

## THE MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS

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After finishing our class, I wanted to leave you all with some point of reference for your own study of the Book of Psalms, as well as some of my own notes about how I think the book has a message for us in the twenty-first century. That message, I think you will find, challenges us in much the same way as the New Testament does, and will continue to challenge us until our Messiah returns to finish the work he started some 2,000 years ago, the very work which the Book of Psalms envisions.

### *Introduction (Psalms 1-2)*

The book of Psalms begins with two psalms that have been set off to the side, not having any kind of heading as the rest of the psalms in Books 1-2 (3-72). These psalms form a unit which has as its central concern the establishment of a righteous, Davidic king (cf. 2 Sam 7) upon Mount Zion, the “capitol city,” if you will, of God’s kingdom. Numerous word repetitions link these psalms together, most notably the “blessing” of the Man (1.1) and its counterpart for those who take refuge in the Son of God (2.12). Forming an inclusion of blessing, these opening psalms give the rest of the Book of Psalms a framework that one can interpret within. They provide us with the following context.

First, they introduce us to the Man of the book (1.1). He is the righteous one set apart from all wicked men and evildoers, who receives special blessing from God as a result of his delight in studying Scripture day and night (1.2) and his

uninhibited success (1.3). The psalmist pictures him as a tree who has been transplanted by streams of living water, whose life never ends, and whose abundance will be given at an appointed time.<sup>1</sup> He is also contrasted with the wicked, who are like chaff blown away in the wind, who will not be resurrected in a future judgment. The way of the righteous (a group linked with the Man of 1.1, but *not the same as the Man*), as opposed to the perishing way of the wicked, is a ‘way’ that the Lord knows and blesses.

Second, Psalm 2 picks up on the figurative language and imagery from Psalm 1, but describes the details in a more literal style. For example, the wicked of Psalm 1 (1.1, 5-6) become the raging and plotting nations of Psalm 2 (2.1-2, 12), who are attempting to free themselves from the authority of Yahweh and his Anointed King. The Lord who already reigns in Zion is hardly phased by their rebellion, and in his anger sets in motion their ultimate judgment by establishing his king on Mount Zion (cf. 1.3). The language of Sonship used to describe this situation (2.7) is connected to the Davidic covenant from 2 Samuel 7.14. As such, this is not just any king being established, but the promised Son from the covenant promises to David. From his throne, this King will be given the nations as his inheritance (2.7-8) and will execute judgment over all men (2.9). In this regard, the kings and peoples of the earth

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<sup>1</sup> Importantly, the imagery used to describe the environment of this Man is also used to describe the environment of the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-2, as well as the eschatological City and Temple described in Ezekiel 40-48. As such, the imagery suggests that this righteous man has been placed in the restored city of Zion. Furthermore, the description of his contrast with the wicked (1.1-3) also has royal parallels in Deuteronomy 17 and Joshua 1. If such parallels are legitimate, then the Man described for us in Psalm 1 is the approved King of God (Deut 17) whose success (1.3) is a military one (Josh 1.8ff). This is exactly the situation expressed for literally in Psalm 2.

are warned to stop their plotting and rebellion against the Lord. Instead, they are to act wisely by serving and rejoicing in the Lord with fear and trembling (2.10-11). If they continue to rebel, they will kindle the wrath of the Son of God, who will destroy the wicked in their way (2.12; 1.5-6). The way to blessing in God's program (the way the Lord knows) is to seek refuge in the Son of God (2.12).

This plot structure, including its key themes and vocabulary, are points of reference throughout the rest of the Psalter. Look for them to be developed and given greater description in the psalms to come.<sup>2</sup>

### *Books 1-2 (Psalms 3-41 and 42-72)*

The vast majority of the psalms in Books 1-2 are penned by David, and the history of interpretation has certainly connected them with key events in David's life experience.<sup>3</sup> Within the literary framework of Psalms 1-2, however, the psalms attributed to David take on another, different voice, the voice of the Davidic king. His voice may be heard in several collections of psalms attributed to David throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> The theme of "blessing" takes an especially prominent place in the structure of the Book of Psalms, as it is one part of the doxologies which close each "book" in the Book of Psalms (41.13; 72.18-19; 89.52; and 106.48). Here, the people of God are to praise God by doubly-agreeing that the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, be blessed forever.

