



*Worldwide Church of God*  
*Camberwell*

*Living and sharing the Gospel*

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**Dear Church Family,**

Down through history God's people have sung Him their praises. When God brought His people out of captivity in Egypt and delivered them from Pharaoh's pursuing army, Exodus 15:1 records that they sang a song to the Lord. When God gave Israel victory over their powerful enemies under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, they sang (Judges 5). When David brought up the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, there was much joy expressed through singing and music (1 Chron. 15:25-28). When King Hezekiah restored the temple worship in Jerusalem, the Levites joyfully sang praises to the Lord with the words of David and Asaph, and the whole assembly bowed down and worshiped (2 Chron. 29:30).

In the New Testament, at the conclusion of the Lord's Supper, just before Jesus and the disciples went out to the Mount of Olives where He would be betrayed and arrested, they sang a hymn (Mark 14:26), which commentators agree was the Hallel (Psalms 113-118). When Paul and Silas were unjustly thrown into jail in Philippi, with their backs raw from being beaten and their feet in the stocks, they sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25).

Since the days of the New Testament, God's people have continued to sing. In A.D. 112, Pliny wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan that reported, among other things, that the Christians sang hymns to Christ as God. During the Reformation, Martin Luther promoted music in the church. The great revivals under the Wesley's in the 18th Century and Moody and Sankey in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were also marked by an upsurge in hymn writing and singing.

And one day in heaven, we will all be gathered around the throne of God, singing praises to the Lamb that was slain (Revelation 5:9; 14:3; 15:3).

Whenever God's people have their hearts right before Him, there is joyful singing. It should come as no surprise, then, that the longest book in the Bible, the Old Testament book quoted most frequently in the New Testament, is a hymnbook, the book of Psalms. God loves to hear His people sing His praises, and so He ensured the inclusion of the Psalms as a major part of His inspired Word. The Book of Psalms has occupied a central place of importance among God's people down through the centuries.

In this letter I want to give you an overview of the Psalms as an introduction to our study of many specific psalms over the coming months. My prayer is that it will not only give you some basic information about the psalms but in addition will motivate you to meditate on the psalms regularly for the rest of your life.

## January 2010 – The Psalms

### 1. Title

The word “Psalms” comes from the Greek word meaning a song sung to a stringed instrument. The book is also called the Psalter. The Hebrew title, *Tehillim*, means “praises.” While we no longer know the tunes, it’s important to remember that the Psalms were set to music.

### 2. Arrangement, Authorship, Date, Features

The Psalms are arranged into five books: Book 1 (Psalms 1-41); Book 2 (Psalms 42-72); Book 3 (Psalms 73-89); Book 4 (Psalms 90-106); and, Book 5 (Psalms 107-150). Each of the five books concludes with a doxology, signifying the completion of the collection. For example, Psalm 41:13 ends Book 1: ‘Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen’. The entire Psalm 150 serves as the final doxology to the entire Psalter.

No one knows for sure what theme was followed in arranging the five books. They seem to have been compiled somewhat independently and then brought together into one collection at a later date. There is some duplication: Psalm 14 in Book 1 is repeated as Psalm 53 in Book 2; a portion of Psalm 40 in Book 1 is repeated as Psalm 70 in Book 2; and the latter halves of Psalms 57 and 60 in Book 2 are combined as Psalm 108 in Book 5. Book 1 is dominated by psalms of David and consists mostly of personal psalms that arose out of his own experiences. Book 2 was probably compiled by Solomon and exhibits more of a national interest. Book 3 was probably compiled soon after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., since Psalms 74, 79, and 89 all have references to this event. David may have compiled Book 4, which focuses more on corporate worship than Book 1 does. Book 5 is also liturgical, but contains several postexilic (after the exile in 586 B.C.) psalms. It probably came into being after the return of 537 B.C. Then a scribe, perhaps Ezra (444 B.C.), probably wrote Psalms 146-50 as a conclusion and Psalm 1 as an introduction and compiled the five books into one.

In other words the Book of Psalms as we have it today was the result of a process spanning about 1000 years. It began with individual psalms, the earliest being Psalm 90 by Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.). More than half were written by David (ca. 1000 B.C.). Then the individual psalms were grouped into collections of books for corporate worship, and finally the books were arranged into the final book, probably around 444 B.C. (Ezra’s time).

Many psalms contain a superscription, which sometimes identifies the author, the historical setting, and other features. For example, Psalm 3 begins, “A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom.” These psalm titles are a part of the original Hebrew text (they are verse 1 in Hebrew, thus making the Hebrew verse numbering differ in many places from the English) and are just as inspired as the rest of the psalm.

