

Reading the Bible Series

How to Get the Most out of Reading

PSALMS

Dr. Tim Riordan

How to Get the Most out of Reading Psalms

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Chapter One

Considering the Big Picture

Psalms is one of the most loved and misunderstood books of the Bible. When people are stricken by grief or challenged by hardship, they often turn to the pages of the psalter for help and encouragement. One reason this central book of the Bible is so beloved is because we not only find God in the pages of the Psalms, but we also find ourselves. In the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, John Calvin addressed the multifaceted nature of this inspired book of Hebrew poetry and how every aspect of our emotional life is exposed within the 150 chapters. Calvin called the Psalms “an anatomy of all parts of the soul.”¹

The focus of this brief book about the Psalms is on how to read and study this central Bible-book of Hebrew poetry. Volumes could be written, and we could go into great detail on learning how to get the most out this important book of inspired Scripture. For example, an important principle for biblical interpretation is to understand the part by first studying the whole. This requires us to consider the flow and construction of the entire book.

Psalms appears to be divided into five books or groupings: Psalm 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106; 107-150. This grouping is obvious with each section ending with a doxology. Authors La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush clarify the possible reason for this structure: “The best explanation of this grouping is that the

various sections may represent stages in the process of collection.”² Most scholars seem to agree that the five sections of the Psalms correspond with the pattern of the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch.

Understanding structure will also lead the student of Psalms to consider a general outline for the book, literary categories of the psalms, the original context of the writing, authorship and background leading to the original writing, and an understanding of Hebrew poetry. In addition to these contextual and structural issues, we should also seek to view the Psalms from the perspective of the Jews as well as viewing the Psalter with the New Testament in mind. Understanding the Psalms will be a life-long project, but it will be one filled with new delight as your understanding deepens and the truths not only open up your mind but also your heart.

As we embark on a study of the Psalms, we should focus on the fact that we are on a journey to know God, but we are also on a journey to know ourselves. We each have a tendency to hide behind platitudes and ambitions, and we fail to see a true picture of ourselves. God led each writer of the Psalms to guide us to look deeply into our own souls and see unmistakable truths. Sometimes this gaze reveals marvelous attributes that will cause us to celebrate, while other times, we spy shameful realities that lead us to lie prostrate in repentance before a holy God.

The question I want us to consider through the brief pages of this book is this: “How can I get the most out of the book of Psalms?” This is a worthy question and one that should be

applied to all of Scripture. Before we look deeper into some specific Bible study principles, let's first grasp one of God's greatest goals for His Word. God has given us His Word so that we can come to *know* Him. The bottom line of Scripture is that God wants a relationship with us. No book of the Bible resounds so clearly with this truth as the book of Psalms. Philip Yancey summarized this thought well when he said, "More than any other book in the Bible, Psalms reveals what a heartfelt, soul-starved, single-minded relationship with God looks like."³ Our quest to study Psalms is not merely for the goal of Bible knowledge, Bible teaching, or even personal comfort and encouragement. Our main goal for pouring over the pages of this amazing selection of the Word of God is so that we might come to truly know Him.

A casual reading of Psalms reveals praise to be an important part of our worship experience, but real praise can only come from a heart that knows God. Praise is quite different than thanksgiving. Through thanksgiving, we express our gratitude for what God has done. Through praise, however, we declare Who God is. We acknowledge God's character and how He expresses His nature in our world. In order to praise God, we must know God.

We have two important steps of coming to know God. The first step is theological in nature while the second step is more experiential. We need to dig into the pages of Scripture to learn of the theological aspects of God's nature. For example, we read in Isaiah 6 that God is holy, and in Psalm 139:7-12 we discover that God is omnipresent. These are theological truths that we

store upon the bookshelves of our minds. For these theological realities to take root in our hearts, we must also come to experience them in our lives.

We come to know that God is faithful (Deut. 7:9) when we apply the scriptural truth underscoring His faithfulness to our circumstances of desperate need. As God meets our need when we have nowhere else to turn, we discover the true meaning of God's faithfulness. We come to know God at the place where theological truth meets practical experience. Not only do we need to read the Scripture, but we should also watch for the truth of Scripture to be expressed in our daily lives.

Understanding the book of Psalms requires a great deal of thought and study, but it must first begin by looking at the big, grand picture of this beloved book. The goal is that God wants us to know Him. He wants us to meet with Him and walk with Him day-by-day. This truth influenced my choice of titles for my earlier book on Psalms: *Songs from the Heart: Meeting with God in the Psalms*.

The goal of coming to know God and personally giving Him worship is communicated in the overall layout of the book. The earlier chapters of the Psalms are often written *about* God and deal with a variety of topics people encounter throughout their lives, but the later chapters are words that are often expressed *to* God and specifically call believers to praise and worship. The layout of the entire psalter seems to have intention moving believers into a deeper relationship with God as they read further into the Psalms. Although the psalter contains more laments than hymns, you will find hymns of praise take over as

you move closer toward the end of the book. This movement points to the reality that when we move our focus from ourselves to God, our songs of sorrow are swapped for songs of praise.

With this large concept in mind, it is time to delve into the deeper study of this cherished book. You will find this book to be a companion of my earlier book, *Songs from the Heart: Meeting with God in the Psalms*. As you read through the following pages and consider their application to the study of Psalms, always keep in mind that God's greatest desire is for you to know Him and to love Him. You are God's greatest treasure, and He seeks a growing relationship with you. While loving God in response to His unending love for you, praise will be a natural by-product of your deepening walk with Jesus Christ. As you enjoy your study of the Psalms and strengthen your relationship with God, I hope you will soon be able to echo the thoughts of C. S. Lewis, "The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express the same delight in God which made David dance."⁴

Chapter Two

The Psalms in the Life of Israel

Have you ever considered how the Jewish people adapted the Psalms to their worship? It must have been a growing process as people gradually incorporated the truths of the Scripture into their worship and daily lives. I must admit that I had not considered this process much until I wrote the opening chapter of *Songs from the Heart*. I created a fictional story of a family living in En Gedi in about 800 B.C. Writing the story caused me to consider the practical use of the Psalms to the Jews and the fragmented process they must have followed in formulating the psalter.

For the Jewish worshiper, music and praise were not only central to their worship, but also to their lives. I do not want to assume that every Jewish person who lived before Christ was a faithful follower of Jehovah God, but for those who were, worship and praise were a part of their lives and not just a service of worship. This means that the Psalms eventually became a part of their daily experiences. God used struggles and the victories of the psalmists to inspire His people to place their hope in God's precious promises. Experiencing the supernatural God in the ordinary struggles of life ultimately overflowed in unfettered worship.

The genres of Psalms suggest uses of the songs that apply to more than just formal, corporate worship. Music for the Old Testament Jew was not reserved only for the professional. The

quality of the sound was not nearly as important as the quality of the heart. In our culture, many worshipers shy away from singing above a whisper for fear that someone may hear a note that is a little off pitch. The Psalms suggest that the Jewish people of old sang with gusto from a heart that was overflowing with gratitude for the blessings of God.

Although I will deal more with the topic of the formation of the Psalms in the next chapter, they were written over a 1000-year period, so incorporating the songs of worship into Jewish life was indeed a process. The oldest psalm (Psalm 90) was probably written by Moses, so we can give it a date of somewhere between 1200 and 1400 B. C. (depending upon when you choose to date the Exodus). The *book* of Psalms, then, was initially *a* psalm, Psalm 90 may have first been a reflection of Moses that was included in another collection of writings. When the book of Psalms was compiled, God led the compiler to include Moses' psalm. While God obviously wanted Psalm 90 to be included in His Word, it is impossible to know the details behind how this first psalm made it into this collection of inspired, Jewish poetry.

Regardless of how Psalm 90 got into the Psalms, you can allow your imagination to run free as to how it was used in Jewish worship before the time of David. Moses could have written the psalm after judgement was passed upon Israel for their lack of faith. They may have sung the song during their forty years of wandering through the wilderness. Through this repetition, it would have been passed down to the next

generation of Jewish nomads and eventually became ingrained into the fabric of Jewish life and worship.

