



The Psalms

The book of Psalms (also known as the Psalter) is a collection of 150 poems, prayers, hymns and meditations. The book of Psalms consists of five collections of Psalms (1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150) which have clearly been gathered together at different times because there are a few duplicates. All the psalms are addressed to God, whether they are giving thanks for what he has done or begging for help in a time of crisis. The psalms give us an insight into the life and spirituality of God's people and have been used continually in both Jewish and Christian worship for over 2,000 years. Because the psalms are so personal and portray such genuine human emotion, they remain as powerful today as they always were.



How long will it take?

- Reading time:** 5 hours – this is one of the hardest books to read at a single setting, you may have to take it slowly or deliberately pick certain psalms and leave others.
- Short of time?** Just read 1; 41; 42; 72; 73; 89; 90; 106; 107 and 150 (these are the first and last psalm of each one of the five collections it will give you a sense of how the book works as a book, rather than as 150 separate psalms).



Anything tricky?

Reading the book of Psalms as a book is just tricky. It is one of the few books in the Bible that was not designed to be read as book – it's an anthology. What you get when you read it like a book is a sense of the breadth of emotion and the clever way in which the psalms have been put together in the anthology.



Genre

Poetry



Inspiring quotes

It is almost impossible to choose just a few verses from the psalms – these are just some favourites. Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. (*Psalms 1.1-2*)

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. (*Psalms 19.1*)

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (*Psalms 119.105*)

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (*Psalms 139.13-14a*)



About the Author

Many of the psalms in the Psalter are ascribed to David at the start, however the wide range of historical events referred to in the psalms raises questions about whether David could have written them all. Psalms seem to have been written throughout Israel's history inspired by the memory of King David, a great musician and person of faith.



About the times

Psalms were written throughout the Old Testament period. At one end of the spectrum, one of the songs in the Bible that is thought to have been written earliest is Miriam and Moses' song at the Red Sea (see Exodus 15.1-21). At the other end of the timeline many scholars think that Psalm 30 was written when the Temple was rededicated after the Maccabean revolt in 164bc. Many believe the Psalter to have been compiled in the second century bc with the five collections being drawn together at that point.

What were people feeling?

Read the Psalms and find out – the psalms reveal a wide range of emotion from pure joy (Psalm 150) to utter despair (Psalm 88) with many points between.

Other books set around this time

In terms of individual psalms and their dating, the book probably spans almost the whole Old Testament.



How is it structured?

The book of Psalms falls into five sections or as some people call them 'books', each of them ends with a 'doxology' or hymn of praise to God (41.13; 72.20; 89.52; 106.48 with the last 'book' ending with a whole Psalm doxology Psalm 150). Some also argue that Psalms 1-2 act as an introduction to the whole book.

Book 1: 1-41 – most of these are psalms of lament

Book 2: 42-72 – most of these are psalms of lament

Book 3: 73-89 – this book is an equal mix of laments and other types of psalms

Book 4: 90-106 – this book contains more hymns and psalms of thanksgiving than of laments

Book 5: 107-150 – this book also contains more hymns and psalms of thanksgiving than of laments.

As well as the five big collections you will also notice a number of smaller collections (like the Psalms of Ascent 120-134). It is thought that these smaller collections were gathered together to make the larger collections that we now have. You will notice that the beginning of the Psalter has more laments and the end more hymns and psalms of thanksgiving. The dead centre of the Psalter (in terms of quantity of text rather than numbers of psalms) is Psalm 88 which is the only Psalm of complete despair. The corner is then turned and much more praise is to be found. It is possible that the Psalter intends to take you, the reader, from lament to praise in the structure of this collection.



What kind of Book is it?

It is an anthology of poetry and like all anthologies has all sorts of different poems in it. People sometimes try to group the different kinds of poems together, these types include:

- Hymns – these begin with praise, describe something about God that causes this praise and ends with praise.
- Laments – there are both communal and individual laments, these lay out the reason for the lament and beg for God's help. Nearly all of these psalms end positively with a conviction that God really will help – the only exception is Psalm 88 which ends as miserably as it began.
- Royal Psalms – psalms focussed on the King of Israel
- Thanksgiving Psalms – these give thanks for something that God has done (as opposed to hymns which are more general expressions of praise).



Look out for...

The nature of God is described and declared time and time again throughout the psalms – what picture of God do you get as you read your way through?

Nearly all the psalms of lament, no matter how despairing, end with a statement of confidence in God. Does this deep confidence in God change the feeling of despair?

Certain psalms and sections of psalms repeat throughout the Psalter – look out for these and ask why this might be.



What could this mean for me?

Notice the relationship between God and his people in the Psalms. Even in times of absolute despair the people spoke to God, cried out to him and asked him for help. It sometimes feels as though there is nothing that they felt they could not say. How does this compare to your prayer life with God?

Try writing your own psalm – what might you put into it?



Discussion group questions

- Were there any parts of the book that you particularly liked or which inspired you?
- Were there any parts of the book that you disliked or which troubled you?
- What did *you* think the book was about?
- Think about how you summed up the Psalter and then think about the hymns and songs we sing in churches today. If we were to put them all together how might we sum them up? Are the similarities/differences between the two?
- Why do you think that the psalms have been so important for the last 2,000 years of Christian history? What have they provided that other parts of the Bible have not?
- Do you read/sing/pray the psalms enough in your church? If you were going to use them more what ideas might you have to do that?
- The structure of the Psalter suggests that its compilers might have put all 150 psalms together with a purpose in mind. Can you work out what it might have been?
- Did you read anything in the book that touched you, expanded your faith or made you think more deeply about your life and how you live it?



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