**Session 1: Introduction to the Psalms (& Psalm 1)**

# **Introducing the Psalter as a Whole**

## 1. Significance of the Psalms

* **Millennia** of use by blessed believers

*‘The book of Psalms (or the Psalter) has been the hymnbook and prayer book for countless generations of Jews and Christians over the centuries. It contains the entire range of human emotion, from the highest points of joy and thanksgiving to the lowest points of depression and loss, and everything in between. The psalms are timeless—hence their popularity among believers in all times and all places. Their presence in the Bible instructs the faithful in the best ways to praise and thank God, and they model legitimate ways to grieve and to address God boldly and directly in the midst of pain and sorrow.’ - NIV Zondervan Study Bible, p. 968.*

* **Largest book** of the Bible: 2,461 verses, 43,743 words.[[1]](#endnote-1)
* OT book **most quoted** by the NT (116 of 283).
* Biblical book with the **most authors** (7 are named)

## 2. Meaning of the title ‘PSALMS’

English ‘psalm’ from Latin *Psalmi* & Greek *psalmoi* = **‘songs sung with musical accompaniment’**. It is a translation of the Hebrew*mizmor* = ‘a song accompanied by musical instruments’. The Hebrew title *Tehillim* = ‘songs of praise’.’[[2]](#endnote-2)

**3. Literary genre of the Psalms**

* Part of Israelite **‘covenant literature’** (must be read through the lens of the Abrahamic, Davidic, Land, New, and Mosaic covenants)
* Traditionally part of **‘wisdom literature’** (by sages and poets), including Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon. (Biblical ‘wisdom’ is rooted in the fear of/respect for God and His Word (Pr 9:10). It is this kind of wisdom (or the lack of it) which identifies the fundamental mindset, character, and life-trajectory (‘way’) of ‘the righteous’ and ‘the wicked’ (Ps 1:6).
* Often referred to as **‘poetry’**.
* Within the psalms there are **three main genres: praise, lament and thanksgiving**.

There are also a number of sub-genres: e.g., royal, messianic, ascent, wisdom, hallel, etc.

**Thanksgiving:**

**Life is hard but God is still good**

**Lament:**

**Life is hard**

**Praise:**

**God is great**

## 4. Date of the Psalms

DAVID

1000 BC

* From Moses (1400 BC) to the return from Exile (450 BC) = about 1000 years![[3]](#endnote-3)
* **Significance: Psalms ‘contains some of the earliest and some of the latest texts in the Old Testament and is in a sense a microcosm of the whole Old Testament corpus.’[[4]](#endnote-4)**

## 5. Authorship

* David (**76**)[[5]](#endnote-5); Asaph (12); Sons of Korah (11); Solomon (2); Moses (1); Heman (1); Ethan (1)
* **50** are anonymous (some traditionally ascribed to Ezra).

# **6. Two Analogies[[6]](#endnote-6) for ‘uniting’ the psalms:**

* A **cathedral** (the Cologne Cathedral took 600 years to build)
* A **photomontage board**

## 7. The Five Books in the Book of Psalms

* Book I (Ps 1-41); Book II: (42-72); Book III: (73-89); Book IV (90-106): Book V: (107-150)
* The books are edited collections of collections[[7]](#endnote-7) assembled/arranged by unknown editor(s) after the return from the **Babylonian Exile.**[[8]](#endnote-8)
* **Significance:** *‘Psalms, particularly the royal psalms, must be read from this postexilic perspective when there was no Davidic king on the throne. As a result, the psalms are to be read not [just] looking back at past kings of Israel but* ***forward to the coming of the anticipated son of David, the messianic King.’*** *- Moody Bible Commentary, 743.*

## 8. How to read a psalm ‘biblically’

* Read a psalm against the backdrop of the **covenants**
* Read a psalm through the **author’s** (& community’s) eyes & era
* Read a psalm from the editors’ post-exilic perspective
* Last, read a psalm from a/the **New Testament** perspective

## 9. How to read a psalm ‘theologically’

* Read a psalm as both divine revelation ***and* human meditation**
* Read a psalm as God’s Word to us ***and*** **man’s** words to God
* Read a psalm as if you’re looking over the **writer’s shoulder**

**Psalm 1 & 2 as an Introduction to the Psalter**

* Editors placed as an **Introduction** to the entire collection
* No superscriptions (unlike Ps 3-9; 11-32 etc.)
* The Talmud (Jewish commentary) combined Ps 1 & 2 as a single psalm
* Inclusio: ‘Blessed’ (1:1; 2:12)
* **Repeated words:** ‘destruction’ (1:6 & 2:12); ‘meditate’ (1:2), tr. ‘plot’ (2:1)
* Who wrote Ps 1&2? Ps 2 is Davidic (says Peter in Acts 4:25-26). Ps 1 & 2 a unit. Ps 1 by David?
* They introduce **primary themes** of the Psalms and provide an **interpretive lens** through which to read the entire book of Psalms:
  + **Ps 1: the righteous [man] delighting in Yahweh’s law is blessed; the wicked cursed**
  + **Ps 2: God and His Anointed are on the throne, despite appearances**

*‘The single, overarching theme of the book of Psalms is God’s kingship, his status as the divine King who rules over all peoples, nations, gods, even elements of nature.’ – NIV Zondervan Study Bible, 968.*

# **Theological Message of Psalms**

*“The book’s theological message may be summarized as follows: As the Creator of all things, God exercises sovereign authority over the natural order, the nations and Israel, His unique people. In His role as universal King, God assures order and justice in the world and among His people, often by exhibiting His power as an invincible warrior. The proper response to this sovereign King is trust and praise.’*  *- Robert Chisholm,* “A Theology of the Psalms” *in Biblical Theology of the Old Testament,* 258.

