

105

A Psalm of Dā'-vid.

BLESS the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name:

2 Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

3 Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;

4 Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies;

5 Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD executeth righteousness and judgment for all that are oppressed.

He made known his ways unto Moses unto the children of Is'ra-él.

The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.

He will not always chide, neither will he always be wroth.

For he will not chide forever, neither will he be wroth unto ever.

For he will not chide forever, neither will he be wroth unto ever.

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GREAT THEMES OF PSALMS

A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study by Jeff S. Smith

INTRODUCTION

Save for a few special pearls, the Hebrew psalms are a rather obscure treasure in the midst of the Old Testament. Solace, however, is found beyond the twenty-third, direction to the penitent is heard outside the fifty-first, and exercises in perseverance can be discovered in outposts other than the one hundred nineteenth.

The 150 psalms comprise a collection of praises and prayers that were composed over a long portion of ancient Israel's history, dating perhaps from the reign of David up to the exile. They are divided into five units:

- Book One: Psalms 1-41
- Book Two: Psalms 42-72
- Book Three: Psalms 73-89
- Book Four: Psalms 90-106
- Book Five: Psalms 107-150

Scholars have identified some subtle differences between these units, but subject matter is not among them. Each unit of the Psalms contains messages of petition, praise and thanksgiving. The Hebrew psalms were not written to rhyme, but to create a sense of balance between positive and negative statements. Both sides of a coin are often examined to give a better understanding of the writer's motivation. They are generally lyric poetry, designed to be sung rather than read, and run the gamut of human emotions—joy, sorrow, gratitude, confusion, anger.

David is credited with 73 of the psalms, while 50 are of anonymous authorship. Tradition says that the Psalms were collected and arranged by Ezra and his cohorts around 450 B.C., but that some later additions were also made. It could be said that the Psalms formed the Hebrew hymnal.

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- This study seeks to present the psalms in categories that can be appreciated and studied together, based on an arrangement originally published in a very helpful reference book, “Tyndale Handbook of Bible Charts and Maps.”

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 1

REASONS TO READ THE PSALMS

The Holy Spirit has indicated that the purpose of sustaining the Old Testament texts is not to establish modern religious authority, but “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

The psalms take their place alongside the Law and the Prophets as components of the Old Testament, fulfilled and replaced as inscribed authority for the people of God by the New Testament of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:44, Matthew 5:17-20, Ephesians 2:14-16, Colossians 2:13-17, Hebrews 8:13). The disciple of Christ would no more read the Psalms to find Christ’s commands than he would read the 10 commandments or the book of Leviticus. Today that authority is explained in the covenant of the Lord, who died and was raised to headship over the church that bears his name.

The Psalms remain valuable as reading material, however, because they lend so much hope, encouragement and guidance. Beyond any expression of commands or prohibitions which may be outdated by the legal transition, the psalms are replete with poetically beautiful messages of comfort and reverence (Hebrews 7:12).

While one may not use the Psalms to seek divine authority for his worship or his place in the church, he certainly will find many principles that are instantly compatible with the New Testament doctrine of Jesus Christ. The psalmists, writing through divine inspiration, provide an especially thorough examination of the nature and character of God, as well as a sometimes painful exhibition of the character of man.

The psalms are essentially the thoughts of writers as they contemplated approaching God, either in prayer, song or conversation. While they maintained a mindset of reverence, they were also frank and emotional. There is little apparent restraint in some of David’s most painful supplications or his imprecatory flights.

The psalms, when read carefully and thoughtfully, have the potential to change the way that one understands his God and himself. The psalmists provide inspired insight that can prevent one becoming detached from his Creator and Redeemed to the point that God becomes anonymous and distant. The psalms teach about our attitudes in approaching the Lord and the reasons why we sometimes choose not to. The psalms solidify the contrast between righteousness and wickedness, sealing the certainty that God will sort out the two in the end. The psalms are a limitless source of comfort and hope.

1. When did David approach God (Psalm 5:1-3, 7-8, 11-12)? How? Why?
2. Who was David trying to understand as he wrote with one eye on the sky (8:3-8, 104:1-35 and 139:1-16)?
3. What did David discover was the secret to pleasing God (15:2-5; Ephesians 5:17)? How do love and fear coexist (103:15-19; First John 4:18)?
4. In what role does Psalm 23 cast the child of God (cf. John 10:11-15)? What is his hope? What do people find in this psalm?
5. How is God portrayed in Psalm 24? Who may approach him (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16, Matthew 11:28-30, James 4:7-10)?
6. What is the primary purpose of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Psalm 92:1-4 and 136:1-3; cf. Ephesians 5:17-21, Colossians 3:16-17, Hebrews 13:15)?
7. Psalm 119 is incredibly long, but if you could distill it to one comprehensive theme, what would it be (John 17:17, Romans 10:17)?
8. In a world where it seems as if chaos reigns, the psalms remind us that there is undeniable order to the universe and to life. Why is that order not to be found in men (Psalm 146:1-10)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 2

PSALMS FROM DAVID'S LIFE

Almost half of the 150 Hebrew psalms are attributed to the inspired pen of David, a renaissance man if ever there was one.

