



Psalms 1–41

IN THE INSTRUCTION OF YAHWEH IS HIS DELIGHT,
AND ON HIS INSTRUCTION HE RUMINATES
BY DAY AND BY NIGHT. —Psalm 1:2

A CHRISTIAN UNION BIBLE STUDY



Psalms 1-41

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A CHRISTIAN UNION RESOURCE
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Christian Union Bible Studies: Psalms 1–41

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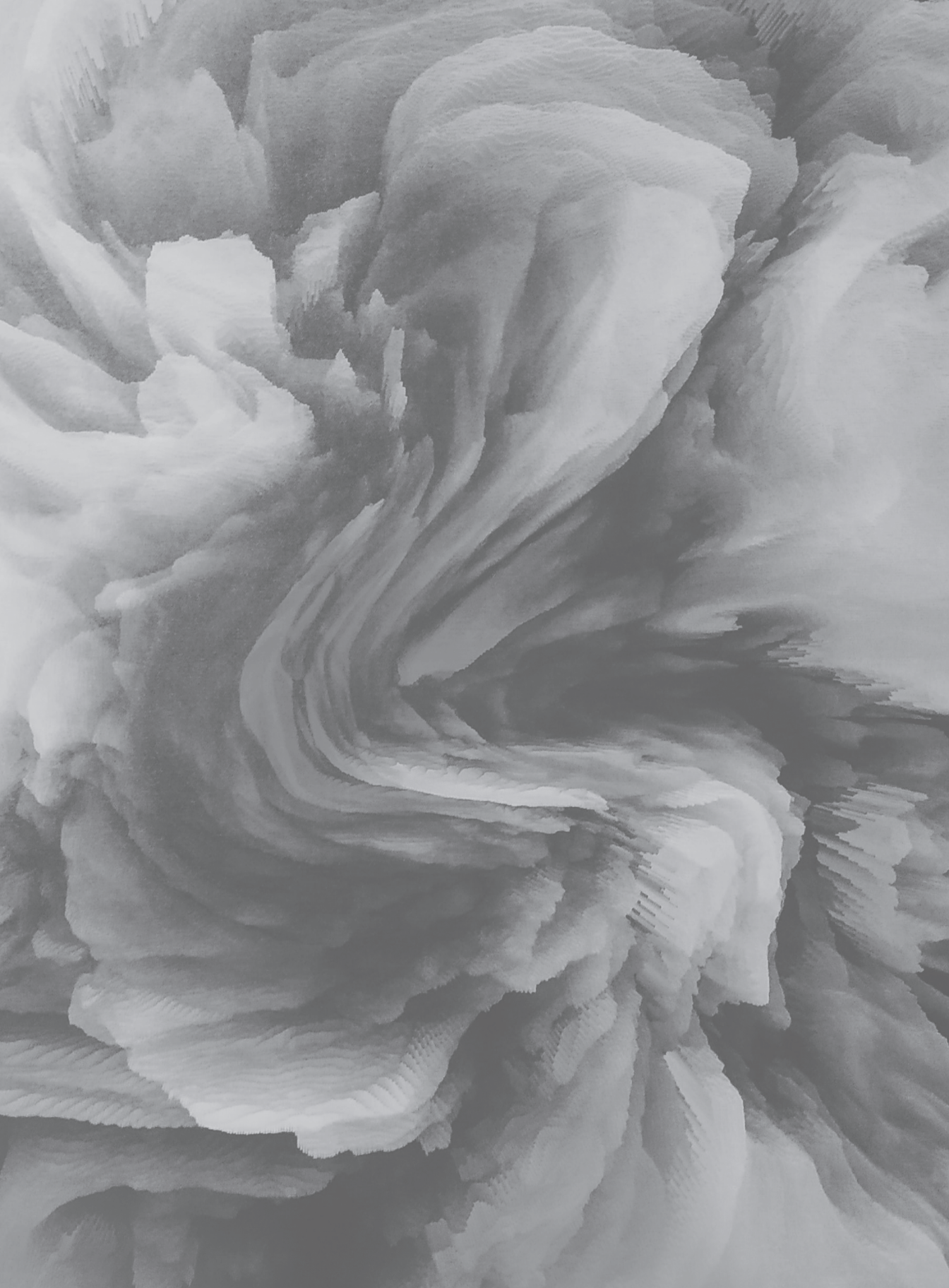
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Series Introduction

*It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone,
but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."*

(MATT 4:4, QUOTING DEUT 8:3)

You know the story. Jesus had been baptized in the Jordan River, God the Father had called Him “my beloved Son,” and the Holy Spirit had visibly descended upon Him. And then He was tested. You have opened this book because, in one way or another, God has impressed upon you the value of knowing and feeding on His Word—of being able to meet life’s trials as Jesus met His in the wilderness, with a sure declaration: “It is written . . .”

A NEW BIBLE STUDY SERIES

Following Jesus’ example means knowing God’s Word and acting on it. Christian Union’s aim in publishing these Bible studies is therefore twofold: that through daily reading and rigorous study you will grow in your knowledge and understanding of what God says in the Scriptures; and that in so doing you will come to more deeply know, trust, love, and walk in step with the One whose words are life (John 6:63). Throughout each lesson, we seek to offer relevant insight from our own engagement with the Word and the best available biblical scholarship, and to stretch you in considering the implications of that insight as you endeavor to live a life that honors God—and to help you lead others in doing the same.

BACKGROUND TO CHRISTIAN UNION BIBLE STUDIES

From our beginnings in 2002 on the campus of Princeton University—and from there to several other of America’s most secular, academically intense, and influential universities, and then to our ministries in key cities, online, and now in print—our mission as an organization has been, and continues to be, to develop Christian leaders who will bring the truth and power of the gospel to bear on every sphere of culture. Our vision is to see national revival and reformation so that every aspect of society brings praise and honor to Jesus Christ.

In keeping with our focus on training Christians as leaders, these studies assume that you have already confessed Jesus as your Savior and King, and that you still love learning. Building on the model we have developed in working with university students, we aim to facilitate a robust engagement of your heart and mind with the texts of Scripture. We do not assume you have received formal training in theology, nor that you have any prior knowledge of biblical languages, but we will introduce you to key terms along the way.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Each book in this series is laid out as a ten-to-twelve-week study, with each week's lesson divided into five parts. This gives you a portion for five days of the week, with two days free for other study. You can make use of this book on your own, or it can be used as a guide for small-group Bible study. In either case, the intention is that you would set aside time on your own each day to pray, read through one part of this study (beginning with that day's Scripture), and answer the questions for that day. On most days, working through the lesson should take roughly fifteen minutes (the introductory lessons may take a bit longer)—though, of course, you may work at your own pace.