From these psalm titles, we learn that David wrote at least 73 psalms. (From Acts 4:25-26 and Hebrews 4:7 we learn that he also wrote Psalms 2 & 95. From 1 Chron. 16:8-36, we can surmise he also probably wrote Psalms 96, 105, & 106.) Two Levitical clans wrote 22 psalms: Asaph (and his descendants, 12 psalms: 50, 73-83); the Sons of Korah (10 psalms: 42, 44-49, 84, 87, & 88). Solomon wrote two (Psalms 72, 127). Ethan the Ezrahite wrote one (Psalm 89). Moses wrote one (Psalm 90). The other 51 psalms do not specify any author.

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Some psalm titles indicate technical names to designate the type of psalm. *Psalm* emphasizes stringed accompaniment (57 psalms have this title). *Song* indicates a joyful melody (12 have this label, e.g., Psalm 46). *Maskil* may refer to a contemplative or didactic (intended to teach or instruct) psalm (13 have this label, e.g., Psalm 32). The meaning of *Miktam* is uncertain (six psalms: 16, 56-60). *Prayer* labels five psalms (Psalm 17, 86, 90, 102, 142). Psalm 145 has the title, *Praise*. And there are a few lesser-used titles (Pss. 7; 38 & 70; 100).

Fifty psalms are addressed, “for the choir director” (e.g., Pss. 4, 5, 6). There are other notations describing the kind of instrument to be played as accompaniment (Pss. 4, 5, 6) or the tune that the song is sung to (Pss. 9, 22, 45, 46, 60).

Some psalms have titles instructing the worshiper as to the intended use of the psalm in worship. For example, Psalm 92 was “for the Sabbath day.” Psalm 100 is “for Thanksgiving.” Psalms 120-34 are labeled, “Songs of Ascent.” They were probably sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem for the prescribed feasts.

The familiar term, “Selah,” which occurs 71 times in the body of 39 psalms (e.g., Psalm 3:2, 4, 8), probably is a musical notation informing the worshipers to pause and reflect, ‘stop and listen’, to ‘weigh up’. It was not intended to be read aloud.

### 3. Hebrew poetry

The psalms are poetry, and you need to understand something about Hebrew poetry to understand and appreciate them. There are three elements of Hebrew poetry to keep in mind as you read the Psalms (and other poetical books such as Job, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations):

#### A. Parallelism

Instead of rhyming words, as much of our poetry does, the Hebrews rhymed ideas. One of the key features of Hebrew poetry is the idea of parallelism. There are several main types of parallelism:

**Synonymous** - This occurs frequently. The second line is similar to the first. For example, every verse of Psalm 114 has synonymous parallelism.

**Synthetic** - The second line takes up and develops further a thought begun in the first line. For example, Psalm 95:3, ‘For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods’. (See also, Psalm 19:7-9.)

**Climatic** - The second line takes up some words from the first line and adds to or completes them. For example, Psalm 29:1, 2, ‘Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness’. (See also, Psalm 22:4.)

**Emblematic** - One line presents an image or metaphor which the other line clarifies or applies. For example, Psalm 23:1, ‘The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want’. (See, also, Psalm 42:1; 44:22; 103:13).

**Antithetical** - The second line contrasts with the first. For example Psalm 1:6, ‘For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish’. (See also, Psalm 90:6.)

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### **B. Figures of Speech**

Hebrew poetry is loaded with figures of speech, and you must recognize that fact in interpreting various passages. For example, Psalm 18:7-15 describes the power of God as seen in a thunderstorm, which apparently was sent in answer to David's prayer in battle. It describes God in anthropomorphic terms. It does not mean that you interpret such figures of speech literally. For example, God doesn't have smoke coming out of His nostrils or fire coming from His mouth (Psalm 18:8).

### **C. Acrostics**

Acrostics are alphabetical psalms, where each verse (or in Psalm 119, each verse of successive stanzas) begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Psalm 9-10 [together = one acrostic], 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145, and Lamentations). Keep in mind that the psalms are poetry and must be read as such. They are full of emotion, art, beauty, and figurative language. The psalmists were trying to draw forth not just an intellectual response, but also an emotional one. John Calvin wrote of the Psalms, "I have been accustomed to call this book ... 'An Anatomy of all Parts of the Soul'; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."

### **4. Themes**

There are many themes running through the Psalms. Here are five:

#### **A. The character of God**

God's attributes are frequently extolled in the psalms: His righteousness, power, sovereignty, mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, etc. (see Psalm 25:8, 10; 63:2-3). The psalms reveal an almighty God who is gracious and compassionate to His people, but who will impartially judge the wicked.

#### **B. The Kingdom of God**

The concept of God's ruling on the earth in justice and righteousness through His anointed king runs throughout the psalms (e.g. Psalm 2, 96-99, 110).

#### **C. The Messiah of God**

Closely connected with the kingdom is God's Messiah. Many psalms are "messianic," meaning that in whole or part they prophesy of Christ and His rule (Psalm 2, 22, 45, 72, 110).