David was a shepherd boy and a musician before the Lord led him into battle where he became a living legend, standing over the decapitated corpse of the Philistine giant, Goliath. His fame spread and the paranoia of King Saul became self-fulfilling as the monarch baited his perceived rival and the subject maintained his integrity while growing his charisma.

David became king once Saul's life was ended, but his habit of composing emotionally beautiful religious poetry only increased. David found the composition of psalms to be soothing and conscience-clearing—an opportunity to speak with God and to tell him all of his heart so that relief might come. Perhaps some of us never find that degree of relief because we are holding too much back.

Toward the end of David's life, his final words are recorded by a historian, who refers to him as “the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, the sweet psalmist of Israel” (Second Samuel 23:1). Never mind that many of David's psalms were imprecatory—petitioning curses upon his and God's enemies. David's psalms were sweet because they were heartfelt and full of experiences and emotions shared by every follower of Jehovah.

David's final words speak to his intimate relationship with his Maker, revealed throughout his songs: “The Spirit of the Lord speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth” (2-4).

At least fourteen of David's compositions can be connected with specific events in his life which were described in the historical records that we call First and Second Samuel. When David was being pursued by a bloodthirsty, maniacal King Saul, the sweet psalmist of Israel was penning lyrics to God. Whether hiding in a cave or realizing that he had been betrayed by others, David told it to God in song. David's refusal to fight back and kill Saul was vindicated when victory was secured his way—peacefully and with integrity toward the Lord's anointed.

David's heart was broken many times and his psalms indicate regular bouts of depression and confusion, but never doubt. His psalms—like our prayers—helped him to put his travails into perspective and to solidify his reliance upon the Lord for guidance and for comfort.

1. Why did King Saul want to kill a Hebrew hero like David who won the battle he was desperate to avoid (First Samuel 18:6-9; 19:11-17; Psalm 59)?

2. Saul's harassment became so consistent that David was forced to flee. How did he survive in Gath (First Samuel 21:10-15; Psalms 34, 56)?

3. What encouragement did David find in the cave of Adullam (First Samuel 22:1-4; Psalm 142)? When do you need and find something similar?

4. How did David get the priests of Nob into trouble (First Samuel 21:1-9, 22:6-22; Psalm 52)? What should you do when you get someone in trouble?

5. What did the Ziphites offer Saul (First Samuel 23:14-23)? How did David escape (24-29; Psalm 54)?

6. What happened the next time David took refuge in a cave (First Samuel 24:1-22; Psalms 57, 63)? How does a cave often make people feel?

7. How did David think of God, especially after Saul's pursuit was over and frustrated (Second Samuel 22, Psalm 18)?

8. How did David approach God when confronted with his sins with Bathsheba (Second Samuel 12, Psalm 51)?

9. How did David act when his son Absalom rebelled (Second Samuel 15:30-32; Psalms 3,7)? How was he rewarded for his faithfulness?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 3

TROUBLES AND COMPLAINTS

A new demographic has emerged in world today—the millionaire celebuntante heiress.

She is usually blonde, always slim and surprisingly dimwitted, self-involved and ungrateful for the fortunate accident of her birth. Surely, she has no cause to complain, nothing to fear and no potential for unhappiness.

Except that her demographic is chronically in trouble with the law and embarrassed by the ubiquitous paparazzi and is apparently bankrupt where it matters the most—in morality and in spirit.

If the pampered rich are not content with the silver spoon in their mouths, then surely the child of God at least should exemplify freedom from anxiety and complaint. Not so fast. King Saul was mighty and powerful—and miserable. King David was handsome and heroic—and lived a life with its own bitter disappointments and failures. Nothing—not even wealth or faith—will insulate a human being from hardship.

The writers of the psalms fit this universal category well with the added bonus of recording this complaints before God for all of posterity to consider. They are an intensely honest guild of writers who bring their fears and sense of abandonment before the Lord whom they sometimes blamed for the durability of their sufferings.

David christens the custom in the third psalm, evidently written during the time in which his son Absalom had subverted the throne and sent his father to flight from Jerusalem. David not only lost power temporarily, but his own son was to blame. David brings this considerable trial to the Lord, though without much hint that he held God responsible for it. As with many hardships, David himself was much to blame for his own troubles.

The psalms often proved to be crucibles for testing the validity of one's complaints, especially regarding the target of his resentment. Psalms that begin with fear, disappointment or abandonment usually end with a renewed sense of trust and faith, as well as promises of patience and perseverance. Like our prayers, the composition of psalms gave the writers opportunity to ponder their circumstances more soberly and analytically, often allaying many of their more serious concerns and placing their trials in clearer perspective.

How honest may one be with God? While one never has a legitimate reason to direct anger at God, it remains that some of us feel that emotion toward him anyway. Will suppressing the anger or bitterness bring healing more than an honest conversation—whether in prayer or psalm or counsel with another believer. Perhaps these psalms show the way to healing.

1. What were people saying about David when he fled from Jerusalem (Psalm 3)? What did David believe anyway?

2. Discuss the modern expression “Somebody up there doesn’t like me.” How do sufferings cause some a crisis of confidence in their God? Compare this sentiment to the sufferings of Job (James 5:7-11).

