

# **MOUNT SINAI MISSIONARY BAPTIST CHURCH**

## **MONDAY EVENING BIBLE STUDY**

### **THE PSALMS**

#### **Introduction**

##### **THE BOOK OF PSALMS,**

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."

***Structure of the Book.*** With 150 individual psalms, this Book is clearly the longest in the Bible. It is also one of the most diverse, since the psalms deal with such subjects as God and His creation, war, worship, wisdom, sin and evil, judgment, justice, and the coming of the Messiah. In the original Hebrew manuscripts, this long collection of 150 psalms was divided into five sections: Book 1 (1-41); Book 2 (42-72); Book 3 (73-89); Book 4 (90-106); and Book 5 (107-150). Each of these major sections closes with a brief prayer of praise. Many modern translations of the Bible, including the NKJV, retain this fivefold division.

Scholars are not sure exactly why the Book of Psalms was organized in this manner. One theory is that it was divided into five sections as a sort of parallel to the Pentateuch-the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). But other scholars believe the five sections were different collections of psalms that circulated at different times in Israel's history. These five small collections were finally placed together, they believe, to form the large compilation which we know today as the Book of Psalms.

The second theory does seem to make sense when we examine the content of the psalms themselves. Individual psalms attributed to David appear in all five of these sections of the Book. Within these five sections, different types of psalms also appear. These include songs of thanksgiving, hymns of praise, psalms of

repentance and confession, psalms which invoke evil upon one's enemies, messianic psalms, and songs sung by pilgrims as they traveled to Jerusalem to observe one of the great festivals of their faith. Such variety among the psalms within these five sections may indicate they were complete collections within themselves before they were placed with other groups of psalms to form this larger body of material.

But no matter how the present arrangement of the book came about, these individual psalms were clearly inspired by God's Spirit. Through these hymns of praise, we come face to face with our Maker and Redeemer. In the glory of His presence, we are compelled to exclaim along with the psalmist, "O Lord, our Lord, how excellent is Your name in all the earth!" (8:9).

***Authorship and Date.*** Most people automatically think of David when they consider the question of who wrote the Book of Psalms. A shepherd boy who rose to become the most famous king of Judah, he was also known as "the sweet psalmist of Israel" (2 Sam 23:1). He lived during the most creative age of Hebrew song and poetry. As king, he organized the services of worship in the tabernacle, appointing priests and Levites for the specific purpose of providing songs and music. So, it is not surprising that his name should be clearly associated with this beautiful book of praise.

The brief descriptions that introduce the psalms have David listed as author in 73 instances. But some scholars believe the phrase, "A psalm of David," should not be interpreted as a certain indication that David actually wrote all these psalms. They point out the Hebrew word translated as of can also be translated to or FOR. Thus, these psalms could have been written by anonymous authors and dedicated to David or even written on his behalf (for David) and added to a special collection of his material already being used in the sanctuary.

While this is an interesting theory, there is no strong reason to question the traditional view that David actually wrote all the psalms that are attributed to him. David's personality and identity are clearly stamped on many of these psalms. For example, Ps 18 is a psalm of David which sings praises to God as the sovereign Savior. The title indicates it was written after David was delivered "from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul." The same psalm in almost identical wording appears in 2 Sam 22. This passage indicates that David sang this song

after the death of Saul and upon his succession to the throne as the new king of Judah.

While it is clear that David wrote many of the individual psalms, he is definitely not the author of the entire collection. Two of the psalms (Ps 72 and Ps 127) are attributed to Solomon, David's son and successor. Ps 90 is a prayer assigned to Moses. Another group of 12 psalms (50 and 73-83) is ascribed to the family of Asaph. The sons of Korah wrote 11 psalms (42; 44:1-49:20; 84:1-85:13; 87:1-88:18). Ps 88 is attributed to Heman, while Ps 89 is assigned to Ethan the Ezrahite. With the exception of Solomon and Moses, all these additional authors were priests or Levites who were responsible for providing music for sanctuary worship during David's reign. Fifty of the psalms designate no specific person as author. They were probably written by many different people.

A careful examination of the authorship question, as well as the subject matter covered by the psalms themselves, reveal they span a period of many centuries. The oldest psalm in the collection is probably the prayer of Moses (90), a reflection on the frailty of man as compared to the eternity of God. The latest psalm is probably 137, a song of lament clearly written during the days when the Hebrews were being held captive by the Babylonians, from about 586 to 538 B.C.

It is clear that the 150 individual psalms were written by many different people across a period of a thousand years in Israel's history. They must have been compiled and put together in their present form by some unknown editor shortly after the Captivity ended about 537 B.C.

