

# The Psalms: The Structure and Theological Background

## **Psalm 1:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> *Blessed is the one  
who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
or sit in the company of mockers,  
<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and who meditates on his law day and night.  
<sup>3</sup> That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
whatever they do prospers.  
<sup>4</sup> Not so the wicked!  
They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.  
<sup>6</sup> For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

## **Psalm 2:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> *Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?  
<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together  
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,  
<sup>3</sup> “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles.”  
<sup>4</sup> The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.  
<sup>5</sup> He rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,  
<sup>6</sup> “I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.”  
<sup>7</sup> I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, “You are my son;  
today I have become your father.  
<sup>8</sup> Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance,  
the ends of the earth your possession.  
<sup>9</sup> You will break them with a rod of iron;  
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”  
<sup>10</sup> Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth.  
<sup>11</sup> Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling.  
<sup>12</sup> Kiss his son, or he will be angry  
and your way will lead to your destruction,  
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.*

## **Psalm 3:1-8**

<sup>1</sup> *Lord, how many are my foes!  
How many rise up against me!  
<sup>2</sup> Many are saying of me,  
“God will not deliver him.”  
<sup>3</sup> But you, Lord, are a shield around me,  
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.  
<sup>4</sup> I call out to the Lord,  
and he answers me from his holy mountain.  
<sup>5</sup> I lie down and sleep;*

*I wake again, because the Lord sustains me.*

<sup>6</sup> *I will not fear though tens of thousands  
assail me on every side.*

<sup>7</sup> *Arise, Lord!*

*Deliver me, my God!*

*Strike all my enemies on the jaw;*

*break the teeth of the wicked.*

<sup>8</sup> *From the Lord comes deliverance.*

*May your blessing be on your people.*

## Introduction

The Psalms is the prayers and praises of the people of God who were moved by the presence of God. The New Testament quotes the Psalms approximately more than 100 times. Jesus quotes the Psalm when He prays. Christians throughout the ages have found strength and comfort in the message of the Psalms during the most difficult seasons of their life.

In the Psalms we discover the substance that undergirds the faith of God's people in times of celebration, gratefulness, trouble, and despair. The Psalms help us voice our praises and gratefulness to God. There are Psalms that lift the soul from despair, and there are Psalms that move us to look deeply within our despair and pain in ways we would rather avoid. This makes the Psalms both a delightful and difficult book to read. The Psalms captures every aspect of the human experience, living in a broken and rebellious world, in the hands of a sovereign, righteous, merciful, and faithful God.

*The Jews called the book of Psalms *sēper tehilliīm*, "book of praises" or simply "praises." Our word "psalms" transliterates the Greek of the New Testament *biblos psalmōn*, which corresponds to the Hebrew. A few manuscripts in the Septuagint have the word **psalterion**, "stringed instrument" or "collection of songs." From this comes the word **Psalter**.*

(Expositors Bible Commentary)

Resources for this Study:

- a. How to read the Psalm: Tremper, Longman III
- b. Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's guide for Discovery and Engagement.  
Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson

## Structure

The Book of Psalms is not a collection of Psalms thrown in together randomly. The book begins with a psalm that speaks of the Torah (God's law). Like the Torah, the Psalms is divided into five books. Each book has a collection of Psalms that share a similar theme.

