



HOW TO READ
THE PSALMS

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Preface 9

Introduction: An Invitation to the Psalms	11
Part I The Psalms Then and Now	17
1. The Genres of the Psalms	19
2. The Origin, Development and Use of the Psalms	37
3. The Psalms: The Heart of the Old Testament	51
4. A Christian Reading of the Psalms	63
5. The Psalms: Mirror of the Soul	75
Part II The Art of the Psalms	87
6. Old Testament Poetry	89
7. Understanding Parallelism	95
8. Imagery in the Psalms	111
Part III A Melody of Psalms	123
9. Psalm 98: Let All the Earth Praise God, Our Warrior	125
10. Psalm 69: Lord, I Suffer for Your Sake	133
11. Psalm 30: Thank You, Lord, for Healing Me!	143
Epilog	149
Notes	151
Answers to the Exercises	157
Guide to Commentaries	165

Preface

The Psalter is one of the most familiar and most foreign of books in the Bible. It is familiar to us from constant exposure in both private and public devotional readings. It is foreign to us because of its poetic idiom and its implicit setting. It is my *prayer* that this book will help its readers understand the Psalter better.

I have had a broad readership in mind as I have written the book. I hope it can be used both inside and outside of an academic setting. I tried to make the book readable for the college student while still providing enough substance to make it appropriate for a seminary course on Psalms. I also hope that it will be studied by adult Sunday-school classes as well as interested individuals.

Many chapters end with some questions for further thought and a bibliography. An answer key for the questions is provided at the end of the book. The last few chapters omit questions because their content is too involved for brief questions and answers. The bibliographies are intended for those who want

to pursue the study of a particular subject further. Some books are marked with an asterisk to indicate that they are highly technical studies.

I want to take this opportunity to thank a number of individuals who gave me help while I was writing this book. Some of my colleagues at Westminster Theological Seminary took time from their busy schedules to read the manuscript and offer me constructive criticism. I would like to thank Drs. Raymond Dillard, Sinclair Ferguson, Moises Silva and Bruce Waltke for their comments and encouragement. Professor Terry Eves of Calvin College also provided me with much helpful advice. My good friend and fellow elder at New Life Presbyterian Church (Jenkintown, Pennsylvania), Mr. Richard Wyatt, also read the manuscript and provided me with comments on substance and style. While benefiting from their comments, needless to say, I accept full responsibility for any errors (particularly since I didn't act on all of their suggestions).

Most of all, I would like to express my thanks and affection to my wife, Alice, and my three children (Tremper IV, Timothy and Andrew) for their support while I worked on this and other projects.

I dedicate this book to my parents, Tremper (Jr.) and Mernie Longman, for the loving way in which they raised me.

Introduction: An Invitation to the Psalms

God is present in every corner of his creation. He is with us whether we are at work or at home, shopping or studying, in the city or in the country, at sea or on land. He is everywhere and with us no matter what we do.

Nonetheless, the Scriptures make it clear that, though God's presence permeates the world, he chooses to dwell in a special way in certain places and to make his presence known at certain times. For instance, the Lord dwelt on Mount Sinai (Ex 19—20) in a special way at the time that Moses received the law. His presence was manifested and experienced in a way that was not repeated on any other mountain until he chose to dwell on Mount Zion in the time of Solomon.

These special places of God's presence are places of intimate and at times fearful encounter with the God of the universe. They are places which demand human response; they demand worshipful prayer. The Psalms are such a divine-human encounter, and they find their actual setting within the formal worship of Israel.

As we read the Psalms, we are entering into the sanctuary, the place where God meets men and women in a special way.

We will see that the conversation between God and his people is direct, intense, intimate and, above all, honest.

Thus, the Psalms are a kind of literary sanctuary in the Scripture. The place where God meets his people in a special way, where his people may address him with their praise and lament. In the same way that the sanctuaries of the Old Testament, primarily the tabernacle and the temple, were considered to be at the physical center of the people of God, so too is the book of Psalms in the middle of the Bible.

Moreover, there is a second connection between the Psalms and the sanctuary. It is here that the Psalms found their use during the Old Testament period, that is, within the context of the community and private worship of God. The Psalms were sung in the temple on Mount Zion:

Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion;

To you our vows will be fulfilled.

We are filled with the good things of your house,
of your holy temple. (Ps 65:1, 4)

In the Psalter we see the Old Testament people of God at worship.

