

Psalms: Our God Reigns

Background

- Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, at 150 chapters long. It's in the Old Testament, and divided into 5 sub-divisions, called 'books'.
- The book of Psalms has been dearly loved by God's people over the centuries. The reformer John Calvin famously wrote, 'I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul"; for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short all distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.'¹
- We can think of the Psalms as spanning roughly a thousand years. Psalm 90 was written by Moses (see its superscription - 'a prayer of Moses, the man of God'), and so may be the oldest Psalm (c. 1400 BC). At the other extreme, Psalm 137 may be the youngest Psalm; it begins, 'by the waters of Babylon, there we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion', thus taking us at least as far back as the Babylonian captivity (6th century BC).
- It is clear from reading the Psalms as a whole that over the course of time they were arranged into the form in which we have them. There are 'collections within the collection'. For instance, Psalms 120-134 all share the superscription 'A song of ascents'. There are several collections of Davidic Psalms (i.e., a Psalm 'of David'), such as 3-41 or 51-70, as well as a collection of Psalms 'of the Sons of Korah', 42-49. Psalms 73-83 are 'of Asaph', followed by another collection 'of the Sons of Korah', 84-88.
- Whilst there is enormous diversity within the Psalms, it is helpful to notice three common 'types' - which we might label as hymn, lament, and thanksgiving. Broadly speaking, the hymn gives us words to remember, rehearse and praise God when 'all is well'; the lament for when something is wrong, and the thanksgiving for when a wrong has been set right.²
- The 'hymns'³ generally begin with an invitation to praise God, followed by praising God - often through rehearsing God's great works and character, and concluding with an affirmation of faith. Through the light of the New Testament, we can see that these hymns

1 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1979), 1:xxxvi-xxxvii.

2 Mark Futato, *Psalms* in Miles van Pelt (ed), *A Biblical-theological introduction to the Old Testament: the gospel promised* (Crossway, 2016), location 9352.

3 See, e.g., Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 65, 67, 68, 93, 96, 98, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150.

are in fact praising Jesus, who is the creator and redeemer (cf John 1.1-3; Colossians 1.10-15).

- The 'laments'⁴ generally move from negative to positive, and often communicate a profound honesty in asking questions before God. There will often be a concrete request being asked of God – for help, deliverance, forgiveness, etc. Many of the laments end with striking notes of assurance and confidence in God. Through the light of the New Testament, the laments point us to Jesus, the suffering servant and the high priest – the One who himself called out 'why have you forsaken me?' (Matthew 27.46, also see Hebrews 5.7)
- Thanksgiving Psalms⁵ are characterised by three things; an intention to give thanks, a rehearsal of previous trouble and deliverance, and a concluding expression of thanks. Through the light of the New Testament, we can see the Lord Jesus leading us in praise of God (cf Hebrews 2.12).
- Some Psalms have 'imprecatory' texts – that is, verses which call curses on a person or group of persons. These belong in our Bibles, however difficult we may initially find them. We can note that a) the New Testament applies these texts to confirmed enemies of God (see in Acts 1 how imprecatory Psalms texts are applied to Judas); b) Jesus himself bore the curses due for his people (see Galatians 3); so such texts lead us to rejoice since we know we deserve curse but have instead received favour. c) it is the risen Jesus who alone, with total justice, sings these curses and judgement on his enemies. The 'imprecatory' texts call on God, not us, to do justice.

Structure

- The Hebrew title of Psalms is literally, 'book of praises'. This may surprise us since there are many more laments than praises among the 150 Psalms. However, there is a clear progression and sense of movement across the book as a whole – from suffering to glory. This also shadows Jesus' words on the Emmaus road; 'was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?' (Luke 24.26) In this sense, the book of Psalms is a 'portrait' of Jesus.
- Often, there is a clear link between one Psalm and the next. Or, a question raised in one is answered in the next (compare Psalm 106.47-48 with Psalm 107.1-3, for example).
- Psalms 1-2 together form a vital 'gateway' to all 150 Psalms. We may miss some of the significance in English, but in the Hebrew text of these Psalms there are several features which show that the two are bound together to perform a function as a basis together for all that follows:

⁴ See, e.g., Psalms 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 38, 39, 42, 43, 44, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 79, 80, 83, 86, 88, 89, 102, 109, 120, 130.