## The 5 books and the themes (The NIV Theological Study Bible)

Book I (Ps. 1-41)	Pss 1–2, God the King installs his chosen, anointed king on Mount Zion as his royal representative (Ps 2) and the exemplar of the righteous man (Ps 1). David is the OT symbol of the righteous king, and his psalms dominate Book I (Pss 3–41), where the prevailing note is one of lament, arising out of David’s distresses.
Book II (Ps. 42-72)	In Book II (Pss 42–72), other voices join David’s (the sons of Korah, Asaph), and it occasionally notes national concerns alongside individual ones. The book ends on a high note, speaking of the ideal human king as one with a universal reign (Ps 72).
Book III (Ps. 73-89)	Book III (Pss 73–89) is one of crisis, both personal and national. It begins with doubts about God’s justice (Ps 73) and ends with two despairing psalms (Pss 88–89), the final one questioning God’s commitment to the Davidic covenant.
Book IV (Ps. 90-106)	Book IV (Pss 90–106) marks a major turning point in the Psalter. The focus turns to a time when there was no human king: the time of Moses (Ps 90). It celebrates God’s role as the great King (Pss 93–99). Book IV answers the despair at the end of Book III. It says, in effect, that if people were tempted to look for their security in the Davidic king, then they would end up disappointed; they needed to look to the Lord as their refuge and strength and as their great King.
Book V (Ps. 107-150)	Book V (Pss 107–150) shows that God’s commitment to his promises to David remained unwavering, and David therefore returns to prominence in this book, especially at the beginning and end (Pss 108–110; 138–145) and in the important Ps 132. The book ends by extolling David, the Lord’s anointed king (Ps 144), and the Lord himself, the divine King (Ps 145), echoing the beginning of the Psalter (Pss 1–2), which also features the Lord and his anointed king. And in the final climax of praise (Pss 146–150), Ps 149 anticipates God’s victory over the rebellious nations and rulers introduced in Ps 2.

## The Genre of the Psalms

The Psalms are a collection of Biblical poems. These poems are structured very differently from English poetry. There are different types of Biblical poetry. Knowing the genre helps us read the psalms better. Scholars have identified seven to ten kinds of genre. Some of the Psalms overlap, meaning they have the characteristics of two or more genres. The following are some of the more prominent genres and some examples.

### A. **The Hymn** (Tremper Longman III)

#### **Psalm 103:1–2**

*Praise the LORD, O my soul;  
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.  
Praise the LORD, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits.*

Hymns are easily recognized by their exuberant praise of the Lord. The psalmist pulls out all the stops in his rejoicing in God's goodness. His praise is exuberant because the psalmist is very conscious of God's presence.

There are many different types of hymns, almost all of them share a similar basic structure:

1. Hymns begin with a call to worship.

**Psalms 113:1**

*Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, you his servants; praise the name of the Lord.*

**Psalms 92:1**

*It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High,*

2. They continue by expanding on the reasons why God should be praised.

**Psalms 92:1, 4**

*It is good to praise the LORD ...*

*For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD.*

**Psalms 96:1, 5**

*Sing to the LORD a new song ...*

*For all the gods of the nations are idols,*

*but the LORD made the heavens*

3. Hymns often include, and sometimes conclude with, further calls to praise.

**Psalms 19:1-4**

*The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

*Day after day they pour forth speech;  
night after night they display knowledge.*

*There is no speech or language  
where their voice is not heard.*

*Their voice goes out into all the earth,  
their words to the ends of the world.*

He is also praised as King:

**Psalms 47:5-6**

*God has ascended amid shouts of joy,  
the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets,*

*Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to our King, sing praises*

## B. The Lament (Complain)

The Lament is the prayer written when everything is not what it should be. As the Hymns celebrate the heights of the Psalmist's experience with God, the Lament takes us to the valleys. The emotions behind the lament is the opposite of the emotions behind the Hymn.

**Psalms 22:1–2**

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,  
by night, and am not silent.*

Content of the Lament (Tremper Longman II):

The lament is the psalmist's cry when in great distress he has nowhere to turn but to God. We discover three types of complaints as we read through the laments.

1. The psalmist may be troubled by his own thoughts and actions.

**Psalms 42:5, 11; 43:5**

*Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?*

2. He may complain about the actions of others against him (the "enemies").

**Psalms 42:3**

*... men say to me all day long, "Where is your God?"*

3. He may be frustrated by God himself (He feels God has abandoned him).

**Psalms 42:9**

*I say to God my Rock,  
"Why have you forgotten me?"*

Structure of the Lament (Tremper Longman III):

Rarely will all seven elements actually occur together, but a number of them will appear in each lament.

