

Outline of Psalms

We hope this overview and outline of Psalms will assist you as you study God's Word.

General Background:

The Book of Psalms is a book to be sung. It is Israel's and the Church's songbook. We have seven named authors. David wrote 77 of the Psalms (2 [Acts 4:25], 3-9, 11-32, 34-41, 51-65, 68-70, 86, 95 [Hebrews 4:7], 96 [1 Chronicles 16:23-33], 101, 103, 105:1-15 [1 Chronicles 16:7-22], 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-145); Asaph wrote 12 (50, 73-83); the sons of Korah wrote nine (42, 44-45, 47-49, 84-84, 87); Solomon wrote two (72, 127); Moses wrote one (90); Heman wrote one (88); and Ethan wrote one (89). We do not know the authors of the other 47 Psalms. The Psalms span from Moses in the late fifteenth century B.C. until the late sixth century B.C. (126, 137), covering the entire national period of Israel in the Old Testament.

The Book of Psalms is about God. God is mentioned by name in the Psalms 1,220 times, and appears in each Psalm. "Yahweh" (LORD) is found in 132 of the Psalms and "Elohim" (God) is found in 109. Psalm 68 contains the name of God 42 times; Psalm 133 only once. Yet, merely counting the mentions of His name does not tell the full story. Pronouns referencing Him abound throughout the Psalms. For instance, in Psalm 119, the name of God is found 24 times, but a personal pronoun referring to God is found 347 times. In Psalm 23, the name of the LORD is found two times, but a personal pronoun referring to God is found 10 times. God is the constant of the Psalms.

The abundance of references to God in the Psalms underscores the place of God in our singing. While the Psalms deal with every level of human emotion, from total dejection (74) to full praise (150), the core of every Psalm is God. We come together to recount His mighty acts, to call upon Him in times of need, and to praise His name. God is our focus.

The book of Psalms is quoted 81 times in the New Testament, more than any other book. It is quoted by every New Testament writer except James and Jude.

Psalm 1 forms the introduction for the entire collection of Psalms and sets the theme of God's blessings on the righteous and His destruction of the wicked (the fear of God theme). Psalm 150 forms the conclusion of the entire collection and calls us to the praise of the LORD. The first thought of Psalm 1 is man blessed by God. The last thought of Psalm 150 is God praised by men.

Nine of the Psalms form eight acrostic units based on the Hebrew alphabet (9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119 [eight verses per Hebrew letter], 145). Five of these address the fear of the LORD (25, 34, 111, 112, and 145).

Divisions:

The book of Psalms is itself divided into five books: Book 1 (1-41), Book 2 (42-72), Book 3 (73-89), Book 4 (90-106), and Book 5 (107-150). Each of the five books of the Psalms ends with a doxology. Traditional Jewish teaching and much Christian teaching link each of the five books to the five books of the Pentateuch. I have not found the teaching very convincing.

I. The Book of the Messiah. Psalms 1-41:

All but four are attributed to David (1, 2, 10, 33) and no other named writers are included in this group. This book is the most Messianic of the books, with Psalms 2, 8, 16, 20-24, 31, 34, 35, 40, 41 all mentioning the Messiah, clearly about the Messiah, or quoted in the New Testament as referencing the Messiah. Some see Psalm 1 as also Messianic. After the introductory Psalm 1, the book opens with the Messiah (Psalm 2) and closes with the Messiah (Psalm 41:9 see John 13:18). In the very center of the book are five Messianic Psalms, two describing His prayer (20-21) and three describing His past, present, and future work (22-24). The eighth Psalm from the beginning and the eighth Psalm from the end (34) are also both Messianic. The end of the middle Psalm (21) assures us of God's judgment. The bookends of this first book are: "Blessed is the man . . . Blessed is the LORD, the God of Israel."

II. The Book of Desire. Psalms 42-72:

This book is the most personal of the five books (Psalms 42-43, 51, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 63, 64, 66, 69, 70, 71). Of the 13 Psalms that provide us historical background for their origins, eight of them are in this book (51, 52, 54, 56-57, 59-60, 63). This book begins with despondency and a deep longing for God (Psalm 42) and ends with the reign of the King (Psalm 72). Psalm 45 contains the beautiful marriage song of the King. Psalm 46 sets forth the most beautiful song of trust. Psalm 51 powerfully displays confession and forgiveness. The end of the middle Psalm (58) presents God as judge. The bookends of this second book are: "My soul pants for You, O God . . . Let the whole earth be filled with His glory."

III. The Book of Israel. Psalms 73-89:

This book deals mostly with God's dealings with His covenant people, Israel (74, 77-81, 83, 85, 87, 89). Psalm 73 is a great song about the folly of envying the wicked. Psalm 84 describes a heart longing to be with God. The end of the middle Psalm (82) is a cry for judgment. The bookends of this third book are: "Truly, God is good to Israel . . . Remember, Lord, the reproach of your servants . . . Your Messiah."

