

VOLUME 2

PSALMS

SONGS FROM THE HEART

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**48 UNDATED DEVOTIONS
THROUGH PSALMS 51–100**

Structure

The book of psalms is a collection of 150 psalms (songs and poems), divided up into five smaller 'books' as follows:

- Book 1: Psalms 1–41;
- Book 2: Psalms 42–72;
- Book 3: Psalms 73–89;
- Book 4: Psalms 90–106; and
- Book 5: Psalms 107–150.

There are some identifiable groupings of psalms around specific themes, and it is helpful to understand the overall context when we study one particular psalm within any one of these groupings. For example:

- the focus of Psalms 93–100 is on the Lord as the great King;
- Psalms 113–118 form the Hallel, traditionally sung on Passover night;
- Psalms 120–134 are the 'songs of ascents' for pilgrims; and
- Psalms 146–150 close out the book with songs of praise.

Recurring themes

Some powerful themes recur though the psalms: the sovereignty, justice and faithful love of God; why evil people seem to prosper; personal trust and commitment to the promises of God in the face of difficulty; and the greatness of the power of the Creator God – the rock, the refuge, the fortress and the one worthy of our trust, our praise and our worship.

There is also some repetition of words and phrases and even of some whole psalms. For example:

- Psalm 53 is the same as Psalm 14 apart from a few details and the greater part of verse 5 of Psalm 53;
- Psalm 70 is practically identical to Psalm 40:13–17; and
- Psalm 108 is made up of two psalm endings: 57:7–11 and 60:5–12.

Style

The psalms are poetry and songs. Many contain poetic imagery. They include praise, thanksgiving, questioning, requests and laments, but rarely instruction.

Some psalms are written in the form of acrostics. For example, in the very long Psalm 119 each section begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In Psalm 34 each verse begins with a different letter.

Who wrote the psalms?

Many of the psalms tell us (in their header) who wrote them. 73 of the 150 psalms are attributed to David, the shepherd boy who became king. Several were written by Asaph, a temple musician, and some by the Sons of Korah, a guild of temple officials. Others are attributed to authors such as Solomon (Ps. 72) and Moses (Ps. 90), or are unattributed (for example, Ps. 1).

When were the psalms written?

The simple answer seems to be over a period between the time of David (1000 BC approximately) – though with the psalm attributed to Moses possibly earlier – and the years after the exile of the people of Judah into Babylon (300–500 BC). In some cases the headers tell us about the circumstances in which the psalms were written. For example, the note at the head of Psalm 51 tells us that David's famous prayer of repentance was a response to God after the prophet Nathan had confronted him with his sins of adultery and murder. Similarly, we are told that David wrote Psalm 3 while on the run from his own son Absalom who was trying to kill him.

The psalms in the New Testament

The psalms formed the 'hymnbook' of Israelite religion before the time of Christ. There are over 50 quotations from the psalms in the New Testament – more than any other Old Testament book. The frequent use of quotations from 'messianic psalms' in the book of Acts shows us how many of the psalms prophetically point to the coming Messiah and have a specific fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Jesus frequently quoted from the psalms as part of God's Word and as revealing truth about himself (see, for example, Luke 24:44).

The psalms in the Christian church

From the very beginning of the Christian church the psalms have been accepted as part of the divine revelation, and have been used widely in personal and corporate prayers and praise for the past two thousand years. As we read the psalms, therefore, with the New Testament in our hand, we can expect to learn more about Jesus.

The value and use of the psalms today

The psalms form part of our inspired Scripture. When we read them with an open, prayerful heart, we will find that the God who inspired them will continue to speak through them today. He speaks to us where we are at. He challenges us, encourage us, and stirs up our faith and commitment to him.

Like all good poetry, the psalms engage the heart and emotions as well as the mind. Their continuing widespread use in study, private prayer and communal worship is testament to their ongoing appeal to believers in every culture. Whatever our experience at any given time in the emotional spectrum, from elated joy to deep depression, we can find a psalm which echoes our experience. It's no wonder that at times when we find it hard to read or study other parts of the Bible – when we are tired, sick or depressed – it is to the psalms that we turn. They help us to pray, to worship and to reflect on God and our relationship with him.