If using this for a group study, each member of the group should have a copy of this guide and work through it before meeting with the rest of the group. The leader can then draw on a week's worth of content and questions to facilitate discussion when the group comes together. Some groups may wish to work at a different pace than is implied by the weekly format of these study guides; this can be achieved without much difficulty, as each "day" is presented as a self-contained unit. Leaders can thus assign as many "days" as they wish to cover at the next group meeting.

EYES ON THE PRIZE

Foremost among our values at Christian Union is what we call a Seeking-God Lifestyle. (For more on this topic, see Appendix B in this volume.) The psalmist says: "Seek Yahweh and his strength. Seek his face continually" (Ps 105:4). We want to live in God's presence, and we need His power to walk in His ways and heal what is broken. As we seek a greater outpouring of God's holy and healing presence in our land, we aim to do as the Lord instructed Solomon: "If my people . . . will humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways . . ." (2 Chr 7:14). So as you study the contents of these lessons, we will also encourage you to develop such ongoing habits as have marked the lives of the faithful throughout the ages.

Here is a promise worth remembering: "Be subject to God. Take a stand against the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (Jas 4:7-8). As you work your way through this study, may the Holy Spirit fill you and empower you to follow hard after the Lord Jesus and bring honor to our Father in heaven. Amen.

Acknowledgments

First, Christian Union wishes to honor and thank God for giving us His Word as a lamp for our feet and a light for our path (Ps 119:105).

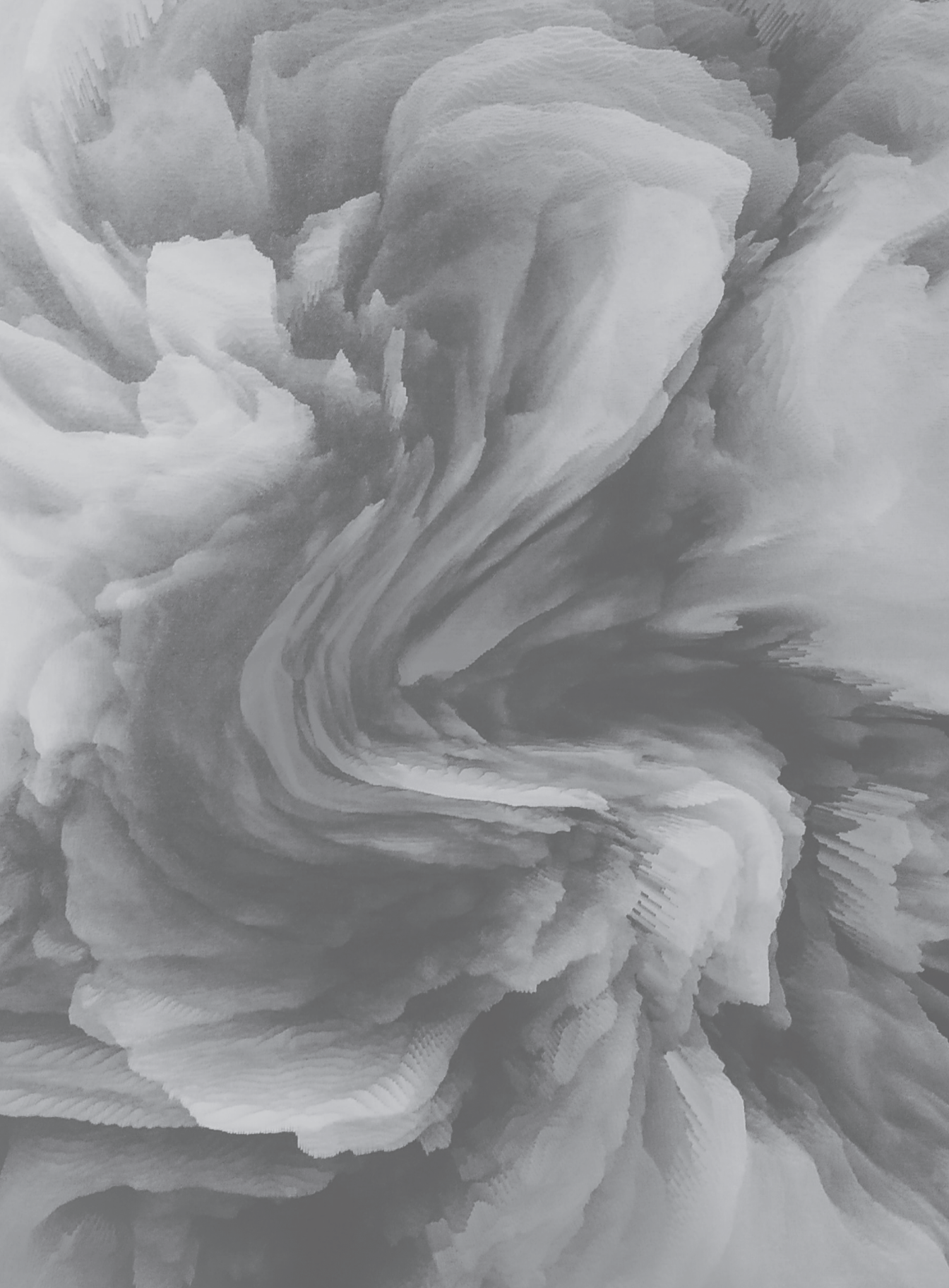
This Bible study series is an outgrowth of the excellent Bible Course Manuals that a number of Christian Union faculty have produced over the years for our work on college campuses. They stem from the vision of our founder and CEO, Matt Bennett, who has supervised the writing process and edited each chapter before submission to the publisher. Thanks also go to Liz Green for her role in inspiring Matt to write Christian Union's first Bible Course and in shaping what has become a central feature of our ministry.

This study was written by Michael Racine, who, prior to working full-time on this project, served as a ministry fellow with Christian Union Lux, our ministry to undergraduates at Yale University. Lessons 1 and 2 also incorporate the work of Dr. Jesse Peterson, formerly with our ministry at Columbia University.

Grateful acknowledgment is given to the Christian Union faculty and staff who improved this study by reviewing the drafts and giving feedback along the way: David Farrow, AVP of Christian Union Universities; Qwynn Gross, ministry fellow with Christian Union Nova (Princeton); Dr. Chuck Hetzler, director of Christian Union Day and Night; Michael Lee, our COO; and Dr. Ben Pascut, ministry director of Christian Union Lux.