3. David references sleep, which is often the first casualty of anxiety. How do you overcome sleeplessness that is due to anxiety or excitement (Psalm 55:22, 77:1-13)? What is insomnia likely to do to the original problem?

4. What did David wonder in Psalm 6? How does his concern mirror our attitude when we pray for relief and it does not come quickly enough (102:2; Matthew 26:36-39; see James 1:2-8, Second Corinthians 12:7-10)?

5. How would you characterize David’s attitude toward God as Psalm 13 opens? What kept him from losing faith (Psalm 37, Second Timothy 1:6-14)?

6. Consider Psalm 31. How does one follow David and commit his spirit to God’s hand when he is unemployed or homeless or lonely? How would God teach us to make him our first refuge not our last (64:10, Hebrews 12:5-13)?

7. How might one be tempted to look elsewhere for relief or to take matters into his own hands when his pleas are not quickly granted (Psalm 121:1-8)?

8. What is the danger in being this honest with God (Psalm 142)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 4

PSALMS TO LEARN AND LOVE

The twenty-third psalm is one of the most universally known poems in the history of the world.

Regardless of their own faith, people are aware of Psalm 23 because it has become a part of western literary culture, which is quite amazing for a song written in the near east three millennia ago. The words of David's song are so relatable and so universal in their scope that people are drawn to them, especially in moments of desperation and longing. They bring comfort to hospitals, funerals and even every day life if anyone is interested in those moments of quietness.

Like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, this work is noteworthy for its brevity, moral clarity, and solemn optimism. The writer requires only a few words to communicate complete reliance upon God and hope for redemption in the face of overwhelming odds. Psalm 23 is easily memorized, making it available to its owner whether he is sitting before an open Bible, suffering in a felled skyscraper or wandering about in the wilderness. Psalm 23 is wisdom and solace that, like God, will not desert.

The twenty-third, however, is not the only psalm that is worthy of appreciation. Other songs, while less famous, offer themselves for particular moments in one's life, to lend comfort, correction and inspiration. It is no stretch to suggest that one of the ways in which God speaks to his children and to those whom he would adopt is through lyrical marvels of the 150 Hebrew psalms. He who has ears to hear should choose to listen.

Reading the psalms with contemplation of God's ultimate authorship is a step in the direction of the Lord. It is a quiet opportunity to approach his throne of grace in search of help in times of trouble and humbling in times of success (Hebrews 4:14-16). Memorizing whole psalms or parts of them paints the mind in brilliant colors, refreshing it for the inevitable change of course that life promises, both to the prosperous and petitioner.

Psalm 24 puts it well:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.
He will receive blessing from the Lord
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.

1. There are psalms that serve to bring us into the presence of God, for petition or for worship. What is the twenty-ninth psalm trying to say about the voice of the Lord?

2. His attitude is certainly one of reverence. How do we express our reverence as we approach God (John 4:23-24, Colossians 3:17, First Peter 4:11, Romans 14:11)?

3. What kinds of joyful noises do we make (Psalm 95:1-7 and 100:1-5; Hebrews 13:15, Ephesians 5:19)?

4. What could possibly mar our entrance into God's courts for worship (Psalm 96:1-9; Isaiah 1:12-17, Matthew 23:23-26)?

5. There are psalms about goodness, like the very first. To what does the psalmist compare and contrast a righteous man? Where is his delight?

6. Why don't we accompany our psalms today with mechanical instruments like the ones in Psalm 150 (Ephesians 2:14-17, Colossians 3:16-19)?

7. How did David feel before he confessed his sins to God (Psalm 32:1-4)? How did he feel afterward (Psalm 32:5; 51:7-12)? How might such psalms play a role in your repentance (First Peter 3:18-22)?

8. What did David learn in writing Psalm 22 (see v. 1, 24)? What does this have to do with your own suffering (Hebrews 13:5-6, First Peter 1:6-9)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 5

CHRIST IN THE PSALMS

An entire category of psalms is devoted to prophetic utterances about the coming Christ—Messianic psalms they are logically called.

Many of these songs were written by David as royal psalms, but in retrospect have an obvious connection to the ministry of his Lord Jesus Christ. Most notably, perhaps, the one hundred tenth begins, “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’”

Precisely what that meant to David and his contemporaries is probably only a matter of conjecture, but Jesus takes it far beyond anything confined to David alone. Here the concept of the throne of David, as well as the priesthood of Melchizedek, comes to the fore (Hebrews 6:20).

The eternal and divine identity of Jesus was always a topic of great controversy, especially among his envious enemies among Jerusalem’s theological set. On one occasion, Jesus asked the Pharisees whose son the Christ should be. “They said to him, ‘The son of David’” (Matthew 22:42).

Fair enough and correct as well, except for one detail. “He said to them, ‘How then does David in the Spirit call him ‘Lord,’” and then Jesus quotes this very passage. “If David calls him ‘Lord,’ how is he his son” (45)?

Jesus found himself in the psalms and challenged his audiences to see him there as well—to consider things that seemed to be impossible to them, but which made sense when the prophetic songs were applied to them. Jesus preceded David, being equated with the Creator of Genesis 1:26, the “I AM” of the burning bush and the eighth chapter of John’s gospel. Yet he also descended bodily from David through the lineage of the tribe of Judah so that he might become a propitiatory offering for sin (Psalm 40:6-8 and Hebrews 10:5-10; cf. Psalm 89:3-4, 35-36).