<sup>3</sup> Thirteen psalms, in fact, expressly point us to events in the book of Samuel to help in interpretation (3; 7; 18; 30; 34; 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59; 60; 63; 142). These historical could indicate that in these psalms we are more likely to hear the voice of the historical David rather than the future David.

Psalter (Pss 3-41, 51-71, 86, 101-103, 108-110, and 138-145). Within these psalms, when the speaker is complaining to the Lord, he does so in reference to personal and national enemies who verbally attack him, who are out to harm Israel, and who are pursuing her king. Not all the Davidic psalms are complaints, though. Several psalms in these opening books, for example, celebrate the majesty of God (8) and his Torah (19).

The centerpiece of Book 1 is comprised of Psalms 15-24. These psalms have a strong focus on the royal and torah themes in the Psalter, but do so in the context of several important questions: "Oh Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?" (15.1), and "Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place?" (24.3). This group of psalms answers that only one man is able to do so, the King from Psalms 1-2.<sup>4</sup> They also tell us that a generation of men will also be able to ascend the hill of Lord, provided they seek after the God of Jacob (24.5-6). But how do these psalms describe the 'way' of ascending God's mountain? The psalms of David in Books 1-2 show that much suffering and affliction will come upon the King before his exaltation to Zion (eg. Ps 40). This seems to correlate with the raging nations and plotting peoples of 2.1-2, especially if we are hearing the voice of the Anointed King in Psalms 3-7.

At the completion of the first two books we have a final vision of the messianic kingdom (72). This is expected given the observations we have made so far. This psalm serves as the epitome of the first two books, not only showing how this king will rule with divine wisdom, but also how his blessings

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<sup>4</sup> This is especially apparent given the contrast between Psalm 14, with its emphasis on finding no righteous man in all the earth, none who seek after God, and the repeated affirmation of righteousness and seeking after God from the voice of the psalmist in Psalms 16-23.

overflow into the prosperity and peace of his kingdom. Book 2 also closes with a mysterious editorial mark (“The prayers of David, son of Jesse, are ended/fulfilled/ culminated”). Scholars debate its function within the Book of Psalms, but in my opinion it does not refer to the prayers of David coming to a completion, but that in the prayer of his son Solomon represents David’s prayers coming to a culmination. In other words, Psalm 72 represents the most lofty prayers of David, the focus of his heart, that the kingdom promised to his son would become a reality.<sup>5</sup>

### *Book 3 (Psalms 73-89)*

The beginning of Book 3 brings us down quite quickly from the heights of Psalm 72. In fact, the whole situation seems to change from earlier. In Book 3 we hear the pens of David’s prophetic musicians (Asaph and Korah), rather than his own pen. This change in authorship is accompanied by a change in theme and focus. The change begins with the psalms of Asaph (73-83), which focus more on national Israel than the Davidic psalms. In part this change in focus is related to the word

*asaph*, which means “gatherer,” which becomes an ever-important concept in Books 4-5 (cf. Psalms 106-107).

These psalms focus on the response of Israel to their own wickedness (73) and subsequent judgment (74). To be sure, in 73.10-15 the psalmist equates Israel with the wicked nations. Thus, they have become one of the nations who are against God and his Messiah (2.1-2). The psalmist’s own voice, however, stands out from the rest of the nation, continuing to call for Israel’s repentance, understanding that their own judgment has come about because of his time spent in God’s sanctuary (73.16-17). His is the voice of a suffering Israelite, who could very well represent the voice of the Davidic king. If so, then these psalms have a vision of the future which not only foresees the Messiah suffering alongside his people, but foresees him as one who teaches Scripture with authority and great wisdom (78), opposing the general population and pleading with them for a change in heart similar to his own (73.18-28). From 78 we learn that this change is in a large part due to both the psalmist’s own (77.4-20) and the nation’s (78.1-8) meditation on the Scriptures, especially God’s relationship with their forefathers.

