



Part 27 ► Praise, Prayer, and Prophecy

A treasure-store

The Book of Psalms is a treasure-store^[1] of 150 Spirit-inspired praises, prayers, and prophecies. It was the song book and prayer book of Israel, and of Jesus and His disciples. It's *our* song book and prayer book, too.

In the Psalms, God's people speak to Him. The Psalms give voice to every human emotion—whether we're joyful or sorrowful, confident or fearful, despairing, perplexed or careworn, angry or thankful, or sorry for our sin. God wants us to speak to Him, whether we feel He's close to us or far away. God wants us to pour out our hearts to Him. The Psalmist cried, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!" (Psalm 130:1). God wants us to be totally honest with Him, just as the Psalmists were.

God speaks to *us* in the Psalms, too. He reveals His character, and the wonderful things He's done. He teaches us about ourselves. And He teaches us about sin and judgment, forgiveness and salvation.

In the Psalms, then, God speaks to us, and we to Him. This implies *intimacy*. The Psalms are the 'voiceover' to our relationship with Him. The Bible story is, at its heart, a love story between God and His people. Psalm after psalm reveals the extent and depth of God's unfailing love and care for us. The psalmist sang, "great is [the Lord's] steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures for ever" (Psalm 117:2). God is "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (46:1). David sang, "The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. . . . Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." (23:1,4 NIV).

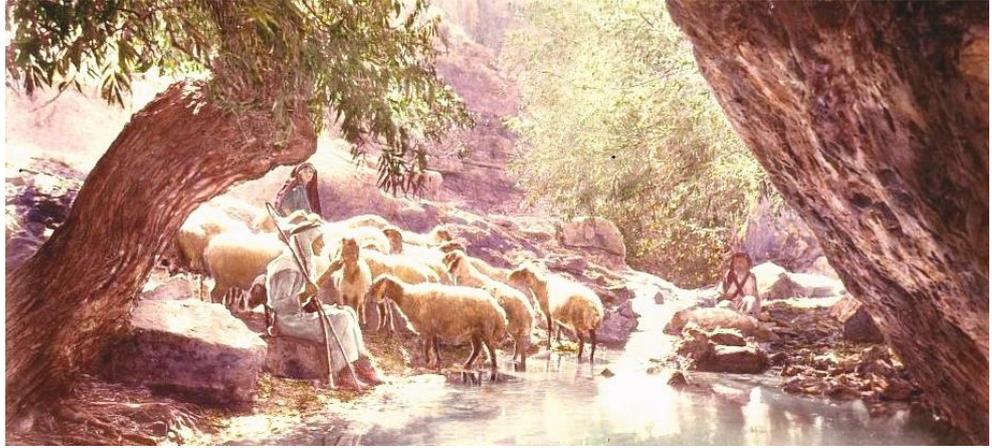
God's covenant love

God's love for us is *covenant* love. A covenant is a binding agreement; it's about *commitment*. God's covenant relationship with His people shows through so powerfully in the Psalms. That's reinforced by two special words we find throughout them.

The first is one of God's names, *Yahweh*. It's used no less than 695 times in the 150 Psalms! (Most versions translate *Yahweh* as "LORD" in capitals). *Yahweh* is God's *personal* name, through which God reveals Himself as our living, personal God, who is present with us, and at work

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to bless us. And that leads us to the second word we find throughout the Psalms. It's the Hebrew word *hesed*, translated "**steadfast love**" in the ESV. It occurs 130 times—as many times as in the rest of the Old Testament put together! God's love for us is committed, steadfast, unending love: "**steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD**" (Psalm 32:10).



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David wrote "**The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.**" (Psalm 23:1-3 NIV). This photograph (taken between 1900 and 1920) is from a set illustrating Psalm 23.

From David to David's Lord

Through the Bible runs a single story; each book of the Bible is part of that story. And that's no less true of the Book of Psalms. It plays a key role in this story; that's highlighted by the fact that it's the Old Testament book most quoted in the New Testament! In fact, the Psalms are at the heart of the Old Testament's message^[2].

A variety of people wrote the Psalms. Nearly half are by King David. Thirteen of his psalms have titles that tell us the event in his life that inspired the psalm. These 13 psalms are a remarkable window into David's soul at these times. About a third of the Psalms are anonymous; the rest are by six other authors, including Moses and Solomon.

God inspired the authors when writing each psalm. He *also* inspired the way the psalms are arranged. So, for example, Psalms 1 and 2 begin the book, and Psalms 146-150 end it for a purpose. Psalms 1 and 2 are the gateway to the Psalms—as we'll see next. Psalms 146-150 end the book with a great outpouring of praise to God. Each of these five psalms begins and ends with the Hebrew word *hallelujah*, meaning 'Praise ye Yah!' ('Yah' being a shortened form of God's personal name 'Yahweh'). It's translated in the ESV as "**Praise the LORD!**".