To ignore the contribution of the psalms to messianic prophecy is to forfeit a wealth of proof about the work of the Lord. His death in particular is described in stunning detail throughout the psalms in ways that would have been impossible to replicate purposely.

This is often true because such a plot would have required the enemies of Jesus to cooperate carry out many of the prophecies they unwittingly executed. The rejection of Jesus as the Messiah is even foretold throughout the psalms, especially in the one hundred eighteenth: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (22). Peter quotes this passage and applies it to Jesus, who in spite of popular resistance, has proven himself to be the Messiah (First Peter 1:6-8).

1. Perhaps the messianic nature of certain psalms can only be understood in retrospect, but the second psalm identifies him as God's son and the object of popular scorn (2:1-2, 7). How did the Hebrew writer apply this passage (1:1-5)? What use did Paul make of it (Acts 13:26-33)?

2. How did Jesus declare God's name (Psalm 22:22, Hebrews 2:11-12, John 20:17)? Why did Jesus have to die in order to perform God's will (Psalm 40:6-8, Hebrews 10:1-7)?

3. When did Jesus quote Psalm 69:9 about himself (John 2:13-17)?

4. David appears to be writing about himself in Psalm 16:8-11, except for one thing that Peter identifies. What is it (Acts 2:22-31)?

5. Where is the prophecy in Psalm 41:9 fulfilled?

6. While a final Day of Judgment is a common theme among us today, it was less so under the Old Testament. Psalm 96, however, predicts such a day of reckoning (13). How does Paul apply to Jesus (First Thessalonians 1:10)?

7. Identify a few aspects of the crucifixion were foretold in the Psalms here.

- Psalm 22:18/Matthew 27:35:
- Psalm 22:15/John 19:28:
- Psalm 69:21/Matthew 27:48:
- Psalm 34:20/John 19:36-37:

8. Jesus quotes Psalm 22 as a pivotal moment on the cross. What was his point?

9. How did Paul apply Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8-10?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 6

CONFESSION, REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS IN THE PSALMS

Forgiveness is probably the key theme of the Bible.

The basic story of God's word begins with man's Genesis loss of access to the tree of life in Eden and God's plan for restoring him to it in the Heaven of Revelation. Everything in between seems to be about identifying sin as the enemy and grace as the ally. Jesus came to seek and save the lost from their sins by presenting them with the means to become forgiven.

The apostle Paul describes the guilt of becoming aware of his sins in the seventh chapter of his letter to the Roman disciples. He spoke of knowing from the Law of Moses the right thing to do, but being uncommitted to perfection when temptation arose. "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (21-23).

He punctuates his negative self-assessment by asking, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death" (24)?

Paul, of course, is mainly describing his spiritual existence prior to his conversion, for he had already by this point acquired the answer to his question. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (25)! In Jesus Christ, man discovers the agent of forgiveness, but confession and repentance remain as necessities and conditions.

Most would prefer only to accept the gift without reference to any righteous requirements, yet the remission of sin is wholly dependent upon man's dedication to turning away from it, reducing its frequency and power to enslave, choosing Christ over Satan. While perfection is a practical impossibility, the pursuit of improvement and growth must never be surrendered.

The psalms provide a lyrical recipe for making confession, carrying out repentance and obtaining forgiveness from God. We have an advantage over the psalmists in that we live after the cross when divine grace has been completely enacted and is no longer a matter of shadows, but is substance.

A pattern is formed as the psalmists recognize their sinfulness, acknowledge it as rebellion, confess their sins to God, appreciate his willingness to forgive them and accept his mercy so that they can move on. Modern people must apply these principles to the dispensation in which we live.

1. What specifically caused David to say that it was better to acknowledge one's sin than to try to conceal it or ignore it (Psalm 32:1-5, 10-11)?

2. Why is it so foolish to ignore one's sinfulness (Psalm 34:12-18 and Hebrews 4:11-13)?

3. Consider Psalm 6:1-5. David obviously felt that God was punishing him through some hardship. How can we know for sure that some suffering of ours is evidence of divine displeasure (Luke 13:1-5)?

4. Many commentators understand Psalm 14 to confine all men under the banner of corruption, but a clear contrast is made between such people and another group. What is the other group and how does one get into it?

5. What were the effects of David's guilty conscience (Psalm 31:9-10)? What are the effects of true repentance (Acts 2:38, 3:19; Second Corinthians 7:10-11)? What distinguishes true repentance from false?

6. In the New Testament, an act beyond repentance is required for initial forgiveness. What does baptism do for a dirty conscience (First Peter 3:21-22)?

7. Consider Psalm 38:1-4. How did Paul describe the opposite kind of conscience (Ephesians 4:17-19, First Timothy 4:1-2)?

8. The ultimate penitential psalm is probably the fifty-first. What did David mean in that his sin was always before him? What kind of spirit is God looking for (cf. First John 1:5-10)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 7

PRAYER IN THE PSALMS

Lack of communication is frequently cited as the top reason that relationships experience difficulty and even break down.

