

Sing to the Lord

This 5-week study will provide an overview of the Psalms and is primarily intended for those with little or no current knowledge of these poetic works. During the course, we will learn how Hebrew poetry works and look at five major categories of psalms—Royal Psalms, Lament Psalms, Wisdom/Torah Psalms, Psalms of Praise, and Thanksgiving Psalms. We consider how the Psalms have been interpreted and prayed through the ages.

About the Psalms

The Psalms were initially written for liturgical use in the Temple. This is clear in Psalms such as 122 which is a pilgrim's song on coming in sight of the Temple Mount. Though the Psalms were initially used in corporate worship associated with the Temple, the Psalms have been transmitted to us not merely as an ancient hymn book but as God's word. The Psalms teach much about the character of God and the expectation of the Messiah—the perfect king of David's line.

Of the 150 Psalms, 117 of them have superscriptions, or brief notes before the Psalm which may be a single phrase of several lines of text. 73 of the Psalms mention David by name, though the Hebrew is unclear as to whether they are “by David,” “of David,” or “for David.” It is possible to understand the Hebrew to mean that they were written by David himself, on his behalf, or even in the style of David. Thirteen of the superscriptions connect the Psalms to specific events in David's life. Other superscriptions contain instructions to the song leader whose meanings are no longer certain.

The Book of Psalms is broken up into five divisions long noted by both Jewish and Christian scholars. Both the New Revised Standard and New International Version translations follow this five book arrangement divided by the doxologies in Ps 41:13, 72:29, 89:52, and 106:48. They divide the Psalter into the following five sections:

Book I	Psalms 1-41
Book II	Psalms 42-72

Book III	Psalms 73-89
Book IV	Psalms 90-106
Book V	Psalms 107-150

If nothing else, this observation shows that the final shape of the collection has been carefully thought through and we should not consider the placement of Psalms to be merely random. Though many Psalms were written early in Israel's history, they did not reach their final form until after the fall of Babylon to Persia in 539 B.C. and the subsequent return to Israel.

Hebrew Poetry

Structure, rather than rhyme, is the dominant element in Hebrew poetry. Three features worth noting are repetition, parallelism, and chiasmic structure.

While in English, it is considered poor writing to repeat the same word, it is good form in Hebrew. Words are repeated throughout a poem in patterns to achieve a purpose. Sometimes English translations make this repetition difficult to discern as translators will opt for different English words to translate the same word in Hebrew. This makes the English flow more smoothly, but can hide the poetic intent of the repetition. Repetition of a word or phrase, at the opening and closing of a Psalm for example, can help to highlight the Psalms theology.

A casual glance at the Psalms will show that the second half of a line often relates to the first half of a line. The second half may restate the first half, amplify its meaning, or even stand in opposition to the first half of the verse. Parallelism occurs throughout the Psalms, but some of the most notable examples are in Ps 1 and 90.

A chiasmic structure gets its name from the Greek letter *chi* (X). The pattern goes ABCBA or ABBA, where A, B, and C stand for elements in the Psalm repeated in a chiasmic pattern. Verse 1 may have element A, verse 2 element B, verse 3 element C, then back to element B for verse 4, and element A for verse 5. The chiasmic repetition may also occur within a single line of poetry (Ps. 6:10 or 100:3), or in several poetic lines (Ps 90:1-2, or Ps 101:3-7). A chiasm serves to emphasize theological insights.



*A tree planted
near running
water, that
yields its fruit
in due season,
and whose leaves
never fade*

An Overview

Here is an overview of the sections to be covered each week. We will look at types of Psalms, each week looking at notable examples of these five major types of Psalms. Reading the text ahead of the class will be helpful, but is not essential.

Week	Passage	General Topic
1	Psalms 1, 19, 119	Wisdom/Torah Psalms
2	Psalms 2, 18, 45, 72	Royal Psalms
3	Psalms 4, 22, 44, 74	Lament Psalms
4	Psalms 23, 62, 30, 92	Trust & Thanksgiving
5	Psalms 95, 122, 150	Psalms of Praise

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הללויה שירו ליהוה Sing to the Lord



Selections from the Psalms

~ a 5-week study ~