

Psalms

This material / discussion group was meant simply as a very brief overview of the Psalms. Below you will find key topics that we discussed. Also, you will find resources that I used in preparation. The Resource Links for each section can be found at the end of the various sections and are highlighted in yellow; there are other Resource Links at the end. I hope you will find these to be helpful.

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Introduction & Overview

Some key elements of the structure of the Psalms:

- Poetry, not prose.
- Range of emotions – deep pain and thirst for revenge alongside amazing joy
- Some are written from the perspective of the individual (“I”) and some from a community perspective (“We”).
- There are sub-groups within the 5 Books: e.g., Song of Ascents in Psalms 120-134.
- Types of psalms (e.g., lament, praise, thanksgiving, cursing / imprecatory, etc.). The types of psalms are scattered throughout the Psalms.
- Many psalms have a superscription before the first verse which gives some kind of context or some kind of instructions for communal use.
- The Psalms are divided into 5 Books and (likely) with an Introduction and Conclusion. Why? Most scholars agree that this division is patterned after the 5 Books of the Torah (Pentateuch, Law) of Genesis through Deuteronomy with the Psalms somehow as a re-telling of this teaching. After that, there is little certainty. I find convincing that there is also a re-telling of some key elements of Israel’s story. Below you will see this with 1) the rise of David, 2) continued monarchy, 3) exile to Babylon, 4) return from exile, and 5) looking ahead in hope.
 - Intro: 1-2
 - Psalm 1: two paths, blessing and cursing, key is focus on the law/teaching of the Lord. How will people respond?
 - Psalm 2: focus on the Lord’s anointed, king. How will the nations respond?
 - Book 1: 3-41
 - Almost all of these psalms are attributed to David. See [here](#) for discussion about authorship. A better translation might simply be “A David Psalm” meaning that the psalm is associated with David, rather than “a Psalm of David” meaning it was written by David.
 - Book 2: 42-72
 - Seems to be a continued emphasis on kingship but not focused primarily on David.
 - The final line of this book is an editorial comment, “The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.” Seems to signify the end of kingship, especially with the focus of Book 3.
 - Book 3: 73-89
 - Focus on the exile. Many psalms from Book 3 are filled with communal mourning, mourning pointing towards the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple followed by exile of many of the leaders of the nation. To get a good feel for the despair, you can look at these passages: 74; 77:7-9; 79; 80:3-7, 14-19; 81:6-16; 83; 85:4-9; 88; 89:38-51.
 - Book 4: 90-106
 - The first line of Psalm 90 says, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.” This seems like a significant affirmation coming out of the despair of Book 3 when their “dwelling place” of Jerusalem had been destroyed and they were experiencing exile in Babylon.

- Many psalms of praise and thanksgiving in Book 3, perhaps as a response to the end of exile.
- Book 5: 107-145
 - A mix of laments and praise / thanksgiving.
 - Many memorable psalms are found in Book 5. Examples are 119, 120-134 (psalms of ascent), 136, 137, and 139.
- Conclusion: 146-150
 - The Psalms end with these 5 psalms of praise. Each of these final 5 psalms begins and ends with “Praise the Lord!”
- Each of the 5 books ends with something like this:

*Praise be the LORD, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!
Amen and Amen.*

Some conclusions:

- The final form of the Psalms was the result of lots of compiling and editing. There is purpose in the arrangement. For example, 5 books of psalms might be meant to mirror the 5 books of Torah or the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy). Also, many scholars think the 5 books of the psalms are meant to re-tell the story of Israel: 1) David – the ideal king, 2) continued kingship, 3) exile, 4) return from exile, 5) anticipation of the coming king / anointed one.
- The final form of the psalms probably came into existence well after the exile (the exile ended, most likely, in 538 BCE). The context of return from exile back to the promised land but with the disappointment of being ruled by foreign powers instead of having their own king formed the backdrop for the compiling and editing.
- The content of the psalms was likely used significantly in communal worship during this second temple period that followed the exile.
- The gospels state that Jesus claimed the Hebrew Scriptures (including the psalms) pointed to him. How does this shape how we understand this material?

Resources Links:

- Bible Project Video on the Psalms (always a good place to start!):
<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/psalms/>
- Matthew Stafford on the Psalms: <https://www.mattstaffordpsalms.com/book-1-41#/introduction-to-the-psalms-1/>
 - This is a 13-minute video. The first half will summarize some of the points around the structure of the Psalms. The last half will talk about Hebrew poetry and some strategies for interpreting the Psalms.

