

Really Useful Guides

Psalms

Simon P. Stocks

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The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 731 7
First published 2018
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
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Cover image by Rebecca J Hall

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK by Zenith Media NP4 0DQ

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Contents

1	Why read the psalms?	7
2	What is the book of Psalms?	10
3	What do the psalms say?	16
	The Lord is king!	18
	Keeping memory alive: the Lord has ruled in righteousness	28
	Keeping faith alive: the Lord rules in faithfulness	35
	Keeping hope alive: the Lord will ever rule in triumph	41
4	How do they say it?	47
	Poetic style	47
	Imagery and idiom	53
	Force and feelings	61
5	What was going on at the time?	66
	A bit of history, people and places	66
	Tailor-made or made for tailoring?	69

6 Reading the psalms today	72
Personal reading of the psalms	73
Reading a psalm in corporate worship	79
7 Some specific examples	80
Psalm 13	80
Psalm 30	86
Psalm 67	90
Psalm 58	94
Psalm 48	100
8 And finally... famous openings	105
Questions for reflection and discussion	111

1

Why read the psalms? A personal reflection

When I first became enthused about reading the Bible as a teenager, I was pretty rigorous about reading my three chapters a day (five on Sunday) so that I would get through it in a year. I even stuck at it through Leviticus – though I cannot claim to have actually read every single name in those long lists! Yet the part of the Bible that I read the least carefully at that time was probably the psalms. They just didn't seem very readable. I could readily make sense of the narrative books of the Bible, and the laws and prophecies were reasonably accessible (if a little dull or obscure), but I just didn't seem to 'get' the psalms.

For many years, the psalms were not part of the worshipping tradition of the churches I attended, and so they were not explicitly in my awareness. (Only subsequently have I discovered how many songs and hymns were based on them.) I next came across the psalms when I was at theological college and

we would use one as part of morning prayer each day. I can still recall how strongly I reacted day by day as the person leading would say something like, 'This morning we will say Psalm 28.' I was (inwardly) shouting 'Why?! Why are we doing that? Why are we using these strange words to express sentiments that I don't even relate to?'

In time, my bafflement found a constructive outlet, and I began my study of the psalms which has continued since. What I soon discovered was that my mindset, both as a teenager and as an adult, had been awry. The psalms are not for reading in the same way that a story is for reading, because they are much more intense and rich. They need to be experienced and felt as much as heard. It was when I slowed down and dwelt with the psalms awhile that they started to come alive. I was like someone who had only ever drunk Americano coffee, learning how to savour and appreciate a really good espresso. They require a different sort of reading.

The psalms also require a different sort of 'saying' – they really make sense when they are prayed. As a means of sharing in the faith experience of those who wrote them, the psalms really started to hit the mark when I learned to pray them with and for other

people. They provide a real point of connection with God's people – past and present – who share the same joys, struggles and hopes that I do. And it is this emotional richness that has really had the most significant impact on me. Strong feelings do not always find comfortable means of expression in contemporary Christian life; indeed, some forms of Christian community can be positively averse to them. Yet, in the psalms, I have found the most extraordinary and wonderful way to connect with God through every shade of emotion.

So, I invite you to read the psalms with me: to learn to appreciate their richness, their flavours and their intensity. May they enrich your own faith and, through your praying them, that of many others too.

2

What is the book of Psalms?

Imagine 2,000 years from now, in a digital age, when only a handful of people are allowed access to old paper documents, one of the country's last ever printed hymn books (dated 2025?) is discovered. What a fascination! If you were in that situation, what would your questions be? What would you want to investigate? Perhaps which hymns/songs were included and which not; or the order in which they were printed; or the topics and ideas about God that they covered? Could they be related to anything else that was known about the Christian church in the early 21st century? All of which would be helped enormously if there was an editor's Foreword to the hymn book (as there usually is) addressing those sorts of issues.

The book of Psalms is a collection of hymns, songs and prayers from ancient Israel, originally written in Hebrew. Sadly, it does not have an editor's Foreword, but it does give us a fascinating insight into the beliefs, hopes and worship of the Israelites. And, as

it was in use at the time of Jesus, it was particularly influential on the New Testament writers and on Christian traditions of devotion and worship.

The book of Psalms, also known in English as the Psalter, consists of 150 numbered psalms. As hymns and prayers, they are generally addressed to God. They have always been associated with music and being sung; several of the psalms themselves mention the use of music and singing (for example, 49:4; 92:3). Some appear to be specifically intended for congregational singing, whereas others are more adaptable to a range of contexts. The psalms vary in length very widely: the shortest (117) is just two verses, whereas the longest (119) is 176 verses.