**Psalm 1: The Way (& End) of the Righteous [Man] & the Wicked**

## 1. A Wisdom or Torah Psalm

## 2. Poetry:

* **laid out** with indented lines
* **rhythm of ideas,** not sounds: walk, stand, sit (v1). Hebrew poetry **repeats *ideas.***
* **parallelism of lines** (pairs or triplets of lines of generally similar length that express the same ideas in similar but different words).[[9]](#endnote-9)
* **variations on themes:** evil people: ‘wicked, sinners, mockers’. Location: ‘walk, stand, sit’.
* **concrete images**: a pathway, a tree, water, fruit, leaf, chaff
* **poetic license:** ‘meditates on his law day and night’, v. 2 (a merism[[10]](#endnote-10). Others in psalter: heaven & earth {and everything in between})…
* **simile:** the blessed/righteous person is ***like***a tree (v3); the wicked are *like* chaff (v4). (Metaphor moves beyond comparison to identification: this *is* that. Ps 3:3: ‘But *you*, LORD, *are a shield* around me.’)
* **key word pairings:** ‘righteous / wicked’ (v6); ‘day and night’ (v2)
* **inclusio** [bookends]: ‘Blessed’ (1:1 & 2:12)
* **repeated words**: ; ‘wicked’ (4,5,6); ‘destruction’ (1:6 & 2:12)

## 3. Significance

* **Ps 1 starkly defines Israel’s (and our) duelling realities**
  + Two kinds of people: the righteous and the wicked
  + Two ways of living: the ‘way’ of the righteous and the ‘way of the wicked’
  + Two states: blessed and cursed (Deut 28; Jer 17:5-8)
  + Two destinies: standing in the judgment; destruction.
* **Ps 1 assumes objective truth, right and wrong, defined by Torah, God’s revelation**
* **Ps 1 (&2) describes Israel’s righteous Man/King/Messiah**
  + Deuteronomy 17:16-20
  + *‘If we read Pss 1 and 2 together, the blessed man who meditates day and night on Torah in Ps 1 can be identified with Yahweh’s messiah in Ps 2, and Jesus came evidencing obedience to Deut 17 as he answered Satan’s temptations by quoting Deuteronomy (e.g., Matt 4:1–11). The righteous are those who call him blessed, for whom he refused the counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners, and the seat of scoffers. As Christians, our first response to Ps 1 is to bless the Lord Jesus, to see how he did what we fail to do, and through that to begin to imitate him in his delight in the Scriptures, meditating upon them, and thereby enjoying God’s presence.’*[[11]](#endnote-11)

1. END NOTES:

   James E. Smith, *The Wisdom Literature and Psalms.* Old Testament Survey Series. (Joplin, MO: College Press Pub. Co., 1996), 183. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Willem Van Gemeren, *Psalms.* Expositor’s Bible Commentary Vol 5. (Zondervan, 1991), 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Moody Bible Commentary*, 743. For Moses’ psalm see Ps 90. For a psalm of the exile see Ps 137. For a post-exilic psalm see Ps 126 (Smith, *Wisdom Literature*, 191). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Gerald Wilson, *Psalms, Vol. 1.* NIV Application Commentary (Zondervan, 2002), 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Also ascribed to David are Ps 1-2 (in Acts 4:25) and Ps 95 (in Heb 4:7). *Moody Bible Commentary,* 743. *Nelson’s Complete Book of Bible Maps and Charts*, 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. **Cathedral:** Derek Kidner notes that ‘Its structure is perhaps best compared with that of a cathedral built and perfected over a matter of centuries, in a harmonious variety of styles, rather than a palace displaying the formal symmetry of a single and all-embracing plan.’ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72.* Tynadale Old Testament Commentaries. (London: InterVarsity 1973),7. **Photomontage Board:** James Hamilton says: ‘I am suggesting that the whole book of Psalms has been purposefully arranged so that the individual Psalms join together to tell a wider story in the way a collage of photographs can be arranged to portray a narrative development.’ Hamilton, *Psalms* (Lexham Academic, 2021), Vol. 1:50. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. E.g. Korah Collection (most from Ps 42-88), the Hallel Collections (113-18; 120-36; 146-50), Van Gemeren, 33.

   Collections indicated by **duplicate psalms** (53 of 14; 70 of 40:13–17; 108 of 57:7–11 & 60:5–12. Indicated by the **close of Ps 72:20**: ‘This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse.’ Yet Ps 86 is titled ‘A prayer of David’ (also 101, 103, 109, 110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-145). Indicated by **doxologies** placed in the ‘seam’ psalms at the end of the first four books and which contain the only use of ‘amen’ in the entire Psalter (41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48). (Note: The final psalms in Book V (146-50) serve as a doxology to the entire collection. Smith, *Wisdom Literature,* 195). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Moody Bible Commentary,* 743. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Scholars used to use diff terms: synthetic, analytic, antithetical etc., which Wilson notes are problematic (Wilson, p. 40, note 6). He prefers the following terms (see p 39-47) which I’ve applied to Psalm 1:

   V1: **affirming parallelism:** 2nd/3rd lines *restate* the 1st *positively*

   V3: **advancing parallelism:** 2nd/3rd lines *develop* the 1st

   V6: **opposing parallelism:** 2nd/3rd lines *restate* the 1st *negatively* [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Wilson, 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. J. M. Hamilton, Jr., [*Psalms*](https://ref.ly/logosres/ebtc19ps?ref=Bible.Ps1&off=19549&ctx=Bridge%0a~If+we+read+Pss+1+and+2+together%2c+), Vol. 1:98. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)