

A Study in Psalms, Week 1 Handout

Introduction to the Book of Psalms

"Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; Praise Him in the heights!"
Psalm 148:1

*Praise the Lord, ye heav'ns a-dore Him! Praise Him, angels in the height;
Sun and moon rejoice be-fore Him; Praise Him, all ye stars of light.
Hal-le-lu-jah! A-men, Hal-le-lu-jah! A-men, A-men, A-men.*

Praise the Lord, a worship song by J. Kempthorne and Lowell Mason

Overview and Introduction

1. Psalm writers (number of psalms written shown in parenthesis)
 - a. (73) **David**
 - b. (11 or 12) **Sons of Korah**
 - c. (12) **Asaph** (choirmaster or derived name of a choir guild)
 - d. (2) **King Solomon** (David's son)
 - e. (1) **Heman** (a wise man in Solomon's time; 1 Kings 4:31)
 - f. (1) **Ethan** (a descendant of Ethan of David's time, or derived name of a choir guild)
 - g. (1) **Moses** (he wrote Psalm 90, the **oldest** psalm)
 - h. (48 or 49) **Anonymous** (many are probably David's)
 - i. *NB:* Other psalms in the bible: e.g. **Jonah** composed a psalm **while inside the great fish!**
2. Psalms are **independent works** spanning many **centuries** (Moses to Babylonian captivity)
3. The Psalms are organized into **five books**
4. The five books contain **150 psalms**—we can't possibly cover them all!
5. Sources: Book of Psalms; commentaries by Coffman, Wiersbe, Deffinbaugh

Significance of the Psalms

1. Singing and reading of psalms were **vital parts** of early N.T. church worship
2. Early **church fathers** often wrote **commentaries** on the Psalms (e.g. Chrysostom, Augustine)
3. One Bible scholar said "*Perhaps we are safe in saying that no biblical book has seen more use throughout Christendom than has the Psalter.*" (H. C. Leupold)
4. The **Roman Catholic** and **Eastern Orthodox** churches made reciting the entire Psalter a weekly **liturgy** (a public service or ceremony). The **Anglican** church read them monthly.
5. Today, our **songbooks** contain many psalm-inspired songs!
6. Psalms and Isaiah are the O.T. books **most often quoted** in the N.T.
 - a. Jesus even quoted part of Psalm 22:1 **from the cross** ("*My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?*")
7. The Psalms **speak to us** individually (like the writer's have been looking over our shoulders!)
8. They reveal God's hand and presence in **Nature**
9. They're a **condensed version** of the Israelite experience, history, and theology
10. More than a book of prayer, the Psalms are a **pattern of participation in worship**
11. The Psalms are also the **key** to understanding why David was "*a man after God's own heart*"
12. In short, the Book of Psalms teaches us how to be **true worshippers** of God!
13. I pray that you will make a **personal commitment** to **earnestly study** and ponder the Psalms this quarter. We know you will be **enriched** and **blessed** for the effort!

What is a Psalm?

1. A Psalm is a **poem**, not **prose** (simple, ordinary speech)

"What must be said ... is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons. ... Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not."

From *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis

2. But remember that this is **Hebrew** poetry—very different from western-style poetry

- a. Western poetry often has a **rhyme** and a **meter** based on balanced syllables:

*A flea and a fly in a flue
Were imprisoned so what could they do?
Said the flea, "Let us fly!"
Said the fly, "Let us flee!"
So they flew through a flaw in the flue.*

The Flea by John Donne

- b. Hebrew poetry, however, has a **rhythm** achieved by **tonal stress** on **important words** through the use of **parallelism** ("thought lines")

*Praise the Lord!
For it is good to sing praises to our God;
For it is pleasant and praise is becoming.*

Psalms 147:1

- c. In using parallelism, the poet makes a statement in the first line, then follows with subsequent lines that reinforce the first by various methods:
 - i. **Synonymous** parallelism—second line repeats the first using different words
 - ii. **Antithetic** parallelism—second line contains an idea opposite to the first
 - iii. **Synthetic** parallelism—second line expands and explains the first (e.g. 147:1 above)
 - iv. **Climactic** parallelism—the second line completes the first
 - v. Other forms, too...
 - vi. Think of parallelism like **stereo vision** or **stereo sound**
3. Many psalms have **titles** and/or **superscriptions**—historically accurate editorial notes added **after** the psalm was written (e.g. "Selah," indicating an interlude or change of music)
4. Psalms are **high powered, condensed**, and full of **energy**. They require **thought, meditation**, and **study** to fully understand.
5. They are **vivid** and **exciting**—a more **intense** form of communication than normal prose.
6. **NB:** While it's **interesting** to know how psalms are **structured**, we won't be studying them as literary forms—we'll be studying them **spiritually**, remembering that they were written to give **praise** and **glory** and **honor** to God!

Next week, the 23rd Psalm...