- One helpful look at the types of Psalms: <https://women.lifeway.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ps-genres-1.pdf>
- Types of Psalm broken into the five books of the Psalms (see page 3 of this link): <https://sovereigngracemusic.org/wp-content/uploads/Reading-the-Psalms-Outline-WG22.pdf>
- <https://www.fbcaa.org/MAPBlog/PsalmsCategories.pdf>
- The Psalms emphasizes a perspective on Israel's history that emphasizes obedience / disobedience and reward / punishment. This is clearly outlined in Psalm 1. This perspective also permeates other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. This article explores the connection between Psalms and Deuteronomy:
 - https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/presidentialaddresses/JBL118_1_1Miller1998.pdf
- Reading / Praying the Psalms: I strongly encourage you to read / prayer the Psalms out loud or listen to them – as opposed to reading them silently.
 - If you read / pray them, then try to put your emotions into it. The Psalms are meant to be felt, not just analyzed.
 - If you listen to them, then you can find lots of options online. Here are a couple:
 - Max McLean: <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/?recording=niv-mclean>
 - David Suchet: <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/audio/?recording=nivuk-suchet>

Hebrew Poetry:

1. Parallelism: Second line corresponds to the first in some way
 - a. Similar: *O LORD, how many are my foes! / How many rise up against me!*
 - b. Opposite: *The LORD knows the way of the wicked / but the way of the wicked will perish.*
 - c. Additional: *Arise, O LORD, in your anger / rise up against the rage of my enemies.*
2. Figurate language
 - a. Metaphor and simile
 - i. Metaphor – direct comparison: *The LORD is my shepherd...*
 - ii. Simile – comparison using like or as: *The wicked are like chaff...*
 - b. Anthropomorphism and personification
 - i. Anthropomorphism – using human characteristics to describe the Divine (both bodily and personality / action): *Let the light of your face shine upon us... Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*
 - ii. Personification – using human terms to describe inanimate objects: *the trees of the field will clap their hands*
 - c. Hyperbole – exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis; not to be taken literally: *All night long I flood my bed with weeping...*
3. Chiasm
 - a. ABBA, ABCBA, and other similar patterns
 - b. Occurs in verses, in psalms, and in groups of psalms (but some people might go overboard in “seeing” chiasmic structures)
4. Form matters: it is not simply what is said but how it is said (e.g., we read a novel in a different way than a set of instructions). “Genre” is the word that is often used in reference to the different types of literature found in the Bible.
5. Three types of language:
 - a. Language 1: personal intimacy and relationship
 - b. Language 2: information
 - c. Language 3: motivation & influence (marketing, politics)

In our “real life” we are surrounded by 2 and 3, often leaving behind 1 after childhood. The Psalms are #1 – but we struggle to connect any longer with this type of language.

6. Psalms / poetry wants to tap our imagination and emotions – not just our intellect.
7. We face a huge temporal and cultural gap: the entire cultural setting of the original psalms (the Ancient Near East of 2,500 years ago) is so far removed from 21st century America.
8. Lenses to read / pray the Psalms:
 - a. Literally: as a psalm of David, for example
 - b. Worship setting of the ancient Jewish community: their prayer book as they gathered for worship in the temple and / or in the synagogue
 - c. Our own individual prayers: challenges we might face whether physical or spiritual
 - d. Prayers of Jesus
 - e. Prayers on behalf of those in our world who have been pushed to the margins: those living on the streets of Portland, those in war zones, etc.

Reading Psalm 23

Read Psalm 23 through four different times:

1. The first time, pay attention to the elements of Hebrew poetry mentioned above. What are the key metaphors? Pay attention to the parallelisms, etc.
 - a. Note the move from stability to chaos to restoration/hope. This pattern is one you will see throughout the psalms.
2. Read through again thinking about this psalm in the life of David (assuming that he did write this one). How might the various parts of the psalm reflect what you know about the life of David?
3. Read through a third time. This time imagine the psalm being used in the second temple, maybe 200 years after return from exile. Note how the psalm reflects the communal life of Israel. It could be reminder of the movement from period of kings / stability to the chaos of exile in Babylon to return to Jerusalem and beginning to rebuild life together. It could also be a reminder of the movement from the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph) and their families as they migrated to Egypt for security and then became slaves and then were led out of slavery to the promised land by Moses and Joshua.
4. Read through again but this time thinking about Jesus as the good shepherd. What do you remember Jesus saying about sheep and shepherds? How does your understanding of Jesus expand by imagining him as the shepherd in this psalm?
5. Read the psalm one more time thinking about Jesus as the sheep and the LORD as his shepherd. When were the points in Jesus's life where he went through the chaos described here (the valley of the shadow of death / the presence of my enemies)? Jesus would have certainly prayed this psalm many times in synagogue and temple as he grew up. He would have known it well. How does the psalm reflect the life, death, and resurrection?