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Finally, Christian Union wishes to thank all of our Cornerstone Partners, whose financial generosity has changed many lives to the glory of God. If you would like to accelerate the transformation that God is bringing among America's current and future leaders, please see ChristianUnion.org/Cornerstone.

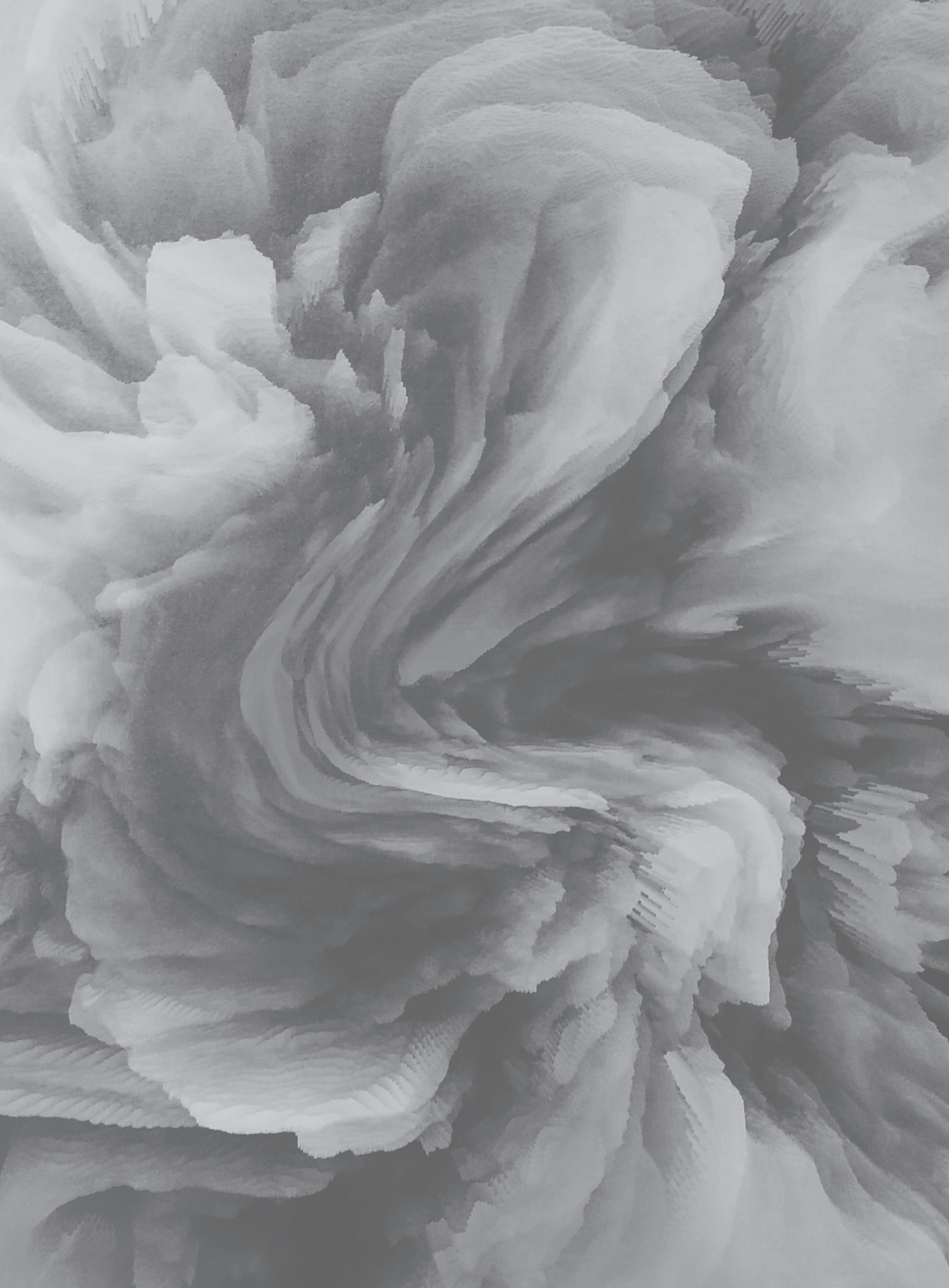


A Note on Translation

Unless otherwise noted, all translations found in this book are the author's own work. We offer our own translation of the text under consideration for a few reasons. First, we do not presume to know which Bible version(s) you may be using regularly, or whether you and the other members of your small group all have the same version, so this keeps us all on the same page. Second, it will save you from juggling continually back and forth between this book and your Bible (though we will include a number of Scripture references along the way, which we encourage you to look up). Finally, we offer the supplied translation as a complement to whatever you already have. Every attempt to translate a Hebrew or Greek composition into understandable and readable English involves many different considerations; using our own translation allows us to preserve some idiosyncrasies of the original composition that we will then unpack in the discussion that follows.

One noteworthy feature of the biblical text that may cause modern readers some discomfort is the common use of a masculine singular pronoun where humanity in general seems to be in view. While some translations, for obvious reasons, substitute gender-neutral plurals (*they/them*) in place of the ancient authors' masculine language, we have specific reasons for retaining the singular pronouns of the original texts. As chief among these, we observe that all of Scripture points ultimately to Jesus (see Luke 24:27, 44), who fulfilled what the Psalms and Prophets foretold of that (masculine singular) figure. So when, for instance, the Psalms reference an unnamed "him," we can understand that pronoun as indicating (a) the psalmist himself—usually David; (b) the Son of David, Jesus the Messiah; and/or (c) each of us (male or female) whose identities are wrapped up in Christ Jesus. The same words can, and often do, operate at multiple levels of fulfillment, and we wish to preserve the ambiguity while allowing messianic prophecy to come through as transparently as possible. In Christ, of course, female and male are equally welcome and equally dignified (Gal 3:28), and all readers of this study are highly encouraged to root their identities in Him.

Because the same pronoun can refer to the psalmist, a generic human figure, or the Messiah, we use the lowercase pronouns *he/him/his* whenever translating a biblical passage that employs masculine pronouns. In our commentary, however, we use capitalized pronouns when referring unambiguously to Jesus, the Father, or the Holy Spirit.



1

LESSON ONE:

Introduction to the Book of Psalms

DAY 1: WHY STUDY THE PSALMS?

