

# **HOW TO READ THE PSALMS**

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## **Study Guide**

Mike Taylor

[www.TaylorNotes.Info](http://www.TaylorNotes.Info)

# I. BACKGROUND

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The purpose of this study is to deepen your love for the Lord, and to give you ways to express yourself more intimately to him.

## A. PSALMS: ANCIENT ISRAEL'S HYMNBOOK

The Book of Psalms is a collection of prayers, poems, and hymns that focus the worshiper's thoughts on God in praise and adoration. Parts of this book were used as a hymnal in the worship services of ancient Israel. The musical heritage of the psalms is demonstrated by its title. It comes from a Greek word which means "a song sung to the accompaniment of a musical instrument."

The Psalms which are actually musical poems which constituted Israel's ancient God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16) "hymnbook" which defined the proper spirit and content of worship.

Psalms are not only informative they are also uniquely emotive. They enable us to express our inner lives to God. They put us in touch with our deepest emotions, and make us sensitive to the emotional struggles of others. They help us discipline our emotions (express, not repress), and they stimulate our imagination.

## B. GETTING THE MOST OUT OF THE PSALMS

1. Read the psalms \_\_\_\_\_ from the heart.
2. Visualize the \_\_\_\_\_ described by the author.
3. Give yourself plenty of \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Avoid reading \_\_\_\_\_ the Psalms (eisegesis) what you want it to say. Instead read \_\_\_\_\_ the Psalms (exegetis) what God has to say.

The fact that God prospered or delivered someone in a particular situation is testimony to what God can do, not a promise that he will always do so for us.<sup>1</sup>

- *Example:*

*"You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday."  
(Ps. 91:5-6 NIV).*

- *Misinterpretation (eisegesis): "I can hang around with large groups of people without a mask and not worry about the covid virus because God promised in Psalm 91 that it will not harm me."*

## C. WARM-UP QUESTIONS

1. Why do so many people love the Psalms?
2. Some Psalms are filled with anger, so why are they in the Bible?

## D. SIX THINGS YOU'LL LEARN FROM THIS STUDY

1. You'll learn who wrote the Psalms and when they were written
2. You'll learn why so many people love the Psalms.
3. You'll learn how the Psalms are organized.
4. You'll learn how to recognize and apply the ten types of Psalms
5. You'll learn how to read and understand Hebrew poetry in the Psalms.
6. You'll learn how to recognize literary devices used in the Psalms.

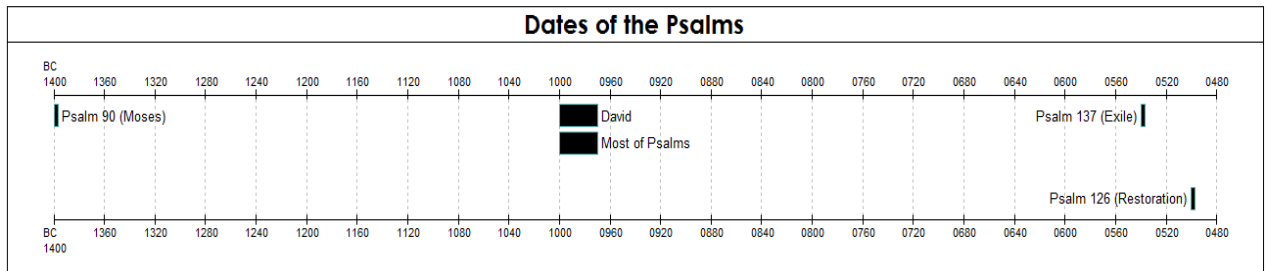
## E. WHO WROTE THE PSALMS?

Author	Description	No. of Psalms
David	King of Israel	73
Asaph	A prominent Levite singer, and choir leader	12
Descendants of Korah	Writers of poetics songs	10
Solomon	King of Israel	2
Ethan the Ezrahite	Singer and writer of poetics songs	1
Heman	A musician and grandson of Samuel	1
Moses	Leader of Israelites during the Exodus	1
Anonymous-probably David	Unknown	50

## F. WHEN WERE THE PSALMS WRITTEN?

The individual psalms were probably compiled later by post-exilic temple personnel so they could also sing and worship in the reconstructed temple<sup>2</sup>

The Psalms were written between 1400 BC (Moses) and 500 BC (Restoration Period). However, most were written during the period from David's reign to the divided kingdom era (1000--931 BC).<sup>3</sup>



Dates are approximate. Source: Irving L. Jensen, Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament

## G. WHY SO MANY PEOPLE LOVE THE PSALMS

1. People love the Psalms because they \_\_\_\_\_.
  - They remind us to thank God for who he is (Ps. 7:17).
  - They remind us to trust God when facing fear (Ps. 23:4).
  - They remind us to tell our friends about God (Ps. 9:1).
  - They encourage us to pray when we are in trouble (Ps. 86:7).
  
