

The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is one of the most fascinating books in the Bible. It contains a large collection of hymns that were written by many different authors, on many different subjects, over a period that spanned a thousand years. Psalms has doctrine, comfort, prophecy, and praise – a *lot* of praise. The 150 hymns in the book of Psalms are eminently worthy of study, but because of the book's massive length there are few preachers who attempt to preach their way through it.

Since our time is limited, we are not going to try to go through the entire book. That would take years, and we only have a single month. However, I do want to show you just how fascinating the Psalms really are, and give you a better appreciation for one of the best-known but least-studied books of the Bible.

Let us begin!

The Longest Book in the Bible

The book of Psalms is, by a wide margin, the longest book in the Bible. It has 150 psalms and more than 2400 verses. This makes it more than twice as long as the runner-up Isaiah, which has just 66 chapters and approximately 1300 verses.

In fact, Psalms is so long that it is actually divided into five different books. I realize that our modern Bibles don't separate them out that way, but if you check the headings of the psalms you will see what I mean. Psalms is the only book where the chapter divisions are a part of the text. The psalms are divided up as follows:

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Book 1: Psalms 1 to 41

Book 2: Psalms 42 to 72

Book 3: Psalms 73 to 89

Book 4: Psalms 90 to 106

Book 5: Psalms 107 to 150

No one really knows why the psalms are divided up in this manner. The five books are not organized by author, subject, or chronology. If there is a pattern to them no one has ever been able to find it. Some people have speculated that this internal categorization reflects the way the Psalms came into existence. They believe that the first two books were compiled by David, the third and fourth by Solomon, and the fifth by Ezra. However, there's not a lot of evidence to support this, and no one really knows for sure.

The Hymnbook of the Bible

If you walked up to someone and ask them to name five songs from 3,000 years ago, the odds are pretty good that he wouldn't be able to do it. Although we are familiar with songs that are popular in our day and could perhaps even name a few songs from centuries past, the ancient world is pretty much lost to us. Historians might be able to name a few songs from distant ages, but for the most part the enormous amount of music that was written by ancient cultures has been lost.

There is a major exception to this rule, however, and that is the book of Psalms. Here we have a collection of 150 hymns from the world before the time of Christ. It is easy to overlook the fact that Psalms is a *hymnbook*, and these psalms were written to be sung in worship. The New Testament even makes mention of this:

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James 5:13: "Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms."

We might not sing very many psalms today, but in the past this was extremely common. In fact, there are some Christians who still do this today. There are a lot of great hymns out there, but I think there is something very special about singing the hymns that *God* wrote.

In the ancient world these hymns were sung on a regular basis. Some of them were even reserved for special occasions. For example, Psalm 120 to 134 are the Psalms of Ascent. (The King James Bible labels these as songs of "degrees".) You see, the city of Jerusalem was set on a hill, and three times a year all of Israel had to *ascend* that hill in order to reach Jerusalem and celebrate the annual feasts that God had ordained. Scholars believe that as the Israelites made their way up the hill, they sang these fifteen psalms. This would have focused their mind on the Lord and put them in a spirit of worship and praise.

The Longest Chapter In The Bible

The longest chapter in the entire Bible can be found in the book of Psalms. It is Psalm 119, and it has an amazing 176 verses. This Psalm is actually an acrostic. The first eight verses all begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the second eight verses start with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on. That is why this Psalm is so extremely long. (We are going to take a closer look at this Psalm later in our study.)

The Shortest Chapter In The Bible

The shortest chapter in the Bible can also be found in the book of Psalms. It is Psalm 117, and has exactly two verses. Here they are:

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Psalm 117:1: “O praise the Lord, all ye nations: praise him, all ye people.
2 For his merciful kindness is great toward us: and the truth of the Lord endureth for ever. Praise ye the Lord.”

You have now read an entire chapter of the Bible. (That wasn't so hard, was it?)

The Mysterious Liturgical Terms

If you read through the book of Psalms you'll occasionally notice that in the heading of the psalm, right before the first verse, is a small note of some kind. Sometimes these notes are very clear. For example, Psalm 40 has a note that says “To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David”. That's pretty straightforward and easy to understand! However, some Psalms have notes that no one has been able to translate.

For example:

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Psalm 9: “To the chief Musician upon Muthlabben, A Psalm of David”. What is Muthlabben? No one really knows. Verse 16 of this Psalm also contains the mysterious word “Higgaion”. Some people think it's some kind of musical notation term, but its exact meaning is unknown.

Psalm 46: “A Song upon Alamothe”. No one knows what “Alamothe” is. Some scholars have suggested that it means the psalm was supposed to be sung by a soprano, but that's just a guess.

Psalm 53: “To the chief musician upon Mahalath, Maschil, A Psalm of David.” Mahalath might refer to the name of the tune that was to be used to sing this psalm, but no one really knows. No one really knows what a Maschil is either.

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Psalm 59: “To the chief Musician, Al-taschith, Michtam of David, when Saul sent, and they watched the house to kill him.” What is a Michtam? No one knows.