Although one can only guess at how Moses' psalm was used in worship during the years of wandering, the Davidic psalms fall into a little better understanding of initial use. It is easy for me to imagine David setting up worship in Jerusalem in the tent he erected for the Ark of the Covenant. Remember that Solomon was the king who actually built the temple after David's death. Songs of worship were sung by the Levites night and day in David's tabernacle (see 1 Chronicles 15-17). I am confident that a number of those songs were written by the greatest psalm writer: King David.

I can picture the choirs lining the interior temple walls during Solomon's reign as worshipers sang some of the antiphonal songs. I can also imagine them marching up the narrow streets toward the temple mount in rows of four or five singing the songs of praise. As the Jewish people came to Jerusalem to worship, they probably learned these new songs. By the end of a week of festival, they carried the new songs back to their communities and into their lives.

A few scholars believe some of the psalms were written with a special festival in mind and may have even been reserved for only that particular occasion. If it is true, it's possible that Psalm 81, for example, was written for Passover or the Feast of Tabernacles (Booths). Verse three of the psalm says "Blow the trumpet...on our feast day." Historically, these two festivals were pilgrimage festivals (the third being Pentecost). Jews traveled to Jerusalem from all over Judah to celebrate these

festivals. These celebrations, however, focus on different aspects of Jewish life and history.

The Passover festival commemorates God's deliverance of the Children of Israel from Egyptian captivity (see Exodus 12). Jews remembered this deliverance through a seven-day festival that began with a special family meal that commemorated The Exodus.

The Feast of Tabernacles or Booths took place in the fall and was also a seven-day celebration. It involved multiple offerings throughout the week, and Jewish families lived in temporary huts or "booths" to commemorate the nomadic state of their forefathers.

If Psalm 81 was for one of these celebrations, the Jews made specific application of parts of the passage to the historical events of their past. For example, consider the way the psalm begins: "Shout for joy to God our strength." If this were sung during Passover, the Jews would instantly think about God's deliverance from Pharaoh. If it were sung during the Feast of Booths, they would possibly think of the battle of Jericho and God bringing down the great walls at the sound of the trumpets.

Whether a psalm was written for a particular festival or not, I'm sure the Jews often thought of specific applications of a particular text to a time in Israel's history. We could do the same. We could read Psalm 81:7 and think of a specific time God came to our rescue: "You called in trouble and I rescued you." This would breathe new life to the psalm and help us to know God better as our deliverer.

Although Jewish worshipers used the Psalms in corporate worship, these songs also brought great meaning to everyday life. A large number of the psalms are songs of lament. A lament is a song that communicates a worshiper's sorrow and struggle with a problem that has yet to be solved. Some of the laments had a nationalistic feel to them as they expressed sorrow over the rebellion of the nation of Israel. Many of them, however, communicated a personal sorrow that related to a more intimate struggle. Psalm Fifty-four, for example, was written by David during a period of personal struggle. He was hiding from King Saul. Verse three presents a little piece of context: "For strangers have risen against me and violent men have sought my life."

Can you imagine how an individual Jewish man may have connected David's predicament to his own personal struggle? Maybe if he were being threatened by someone, he might begin singing, "Save me, O God, by Your name, and vindicate me by Your power." It's possible that he could have learned this psalm from a corporate experience in worship, but the message was birthed out of David's personal struggle. Psalms like the fifty-fourth Psalm find great meaning in the personal struggles of the Jewish people.

I particularly like how the Jewish people of the Old Testament era sang the *Processional Psalms*. Once again, remember that the Jews grew into this type of expression as the songs were compiled and the people began to learn of their proper use. Also, remember that families did not have a copy of the Psalms. Learning the proper use of these psalms was a

process that may have taken years to become a firm part of the Jewish culture.

Some of the *ProceSSIONAL Psalms* were incorporated by worship leaders and included in corporate worship in the temple. This application did not require the gradual acceptance by the Jews. It came through the worship planning of the Levitical worship leaders.

Other *ProceSSIONAL Psalms* fall into the category of “Songs of Ascent” (Psalm 121-134), and I can imagine the use of these psalms were gradually accepted. Songs of Ascent were sung by Jewish worshipers as they made the journey to Jerusalem to worship. They led the worshipers to anticipate the festival and served as a preparation for worship experience of the festival week. The reason they were called “Songs of Ascent” is because the temple was built upon a highpoint in Jerusalem. When people came to the temple, they had to “go up” to worship.

We would do well to apply this practice to our own experiences of worship. Our Sunday morning services would be energized if believers spent time preparing to meet with God. We could sing praise songs on our way to our houses of worship on Sunday mornings. We should even incorporate singing songs of worship throughout the week in anticipation of gathering with other believers on Sundays. If our minds are focused upon the Lord in personal worship Monday through Saturday and in anticipation of corporate worship on Sunday mornings, can you imagine what would happen when we all come together to meet with God? Our worship services would be unlike anything we’ve ever experienced. The glory of God would indeed come

down. Unbelievers would encounter a people who are passionate for God, and our worship would compel them to faith in Christ.

Over half of the Psalms have been attributed to someone other than David, and it may have taken a while for Jewish people to incorporate them into their personal and corporate worship. Some of the psalms were written during Israel's time in exile, while others found birth during the post-exilic period. Regardless of when a psalm was written, the context will impact the message of the passage, and knowing the context can enhance our contemporary expressions of worship with that particular scripture. With some thought, you can imagine the specific application of a psalm in relationship to Israel's circumstances. As you gain a deeper understanding of a psalm's background, you will be more likely to find unique ways to use the passage in your own worship, and God will speak fresh truths from the scripture as He makes application to your life.

In the next chapter, we'll look a little deeper into the background of the Psalms. Volumes have been written to help readers dig deeper, but the next chapter will at least whet your appetite to mine out the riches found in this treasure trove of Scripture. It is my hope that you will be encouraged to diligently study the Psalms through reading the following pages, but that you will also find a fresh application of these marvelous passages to your life and worship.

Chapter Three

Looking at the Details

In seeking to understand any document or piece of literature, a reader should strive to comprehend the original context of the passage or book. This is always true with the Bible, which includes the book of Psalms. Understanding the context of Psalms is a bit challenging because God inspired numerous human writers over a period of several hundred years in response to a variety of different circumstances to write this wonderful Bible book. It is also difficult because it was written as long as 3500 years ago to a people living in a very different culture.

According to the Hebrew Bible, God used King David to write seventy-three psalms. His list includes Psalms 3-9, 11-32, 34-41, 51-65, 68-70, 86, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133 and 138-145.

Asaph and Korah were two worship leaders, who were part of a Levitical singing group, and God inspired them and their families to write twenty-three psalms. Asaph, and his family, wrote twelve (Psalm 50, 73-83) and Korah's family wrote eleven (Psalm 42, 44-49, 84-85, 87-88). Many scholars attribute Psalm forty-three to Korah as well. Moses wrote Psalm 90 and Ethan wrote Psalm 89. King Solomon wrote at least two (Psalms 72 and 127), while Heman joined with the sons of Korah to write Psalm 88. The other psalms are considered anonymous and are sometimes referred to as the orphan psalms.⁵

One of the first things you will notice about a number of the psalms is the title and the particular circumstance behind the psalm. You should note that some of the titles were not included in the original text and were added later by editors. This does not necessarily mean the title or the background story is inaccurate, but some study may be required to verify any of the editorial additions. Some of the titles, however, may be found in the opening lines of the original psalm making them just as inspired as the rest of the chapter.

The second reason that context is challenging is because the date attributed to the writing of the Psalms is broad. You can imagine the time-frame when you consider the variety of human authors God used to write this book of praise.