As we read them, study them, pray them or sing them, our God delights to use them to reveal to us more about himself and to deepen our knowledge of him.

Studying the psalms with this guide

Read the psalm for the day and then the notes and questions contained in the study guide. Ask yourself some questions as you read:

- What do I learn about God in this verse and passage?
- What did this mean to the original hearers?
- What does it mean for me in the twenty-first century?
- How can I respond with practical action?

Repentance and renewal

When we do something wrong, we might regret what we have done, or at least regret being found out! If we have damaged another person, we might also express remorse at the hurt we have caused. According to the Bible, repentance goes much deeper than regret and remorse. This very moving psalm of David shows us what repentance means, and how it leads to restoration and renewal. The background is David's double sin of adultery and conspiracy to murder, told in 2 Samuel 11 and 12.

Repentance

David had been courageously confronted with his wrongdoing by the prophet Nathan and was deeply troubled. Loaded down with guilt, he struggles to come to terms with the fatal flaw in his make-up that had caused him to do such evil. He knew what he had done was wrong, but he did it anyway. He had flouted God's authority, broken God's law and rejected his love (v. 4). So he acknowledges and confesses that he is fundamentally sinful (v. 5).

Seeking and receiving forgiveness is the start of restoration in any relationship. So it is in our relationship with God. David seeks God's forgiveness.

He asks God to 'blot out' (v. 1) his transgressions, to 'wash away' (v. 2) his iniquity, which was spoiling and defiling him, and to 'cleanse' (v. 2) him from sin. He acknowledges that something has to change radically in his life.

Renewal

David desperately wants a new start. He wants to be clean (v. 7), to be a new person, with even the memory of past failures forgotten and totally forgiven. He wants to experience the re-creative power of God in his life (v. 8) and the conscious, constant presence of God (v. 11), and for God to restore the joy which he had lost (v. 12). He also prays that God would again use him to help others find their way back to God (v. 13).

REFLECTION

David confessed his sin, faced up to the sinfulness of his nature, realised he had offended God, then sought God's forgiveness and God's grace and power to change his life. That's what repentance means (1 John 1:8-9).

Two ways to live

This psalm presents two contrasting ways to live. Doeg's deceit, self-serving and violence is contrasted with David's trust in God. David was on the run from Saul, staying with Ahimelek, the priest (1 Sam. 22:6–22). Doeg, the Edomite, had told Saul where David was hiding (1 Sam. 22:9). When Ahimelek refused to betray David, Doeg killed Ahimelek and then slaughtered 85 innocent priests, along with their wives, children and animals (1 Sam. 22:18–19).

'The mighty man' (vv.1–4)

David addresses Doeg directly (vv. 1–4). Using irony and sarcasm, he calls him a 'mighty hero' (v. 1), just as we might sarcastically label someone who preys on the elderly and disabled with, 'What a 'hero!' or, 'What a bigshot!' In reality Doeg is 'a disgrace in the eyes of God' (v. 1). He is deceitful; he loves the whole business of lying and scheming to deceive and outwit the vulnerable (vv. 2–4).

No future (v. 5)

David sees clearly the future of Doeg and all those like him. Those who have no regard for God, and who grow strong by destroying others (v. 7), will themselves

be destroyed. Those who boast of their power (v. 1) will themselves become an object of derision (v. 6). God will bring them down to 'everlasting ruin' (v. 5). They may plot, scheme and kill, but it is they who have no future.

The contrast

David affirms his continuing trust in 'God's unfailing love' (v. 8). Strong in this faith, David pictures two trees. One is cut down, like Doeg (v. 5). The other, like David, is 'an olive tree flourishing in the house of God' (v. 8), fruitful and durable.

REFLECTION

Doeg epitomises all those in every generation who use whatever trickery, deceit or violence is needed to further their own interests. When we are confronted with violence and deceit in the daily news bulletins or in our own experience, let's hold firmly to the truth of verse 5 and make our stand like David (vv. 8–9).