



Community Group Discussion Guide: Psalms Overview

Community Group Leaders: The following information is designed to give you context for your studies in Psalms. Suggested uses:

1. Schedule time during the opening introduction to your study from Psalms to present this information in a shortened form.
2. Present this as it fits into your CG time. For example: When you mention that a psalm has a superscription (Examples: Psalm 56, 57, 59, 60) or uses the word *selah* (Examples: Psalm 55, 57, 59-62), provide these extra details to encourage understanding.

Many psalms have a superscription or subscript: Superscriptions were probably not part of the original composition, but they record the ancient traditions about the origin and use of the psalms.

- a. All but 34 psalms have a superscription that tells something about the psalm.
- b. Many refer to incidents in the life of David about which Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles say nothing (Examples: Psalm 7, 60).
- c. Others refer to traceable incidents in the life of David (Examples: Psalm 56, 57, 59, 60).
- d. Contain musical terms—some of which the meanings were lost by the time the Old Testament was translated into Greek:
 - Liturgical or musical terms: *alamoth*, *gittith*, *higgaion*, *mahalath leannoth*, *maskil*, *muth-labben*, *sheminith*, *shiggaion*.
 - Which musical instrument to use.
 - Song titles indicating the tune to which the psalm should be sung: *Doe of the Dawn* (Psalm 22), *Lilies* (Psalm 45), *Do Not Destroy* (Psalm 57, 58).
 - Musical guilds or singers: *Jeduthun the Levite* (Psalm 62), *Heman the Ezrahite* (Psalm 89).
 - *Selah*: A pause or silence for effect; a crescendo or musical interlude.
- e. Some psalms mention a specific worship setting (Examples: Psalm 30, 38, 70, 92, 100).
- f. Some psalms use distinct terms that indicate the writer's intent:
 - *Maskil* (Example: Psalm 53-55): A contemplative or instructive psalm seeking wisdom.
 - *Miktam/Miktam* (Example: Psalm 56-60): Commonly related to a word meaning "to cover." Since the psalms with this title are written during times of peril, some think the idea is of covering the lips in the sense of secrecy, as if this were a secret or silent psalm sung in a time of crisis.

What are the Psalms? Largest collection of ancient poetry in existence.

- The Hebrew word is *mizmor* or *tehillim* which means praise.
- The word *psalm* is a Greek word meaning plucking of the strings.

- a. Original intent: Collection of worship songs intended to be sung to God by the Israelites to the accompaniment of stringed instruments.

b. What they became: Hymnal and prayer book for the postexilic Israelites' worship in a "virtual temple" as they longed for the building of and/or the return to God's physical temple.

c. What they are today: Book of personal devotions designed for a lifetime of reading and reflection as we hope for the coming Messiah.

Historical Use of Psalms: It is our tendency to think of the psalms as written by private use, but most were written for public performance in the temple of ancient Israel within the context of community worship. There must have been some crucial experience that created a change of national perspective so strong that the original connection of the psalms with temple worship became obscured. Two such events occurred, both involving the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the loss of the temple worship system:

1. The end of the first temple, built by Solomon, at the hands of the Babylonians in 586BC (and subsequent exile to Babylon): When temple worship ceased, so did performance of the psalms. It is in exile that the Jews created the synagogues to protect their identity. In these synagogues, the Jews shaped the Hebrew Scripture to help the exiled nation understand what it meant to be faithful followers of God in challenging circumstances.

2. The demise of the second temple at the hands of the Romans in 70AD: Again, the cessation of the psalms in temple worship. The psalms again became a prayer book for exiles. Early Christians sang the psalms as part of their worship and as a means to understand God's will for their present circumstances.

Organization of Psalms: Psalms was originally collected as series of five smaller books. Each section concludes with a doxology. While the psalms are not organized by topic, it is helpful to compare the dominant themes in each section of the Psalms to the five books of Moses. These five books within Psalms are thought to mirror the five books of the law, also called the Pentateuch of Moses. It's also noteworthy that Moses had five books, and Psalms, often called the Psalms of David, has five books.

Book One: Psalm 1-41 (Doxology: 41:13): Just as Genesis tells how mankind was created, fell into sin, and then promised redemption, many of these psalms discuss humans as blessed, fallen, and redeemed by God. Highlights the power of God in creation.

Book Two: Psalm 42-72 (Doxology 72:18-19): Just as Exodus describes the nation of Israel, many of these psalms describe the nation as created, ruined, and then recovered. As God rescued the nation of Israel, He also rescues us.

Book Three: Psalm 73-89 (Doxology 89:52): Just as Leviticus discusses the tabernacle and God's holiness, many of these psalms discuss the temple, God's enthronement, and His holiness. Because God is Almighty, we can turn to Him for deliverance.