2. People love the Psalms because they \_\_\_\_\_.
  - They can turn negative feelings into positive feelings
  - They can turn doubt turns into trust.
  - They can turn anger into love.
  - They can turn sadness into joy.
  
3. People love the Psalms because they \_\_\_\_\_.
  - They teach about the kingship and sovereignty of God.
  - They teach about the conduct and destiny of the righteous and the wicked.
  - They teach about God's comfort and defense in times of crisis.
  - They teach about the importance of praise in all of its variations.
  - They teach about the role of nature and creation.

## H. HOW THE PSALMS ARE ORGANIZED



### BOOK 1 (Similar to Genesis)

- Psalms 1-41
- Creation, man sins, redeemer, redemption promised
- Authors: Mainly David



### BOOK 2 (Similar to Exodus)

- Psalms 42-72
- God rescues just as he did with Israel
- Authors: Mainly David & Korah



### BOOK 3 (Similar to Leviticus)

- Psalms 73-89
- Tabernacle, God's holiness deserving worship
- Authors: Mainly Asaph



### BOOK 4 (Similar to Numbers)

- Psalms 90-106
- Israel's relationship with other nations; God's overruling kingdom
- Authors: Mainly anonymous



### BOOK 5 (Similar to Deuteronomy)

- Psalms 107-150
- Praise and thanksgiving for God and his Word
- Authors: Mainly David

## II. HOW TO INTERPRET THE PSALMS

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### A. TEN TYPES OF PSALMS<sup>5</sup>

The 150 psalms in the book of Psalms have often been categorized into various types. There is no one way to organize the psalms, but most methods include similar categories with only slight variations.

1. \_\_\_\_\_: Instructive psalms (Examples: Psalms 1, 5, 7, 15, 17, 50, 73, 94, 101).
2. \_\_\_\_\_: references to historical events of the nation of Israel (Examples: Psalms 78, 105, 106, 136).
3. \_\_\_\_\_:<sup>6</sup> Express praise to God (Examples: Psalms 106, 111-113, 115-117, 135, 146-150).
4. \_\_\_\_\_: Confession of sin (Examples: Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143).
5. \_\_\_\_\_: the psalmist cries to God in his own need, or he intercedes for another's need (Example: Psalm 86).
6. \_\_\_\_\_: words of thankfulness (Examples: Psalms 16, 18).
7. \_\_\_\_\_: mostly prophesy of Christ in his two advents: His first advent in humiliation, and his second advent in glory (Examples: Psalms 2, 20-

24, 41, 68, 118).

8. \_\_\_\_\_: God's handiwork inspired the author to express wonder (Examples: Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 104).
9. \_\_\_\_\_: Probably a hymn used by the Jews on their pilgrimage up to the Temple on the occasions of the national feasts. Sometimes titled "Song of Degrees" (Examples: Psalms 120-134).
10. \_\_\_\_\_: The imprecatory (cursing) passages of these psalms are generally viewed with perplexity since why would they be acceptable to God. One view is that they show how to express anger about someone only to God, rather than toward the individual (Examples: Psalms 35, 52, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140).

## B. HEBREW POETRY IN THE BIBLE

Approximately 75% of the Old Testament is poetry. All of Psalms and Proverbs are Hebrew poetry. Even the book of Genesis is full of poetry. The Jewish rabbis believed that if something is worth saying, it is worth saying beautifully." Also, poetry and songs are much easier to memorize than straight texts.

- *Example: Finish this song..."Jesus loves me this I know..."*

1. Hebrew poetry is \_\_\_\_\_ rather than \_\_\_\_\_.

Hebrew poetry is written much differently than our own Western style of poetry. English poetry is often written so that phrases rhyme or have similar rhythms or meter; whereas Hebrew poetry is often expressed as "word pictures" in parallel form...expressing the same idea two different ways.

