

VOLUME 3

PSALMS

SONGS FROM THE HEART

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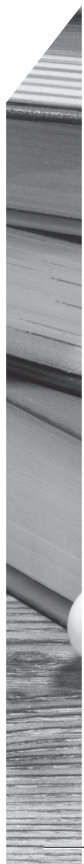
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**54 UNDATED DEVOTIONS
THROUGH PSALMS 101–150**

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?

A leader worth following

Think of a leader that you really respect, maybe in politics, business, sport or at church. What particular qualities do they have that you admire? What makes them worth following?

The leader's commitment

It's common for anyone taking on a leadership role to make clear what they stand for, and the direction they want to take, in some sort of public commitment. Politicians are sworn in, officials in organisations sign codes of ethics, coaches of sports team set their goals and team values. Parents, at the baptism or dedication of their children, make public promises about how they will bring up their children

Even if we are not required to make any public statements, even if we are taking on a very minor leadership role, it's good to get clear in our mind what we stand for and what we will commit to do. This psalm, one of only two psalms of David in Book 4 (103 is the other), is about leadership.

There are seven statements beginning 'I will' in the first four verses, which can be summarised as:

- commitment to worship God (v. 1);
- commitment to integrity at work and at home (vv. 2–3); and
- resolve to steer clear of obvious sin and evil (v. 4).

The leader's actions

We've seen David's personal values and commitments. What matters more to the people he leads, though, is how he will exercise his power. What will he actually do and how will it affect them? David states that he:

- won't tolerate people who slander others or think too highly of themselves (v. 5);
- will surround himself with loyal, faithful people (v. 6); and
- won't associate with deceitful, lying, double-dealing people (v. 7).

REFLECTION

It's one thing to start out in a leadership role with high ideals. It's another to see it through under pressure. Sadly David failed to live up to his commitments, as we may fail to live up to ours. His great successor, Jesus, lived out what he promised, and gave his life out of love and faithfulness for us. He is uniquely a leader worth following.

Two different perspectives

We may view exactly the same set of circumstances in very different ways depending on our personality, our mood and our ability to cope at the time. In an optimistic mood, we might see the glass half full. In our more pessimistic moments, the same glass looks half empty.

This psalm gives us two very different perspectives, not so much glass half empty or half full, but more like completely empty (vv. 1–11) or completely full (vv. 12–27). What makes the difference? Getting a clear view of God’s almighty power and presence.

The first half of the psalm is a picture of deep, prolonged suffering. It begins like many other psalms (for example, Ps. 61:1 and 64:1) with a plea to God to listen to David’s cry for help (v. 1). His body is in pain and wasting away (vv. 3–6). He can’t sleep or hear (v. 7). On top of all that, he is being taunted by cruel enemies who have trashed his good reputation (v. 8). Worse still, he feels that God is angry with him and has cast him aside (v. 10). The focus is very definitely on ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘my’ – the psalmist is very wrapped up in himself and his problems.

‘But ...’ As in so many psalms, halfway through there is a radical change. The focus shifts from the individual to the unseen, eternal, almighty God, and from the individual to God’s people (v. 12). The psalmist is now confident that God will arise and have compassion on the city (‘Zion’, v. 13) and the people, and that the nations and kings of the earth will revere God (v. 15). The Lord will rebuild the city; he will respond to the prayers of the desolate (vv. 16–17). The great God is the Creator of all (vv. 25–27).

The use of these three verses in Hebrews 1:10–12 shows that this is a messianic psalm, pointing to Jesus. He suffered (vv. 1–11; see also Ps. 22) and was raised up to glory.

REFLECTION

There are two clear messages here for all of us. First, however deep our trouble, God stays faithful. Second, we are reminded of our Lord Jesus Christ, who endured great suffering ... for us.