Let the word of Christ live abundantly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Col 3:16)

Everything that is in our Scripture, my child, is both old and new. It is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, as it is written (2 Tim 3:16). But the book of Psalms has, in addition, a certain persuasive observation for those who devote themselves to it. Now each book of Scripture serves its own purpose in what it relates. . . . The book of Psalms is like a garden which, besides bearing fruit in it that is found elsewhere—which it sets to music—brings to light its own special fruit which it accompanies in song. (Athanasius, a fourth-century bishop of Alexandria, Egypt)¹

The Christian life begins with two words: “Follow me.” Human beings were created to bear the likeness of God and to govern the earth on God’s behalf as His representatives (Gen 1:26). But we believed a lie and broke faith with God, and thereby “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God” for corruption, enslavement to sin, and death.² God, meanwhile, still intended for His will to be done on the earth. So He sent His very Son, the Word of God made flesh, the perfect embodiment of His nature,³ to redeem us and usher us back into right relationship with the Father. There is but one way to the Father: Jesus Himself is the Way, and He says, “Follow me” (John 14:6; see also Matt 16:24).

How do we do that? We “hear his words and do them” (Matt 7:24). That requires a lot of grace: We need the Holy Spirit to help us continually where we would fail on our own. And it requires a lot of prayer. Jesus Himself, while walking through Galilee, Judea, and Samaria, prayed frequently. He woke up early, while it was still dark, and went out to pray by Himself

¹ Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus on the Psalms: Spiritual Wisdom for Today*, trans. Joel C. Elowsky (New Haven, CT: ICCS Press, 2017), §2.

² Rom 1:23; see also Gen 3; Rom 5:12-14; 6:16-23.

³ John 1:14; 3:16; Heb 1:3.

(Mark 1:35). Throughout the day, He was in such continual communication with the Father as to do only what the Father showed Him to do and say only what the Father told Him to say (John 5:19-47). And when His perfect love and obedience to the Father led Him to the Cross on our behalf, where our sin separated Him from His beloved Father for the first time, what did He do? He prayed the Psalms.

While most of Jesus' prayers in those few precious years before the Cross are not recorded for us, the Gospels do record that He prayed Psalms 22 and 31 while hanging on that tree.⁴ And the more we delve into the Psalms, the more we will find ourselves praying with Jesus. Just as He died to make us members of His body, so these prayers unite our experience with His and draw us, together with Him, back to the Father.

THE PSALMS HELP AND GUIDE US IN PRAYER

The New Testament writers quoted from the Psalms more than any other Old Testament book. And in these many centuries following the completion of the New Testament, the Psalms have continued to hold a prominent place in the Christian life as both a prayer book and a hymn-book. After Gutenberg finished his printing press, the first book printed was the whole Bible; the second was the *Mainz Psalter* (1457), commissioned by the archbishop of Mainz. Similarly, the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) was the first book ever printed in North America. These generations of Christians saw something crucial about getting the book of Psalms into their hands. Why? Because the Psalms reveal God's character while helping us to pray.

Just as the disciples asked Jesus, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1), so we, too, need to learn the art of prayer.⁵ The Psalter is a collection of inspired prayers that can serve as well-worn templates for those who would come to God in prayer. Eugene Peterson writes:

We cannot bypass the Psalms. They are God's gift to train us in prayer that is comprehensive (not patched together from emotional fragments scattered around that we chance upon) and honest (not a series of more or less sincere verbal poses that we think might please our Lord).⁶

King David rightly understood that we cannot bring anything to God that He has not first given us (1 Chr 29:14). How generous is God that He even gives us words with which to draw near to Him in every situation! In joy and sorrow, in victory celebration and fear of defeat, in gratitude and frustration and anxious awaiting, the Psalms give voice to the deepest yearnings of our hearts, as God Himself yearns for us to speak with Him and listen to Him.

⁴ The opening words of Psalm 22 are quoted in Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, while the closing words of the psalm are alluded to in John 19:30. Luke 23:46 quotes Psalm 31:5.

⁵ Bernhard W. Anderson and Steven Bishop, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 3.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 3-4.

How do you hope the Psalms might help you draw closer to God in prayer? What are you hoping they might teach you?

THE PSALMS ARE FILLED WITH WISDOM AND REVELATION

Consider Paul’s admonition to the Colossians, quoted at the outset of this introductory lesson: “Let the word of Christ live abundantly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another, singing psalms . . .” (Col 3:16). While we might naturally think of the Psalms foremost as a collection of prayers, they are truly “the word of Christ” in the most robust sense of that phrase: The Psalms are full of prophecy and wisdom, inspired by the Spirit of God, and they are as useful for “teaching and admonishing” us as they are for helping us pray.

It is probably for this reason that the Psalms receive more references in the New Testament than any other Old Testament book. While we have noted the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ praying two psalms on the cross, in virtually every other instance the Psalms are cited as prophecies that reveal to us who Jesus was and is.

The single most quoted Scripture within the New Testament is Psalm 110. Jesus Himself cites that psalm’s opening verse as attesting His divinity, since King David, from whom the Messiah was to descend, himself calls the Messiah “my Lord” (Matt 22:41-46; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44). Peter, freshly filled with the Holy Spirit, expounds upon this same point in his great sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:29-36). The epistle to the Hebrews not only references the psalm’s opening verse in proclaiming the excellencies of Jesus (Heb 1:13) but also goes on at length to unpack the revelation of Psalm 110:4 that Jesus is “a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” (This truth forms the backbone of the teaching that extends from Hebrews 4:14 through the end of chapter 9, and Psalm 110:4 is quoted verbatim multiple times, beginning at Hebrews 5:6.)

Other New Testament references to prophetic revelation in the Psalms are far too numerous to recount here. But keep your eyes open as we work our way through the Psalms in this study (and check the footnotes in your Bible when you read through the New Testament). The more you come to know the Psalms, the more you will recognize how profoundly all the apostles and Gospel writers were steeped in them, and the more you will understand why Jesus spoke about the fulfillment of “all that was written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and Psalms about me” (Luke 24:44).

Has it occurred to you that the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) was the only Bible the apostles and Gospel writers had? The Old Testament, along with their own encounters with Jesus and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, equipped them to do more than most

Christians today have dreamed of. So be prepared to let the Psalms shape your understanding of Jesus as they did for the great saints of old, and ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to the glorious truths contained in this great treasury of wisdom.

Are there any specific aspects of the gospel concerning which you are hungry for greater understanding? Make note of them below. You may wish to return to this list as our study goes on and mark specific passages that have spoken to your questions.