This is obviously true, of course, in marriages as husbands and wives sometimes grow apart and compatibility declines because different interests evolve. It is also true in the relationships of adult children with their aging parents and in homes where teenagers roam wild. Grunting and eye-rolling do not qualify as communication, even among dolphins and chimpanzees.

Things go wrong in the military, the job site and the class room because of failures to communicate. And then there is our relationship with God. Communication is vital, but very different from any other circumstance. Prayer is the method by which we communicate with God, yet he does not answer verbally and that fact alone contributes to a certain disinterest in prayer among many Christians.

The psalms might be described as a collection of prayers within a poetic arrangement. They are not merely songs about something, but are songs to someone—to God in most cases. The Christian, by reading the psalms, can learn more of the value of speaking to God, and speaking to him respectfully, but also honestly and emotionally.

We do ourselves a great disservice when we emasculate our prayers by stripping out the emotion and honesty from them. Where God wants to listen to us as a father listens to the child whom he loves, we often feel compelled to dress our prayers up in costumes of false contentment. We pretend to be happy when we are not, to be free of sin when we are trapped in its cords, to be rising above the fray when we are the worst of instigators. What can we possibly gain from such exercises in dishonesty except deepened delusion?

The Psalms are striking for their “unedited honesty” (Wilson, Taylor). They display disappointment, resentment, anxiety, love and even hatred. We could not and should not imitate every sentiment in the psalms, for we live under a more perfect dispensation, but the songs of the Hebrews have the potential to teach us a great deal about ourselves—the secrets we harbor and the people we could become if we trafficked in honesty.

Studying the psalms can help us understand God better. Too many see God as a senile old grandfather, unaware of their mischief and existing for the sole purpose of doling out treasure and favor. Others relate to God as if he was a mean old miser, yearning to throw lightning bolts at people because his expectations are so high and his fuse is so short.

Neither is the true God, although his character does include blessing and correction. God is a father who can be approached by his children.

1. What did Asaph complain about in the seventy-ninth psalm? What did he expect God to do about it? What might make modern people feel the same?
2. What “accusation” did David make against God in Psalm 35:1-17? When are we prone to question God’s timing or patience? What might his patience with evildoers actually be (Romans 2:4-5, Second Peter 3:9)?
3. With what kind of attitude should we enter the worship assembly (Psalm 100:1-5, Hebrews 10:24-25)? Why do we sometimes enter differently?
4. What is the value of thanksgiving (Psalm 136; Philippians 4:4-7, First Timothy 4:4-5, James 1:17)?
5. Psalm 18 was apparently written after David survived Saul’s pursuit. What is David expressing? How can we let our prayers be answered without returning prayers of gratitude?
6. Why do we tend to pray more when things are going poorly than we do when everything seems okay (Psalm 3; Second Corinthians 12:7-10)?
7. Read Psalm 5 (maybe twice). How is it apparent that David felt better when he was finished writing this poem (Psalm 55:22, Ephesians 6:18)?
8. How is emotion expressed during prayer (Psalm 6)? What role does trust play in the answering of prayers (James 1:5-8)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 8

JUSTICE IN THE PSALMS

Justice is an important theme throughout the Old Testament and to the divine character of Jehovah. This sense of justice is resoundingly present in the psalms, in which writers plead with God to express his power to intervene and deliver a just resolution to the affairs and conflicts of his creatures.

Other segments of the wisdom literature present God as just as well. Each speaker in the book of Job comprehends God to be a just arbiter in the lives of men, although a division arises over what that means for Job, who was no infamous sinner. The Proverbs, likewise, extol the virtue of justice, especially in the hands of men with the power to bring it about themselves before God must intervene.

The psalms, however, contribute that element of intense emotional appeal to God to intercede when the poor and righteous are oppressed, to shatter the pride of the wicked and powerful who take advantage of others, to save Israel from heathen enemies.

The imprecatory psalms envision this divine justice to be painfully negative in the lives of their enemies. Justice, in such cases, is predicted to be a humiliating comeuppance, an ignominious defeat, a fatal mistake. When the psalmist should see the enemy and oppressor wallowing in misery, he can then thank God for interceding and delivering justice. Until then, he was left to wonder why God was delaying (Psalm 94:1-3).

The imprecatory nature of such psalms is discomfiting to modern readers who find disturbing that inspired writers should wish for the heads of their enemies' children to be bashed in. The only explanation for this violent imagery is the distinction of the covenants. Old Testament Israel was a political force with militarized enemies and a struggle for physical survival that required the imposition of force, both as self-defense and geographic conquest. The New Testament church, however, is no geopolitical power at all, but is a spiritual kingdom scattered throughout the nations of men and with a mission of converting unbelievers to faith, not sending them prematurely into damnation. For that reason, it is difficult, if not impossible, to try to harmonize the imprecatory pleas of David with the teaching of Christ. There is neither reason nor need to do so.

The often forgotten side of justice is where humans have the potential to repair their own conduct toward the helpless or to reach out justly to the innocent and weak. Too often, modern men want to hand every problem over to someone else—the church, the government, even God—without considering how God might have already empowered them to do justly.