Resources Links:

https://dwightgingrich.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Green-The_Lord_is_Christ's_Shepherd_Psalm_23_as_Messianic_Prophecy.pdf

Reading Psalm 42-43

Try reading this psalm aloud and with emotion.

What are you lamenting now or have you lamented in the past?

Some observations from the text:

1. Psalms 42 and 43 were likely one combined poem originally. (Note the repeating chorus and similar theme.)
2. Water is a key image.
3. Written from the perspective of the individual, but the superscription (to the choirmaster) that would indicate communal use at the temple.
4. Psalm of lament, introspection, and trust.
5. Laments make up around 1/3 of all psalms. Do you think we offer enough lament (or too much) in our own communal worship?
6. What is the connection between lament and hope? How can these go together?
7. The psalmist is yearning to be with God, and it seems the desire is centered on a return to the temple (42:4, 43:3-4) as that was the place of God's special presence. How do you reimagine this psalm as a follower of Jesus? Where is God's Spirit to found now?

Try writing your own lament using the language of the psalms as a framework.

Resources Links:

- Interview & discussion with Bono and Eugene Peterson on the Psalms:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-l40S5e90KY>
- <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6426f18785ef0f530ff90208/t/64fa014fb1961e47d51a84e2/1694105955518/How+To+Lament>
- Trauma-Informed Care is a topic that I wish we had had time to explore. I don't know much about it, but it seems helpful:
 - <https://faithandleadership.com/texas-congregation-caring-immigrants-gains-new-understanding-christianity-trauma-healing-movement>
 - <https://www.audacy.com/podcast/prayers-that-bring-us-home-40ed4>

Reading the Imprecatory Psalms (focus on Psalm 79)

The imprecatory psalms, or cursing psalms, are a particular challenge for Christians, especially for those of us in the Anabaptist tradition that has emphasized peacemaking and love for enemies. Can we pray these psalms when Jesus taught us to love our enemies and to pray for them and when Jesus modeled this very behavior in his own life?

There are imprecatory psalms scattered throughout the psalter. We focused in particular on Psalm 79. It is found in Book 3, and it bears witness to the Jewish experience of exile. Psalm 79 is also particularly relevant in the fall of 2023 with the war in Israel-Palestine.

Some questions:

1. What has happened? What is the context that prompts the cursing of enemies?
2. What are the specific curses that the psalmist is pronouncing?
3. Is the psalmist wanting to act or is the psalmist wanting God to take action? Does this difference matter?
4. God's "name" is mentioned a number of times in Psalm 79. What is the significance?
5. When have you been able to relate to these feelings of vengeance? Who have you cursed or wanted to curse? Maybe it has been a very personal situation or maybe it has been very political.
6. Does it make a difference when these prayers are offered by a people without power (i.e. with no power to act on these prayers)? In other words, does it feel different to imagine US citizens praying these prayers (e.g. after 9/11) compared with a Native American community, for example, offering prayers like these when they have no military power to act on them?

Can we pray these psalms?

The Psalms invite us to pray these prayers of cursing, but, as followers of Christ, should we?

- Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus taught: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. **But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.** He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
- Likewise, Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus offered this prayer as he was dying on the cross, "**Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**"

How does Jesus' teaching and example around loving our enemies place limits on if / how we can pray the imprecatory psalms? Here are some options:

1. We cannot pray these prayers at all.
2. We can pray them but:
 - a. Only as a means of being honest with God about our own feelings of anger and desire for revenge, trusting that these emotions and desires are better brought into the light of God's transforming love than left to fester in darkness. And,
 - b. Asking God to forgive us and to bend these desires towards love.

- c. Praying these prayers can only be as a first step towards our own transformation and, to the extent possible, towards reconciliation.
 - d. In praying these psalms, we should not be surprised to find ourselves as part of the guilty ones. Our social location is in the most powerful country in the world. As we pray for those on the margins of this world, this country, this city, we might find ourselves being complicit in the sin.
3. We cannot pray them towards people, but we can pray them in regard to the structural evil that undergirds so much of the evil in the world -- racism, sexism, militarism, sexual exploitation, poverty, etc. The New Testament uses the language of the “principalities and powers” for this type of evil. [The Mennonite Confession of Faith](#) picks up on this theme with the following:

In addition, “powers,” “principalities,” “gods of the nations,” and “elemental spirits of the universe,” though not necessarily evil, are prone to distort God’s purposes for them. They can corrupt and enslave humanity (Isa. 42:17; 45:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:1-3; 6:12; Col. 2:15). Sin is thus not only an individual matter, but involves groups, nations, and structures. Such organizations have a “spirit” that can incite persons to do evil they would not have chosen on their own. Governments, military forces, economic systems, educational or religious institutions, family systems, and structures determined by class, race, gender, or nationality are susceptible to demonic spirits. Human violence toward each other, enmity between peoples, the domination of men over women, and the adverse conditions of life and work in the world—these are all signs of sin in humanity and in all creation (Gen. 3:14-19; 4:3-16; 6:11-13; 11:1-9; Rom. 8:21).