The second half of Book 3 is tied closely to the progression of thought, though a different group of authors appear – the Korahites (84-85, 87-89) and David (86). The psalms of Korah pick up by contrasting the future “walk” (pilgrimage) to Zion with the “walk” Israel is currently undertaking (84.7; cf. 81.13; 82.5; 83.4). They also begin where the prior Korahite collection ended (42-49), by focusing on the benefits of making pilgrimage to Zion. Psalm 85 ends with a reflection on the restored kingdom of God, reminiscent of Psalm 72. Importantly, it ends by saying, “The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

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<sup>5</sup> Book 2 features psalms by David’s prophetic musician-families, Korah and Asaph. These psalms make up the first half of Book 2 (42-50). The Korah psalms have a strong wisdom focus (many are *maskil*) and take on the themes of rejection for both the individual speaker and the nation, cries out to God for deliverance, reflections on Zion, and in Psalm 49 on the resurrection from the dead (49.15). The Asaph psalm (50) sets up the next section of Davidic psalms which focus largely on how the one should respond rightly to the Lord (seek refuge in him), most notably through offerings of thanksgiving and the performance of vows. This is where we find a large number of historical notes for David (Pss 51-63).

Righteousness will go before *him*, and *make his footsteps a way.*" Note that the Lord here is walking ahead of the people into the restored land, signifying that the way for the people to make pilgrimage to Zion is to follow in the footsteps of her Lord.

Psalm 86, though Davidic, continues in the same train of thought. It is the cry of the one whose footsteps the saints will follow into Zion – the Davidic king. He is praying to walk in the Lord's ways (86.11-12), for the Lord plans to deliver his soul from death ('from the depths of Sheol'). Thus, the Messiah has a similar role to the Lord in 85.13; the way of the Son of God and the way of the righteous after him are effectively connected together. Tied to this is the prayer for the nations to worship in Zion (86.8-10), which is similar to the Asaphites vision for justice in 83.16-18. Both passages connect God's punishment of the wicked with their knowing God and seeking after his name. Appropriately, Psalm 87 envisions the result of this prayer in the establishment of Zion as the great city of God. In accordance with the prayer, the ancient enemies of God's people are now said to be born in Zion (87.4-6).

The remaining two psalms in Book 3 (88-89) take a different turn, which mirrors the arrangement of psalms in the earlier Korahite collection (42-29). There, psalms focused on going to the Temple (42-44; cf. 42.4; 43.3) are followed by a royal psalm and psalms of Zion and divine rule (45-48), finishing with a psalm about the resurrection from the dead (49). In a similar way, the remaining two Korahite psalms (88-89) focus on the death of the Davidic king and the psalmist's continued hope for a future for the house of David because of resurrection. To this end, Psalm 88 explains the death of the Davidic king (cf. 86.13) explicitly as the wrath of God being

poured out on him (88.6-7). This same "wrath" is described in 89, beginning in verse 38. Though Psalm 89 begins with a long account of the Lord's commitment to the house of David (i.e. 89.35, "I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David"), it ends with the question of resurrection, "What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?" (89.48; cf. 86.13). The question of resurrection is a crucial one, for the psalmist connects the death and resurrection of David (86) with the salvation of Israel from exile (89.49-50) and their pilgrimage to Zion, "they mock the *footsteps of your anointed one*" (89.51; cf. 86.11).<sup>6</sup>

In sum, Book 3 as a whole considers the national deliverance of Israel in light of the salvation of this Anointed one, who is delivered from death by the Lord and whose footsteps they will follow as they make their way to Zion in repentance to what they have done in joining the company of the wicked. This repeats and further details some of the themes we have already highlighted from key sections in Books 1 (15-24) and 2 (42-29).