DAY 2: THE ORIGIN AND EARLY USE OF THE PSALMS

The quest for the origins of Israelite psalmody—singing songs of worship to God—takes us back much further than the book of Psalms itself. Sprinkled throughout the Hebrew Bible’s narrative we find poetic songs, such as the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1-8), the Song of the Ark (Num 10:35-36), the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1-43), the Song of Deborah (Judg 5), and the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), among others.⁷ The collection of psalms gathered into one book in our Bibles represents the work of a number of authors over nearly a thousand years: Psalm 90 is labeled “a prayer of Moses, the man of God,” while Psalm 137 comes from exiles in Babylon sometime after the fall of Jerusalem and the southern kingdom (in other words, not before 586 BC).

For a number of good and obvious reasons, modern scholarship places great value on understanding ancient texts in light of their historical contexts and how their original audiences would have understood them. So it is important to note at the outset what we do and do not know about the Psalms regarding their authorship and earliest usage. And the first thing to say is that we don’t know much more than what has already been stated. As the learned commentator John Goldingay frankly admits: “The Psalms conceal their origins. It is thus an odd fact that study of the Psalms in both the premodern and modern periods paid considerable attention to their authorship and historical background.”⁸

Given the number of psalms that supply no attribution whatsoever and the paucity of information given where we do find a heading (or *superscription*) prior to the psalm text, the book’s compilers clearly intended for us to focus on the psalms’ Holy Spirit–inspired *content* rather than speculate about where and when and by whom they came to be written down. So we will not go down a long rabbit trail of conjecture. But what *has* been made known to us about the Psalms’ origins?

⁷ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 25.

⁸ John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1: Psalms 1–41*, BCOTWP (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 25.

Of the 150 psalms that make up our collection, 116 are introduced by some sort of heading. Seventy-three of these are marked as “David’s” (*ledawid* in Hebrew), among which fourteen are specifically connected with some event in David’s life. Scholars debate whether we should take “David’s” to mean “This psalm was written *by* David,” or whether it might suggest in various cases that a psalm was written *for* or *about* David. The precise reasons for this debate are not pertinent here, and in most cases, settling the question one way or another has little to no impact on how we would understand or apply what the psalm is communicating. That said, the New Testament does expressly affirm David’s authorship of seven of the Psalms (including Psalm 2, which bears no heading), and in the case of Psalm 110 at least, that attribution is theologically significant.⁹ So we will proceed on the general assumption that “David’s” means “composed by David.” Besides those psalms marked as “David’s,” two refer in the same way to Solomon (Pss 72, 127), twelve to Asaph (Pss 50, 73–83), and eleven to the sons of Korah (Pss 42, 44–49, 84–85, 87–88), while Psalm 88 also names Heman the Ezrahite, and Psalm 89 names Ethan the Ezrahite. As already mentioned, Psalm 90 is identified as a prayer of Moses.

The antiquity of many psalms is attested by the fact that a number of technical terms found in their headings, which apparently indicated something to the worship leader about musical setting or choreography, were already opaque to the Jewish elders who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the second and third centuries BC.¹⁰

A NOTE ON MANUSCRIPTS AND TRANSMISSION OF THE TEXT

This Greek translation of the Old Testament—known as the Septuagint (or LXX) for the seventy elders said to have worked on it—gives us an ancient reference point with which to compare the Hebrew text currently available. Virtually all modern versions of the Old Testament are based on a set of Hebrew manuscripts dated to the tenth and eleventh centuries AD known collectively as the Masoretic Text (MT). (*Masorah* refers to the vowel markings, chant intonation, and marginal notes the medieval scribes added to what was originally a consonant-only text.) Comparing the Septuagint with the Masoretic Text confirms that the Hebrew Bible has been well preserved. (In the few places where the Greek suggests a different reading from what we find in the Masoretic Text, that will be noted in our translation.) Recent findings from a trove of manuscripts discovered in the caves at Qumran near the Dead Sea (also known as the Dead Sea Scrolls) have included portions of the Hebrew Bible (mostly small fragments) dated to around the same period as the Septuagint and confirming its accuracy. The Septuagint is also a major source of Old Testament references in the New Testament, as the New Testament writers made use of it while composing their works in Greek.¹¹

⁹ As discussed in the Day 1 reading, Jesus and Peter affirm David’s authorship of Psalm 110. The New Testament also affirms David’s authorship of Psalm 2 (Acts 4:24–26), Psalm 16 (Acts 2:25–28), Psalm 32 (Rom 4:6–8), Psalm 69 (Acts 1:16–20; Rom 11:9–10), Psalm 95 (Heb 4:7), and Psalm 109 (Acts 1:15–20). See Goldingay, *Psalms 1–41*, 26.

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC 15 (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 47.

¹¹ Some of the early church fathers give evidence that Matthew was first written in Hebrew; however, no original Hebrew version survives, so Greek remains our starting point for every book of the New Testament.

SUMMARY

While scholars have posited various theories about how individual psalms or types of psalms may have been used in the worship and public life of ancient Israel, we must not pretend to know more than we do. What we do know is that the Psalms were a regular fixture of Israel's worship from the time of David right up to the arrival of Jesus, who gave new significance to these ancient prayers and testimonies. And we know that the early church continued the ancient practice of praying the Psalms daily at regular hours, morning and evening (see Acts 3:1). As time went on, this practice became highly developed in monasteries, but sadly, many in the West have forgotten that our forebears saw regular, morning-and-evening devotions as standard practice for all believers.

After His resurrection, our Lord Jesus unveiled “things about himself” that had been foretold throughout the Old Testament Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 44). How much have you endeavored to understand the eternal character of God and the nature and role of Christ Jesus through the witness of the Old Testament?

DAY 3: RECURRING FORMS AND FEATURES IN THE PSALMS

We all live, and pray, according to certain regular patterns. Whether our customary worship involves the precisely orchestrated celebration of the Catholic Mass or the most nonliturgical of Protestant services, we go to church expecting to find certain elements present (for example, singing, Bible reading, preaching, and prayer), and we generally know which element will follow another. We employ these regular forms because they help us accomplish in good order what we have set ourselves to do, and they keep us from neglecting what we might otherwise be prone to forget. So as we set out to be trained in prayer through the Psalms, let us keep an eye out for some of the recurring forms and features we will find among them.

PRAISE

While our word *psalm* comes from a Greek term for playing with stringed instruments, Hebrew speakers refer to the book as *Tehillim*, which means “praises.” Although many psalms—particularly those at the front of the collection, as we shall see in this first volume—express fear, anguish, and frustration, the final word of the Psalms is praise. Not only do Psalms 146–150 form an unbroken crescendo of adoration at the close of the book, but even in prayers of lament, the psalmists consistently, in one way or another, acknowledge and trust in God's

goodness. The first example we will come across of what may properly be called a “praise psalm” is Psalm 8, in which David marvels at the grandeur of creation and its majestic Creator.