Julius Wellhausen described the book of Psalms as ‘the hymn-book of the second Temple,’ which led some people to accept a late date of authorship with God using fewer human authors.⁶ I do not agree with writers who declare the psalms to be a postexilic book entirely. Another thought is that just because someone refers to Psalms as being a hymnal for the second Temple, it doesn’t mean it was written during the construction period of the second temple. Some of the psalms could be post-exilic in origin, but many of them were undoubtedly written before the Babylonian captivity.

Most people believe the earliest psalm (90) was written by Moses. The title attributes the psalm to Moses, and scholars see a connection in writing style to the Pentateuch—especially Deuteronomy.⁷ Assuming Moses is the earliest author, we can begin dating the Psalm somewhere around 1450 B. C. (for those

holding to an early exodus) or 1275 B. C. (for those holding to a later date for the exodus).

David became king around 1010 B. C. and handed off his throne to Solomon after forty years. The Davidic psalms could have been written by David before he became king, but they had to be written before his death in about 970 B. C.

The final Psalm written was Psalm 137 and was penned during the post-exilic period. This date would be sometime after 445 B. C. With a little math, you can see that the date of the writing of Psalms spanned about 1000 years.

With these two challenges in mind, the student of Psalms will have to consider the moving target of the context. Most scholars seem to agree that Ezra ultimately grouped and edited the final version of the Psalms.⁸ I've wondered if Ezra wrote any of the psalms. Even though a 19th century Anglican bishop suggested Solomon wrote the first psalm because he saw similarities to the Proverbs, is it possible that Ezra wrote it as an introduction to the psalter? As God led His people to slowly compile the Psalms over the years, the initial use of the psalter probably expanded throughout time.

It is interesting to consider the historical context of a specific psalm. Connecting a particular Psalm to an author and the inspiring circumstance can make personal application to our lives a bit easier. For example, if the title and attribution to Psalm Seven are correct, which I don't think anyone doubts, then it is easy for us to find personal application of the truths of that psalm to our lives. Psalm Seven was probably written in response to David being persecuted by King Saul as he declared

his innocence and expressed his trust in God. We may find comfort and encouragement in the Psalm if we are being persecuted or unjustly accused. We may hold firm to the opening words during our time of trial: “O Lord my God, in You I have taken refuge.”

Understanding authorship is only a small piece to putting together the contextual puzzle of the Psalms. The type or genre of a psalm may have greater use in this endeavor. When I wrote *Songs from the Heart: Meeting with God in the Psalms*, I went into a little detail about seven different genres you will encounter in the Psalms. While I do not want to repeat that information, I would like to share some additional thoughts on a few of the genres described.

Many of the psalms are *Hymns* of praise. This makes sense because the Hebrew title for this entire book is translated as “Songs of Praise.” I shared in *Songs from the Heart* that a hymn “usually includes a call to worship, a description of God’s attributes, and a final call to worship and praise the Lord.” You can see an example of a hymn in Psalm 96. The “call to worship” is found in the first three verses that begin with “Sing to the Lord a new song.” The description of God’s attributes begins in verses four and five: “For great is the LORD and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.”

You will notice how the focus of the hymns is upon God. I emphasize this truth because many of us grew up singing “hymns” that did not focus upon God. I do not discount songs

like *Love Lifted Me*, and *When We All Get to Heaven*, but I want to distinguish the difference between a true hymn and a gospel song. A gospel song leads worshipers to reflect upon the benefits of becoming a Christian and becomes more of a testimony of the change in the life of the believer. A true hymn is all about God. *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* and *How Great Thou Art* are examples of true hymns. Part of *How Great Thou Art*, however, leans toward a gospel song:

“And when I think of God His Son not sparing sent Him
to die, I scarce can take it in that on the cross, my
burdens gladly bearing He bled and died to take away my
sin.”

I love *How Great Thou Art*, and it is not too difficult to turn a song about my salvation into a song of praise to my Redeemer. You can see how this particular section of the hymn, however, moves our focus to the benefit of our salvation. Gospel songs certainly have their place in worship, but it is easy for congregations and individual Christians to become out of balance in their worship. Our basic nature causes us to be self-centered, and this self-orientation can show up in our worship. If you think about it, self-centered worship is not truly worship of God.

Years ago, I took a survey of the favorite hymns of the particular congregation I served at that time, and every “hymn” that was submitted was a gospel song. It is easy for God to be robbed of praise as we only reflect upon the benefit of our salvation. Is it possible that the modern church has a praise-deficit in worship?

The *Psalms of Lament* express the personal struggle of the people of God. They often express the anguish of the psalmists as they cry out to God for help. While laments express sorrow and even complaint, they also communicate faith as the worshiper cries out to God for deliverance. By including the laments in the Psalms, God reveals to us a very raw and realistic side of His people. We connect to the struggles of a saint of old and can easily see ourselves and our circumstances within the lines of Scripture.

How many of us have read the lament in Psalm Forty-two and found ourselves looking into a mirror? Have you ever experienced the emotional state described by the Psalmist? “My tears have been my food day and night, while *they* say to me all day long, ‘Where is your God?’” I easily resonate with the opening words of desperation the Psalmist expressed: “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God.”

The laments usually include statements of sorrow and struggle, but they also typically conclude somehow with statements of faith. Psalm Forty-two is no exception. Consider this final verse; “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God.”

As you study the *Processional Psalms*, look a little deeper into possible Jewish applications. The psalms will come to life if you can determine their original use. For example, Psalm 118 is one of the *Processional Psalms* that some scholars believe was used in celebration of Passover. Although the exact date and

authorship is impossible to determine, you can imagine the antiphonal nature of the psalm and the focus upon God's deliverance.

Although we do not typically process toward our church buildings in a group, you could still duplicate the antiphonal nature of the psalm as you incorporate it into a corporate call to worship. I can imagine a congregation reading the first four verses in antiphonal style in the opening moments of a service. Part of the congregation would say, "Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good." The other half would reply, "For His lovingkindness is everlasting." These four verses could crescendo as the music behind the worship leaders builds in anticipation. When the last "For His lovingkindness is everlasting" is declared, the congregation could burst into a song of praise.

Authorship and genre are not the only important pieces of background information we need in order to better comprehend the Psalms. We must also look deeper into the *larger* context. The thirty-nine books of the Old Testament fall into one of four groups: Books of Moses, Historical Books, Poetry, and Prophetic Writings. To fully understand the book of Psalms, we must delve a little deeper into seeking an understanding of Hebrew poetry. The next chapter will guide you through an introduction to Hebrew poetry.

Chapter Four

Understanding Hebrew Poetry

We are all familiar with poetry; right? *Roses are red; violets are blue...* Hebrew poetry is unlike any other kind of poetry we may have ever envisioned in our more creative moments. The book of Psalms falls into a larger grouping called “The Writings” or “The Books of Poetry.” One problem we have in grasping this piece of contextual information is that we try to liken it to our own version of poetry. One challenge is that ancient Hebrew poetry is about as similar to our poetry as football is to baseball.

Although Hebrew poetry is different than other forms of poetry, it still carries some of the same impact upon the reader. Poetry is designed to reach deep into the heart of the reader, thereby bringing about a greater effect than typical prose. When we want to communicate our love to someone, we don’t typically pull from our scientific reserves in order to communicate the rapidity of our cardiac palpitations. Poetry has a way of reaching deep into the inner seat of our being to not only communicate truth, but also to express emotions.

Poetry also offers a mechanism for a more significant impression than factual prose. It would be a little odd to repeat a phrase in the story of Joshua defeating Jericho, though it would provide a memorable emphasis. In poetry, it’s not odd to repeat a phrase – we’ll discuss this further in a moment. As a matter of

fact, it is normal for a Hebrew poet to underscore a truth with repetition.

Before we consider some of the uniqueness of Hebrew poetry, I would be amiss to state that the Old Testament writers confined poetry to just *The Writings*. The fact is that you may find sections of poetry in the middle of a passage of prose (consider Exodus 15). Some of the prophets used poetry in their writing. While you will find poetry in some of the prose that make up the other groupings of the Old Testament, you will not typically find prose in the poetry of *The Writings*.