1. Invocation
2. Plea to God for help (The invocation and plea for help usually come together)

**Psalms 12:1**

*Help, LORD, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men.*

**Psalms 17:1**

*Hear, O LORD, my righteous plea; listen to my cry.*

3. Complaints (This is the focal point of the Psalm)

**Psalms 22:6–7**

*But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads.*

#### 4. Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence

**Psalms 69:5** (Confession of sin)

*You know my folly, O God; my guilt is not hidden from you.*

**Psalms 26:5** (Protest of innocence)

*abhor the assembly of evildoers and refuse to sit with the wicked.*

#### 5. Curse of enemies

##### The Enemies

The psalms, most of the time does not reveal the specific nature of the enemy. This could be national enemies, military threat, a spiritual attack (witchcraft) or a legal case (false accusation). Scholars believe that this is done intentionally so that the psalm can be used in various circumstances.

**Psalms 109: 8–9**

*May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership.*

*May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.*

#### 6. Confidence in God's response

In his melancholy, the psalmist makes a confession of trust in God. He makes clear that His trust is in the Lord.

**Psalms 54:4**

*Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me.*

#### 7. Hymn or blessing

Last, *hymns of praise* are common toward the conclusion of a lament. As the psalmist realizes what God can and will do for him, it leads him to praise God.

**Psalms 26:12**

*My feet stand on level ground; in the great assembly I will praise the LORD.*

### C. **Thanksgiving Psalms** (Tremper Longman III)

Thanksgiving plays a very important part in the worship life of the Old Testament. In the sacrificial system of the OT, sacrifices are not only made for the atonement of sin. Sacrifices are also made to God as an act of thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving Psalm is a proclamation of God's response to the Lament. This Psalm is written with the desire to express gratitude and praise for what God has done.

**Psalms 56:12**

*I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you.*

## Structure of the Thanksgiving Psalms:

1. Intention to praise or proclaim a blessing

**Psalms 34:1**

*I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.*

**Psalms 32:1**

*Blessed is he*

*whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.*

2. Invitation to praise

The psalmist, thanking the Lord for answered prayers, bears witness to God's great work in his life. He even calls on the rest of the congregation to join him in thanking the Lord.

**Psalms 30:4**

*Sing to the LORD, you saints of his; praise his holy name.*

3. Recalls the crisis stated in the Lament which is now answered

**Psalms 18:5–6**

*The cords of the grave coiled around me;  
the snares of death confronted me.*

*In my distress I called to the LORD;  
I cried to my God for help.*

4. God's act of saving

The Psalmist recounts how the Lord rescued him. This, then, is followed by an account of God's salvation. In the case of Psalm 18, this deliverance is presented in a dramatic picture of the appearance of God as a warrior who "reached down from on high and took hold of me" (18:16). The remainder of the thanksgiving psalm continues to praise the Lord and to call on others to praise him.

### **The Next Session on: Introduction to the Psalms**

1. Central Themes in the Psalms
2. Jesus in the Psalms

## Prayer Items

1. Growing in Prayer
2. Understanding the work of God in our broken world
3. Expressing our heart to God in Faith
4. Growing in Gratitude

### **Church**

- Online services
- Ministries
- Souls saved and lives transformed
- We may know our role for this season.
- Love, Kindness and Humility
- Renewed by the presence of the God the Holy Spirit

### **Healing**

- Francis: Recover the full usage of his left arm
- Sis Rachel (Tabitha's mum)
- Adri & Ricky (Michelle's sister & brother-in-law):  
Covid-19

### **Malaysia**

- God will deliver us from this pandemic
- Covid-19 – healing and recovery (physical, mental and economically)
- Compassion: people in power and with resources will show compassion and love towards those who are in need
- Racial reconciliation
- Justice and Mercy: The poor, oppressed, foreigners, widows and orphans – pray against the works of greed and corruption
- Leadership and good governance
- The Church will be God's instrument for unity, integrity and racial harmony