



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 in your first session of the series to present this information in a shortened form.
2. Present this as it fits into your CG time. For example: When you introduce David as the author of numerous Psalms, give this additional information. When you mention that some of the Psalms have a superscription (Psalm 56, 57, 59, 60) or use the word *selah* (Psalm 55, 57, 59-62), provide these extra details to encourage understanding.

Author, Date, Recipient, Setting Context, and Purpose of the Psalms:

Psalms 55-63 were written by David: As a shepherd boy from the line of Judah, David was anointed by the prophet Samuel to be second king of Israel following Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. Due to his disobedience early in his reign, Saul was told by Samuel that his kingdom would be given to another.

After his anointing, David returned to living somewhat in continued obscurity except for days when he would play his stringed instrument for King Saul who was constantly tormented by evil. During this time, David went back and forth between King Saul and his father's home where he continued to tend sheep.

Then came the day David killed the Philistine giant, Goliath, and rescued Israel from the Philistine army. This brought David to the attention of King Saul who did not yet know David would succeed him as king. After killing Goliath, Saul kept David with him. David became a mighty warrior in Saul's army. With David's victories came great adulation and jealousy from Saul. Eventually, David, fearing for his life, fled from Saul and hid in the cave of Adullam.

Saul, consumed with jealousy, began to hunt for David to kill him. From Adullam, David gathered his own army and began to fight the enemies of the Israelites. Twice, David had opportunity to kill Saul but did not. Saul eventually was killed in a battle against the Philistines.

When David was 30 years old, the Israelites came to make him their new king. He reigned at first only over Judah for seven years. He reigned over all of Israel and Judah for 33 years. David was described as "a man after God's own heart." He continued to be a musician and songwriter throughout his days. He wrote 73, possibly 75, of the 150 Psalms. These were used in Israelite worship then and continue to be part of the worship of God today.

David did have periods of sinfulness and he did not manage his family as needed. As a result, there was chaos and loss in David's life and among his wives and children. 2 Samuel 11 records David's sin with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah. 2 Samuel 23-24 records David's sin of pride and the resulting death of 70,000 men. After his death, David was succeeded by his son Solomon whose mother was Bathsheba.

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: Alamothe, Gittith, Higgaiion, Mahalath Leannothe, 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 to understand God's will for their present circumstances.

Organization of Psalms: Psalms were originally collected as a series of five smaller books. Each section concludes with 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 are a wide range of thoughts on the classification of the Psalms. This can vary from two types (praise and lament) to 10+ types.

For the purposes of this introduction:

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)