IV. The Book of the Rule of God. Psalms 90-106:

This book contains the great enthronement Psalms, those songs devoted to the establishing of God as King. The book deals mostly with God's rule and should be read in that light. Psalm 90 is His rule over our lives. Psalms 93, 95-99 are the enthronement Psalms. Psalm 94 is His rule over the wicked. Psalm 102 is the enduring rule of God. Psalm 103 is His kind rule over our frailty. Psalm 104 is His rule over nature. Psalms 105 and 106 is His rule in delivering Israel. Psalm 100 is a call to give thanks. The book opens with Moses' great prayer (90) about life. The end of the middle Psalm (98) assures us that the LORD is coming to judge. The bookends of this fourth book are: "LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations . . . Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the Gentiles."

V. The Book of Praise. Psalms 107-150:

Though each of the other four books address praise, this book triumphs praise. Two Hebrew words are used to describe praise: "hallel" meaning to boast and "yadah" meaning to throw or cast our gratitude to God. Psalms 107-109, 111-113, 115-119, 122, 135-136, 138-140, 142, 145-150 speak of the praise of the LORD. Psalms 113-118 are known as the Hallel Psalms ("Praise Psalms") that were sung at Passover. This section is followed by Psalm 119, the great acrostic Psalm focused on the role of God's Word. Psalms 120-134 are known as the Songs of Ascent (120-134) which were sung as the pilgrims ascended to Jerusalem. Psalm 135 calls for people to stand in the courts of the temple and bless the LORD. Psalm 136 recounts the history of God's deliverance using the temple worship refrain (see 2 Chronicles 5:13). Psalm 137 makes this joyous time a sad memory in Babylon. This book then closes with seven Psalms of David (Psalms 138-145) and four Psalms calling us to Praise the LORD (146-150). Two Psalms are quoted by Christ about Himself (110 in Matthew 22:44 and 118 in Matthew 21:42). Psalms 128 and 129 form the middle of this last book. Psalm 128 begins: "Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD" and Psalm 129 ends with a call for judgment on those who hate Zion. The bookends of this fifth book are: "Oh, give thanks (yadah)to the LORD . . . Let everything that has breath

praise (hallel) the LORD.”

At the center of each Book is the core idea of God as judge. Also, at the center of the entire collection we find the same concept. In Psalm 75 we find God as judge (75:7) and the fear of God (76:7, 11). As we have learned, the fear of God is living in view of His judgment (Psalm 34:11-22; 145:19-20; Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). The Psalms center on the fear of God. Psalm 111:10 and 112:1 link the fear of the LORD with the praise of the LORD. Fear forms the breath that gives vitality to praise.

The Praise and Lament Psalms:

Most of the Psalms fall into one of two categories: praise or lament Psalms. The praise Psalms begin with an exhortation to praise or a proclamation of praise. Following this call to praise, the Psalmist lists the reasons why we should praise. Sometimes the reasons are based on who God is. Sometimes they are based on what God has done.

The lament Psalms generally follow a more complex structure. Not every lament Psalm contains all of these elements, but the basic structure is:

- Opening Cry
- Lament Proper (This is the Complaint generally involving 3 parts)
 1. I am hurting;
 2. You have not come; and
 3. They (the enemies) are winning. This is what the Psalmist is experiencing.
- Confession of Trust
- Petition (generally involving 3 strong imperatives that correspond with the Complaint)
 1. Listen to me;
 2. save me;
 3. punish them.
- Motivations for God to respond
- Vow to Praise God.

[Note: this structure comes from Dr. Ronald Allen, Professor at Dallas Theological Seminary]

Like Job, the lament Psalms give voice to our struggles when our theology of God does not meet our experiences in life. The Psalms are raw and refreshing. We may read the Psalms and gasp. How can the Psalmist say that? Yet the Psalmist is not inhibited in expressing his anguish to God. These are cries or prayers to God. The deepness of emotional despair, nevertheless, remains always enshrouded in a will to hope in God. Psalms 42-43 expresses this vividly. In the midst of troubles and dark despair, we need to command ourselves to hope in the LORD. It is the antidote to despair.

Conclusion:

The Psalms form the expression of the soul of man in relationship with God. In every emotion of life, the

Psalms give expressions to that relationship. When in despair and our cries seem lost, we learn to count on a God who will see, hear, and respond. When in celebration, we find a God who informs and enriches our celebration. The Psalms teach us to let God's Word live in us richly (Colossians 3:16). The Psalms are for us to enjoy, contemplate, learn about God, and grow our relationship with Him. God is for the righteous. He is our God (Psalm 63).

Key Idea:

Praise the Worthy God. We boast about God (hallel) and we verbally throw or cast our gratefulness to Him (yadah). "Hallel" is found in the Psalms 89 times out of a total appearance in the Old Testament of 150 times. "Yadah" is found 66 times in the Psalms and 111 times in the entirety of the Old Testament. Interestingly, each word is found 59% of its time in the book of Psalms. Together, 155 times out of 261 times these words are found in the Old Testament, they are in the Psalms. Psalms is about praise and the God who is worthy of praise.

Key Passage: Psalm 117

Key Lesson: We can relate personally with God.