#### **D. The Worship of God**

The psalms put a great stress on both personal and corporate worship of God. There are frequent individual declarations of praise (Psalm 5:11-12; 9:1-2) as well as references to the sanctuary, the temple, and corporate worship (Psalm 5:7; 9:14; 84, 122).

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### E. The Experience of man

Many psalms flow out of real-life situations. The authors did not sit down on a beautiful day without a care in the world and write a clever poem. The psalms are often wet with the tears and the blood of the writer.

The enemy is in hot pursuit. David cries out to God for help. God responds and delivers him against overwhelming odds. After he catches his breath, he recounts the situation and out of the overflow of his emotions, he writes a psalm extolling God's greatness (see, Psalm 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142).

Because of this real-life birthplace of the psalms, God is personal and immediate. God is not some abstract theological idea to the psalmist. These authors knew what it meant to connect with the living God in the midst of their overwhelming crises (see Psalm 56, 57, 59, 60, 63). Even if the situation is not stated, many times you can pick up the circumstances of the author from the context. This means that to appreciate the psalms, you've got to *feel* the life-situation of the psalmist.

The psalms reflect the full range of human emotions: fear (Psalm 3:6; 27:1-3); shame (25:2-3); guilt (32:3-4; 38; 51); depression (42, 43); feeling abandoned by God (13); utter helplessness (18:4-6); being betrayed and attacked by those you trusted (55; 57:3-4); as well as great joy, contentment, and delight in God (103; 145).

### 5. Main lessons

As we go through a selection of psalms we will learn many lessons. Here are four main ones to be thinking about:

#### A. Praise is important.

The psalms are filled with praise and with exhortations to praise God. To praise God means essentially to extol God for His attributes and actions. To praise God we must come to know Him as revealed in His Word and we must be involved with God in our personal lives through prayer and trusting Him so that we experience His all-sufficient help. The psalmists knew God in this way.

#### B. Prayer is important.

Many of the psalms are prayers, cried out to God from the crucible of life. The psalms show us that no experience in life is too high or low to exclude God. We are to call on Him when we are in the pits and we are to call on Him when we're on the peaks.

#### C. Corporate worship is important.

It's not enough to praise God all alone, as important as that is. We need to worship God corporately and sing His praises together. There's something about the corporate aspect of worship that is satisfying to God and to us. The psalms are God's corporate worship book.

#### D. Beauty and creativity are important.

Our God is infinitely creative and He delights in beauty. We see His handiwork in the natural world, and the psalms are full of appreciation for the beauty that God has created. As Psalm 19:1 declares, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands'. While inspired by the Holy Spirit, the psalms also reflect the creativity of the authors, and God is pleased with it. When we enjoy the beauty of good art, music, and literature, created by people who are created in God's image, we should praise God the Creator. But especially, we should praise God through the beauty of His creation all around us.

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### Conclusion

Now here are a few action points in readiness for our series of sermons and for our general reading of the Psalms:

#### 1. Meditate on the Psalms devotionally, so they are never far from your lips.

Continually and repeatedly meditating on the psalms will help guard, sustain, and deepen your heart before God. Remember, the main author was a man after God's heart!

The Psalms were often on Jesus' lips. He cited from Psalm 118 to identify Himself as the stone that the builders rejected, which became the chief cornerstone (Mark 12:10). He quoted from Psalm 110 to confound the Pharisees, showing that He was both David's son and David's Lord (Mark 12:36). On the cross, He cited Psalm 22:1, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Mark 15:34). His last words (Luke 23:46) were from Psalm 31:5, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." After His resurrection, He taught the disciples from the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms to tell of Himself (Luke 24:44). So Jesus knew and used the Psalms.

Many whole psalms as well as individual verses are worth the effort of meditating on. If you struggle with depression, ponder verses on joy and praise. If you struggle with anxiety, think about verses on peace, freedom from fear, and trusting God. Jot them down, and read them often until you know them.

#### 2. Sing the Psalms.

Many of the psalms are now coupled with modern tunes. Singing them and listening to them often is also a good way to meditate on them. If you have a musical bent, work at putting some of the psalms to music.

#### 3. Pray the Psalms.

Elizabeth Achtemeier said, "We are in danger of losing the Psalter in our churches; indeed, many have already lost it, and so it is no accident that many people in our congregations do not know how to pray".

As you read the Psalms devotionally and come to a part that is a prayer, turn it into your own prayer. For example, 'Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD'. (Psalm 25:4-7).

Or perhaps the psalm points out a lack in your life. Turn it into prayer: 'But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, "The LORD be exalted!" (Psalm 40:16). We could use this psalm to pray, "Lord, I don't rejoice in you enough. Help me to exalt you in my life!"

John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with this profound statement: "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves." The Psalms will take us deeper in both of those aspects of wisdom.

Let's ask God to teach us about Himself and about ourselves as we study the Psalms in the coming months.

With love in Jesus' name,

**Barry**

**Barry Robinson**

**Pastor**