



BOOK XIX · OLD TESTAMENT · POETRY & WISDOM

The Book of Psalms

The Prayer Book of the Bible — Praise, Lament, and Trust

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

— Psalm 23:1

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**THE BOOK OF PSALMS:
SONGS OF THE HEART**

Praise, Lament, and the Soul's Journey to God

**SECTION 1:
LAMENT & TRUST
(BOOK I-II)**

- ▶ **Lament:**
Cries from the depths (Ps 3-7).
- ▶ **Trust:**
Confidence in God's protection (Ps 23).
- ▶ **Repentance:**
Seeking forgiveness (Ps 51).
- ▶ **Deliverance:**
Praise for rescue (Ps 18).
- ▶ **Messianic Prophecy:**
Hope in the suffering servant (Ps 22).

**SECTION 2:
PRAISE & WORSHIP
(BOOK III-IV)**

- ▶ **Temple Worship:**
Songs for the sanctuary (Ps 84).
- ▶ **History & Covenant:**
God's faithfulness remembered (Ps 78).
- ▶ **Songs of Ascent:**
Pilgrimage to Zion (Ps 120-134).
- ▶ **Royal Psalms:**
Celebrating God as King (Ps 93-99).

**SECTION 3:
HALLELUJAH
(BOOK V)**

- ▶ **Hallelujah:**
Continuous praise to the Lord (Ps 106).
- ▶ **Creation Praise:**
All nature glorifies God (Ps 148).
- ▶ **Corporate Praise:**
The assembly rejoices (Ps 149).
- ▶ **Final Doxology:**
Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! (Ps 150).

KEY VERSE & REFLECTION

KEY VERSE: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." – Psalm 23:1.

REFLECTION: The Book of Psalms encompasses the full range of human emotion in relationship with God, from deep lament to exuberant praise. It invites us to pour out our hearts to Him and trust in His unfailing love and provision.

Full-page visual overview — five books, key psalms, and structural flow at a glance

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The Book of Psalms is a collection of 150 poems and songs spanning centuries of Israelite worship. Organized into five books (mirroring the Pentateuch), the Psalter moves from individual lament to communal praise, culminating in the great Hallelujah chorus of Psalms 146–150.

SECTION 1

Psalms 1–41 BOOK I — PRAYERS OF DAVID: TRUST AND LAMENT



- 1:1–6** The Two Ways — the blessed life of the one who meditates on God's law versus the way of the wicked. Psalm 1 serves as the gateway to the entire Psalter.
- 22:1–31** "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The great Psalm of abandonment and vindication — quoted by Jesus on the cross (Matthew 27:46). It moves from desolation to praise.
- 23:1–6** The Shepherd Psalm. Six verses that have comforted more people than perhaps any other passage in Scripture. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil."
- 32:1–11** The joy of forgiveness. David's confession after his sin with Bathsheba. "Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven." Quoted by Paul in Romans 4:7–8.
- 34:1–22** "Taste and see that the Lord is good." An acrostic psalm of thanksgiving. Every letter of the Hebrew alphabet declares God's goodness and care for the righteous.

SECTION 2

Psalms 42–106 BOOKS II–IV — COMMUNAL WORSHIP AND NATIONAL LAMENT



- 42:1–11** "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God." A psalm of spiritual thirst and depression — honest about the darkness while still choosing to hope.
- 51:1–19** The great penitential psalm. David's prayer after Nathan confronts him about Bathsheba. "Create in me a pure heart, O God." The deepest expression of repentance in Scripture.
- 84:1–12** "How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty!" A psalm of longing for God's presence. "Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere."
- 103:1–22** "Bless the Lord, O my soul." A comprehensive celebration of God's character: compassion, forgiveness, healing, redemption, love.
- 119:1–176** The longest chapter in the Bible — 176 verses, each section beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. A sustained meditation on the beauty and sufficiency of God's Word.



- 120–134** The Songs of Ascent — 15 psalms sung by pilgrims traveling up to Jerusalem for the three annual festivals. They move from longing (120) to arrival (122) to trust (125) to blessing (134).
- 139:1–24** "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me." The most intimate psalm of God's omniscience and omnipresence. "Where can I go from your Spirit?"
- 145:1–21** The only psalm explicitly titled "A Psalm of Praise." An acrostic celebration of God's greatness, goodness, and kingdom.
- 146–150** The Great Hallel — five consecutive Hallelujah psalms that close the entire Psalter. "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" (150:6)

KEY THEMES

The Book of Psalms establishes four foundational themes that run through the entire Bible — from honest lament to Messianic prophecy.