#### *Book 4 (Psalms 90-106)*

This book continues the messianic vision, though beginning by considering the delay of God in implementing his plans for the future. In doing so, the editor of the Psalter chose to start with

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<sup>6</sup> The commitment of Yahweh to David is so strong in Psalm 89 that I think James Mays is right in saying that "God works in and through David to claim the world for his kingship. The reign of the Lord is at stake in the destiny of David" (*The Lord Reigns*, 124). This makes the response of the Lord to the questions at the end of 89 even more important. His very glory, even sovereignty, is at stake in whether or not he will raise up his servant from the dead.

a psalm of Moses, though Moses plays an important role throughout the book, through personal reference (eg., 99.6) and quotation (Psalms 104-106). This suggests, as Psalm 78 did, that the answers to Israel's post-exilic questions are to be found in the lessons learned in the past and handed down to them through their Scriptures.

The book is split up into three main sections. Psalms 90-92 begin by responding to the "why" and "how long" questions from Psalm 89. They answer that God counts time differently than man does, as man's perspective is tainted by the shortness of life. To learn how to have a vision of God as their dwelling place (90.1; 91.1, 9; cf. 84.1), they must learn to number their days so as to receive a heart of wisdom (90.12). Insofar as they listen to Moses, they will continue to have hope that God would one day have 'pity' on them (90.13). This 'pity' forms a kind of compassionate, relenting bookend around this whole section (cf. 106.45). This suggests that in the final editor's prophetic vision, Israel will listen to his message and be gathered into Zion.

The second section (93-100) is introduced with Psalm 92, which has as its focus the anointing of the messianic king (92.10), as well as the blessing of the righteous (92.12-15). Here the righteous are described with a mix of imagery from Psalms 1-2 describing the King. They are like the cedars of Lebanon ("a tree"), but are planted in the house of Yahweh ("upon streams of water"), who bear fruit ("gives its fruit") and are ever flourishing ("its leaf does not wither"). The blessings of the Man have certainly been passed on to the righteous.

Psalms 93-100 go on to describe the reign of the Lord and his Anointed. Significantly, the kingdom over which the Lord resides in these psalms is virtually indistinguishable from

the Davidic, messianic kingdom described in 72 and referred to throughout Book 3. The conflation of the kingdom between the Lord and his Messiah will come together in a significant way in Psalm 110, where the Lord (God) addresses the Lord (Messiah) about his kingship (note Jesus' own discussion in Mt 22.41-46).

Book 4 closes with a series of six psalms (101-106) that are usually explained as moral examples for us on how to respond to the reality of the reign of God. Within the Psalter, however, they can also be understood as messianic. Psalms 101 and 103 are of David, with the intervening 102 as a "prayer of the afflicted one." All three can be understood as the voice of the Anointed King. For instance, in Psalm 102, the afflicted psalmist is crying out for the Lord in his battle to "cut off all the evildoers from the city of Lord" (101.8; 102.15-17). He is verbally abused by both his enemies and by the anger of the Lord (102.8-10; cf. Pss 88-89). Strangely, it is during this affliction that he says to God, "You will arise and have pity on Zion; it is *the time* to favor her; *the appointed time* has come" (102.13). What time is this? The time for judgment spoken of in Psalm 75.2, where the Lord was responding to wicked Israel's request of 'how long' their suffering would last. In that psalm, the Lord did not say he would judge Israel's enemies, but the righteous and the wicked. We learned in psalms 73-74 that Israel herself had become wicked. Now, here, in 102, the time of judgment has apparently come. But interestingly, the voice of the afflicted one speaks a prophetic word, "Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord" (102.18). The message is clear: the Lord will arise in *pity* (102.13; 90.13; 106.45) in order that the peoples and nations be *gathered* together to worship the Lord in Zion (102.22).