1. David was often falsely accused of political lust during the reign of King Saul. It is suggested that he wrote the seventh psalm in response to these accusations. David pleads his case both by asserting his own innocence and asking for God to judge his accusers and enemies. What was David accused of doing (Psalm 7:1-5; First Samuel 24:9, 26:19)?

2. In Psalm 7, one thing is the difference between the righteous and those whom God punishes with his sword. What is it (cf. Second Corinthians 7:9-11)?

3. According to Psalm 9, how does God prove to be a stronghold for the oppressed in times of trouble? See especially verses 15-16 (cf. Proverbs 1:18-19, 5:22).

4. David came to understand that we cannot simply sit around waiting for God to introduce justice into the affairs of men. What is the reward for humans behaving justly (Psalm 15; cf. Matthew 10:41, 25:31-40)?

5. If we trust that God will be just, what effect will that have upon our attitudes about present injustices (Psalm 37:1-6)?

6. Judgment Day is the ultimate expression of divine justice, of course. Why do we often lack patience in waiting for it (Psalm 37:7-13, 75:2-10)? What is the religious hypocrites' problem (Psalm 50:16-23)?

7. What could we do to help people like those described in Psalm 82 (cf. James 1:27, Galatians 6:10)?

8. Is God unjust to allow injustice to persist at all (Psalm 94:1-23)? Explain.

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 9

HOW GOD IS DESCRIBED IN PSALMS

God has introduced himself to men and to mankind on many occasions throughout history.

To Adam and Eve, he was a frequent visitor to the garden where they lived, and an authority that ensured their happiness until they suffered one moment of fateful doubt. God introduced himself to Noah as a master architect and to Abraham as a long-term planner. Both of those men chose to cooperate with the Lord because they believed in his goodness and justice.

God introduced himself to Moses very simply as “I AM,” in other words, the only true and eternal God among all the gods of men’s imagination. Moses came to know and to love God in an extraordinarily intimate way.

Later everything changed. “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Hebrews 1:1-3).

For all the one-sided, myopic opinions about nature of Jehovah, the ministry of Jesus Christ provides a succinct, but thorough demonstration of his character, power and objectives.

“Philip said to [Jesus], ‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works’” (John 14:8-10).

The reader of the Psalms will discover that each of the writers emphasizes different aspects of God’s character, but that their words combine to form a more perfect portrait of his nature. So many see God in extremes—short-tempered and judgmental or short-sighted and tolerant. The psalms reveal him to be a God of love, but whose love is only complete when it includes sovereignty and justice that interferes with the sinful ambitions of mankind.

Our God is eternal, omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. The unrepentant sinner finds this to be unpleasant and stifling, but to the person who desperately wants to go home to heaven, it is the promise of guidance, correction and comfort during the trials and failures of life. Nothing could be sweeter than the firm hand of a loving father.

1. How is God love (Psalm 23; First John 4:7-16)?

2. Hope is a powerful thing, especially in Psalm 42. What did the sons of Korah identify as the reminder of their hope by day and by night? How did they express their longing and thirst for God?

3. What aspect of God's character is David describing in Psalm 139? What is the extent of that aspect (13-16)? Although he appreciates it, why might others dislike this aspect (Psalm 36:1-4, Hebrews 4:11-13)?

4. What did the light and salvation of God give David (Psalm 27:1-3; Hebrews 13:5-6, Revelation 2:10)?

5. How do we see the steadfastness of God's love each day (Psalm 36:5-10; Matthew 5:45, Acts 17:25)? How do we know God is reliable (Hebrews 6:9-20)?

6. The key to joy in Psalm 34 appears to be fear of God, but isn't that mutually exclusive to love? How can you harmonize love and fear (111:10)?

7. Who could stand if God was not forgiving (Psalm 130)? Who can be made to stand (Psalm 51:17, Acts 10:34-35)?

8. Is it God's desire that any of his creatures should be lost (Psalm 96; Second Peter 3:9, First Timothy 2:3-6)? Explain.

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 10

HISTORY IN THE PSALMS

Unbelieving scientists and archaeologists are constantly looking for discoveries that will discredit the Bible as a book of fairy tales and legends, and yet year after year, God's book is only proven more reliable with every spade full of dirt or blob on a petrie dish.

The Psalms provide part of the rich tapestry of Bible history, alluding to events that are generally also described in more historical parts of the Old Testament, but frequently adding new details or commentary upon them.

The writers and original singers and readers of the Psalms could use these poems to teach and illustrate their history, celebrating great victories of the past as a mean of encouragement for the present or recalling bitter disappointments and applying the lessons learned to current circumstances. Throughout the Psalms, there is a reminder that God has always made promises and never failed to deliver on them, whether they proved positive or negative to Israel's fortunes.

The sad cliches of history hold true in the Hebrew psalms. Those who forget their history find themselves doomed to repeat it and the more things change the more they stay the same.

When Paul reacted with incredulity that the Galatians were so quickly deserting God to turn to a different, perverted gospel, it was only a modern Gentile introduction to an ancient Hebrew problem (Galatians 1:6-9). "They refused to walk in his law, and forgot his works and his wonders that he had shown them" (Psalm 78:9-11). It is astonishing how God's people can fail to learn from the past—whether their own or the recorded history of people like them and dealing with the same God. As the Hebrews repeatedly turned from "fresh examples of God's faithfulness and forgiveness only to plunge back into sin," so Christians of the first and twenty-first centuries find themselves in the same dark chasm.