01 HONEST PRAYER — LAMENT AS WORSHIP



01

More than a third of the Psalms are laments — raw, **honest** cries of **pain**, confusion, and abandonment. Psalm 22 begins "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Psalm 88 ends in darkness with no resolution. The Psalter gives us permission to bring our full emotional reality to God — not a sanitized version, but the actual weight of our **suffering**. This is not a lack of **faith**; it is the deepest form of **faith**.

MODERN APPLICATION

If you have been told that honest doubt or grief is incompatible with faith, the Psalms disagree. Bring your actual situation to God — the anger, the confusion, the silence — and trust that He can handle it.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me?" — Psalm 22:1

02 THE CHARACTER OF GOD



02

The Psalms are the richest single source in Scripture for understanding who God is. He is **shepherd** (23), **fortress** (46), judge (50), healer (103), creator (104), sustainer (121), and king (145). The Hebrew word **hesed** — often translated "steadfast love" or "lovingkindness" — appears over 120 times in the Psalms. It describes a **covenant** loyalty that is not earned and cannot be broken.

MODERN APPLICATION

Reading the Psalms slowly is one of the most effective ways to reshape our understanding of God's character — moving from abstract theology to lived, felt knowledge of who He is.

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." — Psalm 103:8

03 PRAISE AS A DISCIPLINE



03

The Psalms do not wait for circumstances to improve before praising God. Psalm 34 was written when David was pretending to be insane to escape an enemy — yet it opens with "I will extol the Lord at all times; his **praise** will always be on my lips." **Praise** in the Psalms is often a **choice** made against the grain of current experience, a declaration of what is true about God regardless of what is happening.

MODERN APPLICATION

Praise is not a feeling to wait for — it is a practice to cultivate. The Psalms train us to orient our hearts toward God's goodness even when circumstances pull us toward despair.

"I will extol the Lord at all times; his praise will always be on my lips." — Psalm 34:1



Several Psalms are explicitly quoted in the New Testament as prophecies **fulfilled** by **Jesus**. Psalm 22 describes the **crucifixion** in detail centuries before **crucifixion** was invented. Psalm 110 is the most quoted Old Testament passage in the New Testament: "The Lord says to my lord: Sit at my right hand." **Jesus** himself uses this psalm to challenge the Pharisees' understanding of the Messiah.

MODERN APPLICATION

Reading the Psalms with New Testament eyes reveals that the entire Psalter is, in some sense, the prayer book of Jesus — He prayed these words, fulfilled these prophecies, and now intercedes for us as our great High Priest.

"The Lord says to my lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." — Psalm 110:1

SYMBOLISM & IMAGERY

The Psalms are filled with vivid imagery drawn from nature, warfare, and worship — each symbol carrying deep theological meaning about God and the human condition.



MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

SYMBOL 01

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Psalms were sung with a wide range of instruments: the harp, lyre, tambourine, flute, trumpet, and cymbals. Psalm 150 lists six different instrument families. **Temple worship** was a full-sensory, musical experience — not a quiet, private affair.

THEOLOGICAL MEANING

The variety of instruments in the Psalms reflects the truth that **all of creation** is called to worship. Music is not merely decoration for worship — it is itself a **form of prayer**, a way of engaging the whole person in the presence of God.



DEEP WATERS

SYMBOL 02

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the ancient Near East, the sea represented **chaos**, danger, and the power of death. Psalm 69 uses drowning as a metaphor for overwhelming distress: "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck." The image was immediately understood by ancient readers as a picture of **existential crisis**.

THEOLOGICAL MEANING

When the Psalms describe God as rescuing from deep waters, they claim that **God's power** exceeds even the most terrifying forces of chaos and death. This imagery is fulfilled in Jesus calming the storm and ultimately in the **resurrection** — the ultimate rescue from the **deepest waters**.



THE MOUNTAIN OF GOD

SYMBOL 03

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mount Zion was the location of the Temple — the place where heaven and earth met in Israelite theology. The Songs of Ascent were sung by pilgrims literally climbing the mountain to worship. The phrase "lifting up my eyes to the hills" reflects this physical and spiritual journey.

THEOLOGICAL MEANING

The mountain represents the place of God's presence and rule. In the New Testament, this imagery is transformed: believers are said to have "come to **Mount Zion**" — not a physical mountain, but the heavenly Jerusalem, the community of God's people gathered around Christ.