The concluding psalms (103-106) have a strong connection to the Pentateuch and the histories which flow out of it (Joshua through Kings). For instance, Psalm 103 is largely a meditation on how the Lord made known his ways to Israel right after the Golden Calf incident (Exod 34). The “David” whose words these are give us a glimpse into what it means to meditate on the instruction of the Lord night and day. The same continues into Psalms 104-106: Psalm 104 is a reflection on Genesis 1 and what it means that the Lord is the Creator; Psalm 105 is a reflection on the how God was at work in Israel’s history to uphold the Abrahamic covenant; and Psalm 106 relates how the people of Israel, time and time again, refused to take refuge in God, but rebelled against him so that his wrath and judgment would come upon them. We learn that the present exile of Israel is because they had forgotten the glory of their God and had instead worshipped his creation (just like their forefathers). They had not learned their lesson yet, and still did not take refuge in Yahweh.

In sum, there is a strong correlation between the message of Books 3 and 4. Book 3 called Israel to repentance for their wickedness, noting how their repentance would lead to their future pilgrimage to Zion. This was not without its costs, however. Because of their wickedness, their Anointed King would have God’s wrath poured out on him, die, and would be resurrected from the dead for Israel’s salvation. Book 4 leads us in the same direction, but by highlighting the faith of the Messiah in contrast to the rebellion of Israel. Here, the present generation is to follow the lead of their Messiah, expressed in David’s words and by his example.

### *Book 5 (Psalms 107-145)*

This book opens with an anonymous psalm which is strongly united with the psalms which end book 4 (103-106). This is clearly apparent in both how 107 begins and by its repeated refrain. The psalmist starts by giving thanks to the Lord, for his goodness and steadfastness love (107.1). This is to be repeated by the redeemed of the Lord (107.2) and those whom the Lord has gathered in (107.3), which are specifically singled out in 106.10, 47. Psalm 106.47 specifically says, “Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us in from among the nations, that we may give thanks to your holy name and glory in your praise.” The connection is obvious. The repeated sayings of 107 are also related specifically to 106.43-45. Those verses give us the lesson we are to learn from the rehearsal of Israel’s rebellion, that “many times he delivered them, but they were rebellious in their purposes and were brought low through their iniquity. Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress, when he heard their cry. For their sake he remembered his covenant [with Abraham], and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.” Why, then, did God save them? “They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. . . . Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men” (107.6,8;13,15; 19, 21; and 28, 31). But who are these whom he has gathered in for such a purpose? Not Israel alone, but also the nations and the yet-to-be-created-people of 102.18-22.

From this point, Book V goes on to answer the question already posed several times throughout the Psalter, “Who will bring me to the fortified city?” (108.10). The description of the appointed wicked man (109; identified in the NT as Judas

Iscariot) is followed by a description of the Messiah and his reign (110) and several psalms of praise (111-118). The progression of thought in the psalms is characteristic at this point.

The central section of Book V, and possibly even the Psalter, is the Songs of Ascent (120-134).<sup>7</sup> They are preceded by the lengthy Psalm 119, which emphasizes the benefits and hardship of those who live according to the Scriptures. These are the ones who will ultimately ascend to Zion in festal worship. The connection to the Feast of Sukkoth in the history of interpretation is an intriguing one. This is the feast connected to the eschatological vision of Zechariah 14, which envisions a similar kind of ingathering expressed thus far in the Psalter.<sup>8</sup> These psalms emphasize the divine blessings of prosperity and posterity for those who take refuge in God.

Book 5 closes with a collection of praises (135-137) which are on the lips of those who are gathered in Zion to bless the Lord (134) and a final collection of Davidic psalms (138-145). The Davidic psalms echo the concerns of Psalm 132, and give the reader a final reminder of the kind of faith exemplified not only by the Messiah, but by those who trust in him.