Book Four: Psalms 90-106 (Doxology 106:48): Just as Numbers discusses the relationship of the nation of Israel to the surrounding nations, these psalms often mention the relationship of God's overruling kingdom to the other nations.

Book Five: Psalms 107-150 (Doxology 150:6): Just as Deuteronomy was concerned with God and His Word, these psalms are anthems of praise and thanksgiving for God and His Word.

Categories of Psalms: Psalms can be classified according to form or type; according to subject matter; according to their use; and/or according to the style in which they are written. It's important to remember that not all psalms fit neatly into one category. There is a wide range of thought on the classification of the psalms. This can vary from two types (praise and lament) to 10+ types.

For the purposes of this overview:

1. Enthronement Psalms: Describe God's majesty and sovereign rule over His creation and His providential care by which He sustains, controls, and directs all He has made. (Examples: Psalm 29, 47, 82, 93, 97-99)
2. Wisdom Psalms: Provide practical guidelines for godly living according to God's will and direction. (Examples: Psalm 1, 14-15, 32, 37, 49, 50, 52-53, 62, 73, 90, 112, 119, 127-128, 131, 133, 139)
3. Historical Psalms: Deal with a portion of Jewish history and the powerful ways God demonstrated Himself to His people. (Examples: Psalm 78, 105-106)
4. Zion Psalms: Praise God and specifically refer to His presence in Zion—the place from where God chose to make His presence known to His people. (Examples: Psalm 48, 76, 84, 87, 122, 132, 134)
5. Ascent Psalms: Believed to be sung by exilic Jews on pilgrimage to the restored temple for three celebrations: Passover, Pentecost, and Feast of Tabernacles. (Examples: Psalm 120-134)
6. Lament Psalms: Record the writer's cry and appeal to God for divine deliverance in moments of despair. (Examples: Psalm 3-7, 10-14, 17, 22, 25, 28, 31, 35, 38-44, 51, 55-58, 60-61, 64, 69-71, 73-74, 77, 79-80, 85-86, 88-90, 94, 102, 109, 120, 129-130, 139, 140-143)
7. Imprecatory Psalms: Invoke God's wrath and judgment upon the psalmist's adversaries who were God's enemies. (Examples: Psalm 5, 28, 35, 59, 70, 83; 109)
8. Royal Psalms: Proclaim the reign of earthly kings in Jerusalem as well as the heavenly, messianic King of Israel in Zion. (Examples: Psalm 2, 20-21, 45, 61, 101, 110)
9. Confidence Psalms: Express simple trust in a great God, using vivid imagery or striking metaphors to picture something of what that relationship looks like in practice. (Examples: Psalm 16, 26-27, 36, 46, 54, 63, 91, 121, 125, 144)
10. Thanksgiving Psalms: Express a profound awareness of and deep gratitude for God's gracious blessings. (Examples: Psalm 8-9, 18-19, 23-24, 30, 32-34, 48, 65-66, 75, 81, 92, 95-96, 100, 103-108, 111, 113-118, 124, 126, 135-136, 138; 145-150)

Psalms Writers: Wrote in many different settings over a period of about 800-1000 years (between time of Moses and Babylonian captivity). Psalms contains some of the oldest (Psalm 90) and newest (Psalm 126) writings in the Old Testament. Psalms was written by more authors than any other book in the Bible:

- Anonymous authors account for 49 psalms (1-2, 10, 33, 43, 66-67, 71, 91-100, 102, 104-107, 111-121, 123, 125-126, 128-130, 132, 134-137, 146-150).

- Asaph: Levitical priest, chief worship leader (1 Chronicles 15-16). Wrote 12 psalms (Psalm 50, 73-83).
- David: King of Israel. Wrote 73 of the 150 psalms—some with a specific story mentioned (see Psalm 3). (Psalm *2, 3-9, 11-32, 34-41, 51-65, 68-70, 86, **95, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-145)
 - ⇒ *Acts 4:25 seems to attribute Psalm 2 to David.
 - ⇒ **Hebrews 4:7 seems to attribute Psalm 95 to David, making his number 75.
- Ethan: Wise man and a Levite. Wrote Psalm 89.
- Heman: Wise man and musician. Wrote Psalm 88.
- Moses: Leader of the exodus and wilderness wandering period of Israel's history. Wrote Psalm 90.
- Solomon: David's son, king of Israel; built the temple. Wrote Psalm 72, 127.
- Sons of Korah: Guild of singers and composers. Wrote 11 psalms (Psalms 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88). These singers were part of official worship structure under the leadership of David and Solomon.

Resources used, compiled from, and quoted:

- *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary.*
- *Holman Illustrated Bible Handbook.*
- *Holman New Testament Commentary, Psalms 1-75.*
- *The NIV Application Commentary, Psalms Volume 1.*
- *Shepherd's Notes, Psalm 1-50.*