In a time where copy machines and even printing presses had not even been considered, writers were restricted to utilizing literary devices to make passages memorable such as simile, metaphors, imagery, acrostics, and poetry. We should not be surprised that poetry shows up in the writing of the prophets or in the Pentateuch because these writers wanted people to remember the text. I wonder how many of us ever created a poem to help us remember details for an upcoming test. We'll see in this chapter several qualities about Hebrew poetry that make recall easier and the effect of the passage lasting.

Hebrew Parallelism

Hebrew poetry offers several distinct qualities, but the one which stands out the most is the use of parallelism. Gleason Archer described parallelism as “the practice of balancing one thought or phrase by a corresponding thought or phrase containing approximately the same number of words, or at least

a correspondence in ideas.”⁹ In other words, parallelism is simply a repetition of thought.

Within the construct of parallelism, Hebrew poets may employ different levels of this literary tool. Through the years, a lot of theologians and literary experts have sought to categorize the different styles of parallelism, but it seems that many students and experts alike continue to refer to Bishop Robert Lowth’s work that was published in 1753. He said that Hebrew parallelism is divided into three types: synonymous parallelism, antithetic parallelism, and synthetic parallelism.¹⁰

Synonymous parallelism presents a particular thought in the first line, and then it repeats the idea in the second line. This repetition can be identical or similar and therefore repeat the same concept for the purpose of emphasis. In reading poetry that employs synonymous parallelism, the reader should see the repeated line as providing a little more detail or a slight commentary on the previous statement. It does not add a new idea to the truth but rather a further explanation of the truth presented in the first line. Consider the parallelism of Psalm 24:1 as an example of synonymous parallelism.

The earth is the LORD’S, and all it contains,
The world, and those who dwell in it.

Antithetic parallelism is similar to synonymous in that it presents the *same* idea in the second line as the first line. It is called *antithetic* because it expresses the same truth by using antonyms. Psalm 1:6 offers an example.

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

You can readily spot the opposite expression of these two lines. The ways of the righteous and the wicked are compared, thus presenting a concept of opposites, but the same truth is presented in both lines. Tremper Longman offered this explanation of Lowth's description of antithetic parallelism:

Lowth, however, meant that just as in synonymous parallelism, the same thought is expressed, but this time using antonyms (a word whose meaning is the opposite of another word: skinny/fat; kind/mean) instead of synonyms. In other words, the same thought is expressed, but expressed from two different and often opposite perspectives.¹¹

Synthetic parallelism is a phrase Lowth used to describe a style where the second line completed the thought presented in the first line. It is difficult to see how this idea could be included in the category of parallelism at all, and some scholars see it as a final category he created for the other poetic phrases that would not fit so neatly into the first two categories. Consider the two phrases of Psalm 2:6.

Yet have I set my king
Upon Zion my holy hill.

Since Lowth established these categories of parallelism, other scholars have added additional categories. You may want to study all of the different classifications, but they all point to phrases that connect in order to bring a deeper explanation of a concept.

Acrostics

Using acrostics has been common for centuries. We still use them today. Many of us learned to pray by using the acrostic P.R.A.Y. (Praise, Repent, Ask, Yield) or A.C.T.S. (Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication). Preachers will use acrostics in sermon outlines, and government officials use them for names of agencies. Hebrew poets used acrostics for emphasis and to promote easy retention. British scholar J. Alec Motyer said that this feature of using the entire Hebrew alphabet as an acrostic for a passage was “a poetic way of saying that a total coverage of the subject was being offered.”¹²

The longest psalm (Psalm 119) is an acrostic on the Hebrew alphabet. Proverbs 31:10-31 was written as an acrostic of the Hebrew alphabet. Unfortunately, we cannot see this literary device in our English translations, but it is interesting to note that the Hebrews employed this device often.

Imagery

We often find Imagery in modern writing through the use of simile and metaphors. This same type of imagery is found throughout the Psalms. Consider Psalm 42:1, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God.”

Imagery is found throughout the Psalms and presents powerful and memorable statements of truth. One of the best-known passages of the Bible is rich with imagery: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.” When you read Psalm 23, you see imagery in nearly every verse. We lie down in green

pastures and walk beside quiet waters. We walk through the valley, and He prepares a table for us.

It is obvious to readers that this literary device is not meant to be taken literally. We know that God doesn't actually place a table before us in the middle of battle, but we understand God to be saying that He is our provision during our times of conflict. The pictures that this type of writing provides remains in our memories and continues to lead us to consider the truth they represent.

Meter

Early scholars tried to create a basis for meter in Hebrew poetry because it is such an important part of modern poetry. Recent writings, however, have disputed the existence of meter. I mention this because we are so prone to apply our understanding of modern literature to ancient writing, and to us, meter is a central part of poetry. This is just not the case to the ancient Hebrews.

Poetry's Intimacy

Many people would agree that the book of Psalms may be the best loved book of the Bible. One reason for this acclaim is that many feel that Psalms touches one's heart like no other inspired book. Is it possible that one reason it seems to lay open our hearts is because of the power of poetry? God obviously knows how to speak truth in such a way to break through the walls and touch the very core of our being.

God used the Old Testament poetry to connect intimately with His creation. We find through Psalms a sense of transparency, and we are confronted with blatant truth. While the use of poetry helps us to connect with ourselves, it also reveals to us the heart of our heavenly Father.

As much as we love the Psalms, how are Christians to use them in our lives today? God obviously included them in His inspired Word for a purpose. What are the Christian overtones of this beloved book? In our next chapter, we will consider the Christian application of this book written long before Christ was born.

Chapter Five

Christ in the Psalms

When I was a child in elementary school, a group of businessmen (the Gideons) arrived one day with small Bibles to give to each student in my class. They did not offer the entire Bible, but rather a small New Testament that included Psalms and Proverbs. Looking back at it now, it is fitting to include the Psalms with a copy of the New Testament. Psalms has been regarded by Christians throughout the years as a vital part of Christian worship.

Not only did the early Christians sing and pray the Psalms, but many of the psalms point to our Messiah. Father Pat Reardon suggested that the progressive scheme of the first three psalms not only sets up an introduction to the Psalms, but they also introduce us to Jesus and His plan of salvation that is seen throughout the entire book of Psalms. He said, “[The first three chapters] form a tripod on which the whole Psalter stands. These three psalms do not simply appear *first* in the book; they provide, in addition, the theological outline of the book: first, the Man (Psalm 1), then the Messiah (Psalm 2), and finally the Suffering Servant (Psalm 3).”¹³

The Psalms were not just intended for the Old Testament Hebrews. Colossians 3:16 underscores the importance of the singing of psalms to the first century church. The early church fathers wrote of the Psalms’ prominence in the infant church. Martin Luther urged Christians to read the Psalms, and this

treasured book of the Old Testament became central to the Reformation. Luther referred to the Psalms as a “mini Bible.”

Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, reminded us, “There are two ways to read the Bible. The one way to read the Bible is that it’s basically about you. . . . Or you can read it as all about Jesus.”¹⁴ If we read the Old Testament, and particularly Psalms, with a Christocentric perspective, we find Jesus nearly on every page.

Jesus encountered a sick man at the pool of Bethesda one Sabbath day, and He healed him. This, of course, upset the religious establishment, and they confronted Jesus about His apparent disregard of the law regarding keeping the Sabbath day holy. Among Jesus’ comments, He said, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me” (John 5:39). Obviously, Jesus was not referring to the New Testament. The “Scriptures” in His day were only the Old Testament. To which of the Old Testament scriptures was Jesus referring?

Consider Jesus’ confrontation with the Pharisees as recorded in Matthew 22:41-46. Jesus asked these religious leaders, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is He?” The religious leaders of course said, “The son of David.” Jesus referred to Psalm 110 as He said, “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord’ . . . If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” Jesus knew the Psalms spoke of Him.