Psalm 81: “To the chief musician upon Tittith, A Psalm of Asaph”. No one knows what Tittith (or Gittith in some translations) might refer to. There is some speculation that it may have had something to do with the grape harvest, but it's impossible to know for sure.

There are a number of other mysterious and untranslatable words that are found in the book of Psalms, but I think you get the point. In some ways this is a book of mysteries – it has more untranslatable words than any other book of the Bible. And yet, in spite of that, the psalms are still very understandable. The words that cannot be translated do not impact our ability to comprehend the

meaning of the psalms.

The fact that the Psalms contains so many untranslatable words is strong evidence that it is a very old book. If it was more modern and had been compiled closer to the time of Christ then it would have used the musical terms that were common in those days, which are much better understood. What we are glimpsing here is the enormous age of this book. These psalms really were written in the time of David. This is important because the psalms contain prophecy about the coming of the Messiah – prophecies that Christ fulfilled.

The Many Authors of the Psalms

The book of Psalms has quite a few different authors. All sorts of people wrote Psalms – including some that you might not expect. For example:

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King David wrote 75 psalms. (73 are noted in the book of Psalms. Psalm 2 is attributed to David in Acts 4:25, and Psalm 95 is attributed to David in Hebrews 4:7). This means he wrote half of the longest book of the Bible! He wrote Psalms 3 - 9, 11 - 41, 51 - 65, 68 - 70, 86, 101, 103, 108 - 110, 122, 124, 131, 133, and 138 - 145.

Asaph (and family) wrote 12 psalms. He was a musician during the time of King David and wrote Psalm 50 and Psalms 73 - 83. Interestingly, 2 Chronicles 29:30 tells us that Asaph was also a prophet.

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The sons of Korah wrote 11 psalms. They wrote Psalm 42, 44 - 49, 84 - 85, and 87 - 88. According to 1 Chronicles 9:19-21 the Korahites were doorkeepers and custodians in the Temple. They were a direct descendent of the famous Korah who rebelled against Moses in Numbers 16 and were cast alive into Hell. Some of that group did *not* rebel, though, and during the time of King David they became leaders in tabernacle music.

Heman the Ezrahite wrote Psalm 88. According to 1 Chronicles 6:33, Heman was the grandson of the prophet Samuel. 1 Chronicles 25:11 says that Heman was one of the three primary musicians appointed by King David. Interestingly, 1 Chronicles 25:4-6 says that Heman was a prophet (which makes it quite possible that Psalm 88, which speaks of a man who is being tormented and facing death, is actually a Messianic prophecy).

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Solomon wrote 2 psalms: 72 and 127. He is well-known for his proverbs, but he wrote psalms as well. Interestingly, Psalm 72 appears to be a prophecy about the Millennial Kingdom (which

is something we'll discuss in a future lesson).

Moses wrote Psalm 90. This is the first psalm in Book IV and is probably the oldest psalm. (It's impossible to know for sure which one is actually the oldest because there are a number of psalms that have no attributed author.)

Ethan the Ezrahite wrote Psalm 89. Very little is known about him. 1 Kings 4:31 says that Solomon was so wise that he was even wiser than “Ethan the Ezrahite”, so he must have been a very wise man.

No one knows who wrote the remaining 48 psalms. It is a great mystery (much like all those musical terms!).

A Book Of Many Themes

Psalms is a very long book, so it should come as no surprise that it has a great deal to say. The psalms can be placed into a wide variety of different categories:

Praise: Some of the psalms are psalms of praise. For example, here are the first few verses of Psalm 33:

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Psalm 33:1: “Rejoice in the Lord, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright.

2 Praise the Lord with harp: sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings.

3 Sing unto him a new song; play skilfully with a loud noise.”

As you can see, this psalm is full of praise – praise that, interestingly, was intended to be *loud*. This was not a quiet and serene hymn! Psalm 98:4 and Psalm 150:5 also specifically state that the hymn should be loud. (If you ever wondered what God thought about loud music, now you know!)

There are many psalms like this scattered throughout the book. Psalm 95 is another great example of this genre:

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Psalm 95:1: “O come, let us sing unto the Lord: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

2 Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.

3 For the Lord is a great God, and a great King above all gods.”

Others in this category include Psalm 100, 103, 104, 111, 113, 114, 117, and Psalm 145 - 50.

These are hymns of praise.

Lament: Some of the psalms were written from a perspective of suffering and pain. For example, take a look at Psalm 3:

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Psalm 3:1: “Lord, how are they increased that trouble me! many are they that rise up against me.

2 Many there be which say of my soul, There is no help for him in God. Selah.”

These psalms fall into two categories. Some of these lamentations reflect personal problems that are afflicting one person, and that person is crying out to the Lord for mercy and help. Others, though, reflect the problems of an entire nation. For example, take a look at this one:

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Psalm 44:9: “But thou hast cast off, and put us to shame; and goest not forth with our armies.

10 Thou makest us to turn back from the enemy: and they which hate us spoil for themselves.

11 Thou hast given us like sheep appointed for meat; and hast scattered us among the heathen.”

That was clearly written about a nation that was suffering persecution and difficulties. The psalmist is praying that God would deliver them from their enemies.