Psalms 1 and 2 are the gateway to the Psalms. Psalm 1 begins, "**Blessed is the man**" whose "**delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night**" (1:1-2). Then in Psalm 2:6, God says "**I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill**" (Mount Zion being where Solomon built the Temple). The Law and the king are closely connected. The king of Israel had to write his own personal copy of God's Law, read it "**all the days of his life**", and always obey it (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). Israel's greatest king was David. Did *he* always obey God's Law? Is *he* the king of Psalm 2:6? No. The very next Psalm puts paid to that thought. The title of Psalm 3 is "**A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son**".

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David was fleeing from his own son because of his sin. He'd committed adultery with Bathsheba, and got her husband killed. He'd repented (see Psalm 51:1-17), and God had forgiven him. But nonetheless, there were consequences. God told David: "I will raise up evil against you out of your own house" (2 Samuel 12:11). One of those evils was Absalom's attempt to take the kingdom from his father.

Great as he was, David was a sinner. He wasn't the king of Psalm 2:6. And so, as we read through the Psalms, we're looking for that king—the king who always obeys God's Law. He'll be a king of David's dynasty, and he'll reign for ever. In Psalm 89 God says: "I have made a covenant with . . . David my servant: 'I will establish your offspring for ever, and build your throne for all generations'" (89:3-4). This Psalm was written long after David's reign. In fact, by the time the 150 Psalms are collected and arranged into their final form, God's people are in exile. The final king of David's dynasty is a distant memory. So who will be the king of David's dynasty who'll reign for ever?

The Book of Psalms takes us to Him. It leads us all the way from King David to this eternal King of David's dynasty. The 'royal psalms', for example Psalms 2, 45, 72 and 110, tell us about Him. Psalm 45:4 tells the king, "In your majesty ride out victoriously for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness . . .". In Psalm 72, the psalmist envisions the whole world bowing to his rule. He writes, "May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!" (72:11). This king shepherds his people, "he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper" (72:12). Psalm 110 is a prophecy about this king. We discover that He's David's "Lord" (110:1)—a king far greater than the greatest king of Israel. "The LORD" (Yahweh) says to him, "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool" (110:1). He'll rule at Yahweh's right hand, until He's conquered every enemy. He'll be "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (110:4), who'll bring us into God's presence and keep us there always.

What joy this king will bring! The Book of Psalms traces a journey from sorrow to joy and praise. Most of the 50 or so Psalms of sorrow are in the first half of the book; most of the 45 or so songs of joy are in the second half. There's a movement from lament to praise, rising to a glorious crescendo of praise in the final five Psalms. Not only that, but all but one of the individual psalms of sorrow ends in praise! God will turn His people's "mourning into dancing", just as He did for David (Psalm 30:11). And that will happen when a king of David's dynasty ascends his throne.

Pointing to Jesus

This king is the 'Messiah'—a Hebrew word meaning 'anointed one', who'll save God's people, defeat their enemies, and rule the world in righteousness and justice. This king is *Jesus*. The picture of the Messiah begins right back in Genesis 3:15. We learn more and more about Him as we journey through the Old Testament. Now the Psalms add to the picture. Jesus Himself tells us this. When He first appears to His disciples after His resurrection, He tells them: ". . . everything written

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about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44). Here, "the Psalms" probably refers to the part of the Old Testament that the Jews called 'The Writings', of which the Book of Psalms is a key book. *The Psalms point us to Jesus*.

Many Psalms contain prophecies about Jesus. We've already looked briefly at four psalms (Psalms 2, 45, 72 and 110). Here are just a very few of the many other examples:

- In Psalm 22, David feels besieged by evildoers who mock and attack him. He writes, "they have pierced my hands and feet . . . they divide my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots" (22:16,18). We're taken beyond David's own distress to see Jesus on the Cross, His hands and feet pierced with nails, His clothing divided among rough Roman soldiers (see John 19:23-24,37). Jesus Himself quotes the first verse of this Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46).
- In Psalm 34:19-20, David writes that the Lord delivers the righteous out of their afflictions, "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken". When Jesus is crucified, none of His bones are broken (John 19:31-33,36).
- In Psalm 118:22-23, we read, "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes." Jesus quotes this just days before His crucifixion (Matthew 21:42). Rejected by the Jewish leaders, He becomes the Cornerstone, the One whom God has "highly exalted" and given "the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:9).

And through King Jesus, God would fulfil His promise that, through Abraham, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The wonderful little Psalm 117 points us to the fulfilment of that ancient promise. It begins "Praise the LORD, all nations! Extol him, all peoples!" We're pointed forward to the time when "a great multitude . . . from every nation" will cry "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Revelation 7:9-10).

Next time

We'll explore the Bible's 'wisdom literature'—the Books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. In these four books, God shows us how to think and to live wisely in this world. And, like the whole of the Old Testament, they point us to Jesus.

Bible Reading and Questions

You may like to read Psalm 139:1-16. Here are questions to think about:

- What does this marvellous passage tell us about God, and about ourselves? And how should it impact the way we live in this world, and the way we relate to God?

REFERENCES ► [1] The contents of this part have been inspired by *Treasuring the Psalms: How To Read The Songs That Shape The Soul Of The Church* by Ian J. Vaillancourt. Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, in 2023. [2] From *How To Read The Psalms* by Tremper Longman, page 51. Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, in 1988.

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