When Jesus met the disciples in the upper room after His resurrection, as recorded in Luke 24, He told them that the Psalms spoke of His coming and ministry (see Luke 24:44).

Whether or not you believe you will find Jesus on *every* page of the Old Testament, certainly many Old Testament passages record truths which point to Jesus.

Where can we find Jesus in the Psalms? What did Jesus know that maybe we have not seen? I would love to have been on the receiving end of Christ's teaching about Himself from the Psalms. Since we were not there, let's spend a few minutes looking into several passages and concepts that reveal Christ's redemptive ministry.

Jesus' Use of the Old Testament

It seems a little odd to refer to Jesus as an Old Testament scholar because even though He used other human authors to write it, the Bible is still His Word. During Jesus' earthly ministry, He was recognized as a rabbi with a keen knowledge of the Scripture. He quoted from twenty-four different Old Testament books, but His most quoted book was the Psalms. According to Jeffrey Kranz, Jesus is recorded as quoting the Psalms on eleven different occasions.¹⁵

Possibly the most recognized reference to the Psalms by Jesus happened as He was dying on the cross. In Matthew 27:46, Jesus quoted from the first verse of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" He then quoted Psalm 31:5 before taking His last breath: "Into Your hand I commit my spirit." As author Joel Miller said, "Christ lived and died with the Psalms on his lips."¹⁶ Although these two quotes may be the most familiar, the other passages carry just as much

significance and underscore the prominence of the Psalms in the foundational scriptures of the early church.

Kranz provided the following list of additional passages where Jesus quoted the Psalms:

- Jesus used the Psalms while being confronted by the Pharisees (Ps 8:2, 110:1; Mt 21:16, 22:44; Mk 12:36, 14:62; Lk 20:42–43).
- Jesus said that the Psalms foretold the hatred He would experience from others (Ps 35:19, 69:4; Jn 15:25).
- He quoted the Psalms when talking about His betrayal (Ps 41:9; Jn 13:18).
- Jesus recalled the manna in the wilderness after feeding a multitude (Ps 78:24; Jn 6:31).
- When the Jews wanted to stone Jesus for claiming to be God, He responded with a line from Psalms (Ps 82:6; Jn 10:34).
- Jesus quoted Psalm 110 when Pilate asked if He is the son of God (Ps 110:1; Mt 26:64).
- He quoted Psalms to the chief priests and elders, calling Himself the Chief Cornerstone (Ps 118:22–23; Matt 21:42; Mk 12:10; Luke 20:17).
- Jesus referenced Psalms when foretelling Jerusalem's destruction (Ps 118:26; Matt 23:39; Lk 13:35).¹⁷

New Testament Usage of the Psalms

Jesus was not the only one who quoted from the book of Psalms in the New Testament. Theologian Stephen Motyer stated that the New Testament quoted the Old Testament 343 different times with an additional 2,309 allusions and verbal parallels. Psalms is the most often quoted Old Testament book with 79 quotations and 333 allusions.¹⁸

Matthew 4:6 is the first New Testament quote from the book of Psalms where Jesus quoted from Psalm 91 when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The Psalm with the most New Testament quotes and passages alluding to the psalm's content is Psalm 110:1, "The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

After Jesus' ascension, believers gathered in the Upper Room to wait for the Father's promised Holy Spirit. While waiting, they chose someone to replace Judas. They did this based upon two different psalms: Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8 (see Acts 1:20). Once the Holy Spirit fell upon these disciples, they began to preach in Jerusalem. Their first sermon came from two different Psalms: Psalm 16:8-11 and Psalm 132:11 (see Acts 2:24-25).

A. F. Kirkpatrick provided a helpful [resource](#) in listing all of the quotes of Psalms in the New Testament as he underscored the popularity of Psalms in the minds and hearts of those God used to write the New Testament.¹⁹ Why does the Psalter get the most New Testament attention of any other Old Testament book? God put His Word together and guided the human writers as to content, but why do you suppose the Psalms became the favored? The answer to this question is only conjecture, but it's worth considering. I will first underscore that God inspired the writers to include quotations from Psalms, so you could answer the question regarding the favored Old Testament book with the fact that God simply inspired it to be so.

In addition to God's inspiration, you could also deduce that the Psalms was probably the most familiar book of the Old

Testament for New Testament believers. While many young, Jewish men studied the Old Testament scriptures in school, they sang the Psalms regularly in their worship and in response to life circumstances. This means that although a particular passage was studied, the Psalms were lived. So, when God spoke to His people, the Psalms were possibly the truth that was most imbedded in the minds and hearts of the Bible writers. Quoting the Psalms would have been a natural flow for the writers of Scripture.

You can see from another angle why Psalms is the most quoted book of the New Testament. Since the Psalms were the best-known passages of the known Bible at the time it makes sense for God to use these familiar passages to emphasize greater eternal truths. When the New Testament writers picked a familiar psalm and connected it to a current event, the first century readers connected more readily to this truth because of the familiarity of the Psalms.

The influence of the Psalms for the New Testament is not just seen in the number of times it is quoted. New Testament writers were influenced by the pattern and temperament of the Psalms. New Testament scholar David E. Aune wrote of the subtle influence of the Psalms on the content of the New Testament: "The Jewish *hodayah* ('thanksgiving') pattern of prayer, which characteristically began with the phrase 'I/we thank you,' is frequently found in the NT and early Christian literature (Luke 2:38; Heb 13:15; Rev 11:17-18). This type of prayer is also frequently used [by] Paul to introduce petitions

and intercessions (Rom 1:8; Phil 4:6; Col 4:2; 1 Thess 5:16-18).”²⁰

One can imagine how the psalms must have had additional influence in the writing of the New Testament. It certainly guided early believers in corporate worship through the use of hymns. Many scholars believe Philippians 2:6-11 was a hymn of the early church. Even though this passage is not a quote from the Psalms, the pattern of hymn singing has its roots in Old Testament, Jewish worship that was centered on singing the Psalms.

The Messianic Psalms

One particular psalm type that has great interest in the study of the New Testament is the Messianic Psalms. It is fascinating to note how often psalm writers alluded to the coming of the Messiah. The simplest definition of a Messianic Psalm is a psalm that makes mention of the Messiah. Some of them may be prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, while other passages speak to something about His future life or ministry.

What qualifies a particular passage to be a Messianic Psalm? Many people refer to a number of Psalms as being Messianic, and students can readily find psalms with Messianic overtones, but is it proper to refer to each of these Psalms as Messianic? In Luke 24:44, Jesus indicated that the Psalms spoke of Him, so we are certainly justified in making the claim, but one must be careful and not turn a particular passage into something beyond God’s intentions. A number of scholars prefer to reserve the title

“Messianic Psalm” for those passages New Testament writers designate as referring to the Christ.

The study of the Messianic Psalms is so vast that we could not begin to cover the topic in this brief writing. I will, however, focus the next chapter on this fascinating discussion.

Chapter Six

The Messianic Psalms

Would you like to be told in advance of a history making, life-changing event that was to take place sometime in the future? It would be like *Back to the Future 2* where Marty learned that the Cubs would win the world series in 2015 when he actually lived in 1985 (interesting that the real Cubs were only a year off of that prediction).

The Bible contains prophetic statements about a number of future events, and each of those prophecies came to pass exactly as predicted. It is significant that about 30% of the Bible consists of prophecy. It is as if God created a foolproof test to verify the authenticity of the Bible. If God were wrong with one prophetic statement, the whole Bible would be suspect. The opposite, however, is true. God is 100% right with every Bible prophecy. Within all of the prophetic statements in the Bible, 300 of the prophecies relate to the coming of Jesus. A number of those Messianic prophecies are found in the book of Psalms.