SHIELD AND FORTRESS

SYMBOL 04

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Military imagery pervades the Psalms: God is described as **shield**, fortress, stronghold, and rock. These were not abstract metaphors — David and the psalmists faced real military threats, and they expressed their trust in God using the language of physical protection.

THEOLOGICAL MEANING

The military imagery of the Psalms is ultimately about the **nature of faith**: trusting in God's protection rather than in human strength. "Some **trust in chariots** and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God". This is not passivity but a reorientation of where **ultimate security** is found.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

These 8 questions are designed for a 60–90 minute small group session. Begin with the icebreaker, then work through observation, interpretation, and application questions. Close with the prayer prompt.

ICEBREAKER

If you had to choose one Psalm that describes your current season of life, which would it be and why? (If you're not sure, consider Psalm 23, 42, or 139.)

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01

OBSERVATION

Read Psalm 22:1–2 and then 22:24–31. How does the psalm move from abandonment to praise? What happens in the middle that enables this shift? What does this tell us about the nature of lament?

Leader's Note:

Psalm 22 is the most quoted psalm in the New Testament passion narratives. Jesus prays verse 1 from the cross — not as despair, but as the opening of a prayer He knew ended in vindication.

02

OBSERVATION

Compare Psalm 1 (the righteous person who meditates on God's law) with Psalm 73 (the psalmist who nearly lost faith watching the wicked prosper). How do these two psalms together give a more complete picture of the life of faith than either one alone?

03

INTERPRETATION

Psalm 51:4 says "Against you, you only, have I sinned" — yet David sinned against Bathsheba and Uriah. What does David mean? What does this reveal about the ultimate nature of sin?

Leader's Note:

All sin is ultimately against God because He is the moral standard and the one whose image we bear. This does not minimize the harm done to others — it places it in its proper theological context.

04

INTERPRETATION

The Psalms use over 20 different images for God: shepherd, rock, fortress, father, king, judge, healer, light. Which image resonates most with you right now? Which one is hardest for you to embrace? Why?

05

APPLICATION

Psalm 46:10 says "Be still, and know that I am God." In a culture of constant noise and activity, what would it practically look like for you to practice stillness before God this week? What obstacles would you face?

06

APPLICATION

The Psalms model a full range of emotions brought honestly to God: joy, grief, anger, confusion, gratitude, fear. Is there an emotion you tend to hide from God? What would it look like to bring that emotion to Him in prayer this week, using one of the lament psalms as a guide?

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07

PRAYER PROMPT

Close by reading Psalm 23 together slowly, one verse at a time. After each verse, pause and ask: "Where do you most need this promise right now?" Let the psalm become a personal prayer. End with a moment of silence, then have each person speak one word of gratitude to God.

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08

KEY CHARACTERS

David



Attributed with 73 psalms, David gives voice to the full range of human emotion before God — from soaring praise (Psalm 8) to raw lament (Psalm 22) to deep confession (Psalm 51). His life of faith, failure,

Asaph



Leader of one of David's three choirs (1 Chronicles 6:39), Asaph authored 12 psalms (50, 73–83). His psalms wrestle honestly with theodicy — the problem of the wicked prospering (Psalm 73) — and contain

The Sons of Korah



Descendants of the Korah who rebelled against Moses (Numbers 16), yet whose sons survived and became gatekeepers and musicians in the Temple. Their 11 psalms (42–49, 84–85, 87–88) include some

Moses & Solomon



Moses contributes Psalm 90 — the oldest psalm in the collection — a meditation on God's eternity versus human frailty. Solomon contributes Psalms 72 and 127, connecting the Psalter to both the royal

PRACTICAL APPLICATION — LIVING IT OUT TODAY



Pray a Psalm Daily

Choose one psalm per day for 30 days. Read it aloud as your personal prayer, even if the words don't perfectly match your mood. Let the Psalter shape your prayer vocabulary.



Write a Lament

Using Psalm 22 or 88 as a model, write your own lament psalm. Be honest about your pain, confusion, or unanswered questions — then end with a declaration of trust, however small.



Memorize Psalm 23

Commit the six verses of Psalm 23 to memory. Recite it in moments of fear, grief, or uncertainty. Let it become the default prayer of your heart in difficult seasons.



Study Heseḏ

Look up every occurrence of "steadfast love" (heseḏ) in the Psalms. Notice the contexts in which it appears. How does this word reshape your understanding of God's character toward you?

PSALMS – *My Study Notes*

Praise & Lament



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Key Verse



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Emotions Expressed



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Personal Prayer

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“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”

— Psalm 150:6