THANKSGIVING

Thanksgiving and praise are, of course, closely related. The distinction we observe is between the timeless praise of God’s goodness, which recognizes His eternal and unchanging attributes, and thanksgiving offered to God on account of His particular actions in time and space. Psalms of thanksgiving contain autobiographical testimony, generally with reference to a particular trial from which God has rescued the speaker.

In other words, psalms of thanksgiving may be thought of as *narrative*. They tell a story of redemption and declare: “I will exalt you, Yahweh, for you have drawn me up, and you have not let my enemies rejoice over me. . . . You have turned my lamentation into dancing. . . . Yahweh, my God, I will give you thanks forever” (30:1, 11-12). Psalms 30, 34, 92, 104, 107, 116, and 136 are examples of thanksgiving psalms.

If we are attentive, we will find many reasons to be grateful to God each and every day. Are there particular moments in your life that stand out above others as occasions for celebrating God as the One who got you out of a tight spot?

LAMENT

We give thanks to God for getting us out of trouble, and that is a good thing. But we also need to know how to turn to God when we are *in* trouble, or when an enemy is approaching. As will soon become apparent, the Psalms have a lot to say about enemies: “Yahweh, how many are my adversaries!” is the opening cry of Psalm 3. Many Christians in the modern West stumble over the numerous outbursts against enemies that occur throughout the Psalms. We know that we are commanded to love our enemies, and we struggle to reconcile this admonition with the psalmists’ prayers. There will be much more to say about this topic as we go, but for now, it will be helpful to bear in mind that the command to love our enemies implies that we do have enemies, and Jesus does call us to battle as well—not against flesh and blood, but against a host of forces bent on our destruction (see Eph 6:10-18).

So we will join the psalmists in seeking deliverance from violence, from vicious rumors, from sickness and death, and from our own sin. Whatever the particular distress the psalmists face, they invariably see such troubles as matters of life and death from which they long to escape, and they are not too bashful to demand, “How long, Yahweh?”

Laments are the most numerous type of prayer in the Psalter, making up roughly 40 percent of all the psalms.¹² In Book 1 of the Psalms—that is, Psalms 1–41, which we will cover in this volume—the concentration of laments is much higher.¹³ Despite the frequency of laments in the Psalms, many of us have not learned to pray this way. As James Mays comments:

[The psalmist] seems not to have learned the etiquette of prayer to which we are accustomed. . . . Instead, these prayers have a pleading, passionate, insistent tone. They bring the one who prays them into close quarters with God, too close for comfort. Their language takes the form of a struggle with God, a Jacob-like wrestling that tries to grasp and hold on to God. They are not exercises in equanimity, articulations of selfless piety. To many of us they will seem to lack the manners of proper reverence.¹⁴

This should not be so. As long as human life involves suffering, we need to know how to bring our pains, fears, and anxieties in honesty before God, who can help us and heal us as nothing and no one else can. As people in our society increasingly fall prey to various forms of depression, anxiety, and anger, we must not neglect the resources the Psalms provide for praying through anguish. And if Jesus Himself prayed psalms of lament while suffering on our behalf, we would do well to learn from His example. With God’s aid, this study will help remedy our deficiency.

How have you cried out to God—or retreated from Him—in your times of greatest distress?

WISDOM AND INSTRUCTION

While the psalmists primarily take their joys and concerns and lay them before God, at times they turn toward others to convey what God has taught them. Often these psalms use clear contrasts, such as the righteous versus the wicked, wisdom versus folly, and the like—the sort of binary language typical of Wisdom Literature found elsewhere in the Bible. In fact, the very first psalm urges us to choose which way we want to go: the path of righteousness or the path of wickedness. Some psalms (for example, Psalms 37 and 49) offer wisdom gained through experience with God, while Psalms 19 and 119 famously celebrate the goodness of God’s written instructions and ordinances.

¹² Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 32.

¹³ We give an overview of all five “books” of the Psalms in Day 5 of this lesson.

¹⁴ James L. Mays, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and Gene M. Tucker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 6.

The aim of all God's laws and instructions is that we learn to love and trust Him, and to manifest His goodness to one another. In all their forms (lament, thanksgiving, and praise, as well as the more pointed instruction), the Psalms are invaluable tools in teaching us to trust, love, and obey the One who is truly worthy of our unwavering allegiance.

DAY 4: HOW SHOULD WE READ THE PSALMS?

The Psalms are not simplistic; they “work” on multiple levels. In order to read the Psalms most profitably, we should learn to view them through a few different lenses. Three important ways of understanding the Psalms are (a) as poetry, (b) as pedagogy, and (c) as prayer.

THE PSALMS AS POETRY

Before we attempt to tease out the particular life lessons or prayer applications of a given psalm, we need to pay careful attention to what the psalm is actually *saying*. And to do that, we need to understand the language in which the text aims to communicate with us. For the Psalms, this understanding involves more than the translator's task of rendering Hebrew words and phrases into English equivalents; we should also aim to familiarize ourselves with the nature of Hebrew poetry. For indeed, the Psalms are “Hebrew poetry at its best.”¹⁵

As poetry, the Psalms use a variety of literary techniques, such as metaphor, idiom, alliteration, assonance, inclusion, repetition, chiasm, refrain, acrostic, and word pairs.¹⁶ The most distinguishing feature of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, which involves stating something one way and then restating it (or its opposite) immediately afterward. This serves to draw out a theme, and the subtle contrasts between parallel expressions can provide clarity and nuance.

Consider again the opening verse of Psalm 3: “Yahweh, how many are my adversaries! Many are those who stand against me!” If nothing else, the second half of the verse helps us understand what David means by “adversaries” in the first half. Beyond that, the parallelism sets a rhythm to our reading, giving us time to linger over a thought before jumping immediately to the next.

In some cases, the two halves of a line may not be so straightforwardly logical, as in this proverb: “Six things are there which Yahweh hates, and seven are an abomination to him” (Prov 6:16). *Which is it?* you may ask. Are there six things, or seven? But the aim of the proverb, of course, is not to achieve mathematical precision in a taxonomy of evils; the aim of this striking language is to capture our attention and make us read what follows carefully. (If we read attentively enough to solve the riddle, we just might remember not to *do* those things the Lord finds so hateful.)

¹⁵ James L. Mays, *Psalms*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 5.

