

## How to Read the Psalms

### Why, as New Testament Christians, should we read the Psalms?

- *The Psalms are quoted in the New Testament more than any other book.* Paul shows us over and over that the Psalms anticipate the messiah who would come and suffer and then be glorified.
- *The Psalms point to Jesus.* In Luke 24:44 (ESV), Jesus says: “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”
- *We can sing or pray the Psalms to God.* Many of the cries, the celebrations, the sadness, the joy, the gratitude of our hearts are already written out in a song or a prayer found in the Psalms! So, let our hearts pray what God has already written in His Word!

### Are there different types of Psalms?

Yes, these are known as “genres.” It is important to know and understand the what and why of each genre to help in interpreting. Many Psalms contain multiple genres, but it is helpful to be aware of the various themes and types to understand the Psalmists’ hearts. This is a tool that can be helpful; but be careful not to over analyze. There is a great amount of flexibility and overlap in how many of these genres appear within the Psalms.

The seven genres which we will describe **are the hymn, the lament, the thanksgiving psalm, the psalm of remembrance, the psalm of confidence, the wisdom psalm, and the kingship psalm.** These seven genres may be broken down further into even narrower genres, but for the sake of our reading, these should well suffice.

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## Suggestions for Studying the Psalms

- Consciously make a decision about the genre of a passage of Scripture as you read it.
- Be flexible in your understanding of a text’s genre. More than one category may be applicable.

### ***The Hymn***

Hymns are easily recognized by their exuberant praise of the Lord. The Psalmists praise is exuberant because the psalmist is very conscious of God’s presence. Almost all of them share a similar basic structure. 1) Hymns begin with a call to worship; 2) they continue by expanding on the reasons why God should be praised; 3) Hymns often include, and sometimes conclude with, further calls to praise. *Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits* (103:1-2).

The reasons for praise form the most significant part of the psalm. God is not praised for abstract qualities, but rather for the way in which he has entered into the individual and corporate lives of his people. The transition from praise to the reason for praise is often introduced by the Hebrew conjunction *kî* (“for” sometimes translated “because”). *It is good to praise the LORD...For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD* (92:1,4). *Sing to the LORD a new song...For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens* (96:1, 5).

### **Suggestions for Study**

- While reading a hymn, look for the word *for* or *because*. Here we usually can find the reasons for praise.
- As you study a hymn, list the psalmist’s reasons for praise.

### ***The Lament***

In lament, we go from the height of our relationship with God to its depths. Similar to the hymn, the lament genre is primarily defined by its mood. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.* (22:1-2). The lament is the psalmist's cry when in great distress, he has nowhere to turn but to God. We discover three types of complaints as we read through the laments. 1) The psalmist may be troubled by his own thoughts and actions; 2) He may complain about the actions of others against his (the "enemies"); 3) He may be frustrated by God himself. The psalms are purposefully vague in reference to historical events so that they can be used in a variety of situations.

Besides mood, laments are also united by a similar structure. The following seven elements are associated with a lament, though not strictly in the order listed here and rarely all together: 1) Invocation; 2) Plea to God for help; 3) Complaints; 4) Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence; 5) Curse of enemies (imprecation); 6) Confidence in God's response 7) Hymn or blessing. Since a lament predominantly reflects a downcast mood. It is surprising to note that all laments include some expression of trust in God, often concluding with a hymn of praise. As the psalmist realizes what God can and will do for him, it leads him to praise God. As the psalmist realizes what God can and will do for him, it leads his to praise God: *My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD* (26:12).

#### **Suggestions for Study**

- In a lament, identify the object of the psalmist's complaint. Does he focus on himself, his enemies or God?
- Examine the structure of a lament for the presence of the seven "building blocks" (invocation, pleas, complaint, expression of confidence, confession of sin or assertion of innocence, imprecation, hymn or blessing) which often occur in laments.
- Study a lament carefully to determine whether it is the cry of an individual or the community.

### ***The Thanksgiving Psalm***

A thanksgiving psalm is a response to answered lament. In addition, there is a close connection between hymns and thanksgivings. A typical thanksgiving begins in a similar way to a hymn of praise. The psalmist declares his intention to praise God. *I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips* (34:1). Some thanksgivings, however, begin with a blessing. *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered* (32:1). The psalmist, thanking the Lord for answered prayer, bears witness to God's great work in his life. He even calls on the rest of the congregation to join him thanking the Lord sing to the LORD, you saints of his"

#### **Suggestions for Study**

- Once you've identified a thanksgiving psalm, try to understand the prayer (usually a quoted lament)

### ***Psalms of Confidence***

The psalmist frequently expresses his trust in God's goodness and power. His confidence in God is present as he sings hymns of joy (Ps 46) and as he mourns (3:3-6; 52:8). Occasionally, his feelings of trust dominate the whole psalm, and these psalms we call psalms of confidence. At least nine psalms (Ps 11; 16; 23; 27; 62; 91; 121; 125; 131) are bound together in such a genre. In psalms of confidence, the psalmist asserts his trust in God, though enemies or some other threat are present (11:2; 23:5). Under such conditions, he is able to be at peace because his God is with him (11:4; 23:4).

#### **Suggestions for Study**

- In a psalm of confidence, identify the factors which threatened the psalmist's well-being
- Identify the images of God which the psalmist uses to communicate his confidence in God as he faces trouble.

### ***Psalms of Remembrance***

Psalms do not have a specific historical setting. Nonetheless, they frequently refer to the great redemptive acts of the past. Two events particularly are cited often: the Exodus (Ps 77:16) and the Davidic dynasty (Ps 89 and 132). God's acts are recounted so that Israel might praise him. *Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done* (105:1). Psalm 136 is unique in the Bible due to its recurrent refrain, "His love endures forever." Each verse brings a past act of God's redemption to remembrance.

#### **Suggestions for Study**

- As you read a remembrance psalm, list the mighty acts of God and read about these events in the historical books of the Bible.

### ***Wisdom Psalms***

Wisdom books reveal God's will in the nitty-gritty and difficult areas of our lives. On the one hand, there are wicked men who are cursed of God, and on the other hand, there are righteous men on whom God grants his blessing. Such a contrast is clear in Psalm 1: *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. . . (v.1) For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked will perish* (v.6). A few psalms meditate on the beauty and wonder of the law of God. *The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple* (19:7).

#### **Suggestions for Study**

- Since there is a strong connection between the wisdom books and the Psalms, ask yourself if wisdom themes – like creation order; law; the contract between the righteous and the wicked – are present in the psalm which you are studying.

### ***Kingship Psalms***

The kingship psalms, often included under the category of hymns, may also be profitably read as an independent genre. Two groups of kingship psalms must be distinguished. First, we have in the Psalter several psalms which focus on the human king of Israel. The second group of kingship psalms proclaim that God is king. The two subgroups are closely related because, after all, the human king was simply God's earthly reflection. God was the true king! *For God is the King of all the earth; sing to him a psalm of praise* (47:7). Many divine kingship psalms praise God as king in connection with military victory and may also be studied as Divine Warrior hymns.

#### **Suggestions for Study**

- Examine a psalm to see if the king is speaking the prayer or is the object of the prayer.