***Historical Setting.*** Some of the psalms written by David grew out of specific experiences in his life. For example, Ps 3 is described as "a Psalm of David when he fled from Absalom his son" (see also 51; 52; 54; 56; 57; 59). But others seem to be general psalms that arose from no specific life situation (53; 55; 58). Knowing the particular historical background of a psalm can help the student interpret it correctly and apply its message to life today.

***Theological Contribution.*** We may think of the psalms as a description of our human response to God. At times God is presented in all His majesty and glory. Our response is wonder, awe, and fear: "Sing to God, you kingdoms of the earth" (68:32). But other psalms portray God as a loving Lord who is involved in our

lives. Our response in these cases is to draw close to His comfort and security: "I will fear no evil; for You are with me" (23:4).

God is the same Lord in both these psalms. But we respond to Him in different ways, according to the specific needs of our lives. What a marvelous God we worship, the psalmist declares-One who is high and lifted up beyond our human experiences but also one who is close enough to touch and who walks beside us along life's way.

Other psalms might be described as outcries against God and the circumstances of life rather than responses to God because of His glory and His presence in our lives. The psalmist admits he sometimes feels abandoned by God as well as his human friends (88). He agonizes over the lies directed against him by his false accusers (109). He calls upon God to deliver him from his enemies and to wipe them out with His wrath (59). Whatever else we may say about the psalms, we must admit they are realistic about human feelings and the way we sometimes respond to the problems and inequities of life.

But even in these strong psalms of lament, the psalmist is never totally engulfed by a feeling of despair. The fact that he uttered his protest to the Lord is a sign of hope in God and His sense of justice. This has a significant message for all believers. We can bring all our feelings to God, no matter how negative or complaining they may be. And we can rest assured that He will hear and understand. The psalmist teaches us that the most profound prayer of all is a cry for help as we find ourselves overwhelmed by the problems of life.

The psalms also have a great deal to say about the person and work of Christ. Ps 22 contains a remarkable prophecy of the crucifixion of the Savior. Jesus quoted from this psalm as He was dying on the cross (Ps 22:1; Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34). Other statements about the Messiah from the psalms that were fulfilled in the life of Jesus include these predictions: He would be a priest like Melchizedek (Ps 110:4; Heb 5:6); He would pray for His enemies (Ps 109:4; Luke 23:34); and His throne would be established forever (Ps 45:6; Heb 1:8).

***Special Considerations.*** The Book of Psalms is the best example in the Bible of the nature of Hebrew poetry. The principle upon which this poetry is based is not rhythm or rhyme but parallelism. In parallelism, one phrase is followed by another

that says essentially the same thing but in a more creative, expressive way. Here is a good example of this poetic technique:

*The Lord of hosts is with us;  
The God of Jacob is our refuge  
(46:11).*

This example is known as synonymous parallelism because the second phrase expresses the same thought as the first. But sometimes the succeeding line introduces a thought that is directly opposite to the first idea. This is known as antithetic parallelism. Here is a familiar couplet that demonstrates this form:

*For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the ungodly shall perish  
(1:6).*

A third kind of parallelism in Hebrew poetry may be called progressive, or climbing-in which part of the first line is repeated in the second, but also something more is added. For example:

*The floods have lifted up, O Lord,  
The floods have lifted up their voice  
(93:3).*

Another literary device which the Hebrew writers used to give their psalms a peculiar style and rhythm was the alphabetical acrostic. The best example of this technique is Ps 119-the longest in the collection-which contains 22 different sections of eight verses each. Each major section is headed by a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the original language, each verse in these major divisions of the psalm begins with the Hebrew letter which appears as the heading for that section. Many modern translations of the Bible include these Hebrew letters as a part of the structure of this psalm. Writing this poem with such a structure required a high degree of literary skill.

The peculiar poetic structure of the 150 psalms make them ideal for believers who like to create their own devotional exercises. You can easily combine the lines from

many different psalms into a fresh, authentic expression of praise to God. Here is an example of such a combined psalm:

*Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for He is good!*

*For His mercy endures forever  
(136:1).*

*He has not dealt with us according to our sins,  
Nor punished us according to our iniquities  
(103:10).*

*For You, O God, have heard my vows;  
You have given me the heritage of those who fear Your name  
(61:5).*

*Your testimonies are very sure;  
Holiness adorns Your house, O Lord, forever  
(93:5).*

*So teach us to number our days,  
That we may gain a heart of wisdom  
(90:12).*

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
A good understanding have all those who do His commandments  
(111:10).*

*Oh, give thanks to the God of heaven!  
For His mercy endures forever (136:26).*

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