Resources Links:

<https://www.therebelgod.com/2013/11/facing-violence-and-hate-in-imprecatory.html?m=0>

<https://www.nextsunday.com/jesus-use-of-the-psalms/>

<https://www.ismreview.yale.edu/volume-4-1-winter-2018/the-psalms-and-human-poverty>

A Turn to Praise and Thanksgiving

Read Psalms 95-100

Some observations and questions:

1. Note the emphasis on “the Lord reigns.”
2. Where do you see memories of the exile in these texts?
3. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann talks about psalms of orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation.
 - a. Psalms of Orientation – For those times when the world is well-ordered, reliable, and everything is going great.
 - b. Psalms of Disorientation – For those times when we experience the brokenness of life, and everything seems chaotic.
 - c. Psalms of Reorientation – For those times when God’s grace fills us with thanks and wonder.
4. The predominate message in Book 4 is one of re-orientation as the community of faith has come out of exile and names God’s care for them through that time of chaos.
5. Try writing a psalm of re-orientation, celebrating a time in your life where you emerged safely from the chaotic waters.

Resources Links:

<https://www.fromthefray.com/rhythm-of-life-orientation-disorientation-reorientation/>

<https://stjamestheapostleregina.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/psalms-and-rhythm-of-life.pdf>

Psalms of Hope

As mentioned earlier in these notes, there are many memorable psalms in Book 5 (107 – 150). Do you have a favorite(s) in this book?

For scholars who see a re-telling of Israel / Judah's history in the 5 Books, Book 5 is one of incompleteness or of hope. While the Jewish community has returned from exile, they still live under foreign rule without a king of their own. How can they be a people without being a nation? So, you see in this Book many psalms of praise, but also many psalms of lament as things are not what the people had hoped. How do they move forward? How do they maintain trust? When and how will God act?

Psalm 146-150 might serve as a conclusion to Book 5 or as a conclusion to the entire psalter. These 5 psalms have their focus on praise. The first line and last line of each of these psalms is "Praise the Lord!"

Read Psalm 148

1. Note the two major sections of the psalm:
 - a. 1-6 "Praise the LORD from the **heavens**" in verse 1.
 - b. 7-14 "Praise the LORD from the **earth**" in verse 7.
2. These two verses and many of the others will likely remind you of the first creation story in Genesis 1. Re-read Genesis 1 alongside Psalm 148. How does the psalm echo elements of Genesis 1?
3. The two sections of Psalm 148 give list those who are to give praise to God, from the angels and hosts in verse 2 to the young men and maidens and old men and children in verse 12. What are the reasons to give praise in verses 5-6 and verses 13-14?
4. Verse 14 talks about the "horn" that is raised up. Note how this image is echoed in the prayer of praise and thanksgiving offered by Simeon at the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:69). Also note what Simeon says, and doesn't say, about enemies in this prayer.

Read Psalm 148 a second time. This time, read it with Jesus in mind; Jesus, the anointed one of God. How does the Psalm take on additional meaning in this light?

Resource Links:

Other Resource Links

Helpful Books:

- *Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer* by Eugene Peterson
- *The Case for the Psalms* by N.T. Wright
- *Christ in the Psalms* by Patrick Henry Reardon
- *Praying the Psalms* by Walter Brueggemann
- *Psalms* by James H. Waltner
- *Psalms of Christ* by Daniel H. Fletcher
- *Praying the Psalms* by Daniel Bourguet
- *Praying Curses* by Daniel Nehrbass

Other Helpful Links:

- <https://praypsalms.org/why-pray-psalms-our-psalm-saturated-savior-d774f7b0a10>
- <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-pray-the-psalms>
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/seeing-christ-shape-psalms/>
- <https://preachingsource.com/blog/preaching-christ-from-psalms/>
- <http://www.ctsfw.net/media/pdfs/PlessPsalterandLordsPrayer.pdf>
- https://www.academia.edu/43923464/Psalms_Chart_Author_Type_Miscellaneous_Title_Relationship_to_Neighbors
- <https://timandsonya.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/01-arrangement-of-the-book-of-psalms.pdf>
- <https://www.peacemennonite.ca/podcasts/sermons/series/seeing-jesus-in-the-psalms>
- <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/christopher-ash-can-christians-sing-psalms/>