



Psalms

The Psalms are an anthology of Israel's inspired songs and prayers, used by God's people for millennia in both hardship and celebration. The collection reflects the full range of human experience, from joy to anguish, while consistently pointing to God as the source of judgment, justice, mercy, and redemption.

Introductory Information

Title: The Hebrew title (תהלים) means “Praises.” The familiar English title comes from the Greek Septuagint title ψαλμοι, meaning “to strike the lyre.”

Authorship: Psalms is a compilation of works by multiple authors. Many psalms are anonymous, but others carry inspired superscriptions identifying their authors. These superscriptions are part of the original inspired text rather than later scholarly additions. Because the Hebrew preposition used can mean either “by” or “for,” authorship attribution is not always certain. David is the most prolific named author, with 73 psalms bearing his name and others identified as his by New Testament writers (e.g., Psalms 2, 95, 110). The Psalter's compilation likely occurred in stages, with the final arrangement completed after the exile. Authorship can be understood in three parts: the Divine Author (the Holy Spirit), the Human Author (David, Asaph, etc.), and the Human Compiler (unknown).

Date Because Psalms is a compiled work, dates vary widely, ranging from the time of Moses (Psalm 90) to the exile of Judah (Psalms 79, 137, 147). The Psalter did not reach its current form until after the return from exile, possibly as late as 400 BC.

Theme & Purpose: The purpose of Psalms is to instruct God's people in right worship, giving voice to praise and prayer in every circumstance of life, both private and corporate. The book as a whole looks forward with Messianic Hope. Its major themes include the hope of the Davidic covenant, the need for a greater Davidic King, God's divine kingship, and the future reign of the Messianic King.

Theme Summary: *A collection of inspired songs and prayers that teaches God's covenant people how to faithfully worship Him in every circumstance—celebrating His character and kingship, His covenant faithfulness, and pointing forward with hope to the coming Messiah as the suffering servant and true Davidic King.*

Redemption Revealed In Psalms

The Psalms emphasize that God desires true worship from the heart.

Rather than emphasizing outward forms of worship, the Psalms consistently show their authors crying out to God from the depths of their hearts in both lament and praise. God rebukes Israel not for lacking outward religious piety but for failing to worship him genuinely from the heart, as seen in Psalm 50 and in David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51, where he acknowledges that God desires a broken and contrite heart rather than mere sacrifice. This genuine, heart-level worship finds its fulfillment in Jesus's promise to the woman at the well that true worship would no longer be tied to a temple or location but would be worship in spirit and in truth.

The Psalms anticipate the coming Messianic King whose reign extends beyond David himself.

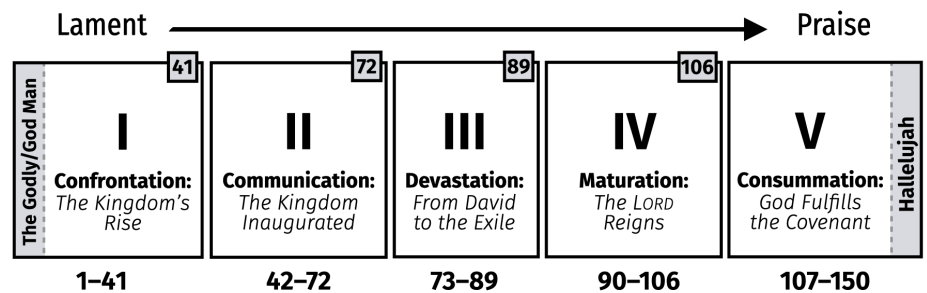
While many psalms speak of David's historic reign, the Psalter as a whole points forward to a coming Messianic king, David's greater son, whose reign will extend forever beyond any earthly kingdom. This is especially clear in Psalms 2, 72, and 110. Psalm 110 is the psalm most frequently cited by New Testament authors as pointing to Christ's exaltation, describing the Messiah as both triumphant and righteous. Psalm 2 describes the promised son ruling over the nations, Psalm 45 declares him the eternal righteous king, and Psalm 89 affirms God's covenant guarantee of an everlasting Davidic kingdom. Jesus himself quoted Psalm 110 to demonstrate that the Messiah is both David's Son and David's Lord, come to establish God's eternal kingdom rather than an earthly one.

The Psalms anticipate a universal kingdom of God in which all nations worship the Lord.

Throughout the Psalter, the authors anticipate a day when all nations will worship the Lord as the one true God. Examples include Psalm 22 (the ends of the earth turning to the Lord), Psalm 46 (God exalted among the nations), Psalm 47 (the princes of the peoples gathering to exalt him), Psalm 66 (all the earth worshipping), Psalm 86 (all nations worshipping before him), Psalm 87 (former pagan nations counted as citizens of Zion), Psalm 98 (God's salvation revealed to the nations), and Psalm 102 (nations and kingdoms gathering to serve the Lord). When viewed as a whole, the Psalms make clear that Israel's worship was never meant to be limited to that nation alone, and this expectation is fulfilled through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which produces a redeemed people from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

Notes:

Structure of Psalms



Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. How does recognizing that the Psalm superscriptions are part of the inspired text, not later scholarly additions, shape the way you read and trust the authorship claims found throughout the Psalter?
2. Consider the proposed thematic flow of the five books (Confrontation, Communication, Devastation, Maturation, Consummation). Does tracing this progression change the way you understand an individual psalm's place within the whole book?
3. Psalm 51 shows David recognizing that his sin required more than outward sacrifice; it required a new and contrite heart. How does this theme of heart-level worship challenge or encourage you in your own approach to worship and repentance?
4. The Psalms repeatedly anticipate a day when people from every nation will worship the one true God. How does seeing this expectation fulfilled in the Gospel shape your understanding of the Psalter's ultimate purpose?