¹⁶ See Gerald H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms—Volume 1* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 31-57; Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 29-47; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

We must take care to read the Psalms in light of the many poetic techniques at work in them. This does not in any way mean dismissing the concrete truths to which they give voice, or softening the impact of difficult passages by assuring ourselves that the author is “being poetic, not literal.” However, it does mean being attentive to the ways the Psalms can speak indirectly and evocatively; it means being attentive to *connotation* and not just *denotation*, as poetry is meant to provoke associations. It requires more of the heart than simple prose, perhaps, yet no less of the head. Indeed, in the Psalms we find an outpouring of emotion that is nonetheless communicated through highly sophisticated, orderly structures: The currents of emotion can flow all the stronger when contained by the barriers of mental discipline. The Psalms engage our whole being.

Sometimes God speaks in prose. Sometimes He gives laws, or tells stories, or inspires His apostles to write letters. Sometimes God speaks through dreams and visions laden with symbols. Regardless of the format, we need the Holy Spirit to guide us as we attend to the words given, for the Word of God is not merely text on a page—it is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12), and the Holy Spirit is the One who knows how to wield it (Eph 6:17).

In your experience of reading the Bible, have you noticed a difference between prose passages and poetic passages? In what way do the poetic parts of the Bible have a different effect on you than the prose parts?

THE PSALMS AS PEDAGOGY

While some psalms are overtly didactic in nature (including the first two), the Psalms as a whole are useful for our instruction (2 Tim 3:16). They aim to teach their readers what the world is like, what humanity is like, and above all what God is like. As John Calvin famously noted, “Nearly all wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”¹⁷

First, the Psalms teach us about God. In fact, we find a higher concentration of descriptive statements about God in the Psalms than anywhere else in Scripture.¹⁸ To give only a brief sampling, the Psalms describe God as “exceedingly great” (104:1), “fearsome in his deeds” (66:5), a “refuge and strength” (46:1), “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loyalty and faithfulness” (86:15). We are told not only who God *is* but what He *does*—indeed, what He already *has done* for His people. God “forgives,” “heals,” “redeems,” and “satisfies” (Pss 103–105). He “saves” (57:3), “hears” (69:33), and “knows” (139:1). He “bestows favor

¹⁷ Calvin, *Instit.* 1.1.1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 35.

¹⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms* 1–41, 69.

and honor” (84:11). He “reigns” (99:1). And these phrases are only a drop in the ocean of the Psalter’s theological language—much more will be explored in the course of this study.

Second, the Psalms teach us about humanity. “What is man?” David asks in Psalm 8. The Psalter is not concerned with providing us a biological answer to this question. Instead, it speaks theologically: A human being is a creature “fearfully and wonderfully made” (139:14), “crowned with glory and grandeur” and appointed to “rule” over all of creation (8:4-6). But we have fallen through sin, and the Psalms also do not shy away from addressing us at our lowest. While at rock bottom, the psalmist wallows: “I am a worm, not a man” (22:6). Yet ironically, the psalmist’s human dignity remains evident in the capacity to articulate his struggle at such a moment of despair (in a poem, no less!) and confess it to God. Even in lament, “these prayers are poignant disclosures of ‘self.’”¹⁹

It is God’s will and deep desire that we know Him, not abstractly, but personally—that we know what He is like, what He values, what pleases and displeases Him. He also desires that we know ourselves and that we catch His vision for human life redeemed in His image. He appreciates our curiosity regarding His nature and rewards us with intimacy as we draw close to Him.

THE PSALMS AS PRAYER

Finally, and perhaps most obviously (we have already touched on this some in the first three days of this lesson), the Psalms are not merely instruction *about* God; they are also prayers *to* God. The vast majority of psalms address God directly, and typically this address falls within the opening line of the psalm, as in the following:

- “Yahweh, how many are my adversaries!” (3:1)
- “When I call, answer me, God of my righteousness!” (4:1)
- “To my words give ear, Yahweh” (5:1)
- “Yahweh, do not in your anger reproach me” (6:1)
- “Yahweh, my God, in you I seek refuge” (7:1)
- “Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth” (8:1)

As praying believers today, we can recognize that prayer has a certain “sound,” carries a certain tone. We can probably pick out the sound of others praying, even if we cannot make out the distinct words, just based on their way of speaking. In the same way, we can strive to listen for the voice of prayer in the Psalms.

One marker of these prayers’ tone or voice is the heartfelt earnestness—even passion—with which the words are addressed to God. When we read the Psalms, we are not simply overhearing a conversation about God. We are given direct access to our spiritual ancestors’ passionate confrontations with their Creator, and we are then given the opportunity to join in and speak to God through their words. We are highly privileged to follow in their footsteps.

¹⁹ Mays, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms*, 52.

In what way would you like your prayers to more closely emulate those of the psalmists?

DAY 5: THE NARRATIVE SHAPE OF THE ENTIRE PSALTER

As modern-day Bible readers, we tend to read the Psalms as a collection of isolated passages. And while it is true that each psalm is a distinct composition, the final form of the Psalter bears the marks of an intentional shaping and ordering. Individual psalms have been brought together and arranged to form an overarching unity, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We could even say that the book has been shaped into a coherent *story* that proceeds with a kind of narrative logic running throughout its beginning, middle, and ending.

One reason for concluding that there is a broader narrative arc to the Psalter is that it is presented to us as five “books”: Book 1 (Pss 1–41), Book 2 (Pss 42–72), Book 3 (Pss 73–89), Book 4 (Pss 90–106), and Book 5 (Pss 107–150). This arrangement is clear in that each of the first four books ends with a similar doxology:

Ending of Book 1:

*Blessed be Yahweh, God of Israel,
from everlasting and to everlasting!
Amen and Amen! (41:13)*

Ending of Book 2:

*Blessed be Yahweh, God, God of Israel,
who alone does wonders.
And blessed be his glorious name forever,
and may the whole earth be filled with his glory.
Amen and Amen!
The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended. (72:18-20)*

Ending of Book 3:

*Blessed be Yahweh forever!
Amen and Amen! (89:52)*

Ending of Book 4:

*Blessed be Yahweh, God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
And let all the people say, "Amen! Praise Yahweh!" (106:48)*

Book 5, as the final “chapter” in the saga, does not end with a short doxology but builds to a grand finale of praise, which comprises the whole of the last five psalms.²⁰

So, since the Psalter is divided into five books—like the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy)—what broader movements of intention and meaning might we find at work in the collection as a whole? Let us now briefly walk through the five books, taking note of these broader features and how the movement across the Psalms has been shaped into a kind of story—a story about *kingship*.

