

# PSALMS



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The Book of Psalms, which we study in this lesson, is probably the best known of all the Old Testament books. Many people in our churches know at least one psalm by heart.

Throughout history, people have respected and appreciated the Book of Psalms. Martin Luther called it a Bible in miniature. John Calvin described the book as a mirror that reflects the anatomy of all the parts of the soul. We especially see the disquieting emotions such as grief, sorrow, fear, care, and anxiety as well as hope, joy, gratitude, and praise.

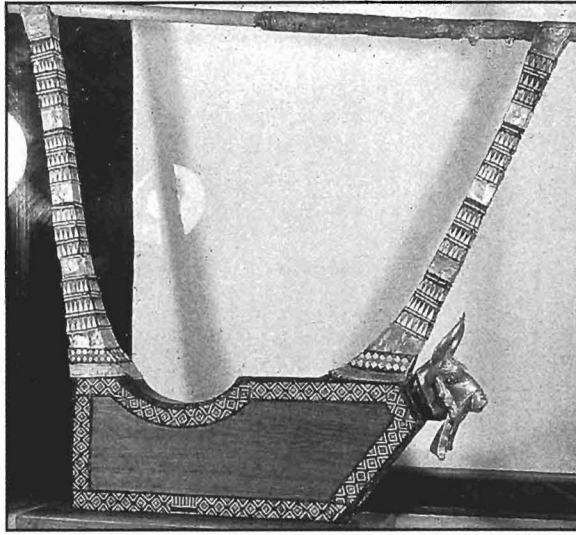
The word *psalms*, which became the title of the book, comes from the Greek language. In classical Greek, *psalmos* originally referred to the playing of a stringed

instrument. Gradually it came to mean the music produced by such playing. Still later, *psalmos* included the song that accompanied the playing of a stringed instrument.

Our present Book of Psalms, based on the Hebrew text, contains 150 psalms. We divide the 150 psalms into five books. The four doxologies that appear at the end of four psalms make us aware of this five-book division.

Psalm 72:20 says, "The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended." The doxology in Psalm 89:52 states, "Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen." A slightly more elaborate doxology appears at the end of Psalm 106:48.

The last psalm in the book, number 150, does not contain a final doxology; the



**Four-foot-high lyre, from Ur**

entire psalm is a doxology in itself. Read Psalm 150.

The doxologies divide the larger book into five smaller books. Book One is Psalms 1 to 41, Book Two is Psalms 42 to 72, Book Three is Psalms 73 to 89, Book Four is Psalms 90 to 106, and Book Five is Psalms 107 to 150.

These doxologies suggest that the book was edited to produce what the ancient rabbis called the five books of David that parallel the five books of Moses. This fivefold division of the book was probably made at a time when the psalms were read in worship services along with the books of the Law. Book One, or Psalms 1 to 41, would be read with the Book of Genesis; Book Two with the Book of Exodus, and so on.

All but thirty-four of the psalms have headings or introductions. Many of these introductions to individual psalms associate the psalms with David. Seventy-two psalms refer to David in the headings. Besides the references to David, these headings supply other information. We can no longer clearly understand many of these introductory statements to the psalms. If you compare a number of modern translations and notice the differences, this fact becomes immediately apparent.

Look at the heading of Psalm 59. The words *To the leader* suggest that this psalm was probably sung by a choir. *Do Not*

*Destroy* may refer to the tune to which the psalm was sung. The word *Miktam* seems to refer to the kind of psalm. The Israelites employed this word in a way similar to our use of such terms as *ballad* or *western* when we describe types of songs. We do not know the meaning of *Miktam*, and therefore scholars leave the word untranslated. *Of David* generally means that David wrote the psalm. The rest of the heading associates the psalm with an episode in David's life.

We can see then that the Israelites associated David with many psalms. Later tradition tended to assume that David wrote all the psalms, but the headings do not support this assumption. The many references to David do, however, show that the psalms were closely associated with the royal family in Jerusalem.

When most people read through the Book of Psalms, they notice two things. Different psalms repeat the same phrases and ideas. So the psalms usually appear repetitious. Also, the subject and tone of the book often changes drastically from one psalm to the next. A boastful and almost irreverent psalm follows a pious psalm. These changes give the book a sense of great diversity. In light of its great similarity and equally great diversity, how can we speak of the book as a whole?

Persons commonly speak of the Book of Psalms as the hymnbook of the Jewish Temple. In some respects, this description is true. Many of the psalms may have originally been sung as hymns in Temple services. Others describe the Book of Psalms as the prayer book of ancient Israel. This description is also partially true since many psalms are prayers addressed to God.

No single description is appropriate for all the psalms. Some of the psalms are addressed to God either in praise and thanksgiving or in words of petition and request. Other psalms speak not *to* God but *about* God and assume a human audience. Some psalms contain the words of God addressed to persons. Some psalms read



**Canaanite incense stand with musicians**

like sermons. The Book of Psalms, therefore, is really a collection of poems.

The psalms were an important part of worship in the Jerusalem Temple. The choirs, priests, and worshipers recited and sang the psalms as part of worship services. Other worship activities included sacred processions, sacrifices, weeping, feasting, and dancing. The variety in the psalms reflects the variety in worship services. Sometimes worship services were joyful and thankful; at other times, sad and lament-

ing. Sometimes services were for individuals, at other times for the whole community, and at other times for the king. The worshipping community used the psalms again and again, just as modern congregations use prayer books and hymnals.