As you read the psalms, you will find that often God and God's actions are the sole concerns of a psalm, while in other psalms there can be attention given to the psalmist themselves, to God's people generally, or to a historical figure or specific place. In a few cases, a psalm is neither addressed to God nor talks about God, but is addressed to other people as a direct means of passing on advice for good and godly living.

The Psalter is traditionally grouped into five smaller collections or 'books' of psalms: 1–41, 42–72, 73–89,

90—106 and 107—150. The division into books is identified by a concluding doxology – a short expression of giving glory to God by means of the phrase ‘Blessed be the Lord...’ Have a look at the end of Psalms 41, 72, 89 and 106 and you will see this. After the end of Psalm 72, you will find an extra fascinating comment! At the very end of the Psalter, the same form of expression is not used. Why do you think that might be?

This feature of the Psalter shows us that the psalms have been assembled and rearranged over a period of time, probably from other smaller collections. Moreover, the insertion of these concluding expressions of glorifying God suggests that the primary purpose of the psalms is to be a means of giving glory to God. They have their fullest meaning when we use them for that purpose. In fact, the Hebrew title for the Psalter is ‘Praises’. This does not fairly reflect the variety of types of psalm found in the book, but does convey the sense that all the psalms are fundamentally for giving glory and honour to God.

Within the five ‘books’ of psalms, there are also some smaller collections. Many psalms (but not all) have a heading in the Hebrew text that associates a psalm with a particular character or occasion. For example, Psalms 73—83 are associated with Asaph, who

was appointed the chief of the temple musicians in 1 Chronicles 16:7. And Psalms 120—134 are all headed ‘Song of Ascents’, which is possibly a reference to pilgrimage up to Jerusalem. You may wonder why the psalms are collected as they are, or put into the order that they are. See if you can discern any connections between psalms as you read them. Sometimes there will be, at other times not.

The headings (known technically as ‘superscriptions’, meaning ‘written at the top’) are translated and included in some English versions of the Bible, but not all. Have a look in your Bible and see if they are there. For example, the heading for Psalm 73 is ‘A Psalm of Asaph’. There might be another heading in your Bible as well as (or instead of) that one. It would probably be in italics and say something like ‘Plea for relief from oppressors’. This is an extra explanation of the psalm that has been added by the English translators.

The most common phrase found in the headings is ‘Of David’. This has given rise to the tradition of the psalms having been written by King David, the second king over all Israel as told in the book of 2 Samuel. (Mentions of David being a musician, such as in 1 Samuel 19:9, also contribute to this tradition.) In

some instances, it is clearly impossible that King David could have been the author of a psalm (see section 5 on historical context), while in others it is plausible. However, the phrase 'Of David' is particularly ambiguous in its meaning (even more so in Hebrew than in English). It could imply 'written by David' but could also mean any of the following: 'About David', 'In the style of David', 'For David', or 'In honour of David'.

Be cautious in making assumptions about how a particular psalm is related to the life of King David. It is probably helpful to use the background of King David's life to add some context and character to the psalms, but not to limit their meaning to those specific details. We can make the same point through our analogy of a modern hymn book. We might know that a hymn was written by John Wesley, and it might have had particular connection to events in his life. But the hymn will have taken on a life of its own: it will have been used for over 200 years by many people who did not know about the circumstances of its origin. Therefore, its place in the hymn book and its interpretation would not be limited by people not knowing that John Wesley wrote it, or even if it were discovered that in fact somebody else had written it.

The ambiguity in the actual author(s) of the psalms is such that we will refer to ‘the psalmist’ as the person who originated a particular psalm. This makes reading the psalms more straightforward and allows us to hold in our mind the various people involved in shaping the psalms, whether as authors, editors or compilers. Some of those people may be identifiable (such as David and Asaph), others not.

Thinking about human authors is part of seeing the psalms as human words expressed to God. So they originally were, and they continue to be as we read them and pray them. But as part of scripture, they are also God’s word to us as we read them. So, they reveal as well as express. They make God known to us at the very moment of our reaching out to God. Or, conversely, as the great early church leader Athanasius put it, ‘While most scriptures speak to us, the Psalms speak for us.’ See if you can discern this two-way communication in your reading of the psalms. Where does the psalmist speak *for* you? And what does God speak *to* you?

The next two sections will delve much deeper into these two areas: What do the psalms say to us (as God’s word)? And how do they say it (as a form of human expression)?



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