This connection between the Psalms and intimate worship of God accounts at least in part for the tremendous appeal which the book has for us as Christians. While Christians have always struggled to understand and apply the Old Testament to their lives, the Psalms have found wide use in the church and in private devotions.

As a result the Psalms, more than most parts of the Old Testament, are used in the context of worship today. In recognition of this fact, publishers produce pocket-sized New Testaments which include the Psalms in the back. Moreover, many contemporary Christian hymns (not to speak of more traditional hymns) are based on passages from the Psalms. Churches with a liturgical bent incorporate a responsive reading from the Psalms into the order of worship. Most significantly, while the church suffers from a lack of preaching from the Old Testament as a whole, sermons are often based on a text from the Psalter.

How have the Psalms retained their appeal through the ages? Listen to the thoughts of two of the fathers of the Protestant church:

In the Psalms we looked into the heart of all the saints, and we seem to gaze into fair pleasure gardens—into heaven itself, indeed—where blooms in sweet, refreshing, gladdening flowers of holy and happy thoughts about God and all his benefits. (Martin Luther)

What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury, it were difficult to find words to describe. . . . I have been wont to call this book not inappropriately, *an anatomy of all parts of the soul*; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. (John Calvin)¹

The Psalms appeal to the whole person; they demand a total response. The Psalms inform our intellect, arouse our emotions, direct our wills and stimulate our imaginations. When we read the Psalms with faith, we come away changed and not simply informed. Of course, the whole of Scripture is radically life-changing, but the Psalms address the modern Christian in a more direct way than, say, the last half of Joshua which details the geographical boundaries of the twelve tribes of Israel.

The purpose of this book is to deepen our love for the Lord by increasing our understanding of this important portion of his Word. Though the Psalms speak to us, a reason we continue to use the book often in our public and private devotion, they are often difficult to understand. We shouldn't be surprised that we struggle to understand the Old Testament in general and the Psalms in particular. After all, they are distant to us in three ways: historically, culturally and theologically.

The latest psalm was written almost 2,500 years ago. The earliest psalm was probably written about 3,500 years ago. Think about that a moment. That would be like someone in A.D. 5500 reading something written today. Times change. God speaks to his people in ways and through means related to their own times.

Along with chronological distance, we must also take into

account cultural distance. Most of the people reading this book are Westerners (since it is written in English). The Psalms, however, were originally addressed to a group of Near Eastern people, the Israelites. While cultural dissimilarity should not be overplayed, since there is much continuity between cultures, we can expect that we will run into some customs and expressions that are strange to our modern, technological society.

Last, and perhaps most significant, there is theological distance. That is, the Psalms were written before Jesus Christ was born, crucified and raised. The Psalms were written in the context of temple worship and animal sacrifice. We will see that Jesus Christ is not absent from the Psalter but, nonetheless, there is a theological distance between the Psalms and the Christian. We need to be aware of this.

These three areas of distance between the Psalms and the Christian manifest themselves in particular areas of difficulty. The most notorious difficulty is the strong language of anger which some of the psalmists use. As previously noted, the psalmists are honest, even brutally frank with God, and occasionally they blast their enemies in a way that Christians feel is out of character with the God that they know through Jesus Christ.

On a more formal level, Christians may wonder at all the repetition in the Psalms. Some psalms sound very similar (for an extreme example look at Ps 14 and 53). Moreover, the lines within an individual psalm are highly repetitive. The Psalms, we must remember, are poetry, and poetry in any language is difficult to penetrate. How are we to read this poetry, this ancient poetry?

Is Jesus Christ anticipated in the Psalter and, if so, how? Are there predictive prophecies found in a few select psalms or does the book as a whole look forward to his coming? These are just a few of the issues with which we will deal in the following chapters.

The book is divided into three parts. In the first part we are asking how the Psalms were understood and used during the period of the Old Testament. We will be studying the individual psalms as a whole. With this background, we will explore how

the Psalms address us today. How should we as Christians read the individual prayers and songs which make up the Psalter? In the next section we will take a close-up look at the Psalms to see the art of the psalmists and the literary devices which they used. Finally, in the last section, three psalms will be examined closely to show how our study all fits together. The chapters in parts one and two each contain numbered suggestions for psalm study that together will summarize a systematic approach for individual study of the Psalms.

As we probe the Psalms together, our ultimate purpose is not to increase our knowledge of ancient customs and poetic forms; we are studying to know God better through his Word.

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