- *Example: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path". (Psalm 119:105)*

In this example notice how the word "lamp" is compared to "light." Notice too how is the word "feet" is compared to "path." The author is drawing our attention to the closeness of the light to our feet and how God's Word gives us day-by-day near-term guidance.

2. Much of Hebrew poetry in the Bible is written as \_\_\_\_\_.

Parallelisms are usually two (bicolon) or three (tricolon) short phrases which say the same thing in different poetic ways.<sup>7</sup> Parallelisms always carry forward the thought in the first phrase into the following phrase(s).<sup>8</sup>

- *Example (bicolon):*

*"<sup>11</sup>For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
so great is his love for those who fear him*



<sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Ps. 103:11-12 (NIV)

- Example (tricolon):

For you have rescued my soul from death,  
my eyes from tears,  
my feet from stumbling Ps 116:8 (NIV)

## C. FIVE LITERARY DEVICES USED IN THE PSALMS<sup>9</sup>

Literary devices are techniques that writers use to create a special and pointed effect in their writing, to convey information, or to help readers understand their writing on a deeper level.

Often, literary devices are used in writing for emphasis or clarity. Authors will also use literary devices to get readers to connect more strongly with either a story as a whole or specific characters or themes.

1. \_\_\_\_\_: a comparison between two things, usually with the words "as" or "like."
2. \_\_\_\_\_: a comparison between two things without using the words as or like but unlike a simile the comparison is implied.
3. \_\_\_\_\_: exaggeration for effect.
4. \_\_\_\_\_: applying personality traits to inanimate objects.
5. \_\_\_\_\_: speaking to inanimate things.

## III. EXERCISES

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### A. IDENTIFYING LITERARY DEVICES IN THE PSALMS

1. Identify the similes in Psalm 52. Remember, a simile is a comparison between two things, usually with the words "as" or "like."<sup>10</sup>
2. What is being implied by the metaphor of a "vine" in Psalm 80:8 ?
3. What is the personification in Psalm 51:8?
4. What is the hyperbole in Psalm 6:6?
5. What is the apostrophe in Psalm 114:6?

### B. IDENTIFYING THE TYPES OF PSALMS

1. Read Psalm 1.
  - *Of the ten types of Psalms which one is this?*
  - *What is the main idea in this psalm?*
  - *List a few main points you see in this psalm.*
  - *How would you apply this psalm to your life?*

**2.** Read Psalm 2.

- *Of the ten types of psalms which one is this?*
- *What is the main idea in this psalm?*
- *List a few main points you see in this psalm.*
- *How would you apply this psalm to your life?*

**3.** Read Psalm 150 (NIV)

- *Of the ten types of psalms which one is this?*
- *What is the main idea in this psalm?*
- *List a few main points you see in this psalm.*
- *How would you apply this psalm to your life?*

## IV. PSALM 139 PRAISING GOD'S GREATNESS

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"For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.



You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. 4 Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

5 You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. 7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.



17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand-- when I awake, I am still with you.



19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! 20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? 22 I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.

23 Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."  
(Ps. 139:1-24 NIV)

## A. DISCUSSION

1. What aspect of God's greatness is David praising in the following verses?

• Verses 1-4 \_\_\_\_\_

• Verses 5-12 \_\_\_\_\_

• Verses 13-16 \_\_\_\_\_

• Verses 17-18 \_\_\_\_\_

2. How would you describe David's mood in verse 6?

3. Why would David want to flee from God's presence (v. 7)?

4. What was the reason for David's (imprecatory) words in verses 19-22?

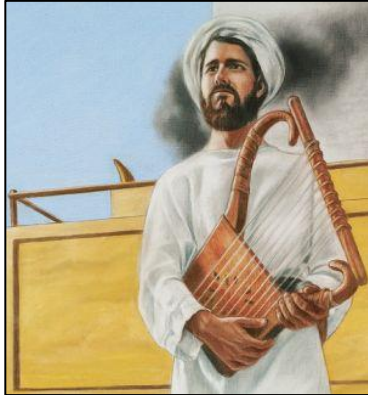
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. What was the reason for David's words in verses 23-24?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. David's wonder of God leaves him with an overwhelming sense of awe. Have you ever had this same sense of awe toward God? What were the circumstances?

## V. PSALM 73 IS GOD SOMETIMES UNFAIR?



Have you ever felt that God was unfair to you because you've been living a good Christian life, while unbelievers were prospering and seem to have few problems in life?

Maybe you've felt that way because God took away something important to you or didn't give you what you wanted. So, is God sometimes unfair?