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<sup>7</sup> Something must be said about the fact that the Songs of Ascent form the only complete collection in the entire Book of Psalms. In my view, this could be an indication that the central theme of the book is not that the Lord reigns, as many Psalm scholars claim, but that every person on earth has the opportunity to worship God on Zion because of his steadfast love in establishing his Son as King through the Son's own suffering, death, and resurrection.

<sup>8</sup> Note also the NT connections to *Sukkoth* in the possibility of Jesus' birth taking place near the time of the feast, John's claim that Jesus came to 'tabernacle' with us (Jn 1.14), the festal gathering of angels in Zion (Heb 12.22, and the gathering in heaven for the great feast (Rev 19.17).

### *Conclusion (Psalms 146-150)*

The Psalter comes to a close with a refrain of praise after praise to Yahweh for who he is and what he has done. It is initiated by the final few verses of Psalm 145, which affirm the salvation of those cry out to God (145.19), the destruction of the wicked (145.20), and the praise of God which is to be the final product of all that God has done, "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless his holy name forever and ever" (145.21). This is effectively the fulfillment of the psalmist's meditations in Psalm 19.14.

The conclusion goes on to reaffirm the framework established in Psalms 1-2 and put into practice the repeated doxology to bless the Lord which ended each book. In a grand finale, the Psalter ends with praise. It began by calling the reader to seek refuge in the Son of God through meditation on Scripture and walking in the way of the righteous, and ends with the product of such a life, the praise of God

### *The Message of the Book of Psalms*

In short, the main concern of the Book of Psalms, if the above observations are on track, is how mankind is to ascend into the presence of God in his eschatological city, his holy hill, his renewed Eden, Mount Zion.

The book goes on to describe that preceding the establishment of the kingdom and city of God the nations will be at war with God and his Anointed King. As part of this battle, the wicked nations (including Israel) will seek to throw off the Lord's authority and there will be a struggle among men. All along, the nations and Israel are to consider God's

dealings with Israel in the past as an example, and are to seek refuge in God so that the blessings which he pours on his Anointed One will also flow onto them. They are to follow the footsteps of their King along the way, though that way takes them through the depths of death, where they both (the King and us through him) are rescued by the Lord. In the end, the righteous from all nations will worship on Zion in the eternal kingdom and city with their king who reigns forever.

Presently, we are to identify ourselves with those who keep taking refuge in the Lord, looking to heaven for the return of the King from his exaltation. As we do, we become members of his kingdom, dying with our Messiah in his death and raised to royalty with him in his exaltation. This restores our original role in the creation of the universe in the beginning: that we would worship God and keep his commandment (Gen 2.15).

אֲשֶׁרֵי כָּל־חֹסֵי בּוֹ

“O the blessings of those who seek refuge in him” (Ps 2.12)

כָּל הַנְּשָׁמָה תְהַלֵּל יְהוָה הַלְלוּ־יְהוָה

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

(Ps 150.6)

## Recommended Resources for Psalm Study

Nothing can replace your own meditations on the Book of Psalms. There is great spiritual insight and reward in taking the time for a careful and detailed study of the book. No commentary or introduction to the book can claim to relay the kind nor quality of information that you will gain from personal reflection. My best advice is to allow the Holy Spirit to be your guide as you contemplate the message of each psalm as they fit together. Along the way, though, it can be helpful to learn from the meditations of others, some of whom have given their entire lives learning Hebrew and studying the book in its original language. In this regard, here are some resources that I have found very helpful.

### *Overview Commentaries*

John Sailhamer. *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Zondervan)  
 Fee and Stuart. *Reading the Bible Book-by-Book* (Zondervan)

### *Books on the Psalms*

James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns* (Westminster John Knox Press)  
 J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction* (Abingdon Press)  
 Patrick Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (InterVarsity Press)  
 Mark Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Kregel)  
 Firth and Johnston, *Interpreting the Psalms* (IVP Academic)  
 B.W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Westminster John Knox)  
 C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harvest Books)  
 Tremper Longma, *How to Read the Psalms* (IVP Academic)