The Holy Spirit suggests that the preservation of the Old Testament is no mere academic compendium, but that, "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). The unimaginable apostasy of people who had witnessed tremendous miracles becomes a cautionary tale—"Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did" (First Corinthians 10:6).

The history found in the Psalms is of a decidedly different kind than what one would find in a textbook or even in the historical narratives outside the Wisdom Literature. The Psalms provide a commentary on history with a heavy dose of application implied (see Psalm 105).

1. Psalm 68 begins with a cry that was heard frequently in Israel's formative years. On what occasions did Moses ask God to arise and scatter his enemies (Numbers 10:35)?

2. The plentiful rain under consideration in Psalm 68:9 might have reference to three things that God provided the nation during their wanderings. What were those three things? Were they ever contented (Psalm 78:21-33)?

- Exodus 16:1-8:
- Exodus 17:1-7:
- Numbers 11:1-9, 31-34:

3. How does Psalm 68:11-12 describe the manner that Israel conquered the Promised Land? How can we win our battles (Second Timothy 1:7, First John 5:4)?

4. What is the value in sharing these histories with our children (Psalm 78:1-8; cf. Ephesians 6:4, Second Timothy 1:5 and First Peter 2:1-3)?

5. What was it in Israel's history that tended to shake them up and return them to a little faithfulness (Psalm 78:34-39)?

6. How did Israel grieve God (Psalm 78:40-42)? How do we grieve him today (Ephesians 4:17-30)?

7. Psalm 95 is quoted by the Hebrew writer. What application did he make?

8. Psalm 114 details many miracles by which God delivered Israel from captivity. Name some.

9. What is the theme and lesson of Psalm 136 (cf. James 5:7-11)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 11

ANGER AND VENGEANCE IN THE PSALMS

The twenty-third psalm is sweet, not shocking, but some of the more obscure songs in the set are astonishing to modern readers who recoil at the unrestrained anger and thirst for vengeance which the writers convey.

The psalmists—especially David—frequently found themselves in dangerous situations and in peril of grievous enemies. They did not always walk away from those challenges unscathed and as they suffered or after they regained their footing, they can be heard to call upon God to repay the people who had troubled them. Some of their vengeance requests became terribly violent even.

Modern Bible students are more accustomed to the meekness of Jesus Christ and the resignation of writers like the apostle Paul who exemplified and pleaded with his his students to forego vengeance and wait on God, to the point that it became dangerous even to contemplate or request divine repayment.

Readers of Romans 12 will instantly recall that Paul taught, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’ (Romans 12:19). Interestingly, however, the psalmists mostly obey this edict which did not come in this form until many centuries after their demise. Rather than pursue personal vengeance, they are mainly heard to plead for divine recompense, and often for wrongs to the nation rather than self.

David, in particular, often wrote from a position of impotence regarding his own protection and restoration to power. He pleaded with God to handle his troublemakers and God usually obliged.

Most of the psalmists were quite aware of the force of God’s judgment, having witnessed it on various occasions, and felt free to write plainly of such things occurring again. To them, it was not shocking for the earth to open up and swallow sinners or for evildoers to be stoned to death as part of a public spectacle. Where our generation is well acquainted with pretend violence—video games, movies, pro wrestling—their generation was much more familiar with the genuine article.

Is their yearning for vengeance really that shocking. Were not millions of Americans hopeful for the same thing after September 11, 2001? When a child molester or mass murderer is apprehended, there are few who contend for mercy, but many who are willing to throw away the key or pull the switch.

1. What does the psalmist ask for the wicked who hotly pursue the poor (10:1-6, 15)? Why? Do you find this request objectionable?

2. Even the sweet twenty-third psalm is not without a hint of imprecation. What is it?

3. What judgment does David request for those whom he calls wicked (Psalm 28:3-5; Revelation 20:12-13, Second Corinthians 5:10)?

4. It is natural and understandable to get angry with someone who is mistreating you. What should we beware (Matthew 5:22, Romans 12:18, Ephesians 4:26-27)?

5. What was David really looking for as he prayed this imprecatory psalms (Psalm 35:1-3)? What was one way they afflicted him (15-16; 109:1-5)

6. What occasioned the plea for vengeance in Psalm 137?

7. What is the imprecatory interpretation that could be made of Paul's request regarding Alexander the coppersmith in Second Timothy 4:14?

8. What might we prove by treating our enemies better than they treat us (Matthew 5:43-48)?

9. What is our abiding hope regarding our enemies, even as we struggle to leave vengeance to God (Romans 12:20-21)?

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 12

PRAISE IN THE PSALMS

In some ways, the psalms are like invitations to one's friends to come and worship. The psalmist seemingly cannot fathom that anyone would not want to join him, so thorough is his gratitude. If only one could bottle that attitude.

Most of the psalms read much like our prayers—petitions and thanksgiving directed toward Heaven with the expectation that God will reply in his own inimitable way. While the themes of the psalms vary, praise is often an important component and sometimes the whole purpose of the song. The writer expresses his admiration, gratitude and joy in words by which he declares his former hopelessness, replaced by a sense of security.