Asaph was a Levite who led one of the temple choirs (1 Chron. 15:199; 25:1-2), and there was a time in his life when he felt that God was being unfair to him and to his people. He expressed this complaint in Psalm 73.

### A. PSALM 73

#### THE WICKED ARE PROSPERING (73:1-5)

"Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure. <sup>2</sup> But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. <sup>3</sup> For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness. <sup>4</sup> They seem to live such painless lives; their bodies are so healthy and strong. <sup>5</sup> They don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.

#### THEY ARE FULL OF SELF-PRIDE (73:6-9)

They wear pride like a jeweled necklace and clothe themselves with cruelty. <sup>7</sup> These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for! <sup>8</sup> They scoff and speak only evil; in their pride they seek to crush others. <sup>9</sup> They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut throughout the earth.

#### IS GOD BEING UNFAIR TO HIS PEOPLE? (73:10-14)

And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words. <sup>11</sup> "What does God know?" they ask. "Does the Most High even know what's happening?" <sup>12</sup> Look at these wicked people-- enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply. <sup>13</sup> Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason? <sup>14</sup> I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain.

#### OH, NOW I GET IT! (73:15-20)

If I had really spoken this way to others, I would have been a traitor to your people. <sup>16</sup> So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult

task it is! <sup>17</sup> Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked. <sup>18</sup> Truly, you put them on a slippery path and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction. <sup>19</sup> In an instant they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors. <sup>20</sup> When you arise, O Lord, you will laugh at their silly ideas as a person laughs at dreams in the morning.

### **MY WHOLE PERSPECTIVE WAS OFF (73:21-28)**

<sup>21</sup> Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. <sup>22</sup> I was so foolish and ignorant-- I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you. <sup>23</sup> Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand. <sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. <sup>26</sup> My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever. <sup>27</sup> Those who desert him will perish, for you destroy those who abandon you. <sup>28</sup> But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do." (Ps. 73:1-28 NLT)

## **B. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- 1.** Have you ever felt that God was not fair to you even though you did the right things?
- 2.** Why did Asaph feel that life was unfair to him(vv. 3-5)?
- 3.** Was Asaph condemning these people because they were prosperous? Why, or why not?
- 4.** What do you suppose Asaph meant by "I almost lost my footing" in verse 2?
- 5.** What especially made Asaph feel so discouraged (vv. 12-16)?
- 6.** Galatians 6:7-8 states that "whatever a man sows, that will he reap," so why

shouldn't God's people always expect to be blessed when they do good things?

7. Asaph's mood changes abruptly from feeling depressed to feeling encouraged. What caused this change to take place (v. 17)? How does this relate to us today?
8. After the event in verse 17, how did Asaph feel about his initial attitude toward God (vv. 21-22)?
9. What reassurances did he hold on to (vv. 23-24)?
10. What conclusions did Asaph reach as a result of this experience (vv. 25-28)?

### C. FOUR PRINCIPLES TO APPLY

1. **Principle #1:** Only God can \_\_\_\_\_ (v. 25).
2. **Principle #2:** Reflecting deeply on God's powerful presence will \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (v. 26).
3. **Principle #3:** God will demonstrate his fairness (and justice) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (v. 27).
4. **Principle #4:** Life will make more sense when you \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ (v. 28).



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## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> (Hill and Walton 353)

<sup>2</sup> Woodrow Kroll writes, "After the Exile, when the Jews returned home, the people rebuilt the temple, not quite as astounding as Solomon's temple but quite functional. It was at this point that the poets and priests began to collect psalms into a corpus or grouping. They needed the psalms so they could sing and worship in the reconstructed temple. They weren't necessarily composing the psalms; they were collecting older psalms by David, Moses, the sons of Korah and others into a hymnbook. Some psalms, however, do show signs of being new like Psalms 1 and 2. Woodrow Kroll Ministries, <<http://wkministries.com/the-psalms/who-compiled-the-psalms/>>. Accessed August 7, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> (Jensen 274, Chart 68)

<sup>4</sup> (Houdmann, S. Michael)

<sup>5</sup> (Jensen 275)

<sup>6</sup> Hallelujah, meaning "praise God (Yahweh)."

<sup>7</sup> For the various categories of parallelisms see (Longman III 99ff)

<sup>8</sup> (Longman III 98)

<sup>9</sup> (Jensen 272)

<sup>10</sup> (Longman III 162)