

**VOLUME 1**

# **PSALMS**

**SONGS FROM THE HEART**

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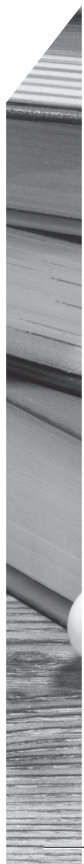
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**Graham Hooper**

**50 UNDATED DEVOTIONS  
THROUGH PSALMS 1–50**



## Structure

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

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

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

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

## Recurring themes

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

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

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

## Style

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

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

## Who wrote the psalms?

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

## When were the psalms written?

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

## The psalms in the New Testament

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

## The psalms in the Christian church

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

## The value and use of the psalms today

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

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

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

## Studying the psalms with this guide

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

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





## Two ways to live

**W**here is true happiness to be found? In a healthy life, with enough money to pursue our dreams? In success in our chosen field? This opener to the book of psalms presents a surprisingly different answer. It is found in delighting in ‘the law [Torah, that is the “teaching”] of the LORD’ (v. 2); in a desire to learn from God through reading and meditating on his Word, the Bible.

As we understand and seek to obey God’s Word, we find it changes our life. We start to want to live differently in the best possible sense. We see in verse 1 that the blessed (that is, happy) person, later called the righteous (vv. 5–6), does not:

- ‘walk in step with the wicked’ – habitually following the majority in doing what is contrary to the Word of God;
- ‘stand in the way that sinners take’ – identifying with those whose beliefs and behaviours are obviously contrary to God’s law; or,
- ‘sit in the company of mockers’ – ridiculing and dismissing faith, and ‘rubbishing’ those seeking to live a godly life.

This happy person is pictured as a growing tree (v. 3), continually drawing

life from the stream. Its leaves do not wither. It is fruitful, healthy and useful – a beautiful and attractive picture of practical godliness.

### *One alternative*

By contrast, ‘the wicked’, those who want no part in God and have no interest in his Word, are like the chaff that the wind blows away’ (v. 4). Their lives have no lasting value or substance.

### *Two outcomes (vv. 5–6)*

Like many of Jesus’ parables, this psalm calls us to choose. There is no compromise, no ‘third way’. There is the way of ‘the righteous’, or there is the way of the ‘wicked’. The outcomes of each path are presented starkly (v. 6).

## REFLECTION

*Two ways of living; two very different outcomes. This psalm is neither a prayer nor a praise song, but it presents us with a choice. The first word of this psalm is ‘blessed’ and the last word is ‘perish’: that seems to summarise the two contrasting ways to live. Each of us has to choose.*

## The Messiah and rebellion against God

On the surface, it often appears that most non-Christians are indifferent, or simply ignorant, of the Christian faith. In popular western culture religion is seen as a matter of personal choice, never to be inflicted on others. But when we look a little deeper, we find a darker picture of antagonism behind the veneer. Humankind is opposed to God and rejects his authority. Individually, our sinfulness and estrangement from God lead us to fight against him.

Moving on from Psalm 1, we are confronted with this darker scene. The idyllic picture of faith and godliness in Psalm 1 changes to an ugly view of the world in rebellion against God.

Why is this so? ‘Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?’ (v. 1). Why do those opposed to God ‘band together’ to try to ‘throw off their shackles’ (vv. 2–3)? Why, when the Son of God came to this earth, did his own people reject him (Luke 19:14)? Why are God’s people persecuted somewhere on the planet in every age?

More importantly, how does the Lord respond to this (vv. 4–6)? In two ways. First, he speaks. Actually, he laughs! (v. 4). As a parent might laugh at a

petulant child throwing a tantrum, so God laughs at humankind’s pathetic attempt to dispense with God in *his* own world. Fighting against God in any generation and in any society is ultimately ‘in vain’ (v. 1). Then he rebukes them in his anger (v. 5), a terrifying prospect for those who fight against him.

Finally, God acts (vv. 6–10): ‘I have installed my king on Zion’ (v. 6). David and his successors were mostly flawed leaders. This psalm points emphatically to Jesus, the coming Messiah, God’s own Son. He will deliver his people and provide a refuge for them. It is no coincidence that this psalm, and Psalm 110, are the most quoted psalms in all the New Testament (see for example Acts 4:23–26).

### REFLECTION

*This very confronting psalm ends with great reassurance for all who take up God’s gracious offer of reconciliation with his Son: ‘Blessed are all who take refuge in him’ (v. 12).*