

# *General Introduction to Psalms*

## *What are Psalms?*

- A psalm is a sacred hymn or song. They appear not only in the book of Psalms but also in other areas of the Old and New Testaments: Moses and the people of Israel sang a song of victory after their deliverance from the Red Sea (Exodus 15); Hannah offered praise and thanks to God for being blessed with a son (1 Samuel 2); Mary's Magnificat is a song of praise (Luke 1).
- The book of Psalms contains 150 psalms. It is quoted around 80 times in the New Testament.
- They are songs and meant to be played with musical instruments (harp, lyre, trumpet, cymbals, flute). We have no way of knowing what the original music sounded like.
- **How are the psalms God's Word to us? And how are they our words to God?**

## *Authors and Dates and General Layout*

David is listed as the author of 73 psalms (and he may well be the author of some of the 50 psalms with no listed author). Another 24-25 are attributed to the Levites, who were responsible for the music in the sanctuary. Those written by David and his contemporaries would date to around 1000 B.C. The oldest psalm—Psalm 90—was written by Moses and would date to around 1400 B.C. A few were written around the time of the destruction of the temple and the Babylonian exile, which occurred in 586 B.C.

The final collection of psalms was assembled after the return from exile—perhaps by Ezra. They are arranged into five parts or books: Book I (1-41), Book II (42-72), Book III (73-89), Book IV (90-106), and Book V (107-150).

The majority of the psalms have headings, which contain information such as: author, historical circumstances, liturgical use, or musical directions.

## *Types of Psalms*

Every commentary and Bible Study book had a different way of classifying the types of psalms. This is not an exhaustive list of the various types:

- Messianic Psalms: contain prophecies of the coming Christ—Psalm 22 points vividly to the crucifixion
- Liturgical Psalms: used in worship—see **Psalm 122:1**
- Wisdom Psalms: offer instruction and often contrast the righteous and the wicked—Psalm 1
- Praise & Thanksgiving: How do you see this in **Psalm 66: 1-3**
- Confidence and Trust in God: Psalm 23 is a lovely example

- Lament Psalms (the largest category): crying out to God in times of trial and despair—how is this shown in **Psalm 94:3-7**
- Imprecatory Psalms: have curses or prayers for judgment on enemies—See **Psalm 139:19-22**

“Christians should understand that the violent outbursts in these psalms are not prescriptions for the behavior of God’s people but illustrations of emotions that God’s people will indeed experience. Christians today who lose loved ones to war or to violent criminals will have these same feelings of anger and revenge. Praying the imprecatory psalms can help God’s people express their anguish before God rather than act out their feelings in an unjust way. Imprecatory psalms prayed with psalms of repentance and hope can guide troubled hearts through the feelings they cannot escape.”—ESV Study Bible, p. 879

### *Poetry of the Psalms*

Hebrew poetry has different features than our English poetry (which often uses meter and rhyme):

- Parallelism—matches thoughts/meanings (rather than rhyming words) in successive lines—watching out for this can help you in understanding the psalm 😊
  - Synonymous: same thought is repeated in different but similar words—How is this shown in **Psalm 19:1**?
  - Contrasting: the second phrase is an opposite or contrasting idea—How is this shown in **Psalm 30:5**?
  - Synthetic: the second thought advances the idea of the first—an example is Psalm 1
- Figures of speech—also help us understand the psalm
  - Simile: directly compares two things (often using “like” or “as” or “than”)—used to make the description more vivid—Psalm 1:3-4 is an example
  - Metaphor: describing something in a way that isn’t literally true but helps to explain it—examples are “The Lord is my Shepherd” or “A Mighty Fortress is our God”
- Wordplay—these are often lost in the translation from Hebrew to English but include puns and alliteration (words beginning with the same sound). Psalm 119 is an example of an acrostic. Each stanza has 8 lines, each of which start with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet—and the stanzas go in alphabetical order as well.

# *Psalm 1—Two Different Ways*

Psalm 1 is a Wisdom Psalm comparing the ways of the righteous and the wicked. The author is unknown. It may have been written as an introduction to the entire book of Psalms. It reminds us that, to understand the psalms, we must be among the righteous. We often act as the wicked, though. But we are made righteous through the death and resurrection of Jesus and through our faith in Him.

## *The Way of the Righteous (verses 1-3)*

1. Verse 1 is a good example of synthetic parallelism as it defines a righteous person by what they avoid. How do these wicked actions get progressively worse?

When we see the prevalence of ungodly attitudes in the world around us—covetousness and materialism, sexual immorality and disregard for the family, violence and war—we realize that we must resist these influences before they gain a foothold in our lives. If we let them walk into our lives, they will soon stand firmly planted there. Finally, they will sit down and make themselves at home. We will soon grow comfortable with ideas and actions that once would have horrified us. When this happens, we will be no different from the world around us. —People's Bible Commentary by J. Brug, p. 42

2. Here, the law refers to the whole Word of God—His commands and His gracious dealings with His people. Describe the pattern of a righteous life in verse 2. What would this look like for us today?
3. In verse 3, someone who is blessed is compared to a tree (simile!). What three statements describe this tree and how does this relate to the life of a believer?
4. How did the tree get there? What does this say about the relationship between God and His people? Who is the one taking action?
5. Why does this tree/believer do so well? See **Jeremiah 17:7-8**.

## *The Way of the Wicked (verses 4-5)*

6. In Bible times, grain production was hard work. After cutting the stalks of wheat, the workers would beat them to separate the grain from the rest of the plant (the chaff). Then they would throw it all up into the air. The valuable grain was heavy and would fall back to the ground. The chaff would be carried away by the wind. What are the differences between the tree in verse 3 and the chaff? How does that look in the lives of people?

7. Verse 1 says that the righteous do not stand in the way of sinners. According to verse 5, where will the wicked and sinners not stand?

### *The Conclusion (verse 6)*

8. Compare the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked?

“The Lord watches over the way of the righteous” could also be translated as “The Lord knows the way of the righteous”. In Hebrew, this word “knows” indicated the deepest and most intimate form of knowledge. Whatever happens to us, God is watching over us and knows what we are going through.

9. Some people would read this psalm and interpret it to mean that good people always prosper (as a reward for doing the right things) and that wicked people always fail. I think that we know this is not always the case in this fallen world. When will the ultimate difference between the righteous and the wicked be shown (see verse 5)?

10. According to this psalm, the righteous will be blessed and the wicked will perish. But Romans 3:10 tells us that “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God”. How then can we see Psalm 1 as Good News for us? See **Romans 3:21-24**.

Grace has been given to us in Jesus Christ, the one who “knows the way of the righteous” (1:6) because he traveled that way, and it is he who leads us, and in him, we find the blessing of the righteous. –Concordia Commentary on Psalms, by T. Saleska, p. 143