Scholars use the term *Messianic Psalms* to describe the psalms which point to the coming Messiah. It is a little difficult to find consensus on the definition for *Messianic Psalm* because various writers and scholars choose different parameters for this grouping. Some writers consider a psalm to be *Messianic* if it simply “anticipates the life and ministry of Jesus.”²¹ Other scholars require the psalm to be quoted in the New Testament with obvious Messianic fulfillment before they put it into this

particular grouping. Missionary and author Norbert Lieth defined a *Messianic Psalm* as “those in which a direct, prophetic reference to the Messiah can be found, and is then fulfilled in the New Testament.”²²

Regardless of your definition of *Messianic Psalm*, you will find prophetic passages about the coming Messiah tucked inside the pages of the Psalter. I once heard someone say that we can find Jesus on every page of the Psalms. In a sense, this statement is true. One of the great purposes of the Word of God is to reveal the heart and person of God to those who are seeking Him. When Psalm 5:4 says, “For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness,” surely this truth speaks of Jesus. True, the psalm does not specify the second person of the Trinity, but Jesus is God, so the truth applies. Some scholars, however, do not call passages with such vague references to the Messiah a *Messianic Psalm*. The passages that fall into this fascinating category will have a clear, prophetic statement about the coming Christ, and you will find its fulfillment somewhere in the New Testament.

Narrowing the Category

When I write of a *Messianic Psalm*, I am thinking of a narrow field of poetic passages written hundreds of years before Christ’s birth that point in some way to His coming. They carry strong, prophetic overtones of God’s promised Deliverer. Even though part of the Jewish heartbeat involved the anticipation of God’s anointed One, I am sure the Jews were a bit confused as to the identity of the Messiah. Though the *Messianic Psalms* are

often veiled prophecies lacking enough detail to satisfy what must have been insatiable curiosity, the Jews lived with eager anticipation to the fulfillment of these passages. Although a number of psalms find fulfillment in Jesus Christ, we will focus specifically on the ones that carry a Messianic thrust and are recognized by most scholars for their prophetic focus.

The Purpose of the Messianic Psalms

The *Messianic Psalms* were included in the Jewish hymnbook first because they are songs of worship. Even though this grouping of psalms offers additional teaching about the Messiah, we must remember that the original purpose of the Psalms was to provide a resource to aid in worship. We will see that while these psalms introduce various features about the Messiah and offer important prophetic statements about the coming Deliverer, God led writers to pen these psalms for the purpose of worshiping the coming King.

Beyond offering songs of praise for Israelites who anticipated the coming Messiah, part of the purpose for the *Messianic Psalms* was to help the Jewish people understand the characteristics and nature of Him. I mentioned in the previous chapter how Jesus stated that the Scriptures are for the purpose of revealing Him to the world (see John 5:39).

Psalms 2:7 states that the Messiah will be the Son of God, and Psalm 45:6 refers to the Messiah's deity and tells us His throne will last "forever and ever." Although the Messiah is worshiped as God, Psalm 8:4 speaks of His humanity. People have struggled with the concept of a God Who is fully God and

fully man, but the Scriptures spoke of this distinction about 3000 years ago.

The Jewish people learned about the work of the Messiah from the *Messianic Psalms*. These psalms are prophetic in nature as they uncovered many things He would do during His ministry on earth leading up to His sacrificial death. Psalm 69:9 tells us He will be consumed by a zeal for the temple, and Psalm 78:2 tells us that He will teach in parables. Jesus showed us that Psalm 69:4 revealed He would be hated without cause (John 15:25) and that ultimately, He came to do the Father's will (Psalm 40:6-8).

Many of the *Messianic Psalms* point to the passion of the Christ. They give a number of details about the events leading up to Christ's crucifixion as well as point to some of the facts about His death and resurrection. Psalm 41:9 foretold His betrayal while Psalms 22, 69, 89, and 129 speak of His torture (mocked, whipped, and scorned). Psalm 22:16 even points to Christ's crucifixion on a cross ("they pierced my hands and my feet"), and Psalm 69:21 tells us that He would be given vinegar to drink. Psalm 34:20 informs us that none of His bones would be broken, and Psalm 22:18 foretold lots would be cast for his clothing. Psalm 16:10 and 47:5 speak of Christ's resurrection, and Psalm 102:16 tells us that He is coming again.

Messianic Psalms Quoted in the New Testament

According to Australian minister Ron Graham, New Testament writers quoted 14 different Messianic Psalms in 57 different passages.²³ For example, Psalm 2 is the first *Messianic*

Psalm quoted in the New Testament (first in the chapter order of Psalms). Acts 4 quotes verses 1-2, and verse 7 is quoted in Acts 13, Hebrews 1, and Hebrews 5. Psalm 2:9 appears in three different places in the Book of Revelation (chapters 2, 12, & 19).

Another prolific Messianic passage quoted in the New Testament is Psalm 118:22-23: “The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner *stone*. This is the LORD’S doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.” These two Messianic verses appear in six different New Testament passages: Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10-11, Luke 20:17, Acts 4:11, Ephesians 2:20, and 1 Peter 2:7. God worked through the years to help the Jews understand the verse’s implications, and we see evidence of this from the Apostle Peter’s use of the passage in Acts 4:11.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that Psalm 110 is the most quoted *Messianic Psalm* in the New Testament. Jesus quoted it when he was confronted by the Pharisees. These religious leaders were trying to determine a way or a reason to arrest Him. They questioned Him about the greatest commandment, paying taxes, and the resurrection. Jesus knew of their intentions, so He got straight to the point of His deity.

In Matthew 22:42, Jesus asked a question, “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is He?” The Pharisees were strict Jewish people, so their response was predictable: “The son of David.” Jesus then referred to Psalm 110:1 with His reply: “Then how does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying, ‘The LORD said to my LORD, “Sit at My right hand, until I put your enemies beneath your feet.”’ Jesus asked the penetrating

question, “If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” The obvious answer was that the Christ was not the son of David, but rather, He was the Son of God. By the divine authority of Jesus, Psalm 110 is a *Messianic Psalm* as it reveals Christ’s divinity.

Although Psalm 110 may be the most quoted *Messianic Psalm*, Psalm 22 is possibly the most familiar. I mentioned previously that the first verse is so well known because Jesus quoted this passage from the cross: “My God, My God. Why have You forsaken Me?” It is a gripping thought to consider that Jesus had the Word of God on His mind as He died for the sins of the world.

Verse one of Psalm 22 is not the only quoted verse of that chapter with Messianic overtones. The Apostle John quoted verse 18 as he reflected upon why the soldiers did not tear the outer garment of Jesus (Jn. 19:24). The writer of Hebrews quoted Verse 22 (Heb. 2:12) to underscore the availability of the gospel, the universality of salvation, and the unity of the body of Christ.

We are commanded in Scripture to be students of the Word of God and to “accurately handle the Word of Truth.” Being accurate with the Scripture means that we work to separate truth from conjecture. I think it can be fascinating to include conjecture in the study of the Bible as long as we recognize it as a possibility and not an absolute. The New Testament writers quote most of the *Messianic Psalms* removing all doubt as to their special classification. At least three psalms could be

included in this grouping that are not quoted in the New Testament. We will consider those passages next.

Messianic Psalms not found in the New Testament

According to Missionary T. Ernest Wilson, three psalms can be considered exceptions to the New Testament rule as it relates to *Messianic Psalms*.²⁴ These three psalms are not quoted in the New Testament, but there seems no doubt that they point to the coming Messiah.

Psalms 24:7-8 guides the student of Scripture to consider the Messianic reference of this psalm: “Lift up your heads, O gates, and be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in! Who is the King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle.” When Christians read that passage, we immediately recognize Jesus as *the King of glory*.

A number of Bible students consider the inspired words of Solomon in Psalm 72 to reference the Millennial reign of Jesus. He began this psalm with words that could point to more than just his own ascension to Israel’s throne: “Give the king Your judgments, O God, and Your righteousness to the king’s son. May he judge Your people with righteousness and Your afflicted with justice.”

The final psalm that Wilson considered Messianic that is not quoted in the New Testament is Psalm 89. It speaks of the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant that happened through King David’s ultimate descendant: Jesus Christ.

