

WISDOM LITERATURE: PSALMS

INTRO:

The Book of Psalms is an inspired collection of 150 ancient Hebrew poems organized in five sections spanning from the time of Moses to the Israelites' return from exile. The Psalms deal primarily with God, Gods people, both communally and individually, and the tensions experienced as they journeyed through life. The frequent shift from lament to praise tells us something about the nature of prayer: we see the heart of humanity reaching out to the heart of God.

To hope in God despite the circumstances humanity often finds themselves in can create conflicting emotions within us as we look at the state of our world and our own inward chaos. Despite the emotions felt, and the circumstances that provoke them, we, like the Israelites, are called to obey Gods word and hope in Jesus. To be human is to express both lament (the point between pain and promise, often accompanied by confusion and anger) and joy (the lasting emotion that comes from the choice to trust God to fulfill his promises).

This book gives us a window into the heart of man and invites humanity to commune with God in triumph and trial, calling us to remain faithful to a covenant keeping God despite our circumstances. The first two psalms layout the theme for the rest of the book and help guide our hearts to the core of its message: a call to remain faithful to Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament) and look forward to the messianic kingdom that is to come.

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING:

Music has genres that help organize and distinguish each artistic composition marked by similarities in form, style, and subject matter. Just like every song we listen to fits within a specific genre of music, so it is with the Psalms. The genres of the Psalms include *Praise, Thanksgiving, Celebration, Lament, Trust, wisdom and Royalty*.

BOOK ORGANIZATION:

Book 1: Psalms 1-41

Book 2: Psalms 42-72

Book 3: Psalms 73-89

Book 4: Psalms 90-106

Book 5: Psalms 107-150

JESUS IN THE PSALMS

Jesus is the object of all the Scriptures in the Old Testament and Jesus himself alluded to fulfillment from the book of Psalms (Luke 24:44) and quoted it more than any other book during his earthly ministry. The New Testament's glorious proclamation is that Jesus is this Christ, the long-expected "Anointed One" of whom these Scriptures speak. Due to the large quantity of writings being attributed to king David, a type of Christ, we're left longing for a better and more perfect King – Jesus.

In the Psalms we see the cry for a King to bring relief, restoration, and comfort amid chaos, tragedy, and captivity. When Jesus expressed his anguish on the cross with the words of Psalm 22, he highlighted one of the precious facets of the Psalms in general; namely, that as songs, they uniquely convey the inward depths of the soul. Not only do the Psalms help shape our response to God in the trials and joys of life, but they also reveal to us something of the inner life of Jesus Christ, glimpses we do not have through the Gospels alone. Look closely and read curiously; The Psalms are both rich in theological depth and messianic hope.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOK OF PSALMS

- **Observation**

- Identify the subgenre - What kind of psalm is this? (Lament, joy, etc.)
- Note any contextual information given in the heading

Example:

- Psalm 51 - "To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone into Bathsheba."
- What is the organization of the psalm
 - What literary devices are used? What is the author emphasizing, contrasting, bringing attention to?

Literary Devices to look for:

- **Chiasm:** follows A-B-B'-A' pattern (sometimes more complex) where the center of the chiasm is the central point. (Psalm 1)
- **Simile:** a figure of speech that expresses a likeness between things of different kinds usually formed with 'like' or 'as.' (Psalm 1: 3)
- **Metaphor:** comparison primarily using 'is.' (Psalm 62:2)
- **Hyperbole:** a figure of speech that uses exaggeration to express strong emotion, make a point, or produce humor. (Psalm 42:3)
- **Parallelism:** phrases or sentences of a similar meaning placed side by side, balancing each other. (Psalm 18:4)
- **Anthropomorphism:** Putting a human characteristic on nonhuman things, events, animals, or God himself. (Psalm 34:15)

- **Interpretation**

- Where else do I see this image, word choice, reference in scripture?
- Example:
 - In Psalm 118:22, it talks about the Messiah being the cornerstone, which later is stated by Jesus himself in Matthew 21:42.
 - In *Psalm 23:1, we see the Messiah represented as a Shephard, later in John 10:11-18 we see Jesus call himself the Good Shephard.*
- Explore the messianic significance of the Psalm (how do you see Jesus in the Psalms)
 - Scripture: Luke 24:44 – The psalms pointed to Jesus
- The images that you read are meant to ignite your imagination through the experience of verbal art. These images, though foreign to you, have significant and symbolic meaning.
 - What is it looking back on? What is it pointing forward to? If you're not sure, you probably need to research the context a bit more.

- **Application**

- How do we pray and hope in light of the text?
- How do we discover Gods presence in good times and bad?
- How do we live by Gods wisdom?
- How do we respond when we experience (_____emotion) in our own lives?
- Is the psalmist learning a lesson that we need to consider ourselves?

- **Prayer**

- The Psalms give voice to our prayers, and in some sense, they really do teach us how to pray.
- Gods people have always used the inspired word of God to pray petitions back to Him.
- Pray the psalms out loud and invite God into your own laments, celebrations, praises, and sorrows.

WHAT CHURCH HISTORY HAS SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF PSALMS:

"... 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 ... 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. The other parts of Scripture contain the commandments which God enjoined his servants to announce to us. But here the prophets themselves, seeing they are exhibited to us as speaking to God, and laying open all their inmost thoughts and affections, call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain concealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy" - John Calvin

Athanasius - Early Church

[The psalms] become like a mirror to the person singing them, so that he might perceive himself and the emotions of his soul...Under all the circumstances of life, we shall find that these divine songs suit ourselves and meet our own souls' need at every turn.

On the Incarnation (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), p.104.

Martin Luther – Reformation

The Book of Psalms is full of heartfelt utterances made during storms of this kind. Where can one find nobler words to express joy than in the Psalms of praise or gratitude? In them you can see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at a lovely pleasure-garden or were gazing into heaven. . . Or where can one find more profound, more penitent, more sorrowful words in which to express grief than in the Psalms of lamentation? In these, you see into the hearts of all the saints as if you were looking at death or gazing into hell, so dark and obscure is the scene rendered by the changing shadows of the wrath of God. Quoted in John Witvliet, *The Biblical Psalms*, 39–40.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

It is not our prayers that interpret the Psalms but the Psalms that interpret our prayers.