If you read through the book of Psalms you will see *many* psalms of lamentation. In fact, this is one of the major themes of the book:

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Individual affliction: Psalm 3, 4, 5, 7, 9 - 10, 13 - 14, 17, 22, 25 - 28, 31, 36, 39 - 43, 52 - 57, 59, 61, 64, 70 - 71, 77, 86, 89, 120, 139, 141, 142

Group affliction: 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 89 - 90, 94, 123, 126, 129

That is a lot of psalms! When the people of God were in trouble they cried out to the Lord – but one thing the psalms makes clear is that even in times of difficulty people still had faith in God. Psalm 3 starts out on a painful note, but look at what comes next:

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Psalm 3:3: “But thou, O Lord, art a shield for me; my glory, and the lifter up of mine head.

4 I cried unto the Lord with my voice, and he heard me out of his holy hill. Selah.”

Why do the psalmists cry out to God in their time of trouble? Because they know that the Lord hears them.

Thanksgiving: There are many psalms that give thanks to God for the great things that He has done. You can literally think of these as Thanksgiving hymns. In our culture there are far more songs about Christmas than any other holiday, but the Bible focuses its attention on times of thanksgiving. If you were ever looking for some good Thanksgiving hymns, the Bible is full of them. For example:

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Psalm 75:1: “Unto thee, O God, do we give thanks, unto thee do we give thanks: for that thy name is near thy wondrous works declare.”

Psalm 107:1: “O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.”

Other thanksgiving hymns include 18, 21, 30, 32, 34, 40, 65 - 67, 75, 92, 107 - 108, 116, 118, 124, 136, and 138. As the Bible says, it is good to give thanks to God and to praise Him for all the marvelous things that He has done for us!

Wisdom: People usually associate the book of Proverbs with wisdom literature, but Psalms also contains a great deal of wisdom – and there are some psalms that seem to be dedicated to that topic. For example, Psalm 37 sounds like something that could have been taken right out of Proverbs:

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Psalm 37:1: “Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity.

2 For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.

3 Trust in the Lord, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.

4 Delight thyself also in the Lord: and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.”

Or take this one, for example:

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Psalm 49:3: “My mouth shall speak of wisdom; and the meditation of my heart shall be of understanding.

4 I will incline mine ear to a parable: I will open my dark saying upon the harp.”

There is also Psalm 36, 73, 112, 127, 128, and 133.

Israel's History: Some of the psalms recount Israel's history and the way that God has worked with His people. For example, take a look at this excerpt from Psalm 105:

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Psalm 105:9: “Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac;
10 And confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant:
11 Saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance:
12 When they were but a few men in number; yea, very few, and strangers in it.”

More history can be found in Psalm 106:

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Psalm 106:7: “Our fathers understood not thy wonders in Egypt; they remembered not the multitude of thy mercies; but provoked him at the sea, even at the Red sea.
8 Nevertheless he saved them for his name's sake, that he might make his mighty power to be known.”

Psalm 135 and Psalm 136 also contain information about Israel's history. People don't usually think of Psalms as a repository of historical knowledge, but there is history to be found there.

Personal History: Some of the Psalms are personal in nature and are about events that are recorded elsewhere in the Old Testament. For example:

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- **Psalm 59** was written when Saul sent people to David's house to murder him (1 Samuel 19:11-18).
- **Psalm 52** was written when Saul came and killed the priests of the Lord for helping David (1 Samuel 22:11-19).
- **Psalm 63** was written when David fled into the wilderness (1 Samuel 23:14).

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- **Psalm 54** was written when the Ziphites betrayed David to Saul (1 Samuel 23:19-20).
- **Psalm 57** was written when David fled from Saul and hid in a cave (1 Samuel 22:1).
- **Psalm 34** was written when David pretended like he was insane in order to escape from the Philistines (1 Samuel 21:10-15).

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- **Psalm 18** is the psalm that David wrote when God delivered him from the hand of King Saul (2 Samuel 1).
- **Psalm 30** was written to dedicate the house that David built in Jerusalem (2 Samuel 5:11).

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- **Psalm 51** was written after Nathan the prophet confronted David about the king's sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:1-12).
- **Psalm 60** was written after David battled the Edomite and Syrian armies (2 Samuel 8:14).

Special Occasions: Some Psalms were written with special occasions in mind. For example:

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- **Psalm 92** was written specifically for the Sabbath day.
- **Psalm 102** was written for people who were afflicted.
- **Psalm 145** is specifically labeled as “David's Psalm of Praise”.

Prophecy: It may come as a surprise, but the book of Psalms does contain prophecy. There are a number of Psalms that speak of the person and work of the Messiah – but we will take a closer look at those in our next lesson.

As we can see, Psalms is a book that is full of praise and thanksgiving – but it is also a book of lamentation and suffering. It contains both wisdom and prophecy, and it has history as well. Above all, though, it is a book that magnifies the Lord and that praises Him for the many great things He has done!