they are in fact two parts of a single, close-knit poem, one of the most sadly beautiful in the Psalter. Not only does one title serve for the two psalms, but the soliloquy ‘Why go I mourning...’ is heard in both...it is the lament of a temple singer exiled in the north near the rising of the Jordan, who longs to be back at God's house, and turns his longing into resolute faith and hope in God Himself.⁹
- By interrelating the psalmist's two modes of communication in Psalm 43 and comparing them with the laments of Psalm 42, we observe indications of progress as he continued to deal with his despondency.¹⁰
- **1A.** Listening in on his first mode *we hear his prayers to God.* (vv. 1-4)
 - **1B.** The first round of his prayers deals with righting wrongs (vv. 1-2)
 - **1C.** His requests (v. 1)
 - **2C.** His reasonings (v. 2)
 - **1D.** positively laid out (v. 2a)
 - **2D.** negatively laid out (v. 2b-c)
 - **1E.** “why rejection?!” (v. 2b)
 - **2E.** “why dejection?!” (v. 2c)
 - **2B.** The second round of his prayers deals with restoring ‘rights’. (vv. 3-4)
 - **1C.** His requests (v. 3)
 - **2C.** His reasonings (v. 4)
- **2A.** Listening in on his second mode *we hear his ‘pep-talk’ to himself.* (v. 5)
 - **1B.** Including exhortation (v. 5a-b)
 - **2B.** Including encouragement (v. 5c-d)

⁹ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 165.

¹⁰ George Zemek, *Road Maps for the Psalms*, Psalm 43.