Sadly, some have to be prodded into worshiping God and others withhold their praise at the slightest apparent provocation—when God allows them to be unemployed or diseased or sad. The gift of life, itself, and the faithful promise of eternal life, however, should be ample motivation for one to arise and praise God, whether individually or corporately.

Praise and the gratitude it reflects are the secrets to true contentment. Paul wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7). One must use his worry energy for counting blessings instead, allowing him to put his complaints in better perspective and to rediscover a praiseworthy God.

The psalms show us a side of praise that can get lost if one slips into a worship rut by which he infrequently prays alone and barely listens to prayer leaders. His singing can become rote as he tires of the same old hymns week after week and the observance of the Lord's Supper becomes mechanical. The real problem is not in the praise, but in the possibility that the worshiper has begun to take God, grace and goodness for granted. To some degree, he seems spoiled and worship become superfluous.

The psalms remind us of what it means be in desperate need and to find God supplying that need. We are all in desperate need—if not for the restoration of health or employment, then certainly for divine mercy and fellowship. The psalmists never take that for granted, because they could not afford to. Neither can we.

Many of the psalms extol the virtues of using instruments of music to accompany the singing. David, in fact, is credited with inventing or introducing certain instruments (Amos 6:5, Second Chronicles 29:26-27), but this does not authorize them for New Testament worship.

1. Read Psalm 8 and really think about what it is saying. For what is David praising God in this song? What important stewardship did God give man?

2. How can an examination of the skies motivate praise (Psalm 19:1-6, Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 14:1)?

3. The same psalm also praises God for his law. What does he find praiseworthy about it (Psalm 19:7-14, Romans 7:6-12)? If this was true of the Law of Moses, what must be said about the New Testament that replaced it (Hebrews 4:11-13, Romans 8:1-6)?

4. What is Sheol, mentioned in Psalm 30:3? What similar circumstances might make us want to praise God in this way (Philippians 2:25-30)?

5. The simple fact that God hears our prayers at all is cause for gratitude (Psalm 65:1-4). To whose prayers will God attend (First Peter 3:10-12)? Does this mean that he always answers positively (Second Corinthians 12:7-10)? How long does it take before we thank God for not granting one of our prayers?

6. How did the sons of Korah feel about going to worship (Psalm 84:1-12; cf. 100:1-5)? Why don't all people share that excitement (Hebrews 6:4-8)?

7. Part of the new song in Psalm 96 has to do with judgment. Why would one praise a judge (7-10, 13; Jude 14-15, Psalm 136)?

8. Why aren't instruments of music welcome in New Testament worship (Psalms 149-150, Ephesians 5:15-19, Colossians 3:16-17, Galatians 5:4).

GREAT THEMES OF THE PSALMS: LESSON 13

REVIEW

1. What did David discover was the secret to pleasing God (15:2-5; Ephesians 5:17)? How do love and fear coexist (103:15-19; First John 4:18)?
2. How did David approach God when confronted with his sins with Bathsheba (Second Samuel 12, Psalm 51)?
3. What did David wonder in Psalm 6? How does his concern mirror our attitude when we pray for relief and it does not come quickly enough (102:2; Matthew 26:36-39; see James 1:2-8, Second Corinthians 12:7-10)?
4. What could possibly mar our entrance into God's courts for worship (Psalm 96:1-9; Isaiah 1:12-17, Matthew 23:23-26)?
5. How did Jesus declare God's name (Psalm 22:22, Hebrews 2:11-12, John 20:17)? Why did Jesus have to die in order to perform God's will (Psalm 40:6-8, Hebrews 10:1-7)?
6. What specifically caused David to say that it was better to acknowledge one's sin than to try to conceal it or ignore it (Psalm 32:1-5, 10-11)? Why is it so foolish to ignore one's sinfulness (Psalm 34:12-18 and Hebrews 4:11-13)?

7. Read Psalm 5 (maybe twice). How is it apparent that David felt better when he was finished writing this poem (Psalm 55:22, Ephesians 6:18)?

8. According to Psalm 9, how does God prove to be a stronghold for the oppressed in times of trouble? See especially verses 15-16 (cf. Proverbs 1:18-19, 5:22).

9. What aspect of God's character is David describing in Psalm 139? What is the extent of that aspect (13-16)? Although he appreciates it, why might others dislike this aspect (Psalm 36:1-4, Hebrews 4:11-13)?

10. What is the value in sharing these histories with our children (Psalm 78:1-8; cf. Ephesians 6:4, Second Timothy 1:5 and First Peter 2:1-3)?

11. What judgment does David request for those whom he calls wicked (Psalm 28:3-5; Revelation 20:12-13, Second Corinthians 5:10)? It is natural and understandable to get angry with someone who is mistreating you. What should we beware of (Matthew 5:22, Romans 12:18, Ephesians 4:26-27)?

12. How can an examination of the skies motivate praise (Psalm 19:1-6, Romans 1:19-20, Psalm 14:1)? The same psalm also praises God for his law. What does he find praiseworthy about it (Psalm 19:7-14, Romans 7:6-12)? If this was true of the Law of Moses, what must be said about the New Testament that replaced it (Hebrews 4:11-13, Romans 8:1-6)?

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