Psalm 23 could be a fourth possible *Messianic Psalm*. One cannot help but wonder if Jesus had this psalm in mind when He referred to Himself as “the Good Shepherd.”

From the beginning to the end, the Psalms are filled with teachings and prophecies about the Christ. It’s fascinating how God used Hebrew poetry that would be sung by thousands of Jewish worshipers to remind them and us that He has an eternal plan of salvation and a Kingdom that will never end.

Jewish people have treasured this wonderful book of Hebrew poetry, and Christians have found it to be central to their personal and corporate worship. How should Christians view the Psalms? We certainly see them as the inspired Word of God, but how should we use them in our lives? The next chapter will challenge us to consider the role of this beloved book in the lives of twenty-first century believers.

Chapter Seven

A Christian View of the Psalter

God is a speaking God, and He has spoken through His inspired Word, the Bible. Even though we know the Bible is the Word of God, many Christians lean toward treasuring the New Testament a little more than the Old Testament. We must remember, however, that the Old Testament is just as inspired as the New Testament. They serve different purposes, but they are both critical in helping us to come to know God and to embrace His wonderful plan of salvation.

While every word of the Bible is inspired and useful, not every word carries the same weight in regard to eternal significance in the life of a believer. Compare, for example, the list of names found in the first chapter of Numbers to the life-giving truth of John 3:16. Both are inspired and have a place in God's Word, but they offer different levels of impact to Christians seeking to live out their faith.

We treasure the book of Psalms in part because it is one of the sixty-six inspired books of the Bible. There is something special about the Psalms that moves it up a few notches when we are evaluating usefulness in our Christian life. Psalms is one of those inspired books that transcends all circumstances to speak relevant truth to every situation. Each psalm was born out of the life experience of people who were seeking after God, and they continue to guide seekers into the warmth of a loving relationship with their Creator. Tremper Longman reflected

upon this truth, “The Psalms inform our intellect, arouse our emotions, direct our wills and stimulate our imaginations. When we read the Psalms with faith, we come away changed and not simply informed.”²⁵

As Christians, we should read all of the Bible and glean the life-giving truths God has included in His Word. We will find ourselves going back to special sections of God’s Word that have a little greater meaning to our spiritual journey. Psalms will be one of those cherished selections. How should a Christian read the Psalms in order to glean the most value from the sacred pages? Let’s consider several principles.

Consider the Jewish Perspective

I spent a great deal of time writing about context in a previous chapter. A whole new world of understanding will open up to us if we will consider the perspective of the ancient Jewish reader. Review the editorial titles that are included with some of the psalms and seek to understand the circumstances behind the chapter. Imagine yourself in similar circumstances with a limited knowledge of God’s power and presence. By putting yourself in the place of the Jewish follower of God from ancient times, the scripture can come alive in your own heart.

Applying the Scripture to your life is an important part of the process of realizing the living aspect of God’s Word. Allow your mind and your heart to experience the truths of a passage as you think of a possible circumstance in your own life that could offer a parallel application. Look especially for the

descriptions of God's character and nature and consider how you can come to know God through your unique circumstances.

As a Christian, you have a greater opportunity to understand the Psalms than the Jewish reader of old. When Jesus visited with the Disciples in the Upper Room after His resurrection, He was clear that the Psalms refer to Him. His words are recorded in Luke 24:44, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."

We cannot allow ourselves to read the Psalms with only an Old Testament perspective. We must embrace the broader teaching of the Psalms that point to Jesus Christ as our Redeemer. For example, whether Psalms 23 was intended to be a *Messianic Psalm* or not, there is clearly nothing wrong or improper with connecting Jesus, the Good Shepherd of John 10, to the Shepherd who *makes us to lie down in green pastures* or the One who walks with us *through the valley of the shadow of death*.

We know that Jesus is God, so as we read the descriptions of God's nature in the Psalms, we can look for these aspects of God's character to be expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus in the New Testament. Psalm 103:8 says, "The Lord is compassionate and gracious," and we come to understand new depths of God's compassion when we consider Jesus' actions in Mark 1 when He encountered a man with leprosy. The man asked Jesus to heal him. Jesus could have spoken a word, and the man would have been healed. He could have blown on him,

waved His hand, or a myriad of other actions that would have at least kept Him at an arms-length from the man carrying the death sentence of leprosy. Instead, Mark 1:39 says, “Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out His hand and touched him.” He touched the leper. How long had it been since anyone had touched him? This act brings further meaning to Psalm 103:8 and helps us to understand God’s compassion with a little more clarity.

Look for Teaching on the Nature of Christ

Psalms was written to connect the heart of the worshiper to the heart of God. It is a deeply personal book where various writers share their struggles, pains, victories, and hopes. Although writers share from the depths of their hearts, you can readily discover deep theological teaching in this beloved book.

As mentioned above, the God of the New Testament is the same God of the Old Testament. Jesus’ actions will always be in concert with the nature and character of God, regardless of in what time-period that nature is expressed. Psalms offers us a wonderful book of theology where we can learn much about the nature of God. We see this divine nature expressed through all three persons of the Trinity, so as we study theology in the Old Testament, we can be confident that these truths are just as valid in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Consider the teaching in Psalm 19 about the glory of God as seen in His creation. Psalm 19:1 states, “The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.” The creation of the world is clearly the work of

God's hand. This passage alone attributes all of creation to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without the aid of the New Testament, we could still consider Jesus as the Creator.

As you study the life of Christ in the New Testament, you should look for the nature of God expressed in the Son. Consider again Psalm 19:1. Because of a passage like this, we may choose to study through the New Testament to discover whether or not we could find any passages relating to Jesus' creative work. Our search would eventually lead us to a passage like Colossians 1:16 where the personal pronoun is a reference to Jesus: "For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him."

One of the wonderful themes of the book of Psalms is the theme of God's greatness. To use the word *great* to describe God's nature seems not to do Him justice. The word means considerably above normal or average. A lot of things could fall into that category. Psalm 48:1 says, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised." Surely this passage is not just saying that God is considerably above normal or average. God alone occupies the category of greatness the psalmist referenced. God's greatness leads to many other qualities such as power, knowledge, and compassion. To say that God is great is to say that no one can compare to any of the outstanding qualities of God.

Since God is great, Jesus is great. You would not be incorrect to interpret Psalm 48:1, "Great is the Lord Jesus

Christ.” There is no one like Jesus. Consider this truth as you read through the New Testament and see Jesus interacting with people in need as well as religious leaders who wanted to kill him. Look for expressions of the greatness of God as communicated through the life of Christ. Understanding the greatness of God magnifies the significance of Jesus giving up His life on a cross.

Knowing Christ is an ever-deepening process, and we can find Him on all of the pages of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The next time you read through the Psalms, read it as if it is an introduction to the life of Christ. I believe you will find this practice will enhance your relationship with Jesus.

Modern Application of the Psalms

Psalms was written for you. This book is not just a collection of ancient writings used for Jewish worship 3000 years ago. It was given to us to help us understand God’s nature and to help us get to know our own heart.

It is difficult to find one word that communicates the theme of the Psalms because God cannot be contained to simply one word. I said that God’s greatness is one of the themes of Psalms, which is a quality that sets God apart from humanity. Another key theme of Psalms is God’s love, which is a quality that beckons humanity to come and know God – personally, intimately. God’s love is woven through word and verse like a woolen blanket created by an artisan of old. As readers journey through the lowlights and highlights of the psalmists’ struggles,

they are reminded on every page that God wants to be known and loved even as He loves and knows.

Even though the circumstances that led to the writing of the Psalms are removed from us by thousands of years, we can still find ourselves within the pages of the Psalter. As a Christian reader, we should allow God to merge our current events with the circumstances of the writers of old who penned the inspired words of this book of poetry. We will find God reaching out to us from His Word to meet us where we are in our own version of twenty-first century chaos or struggle.