The priests offered ceremonies in the Temple for private individuals when persons were sick or facing death, when they felt threatened by enemies, or when they were wrongly accused of some crime. On these occasions, the priest offered psalms to God along with sacrifices as he asked for God's help. Psalm 5 is a prayer for a person who has many enemies. Psalm 6 is an example of a psalm used during time of sickness. Psalm 7 is a psalm for someone falsely accused of some misdeed. Some individuals prayed laments during times of trouble and distress. And persons used some psalms, such as Psalm 51, when they had committed some sin and were asking for forgiveness. Read Psalm 51:1-2, 15-17.

The priests held services of thanksgiving after God saved a person from trouble or distress or forgave that person's sin. Psalms used in thanksgiving rituals looked back on the trouble from which God granted delivery. Psalm 32 is a psalm of thanksgiving for forgiven sin. Other psalms offered thanksgiving for healing from disease or for rescue from one's enemies.

The community had its troubles and times of thanksgiving also. Psalms such as 74 and 79 are prayers by the people after the destruction or defilement of the Temple. These psalms and others like them express the hope that the enemy will be destroyed and that the Temple and the chosen people will be restored. Some of these psalms, such as Psalm 137, are prayers for vengeance on Israel's enemies.

Many psalms are majestic hymns that proclaim God's greatness in creating the world, in bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt, in saving and protecting the people from their enemies, in choosing Jerusalem as God's sacred city, and in making the family of David the chosen dynasty. The

worshippers probably sang these hymns at the great spring and fall religious festivals. These festivals were the Feasts of Passover and Tabernacles. Read Psalm 100.

Just as the psalms gave expression in worship to the diverse needs, emotions, and conditions of the ancient Israelite people, so they still allow us to identify with these same feelings and hopes. They are an eloquent expression of universal sentiments. Thus the psalms have an abiding relevance.

The first kind of psalm we will look at is the *hymn of praise*. Read Psalm 19 aloud. Then answer the following questions.

a. What is describing God's glory in speech without words? (verses 1-4)

b. What is the main theme of verses 7-11?

c. What is the psalmist praying in verses 12-14?

### **INDIVIDUAL LAMENTS**

A second kind of psalm in the Psalter is an *individual's lament to God*. Read Psalm 51 aloud. Then answer these questions.

a. What is the psalmist confessing in verses 1-4?

b. What is the psalmist asking God to do? (verse 7)

c. What is the acceptable sacrifice before God? (verse 17)

### **INDIVIDUAL PSALMS OF THANKSGIVING**

The third kind of psalm, the *individual psalm of thanksgiving*, corresponds to the individual lament. In the individual psalm of thanksgiving the psalmist offers thanks to God for something God has done. Read Psalm 32 aloud. Then answer the questions below.

a. According to the psalmist, who is the blessed one? (verses 1-2)

b. Why had the psalmist suffered? (verses 3-4)

c. How could the psalmist find happiness and joy? (verse 5)

### **PRAISE OF ZION PSALMS**

A fourth kind of psalm we find in the Psalter is the *praise of Zion* psalm. This

type of psalm glorifies the holy city of Zion, or Jerusalem. Read Psalm 2 aloud. Then answer the following questions.

a. Who set themselves against the Lord and God's anointed? (verses 1-3)

b. Where does God sit? (verse 4)

c. Where did God set the king? (verse 6)

### **COMMUNAL PSALMS OF THANKSGIVING**

A fifth kind of psalm found in the Psalter is the *communal psalm of thanksgiving*. In this psalm the congregation offers thanks to God for something God has done. Read Psalm 67 aloud. To whom is this psalm addressed? (verses 3-7)

### **COMMUNAL LAMENTS**

Just as a community addresses thanksgiving to God, it may also lament to God about its collective troubles. Read aloud Psalm 137, *a communal lament*. Then answer these questions.

a. Where did the people sit down and weep?

b. What is the reason for the people's lament?

### **SUMMARY**

Six kinds of psalms are found in the Psalter, with these listed as examples.

- (1) Hymns of praise (Psalm 19)
- (2) Individual laments (Psalm 51)
- (3) Individual psalms of thanksgiving (Psalm 32)
- (4) Zion psalms (Psalm 2)
- (5) Communal psalms of thanksgiving (Psalm 67)
- (6) Communal laments (Psalm 137)

The beauty of this poetry is best appreciated when the psalms are read aloud.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Take a few minutes to think about the times in your life when you have experienced joy, sorrow, anxiety, anger, grief, or any other deep emotion. Which psalms did you find meaningful at these times?

2. The Book of Psalms is a collection of quite varied poems. This was the hymnbook of Judaism and the early church, so the poems were sung. Discuss the value of singing as a worship experience rather than just reading.

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### **DAILY READINGS FOR PROVERBS, ECCLESIASTES, AND SONG OF SOLOMON**

- Day 1: Proverbs 8:22-31  
Day 2: Proverbs 10:1-12  
Day 3: Proverbs 31:10-31  
Day 4: Ecclesiastes 1:1-11  
Day 5: Ecclesiastes 3:1-9  
Day 6: Ecclesiastes 12:1-14  
Day 7: Song of Solomon 8:1-7