Book 1 (Pss 1–41) commences with two psalms that are not prayers in any normal sense—they speak to us, not to God—but are foundational pillars of truth we must remember as we proceed through the prayers that follow. Their combined witness is that wickedness is foolish and leads to destruction, while blessing lies in honoring God’s word and God’s anointed king. When the movement of the Psalter leads into darker valleys, these two introductory psalms serve as “true north”: God has given His word to instruct and His king to rule. This is as true today as when the Psalms were written: “All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for instruction, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16), and Jesus is King forever.

Following these introductory psalms, nearly every one of the remaining psalms in Book 1 carries the superscription “David’s.”²¹ In this way, David is established early on as the “protagonist” of the Psalter. Book 1 is also marked by its high concentration of lament psalms. Combining these two data points with our knowledge of David’s early life from the books of Samuel, we can imagine many of the psalms in Book 1 as reflecting David’s struggles with the various enemies identified in the narrative record. Amid those descriptions of struggle, we also find remarkable expressions of David’s trust in Yahweh, such as the famous Psalm 23.

Although the headings in Book 2 (Pss 42–72) introduce some other psalmists (Asaph, Solomon, and the sons of Korah), David’s is still the primary voice, linked explicitly to Psalms 51–65 and 68–70. The Davidic headings in Book 2 also become more robustly descriptive than those in Book 1. We read concerning Psalm 51, for instance, that it stems from “when Nathan the prophet came to him, because he had gone in to Bathsheba.” Psalm 52 concerns the time “when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, ‘David has gone to the house of Ahimelech.’” Psalm 54 relates to “when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, ‘Is not David hiding among

²⁰ Moreover, as David C. Mitchell states, “This is the only sequence of psalms in which each psalm features a double *Halleluyah*, one at the beginning and one at the end” (David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms*, JSOTSS 252 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997], 74).

²¹ The only exceptions are Psalms 10 and 33, which both lack a heading. In the former case, considerable evidence suggests Psalms 9 and 10 were originally one psalm, as we find them in LXX (see the preface to Psalm 9 in Lesson 3). In the latter case, while it is doubtful that Psalms 32 and 33 were originally one composition, Psalm 33 thematically follows directly on the heels of Psalm 32, and some manuscripts have a heading attributing it to David.

us?” And so on. The Davidic collection of Psalms 51–65 features eight of the thirteen such historical markers that exist in the entire Psalter. So here we find the most historically situated, concrete psalms of the book. But even these terse references to David’s external circumstances are only enough to help us understand these psalms as an expression of his *inner* life, his soul’s encounter with God.²²

In Book 3 (Pss 73–89), David disappears. The king is gone, except in Psalm 86. With that lone exception, none of the headings in Book 3 mention him at all. This corresponds not only to the historical reality of David’s death, but much more importantly to the eventual downfall of the entire Davidic line after the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. That the Psalter’s editor(s) intended to link this forlorn reality with Book 3 appears even clearer in light of their choice for the final two psalms of Book 3. Psalm 88 is known as the darkest moment in the entire Psalter because it is the only psalm that ends, elliptically, with no help in sight: “You have put lover and friend far away from me; those who know me . . . darkness” (88:18). Following this, Psalm 89 remembers God’s vow: “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ‘I will establish your offspring forever and build your throne for generation after generation’” (89:3–4). But then the psalmist laments: “But you have spurned and rejected; you have become furious with your anointed. You have renounced the covenant of your servant; you have laid his crown in the dirt” (89:38–39). As the story of kingship unfolded in Israel’s history, so is it retold in the Psalter: At the end of Book 3, the curtain falls onto a dark, kingless stage.

Book 4 (Pss 90–106) rises from the ashes with a resounding theme: “Yahweh reigns!” The phrase is placed front and center in several psalms (Pss 93, 96, 97, 99). The point seems to be that despite the loss of an earthly king, God still reigns as the true King, Lord of heaven and earth. Moreover, by beginning with Psalm 90—“a prayer of Moses, the man of God”—Book 4 encourages a look back to a time *before* any earthly king reigned in Israel, when Yahweh alone protected them as their King. At that time, God made a covenant with His people through Moses, and Book 4 seeks to remind the reader that God has not forgotten or abandoned that covenant. Language of remembrance proliferates in this book. Book 4 concludes with two historically oriented psalms that rehearse important moments in Israel’s history, noting along the way that God “*remembered* his holy word” (105:42) and that “he *remembered* his covenant for their sake” (106:45). If God has remembered His covenant in the past, He will surely remember it again in the future. He will restore His people. So, then, there must remain yet one more act in the story.

Book 5 (Pss 107–150) puts an overwhelming emphasis on joyful praise, mounting to the explosive five-psalm finale that concludes both Book 5 and the Psalter as a whole. Many of these psalms were written late in Israel’s history, after the Exile. Thus, the joy expressed here is not simply a recollection of “the good old days” when Israel still had a man on the throne. Rather, these psalms reflect a new orientation on the part of the Hebrew poets who penned them—specifically, an orientation to the future. And a future *king*.

²² “David’s inner life was now unlocked to the reader, who was allowed to hear his intimate thoughts and reflections” (Brevard S. Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 [1971]: 149).

Having been all but absent from Books 3–4, King David makes a triumphant return, appearing in the two collections that essentially flank Book 5 (Pss 107–117 and 136–145). David’s reemergence here, amid the prayers of the exiles long after his line had been deposed, suggests a messianic hope on the part of the book’s compilers. They had survived the horrors of exile, and they had come to remember that their true King was Yahweh. Nonetheless, they still desired for God to set a man on the throne of David. They still longed for a Messiah.

This messianic hope reflects the pillar of the foundation laid in Psalm 2, that God’s king will rule the nations. But we must not forget the other pillar of the foundation—that God gives his word to instruct—and Book 5 does not. The book’s glorious centerpiece is Psalm 119, by far the longest of all the psalms and an exhibition of Hebrew poetry at its finest. From start to finish, this alphabetical acrostic extols the goodness of God’s word, and we hear the unmistakable echo of Psalm 1 in its opening line: “Blessed are those . . . who walk in the *torah* [instruction] of Yahweh” (119:1).

The Psalter, then, is not merely a collection of individual psalms. It is *at least* that, to be sure, but it is also much more. It is a story about the history of God’s people, their need for His word, and the King whom He has promised to rule over them. It is a story whose final lines converge in the person of Jesus: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). It is a story that continues for us today.

Do you have any favorite psalms? How might your understanding of an individual psalm be enriched by considering it in the context of the larger story the Psalter is telling?

What are you most hoping to gain out of your study of the book of Psalms?

From this introductory lesson, what have you learned about what God is like?