Hymnal of the Early Church

When the first Christians gathered for worship in Jerusalem, what songs do you suppose they sang? Colossians 3:16 and other passages indicate that psalms were a regular part of corporate worship in the early church: “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

If the early Christians used the Psalms for their worship, we can too. Even though we do not know the melodies of old, we can still take the inspired words and create our own melodies. Isaac Watts, known as the “Father of English hymnody,” did this in 1719 when he published his *Psalms of David*. At least two of these hymns are still popular today: “Our God, Our help in Ages Past” (Psalm 90) and “Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come” (Psalm 98).

Some contemporary song writers continue to use the Psalms in modern worship songs. Chris Tomlin, and Ed and Scott Cash wrote “Whom Shall I Fear” (Psalm 27:1). Matt Redman’s “10,000 Reasons” comes in part from Psalm 103. You may be interested in a new recording project called “[The Psalms Project](#)” where contemporary musicians are working to write and record worship songs from all 150 chapters of Psalms.²⁶ To date, they have recorded three CD’s covering chapters 1-30. My son recorded a new version of the old hymn “Be Still my Soul,” which comes from Psalm 46:10 (his band is called Atlas Rhoads).

The book of Psalms is not just a book of prayer. It is also a book of songs. It is fascinating to think that the Psalms was not just the songbook for the early church, it was also the songbook for Jesus. Have you ever considered the fact that Jesus sang the Psalms? Surely when Jesus went to the temple at the age of twelve, He joined in the singing with gusto and conviction. Since the Psalms were meant to be sung, we should sing them in our worship of Almighty God.

Sing to Our Redeemer

One advantage of modern-day Christians over the Old Testament believers is that we can sing the psalms to our Redeemer instead of just about the coming Messiah. This distinction is noteworthy. It seems that one result of what I will call the “worship movement” of the 70’s is that Christians were challenged to sing to God in worship and not just about Him.

Singing to God instead of just about Him is not a practice that is easily accepted. Depending upon one's worship tradition, worship may not be as personal and intimate as it should be. If we have never experienced singing songs to Jesus, it may at first be a challenging task. It will especially be challenging to do so in a corporate setting. It should be done regardless of our tradition. Psalm 96:1-2 commands us to do so, "Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless His name."

As recipients of the promised redemption, Christians have much about which to sing. How can the church keep silent with so great a salvation? We should "sing a new song" and sing an old song. We should sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Worship should constantly overflow from a heart that is filled with gratitude for the grace and mercy of our Lord.

A Few Final Thoughts...

The Word of God is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). This means that every time I read the Bible, God can speak freshly to me, showing me new ideas and truths that I may have never seen. Each reading of the Psalms can be like the freshness of a spring morning. It can nourish your soul and guide you down new paths where you encounter God in His glory and majesty.

In this short book, I have sought to share some important guidelines that will hopefully take you to new places in your study of the Psalms. It is my prayer that as you apply these principles to your study that you will encounter God in fresh and wonderful ways.

One key to meaningful Bible study is to realize that we are not studying the Scripture just for the purpose of Bible knowledge. Our goal for opening the Word of God, whether to study it deeply or to read it devotionally, is to meet with God. Before you begin a time of Bible study, invite God to meet with you and to teach you eternal truths about Himself. Ask Him to not only meet you in the Scripture, but also to change you by the Scripture.

God’s first goal for your life is to lead you to surrender your life to Him and to become a part of His wonderful family. Once you are a believer, God’s greatest goal for you is to become like His Son. Romans 8:29 says, “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son,

so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.” What does this verse say that God predetermined ahead of time, or predestined? God predetermined that those who would be saved would be conformed to the image of Jesus.

I invite you on a journey of transformation – a journey through the Psalms. It is a wonderful journey where you will discover new thoughts and gain greater understanding of the wonderful truths of God. You will also learn new things about yourselves. Some of these new discoveries will be joyous indeed, but other aspects of your discovery will be heart-breaking and shameful. Regardless of your path, you will always find a gracious God there to meet you and to guide you into new realms of understanding – realms where you find His love flowing deeper than you ever imagined and His grace overflowing without end.

While being an informed student is certainly helpful so that you can gain the most from your study of Psalms, information is not the goal. Transformation is. Transformation is never an event nor a destination. It is a journey where every day is sweeter than the previous day and where the longing for our eternal home grows more intense with each passing hour. Canadian theologian Gordon Fee said it well, “The Psalms, like no other literature, lift us to a position where we can commune with God, capturing a sense of the greatness of his kingdom and a sense of what living with him for eternity will be like.”

I hope that the principles I’ve shared in this book have proven to be encouraging and helpful, but more than anything, I hope you have found a hunger for the Word of God growing

deep in your soul. It's best to open up God's Word to satiate your hunger, and as you find the deepest needs of your soul addressed in the pages of holy Scripture, you will also find a Savior waiting for you there. He will take you to new places where you've never traveled and to new experiences where your only proper response is to continually sing His praises.

Note from the Author

Thank you for reading *How to Get the Most out of Reading Psalms*. I hope it has been helpful, and I trust you are encouraged you in your spiritual journey. If you have not read my other book on Psalms, [Songs from the Heart: Meeting with God in the Psalms](#), I invite you to get your copy today. The first chapter is a fictional story I created about a Jewish family using the Psalms in 800 B. C. The next two chapters contain teaching on how to study the Psalms, but it doesn't go into the detail of this book. The final 33 chapters cover teaching on thirty different psalms. You may also be interested in looking at some of my other books listed on the following pages as well as some others published by GreenTree Publishers.

I would enjoy hearing from you. You'll find ways to contact me on the next page or how to find my [blog](#). I look forward to hearing from you.

Tim Riordan

March 3, 2017

You can follow me or contact me through the Internet and social media outlets listed below:

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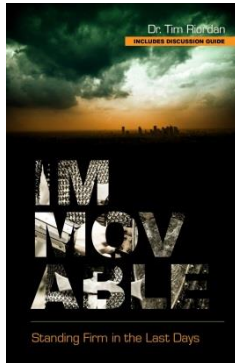
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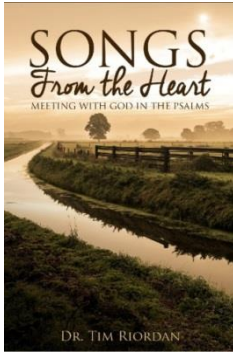
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Immovable: Standing Firm in the Last Days

By Tim Riordan

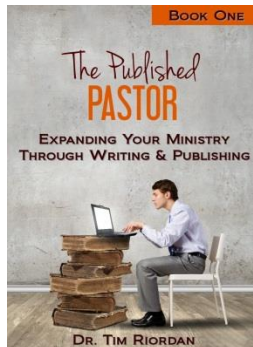
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Songs from the Heart: Meeting with God in the Psalms

By Tim Riordan

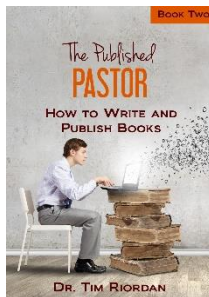
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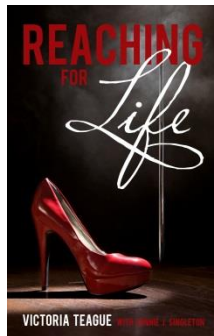
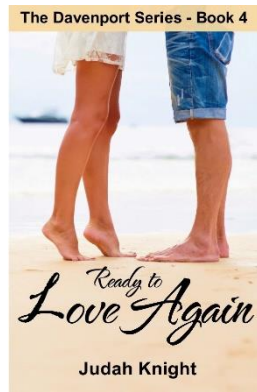
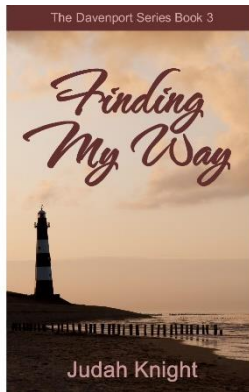


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