⁵ See, e.g., Psalms 18, 30, 34, 40, 41, 66, 92, 116, 118, 124, 138.



- The *first* verse of Psalm 1 and the *final* verse of Psalm 2 emphasise the word ‘blessed’, making this idea the ‘book-end’.
- The words ‘way’ and ‘perish’ are also linked in the final verses of both.
- There is a play on the Hebrew word for ‘meditate’ or ‘plot’, linking 1.2 and 2.1.
- ‘Blessed’ is the opposite of ‘perish’, and these two words are placed at opposite ends of Psalm 1 (they are the first and final words in Hebrew), and that contrast is rapidly summarised by the two words placed near to each other in the final verse of Psalm 2.

The Shape of the Book of Psalms

The deliberate ordering and arranging of the Psalms shows us some remarkable things.

- The Psalms opens the third section – called ‘the Writings’ - of the Old Testament (the other two sections are the ‘law of Moses’ and ‘the prophets’ - see e.g., Luke 24.44). Broadly, the purpose of this third section is to instruct God’s people in how to live as his people.
- The Psalms teach us not only from the individual Psalms and verses, but in the arrangement of the book as a whole. One scholar writes, ‘if it is true anywhere that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, it is true in the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is not a random anthology of discrete poems but an intentionally shaped collection with instruction embedded in the whole.’⁶
- The division of the Psalms into five books may very well mirror the structure of the books of the ‘Law’, the first division of the Old Testament.
- It is clear that ‘David’ dominates all five books. Seventy-three Psalms have ‘David’ in their titles, and ‘Davidic’ Psalms are placed throughout the whole Psalter. There is a particular cluster of Davidic Psalms in the *first* and *last* books (3-9, 11-32 and 34-41 in book one, and then 138-145 in book five).
- The first two Psalms, whilst short, function as a gateway into the whole Psalter, and are rich in connections to the whole Bible story. In Psalm 1, the blessedness of ‘the man who meditates day and night’ on the law of God alludes to the tree of life in the garden of Eden (Genesis 2.10-14), and thus to the trees of life planted by the river of life flowing from the new temple in Ezekiel (Ezekiel 47.1-12; see also Revelation 22.1-2). In Psalm 2, there is a clear expectation that – despite opposition from humankind and human rulers – God will enthrone his messiah to rule over the whole earth. The writers of the New Testament clearly understand Psalm 2 to have been fulfilled in the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus⁷. The placement of Psalm 2 here at the ‘gateway’ shows that this glorious hope – the rule of God’s king, Jesus - remains valid despite the volume of lament Psalms (of which there are many in book 1). In fact, when the Psalter was ‘published’ in its final form – the 150 Psalms, in the order in which we now have them – there was no Davidic king on the

⁶ Futato, location 9312.

⁷ See, for instance, Acts 4.23-31 or Acts 13.33.



throne (the people were in exile). Yet the future hope of God's Davidic King ruling over the whole earth organises and drives the whole Psalter.

- Note how the 'Davidic King' theme is reinforced by the placement of Psalms at the 'seams' of the five books:
 - **Book one** consists largely of laments. After the 'gateway' of Psalms 1-2, Psalm 3 and Psalm 41 (the final one of book one) show that God will give his king triumph over his enemies, even though he suffers treachery from his own son (Psalm 3) or his closest friend (Psalm 41).
 - **Book two** (Psalms 42-72) closes with Psalm 72, which portrays a glorious vision of what it will be like for the Davidic king to rule the earth.
 - **Book three** (Psalms 73-89) considers disaster for the nation of Israel, with an overarching concern to call God's people to faith in him in the midst of bleakness. The concluding Psalm (89) 'poignantly contrasts the stark reality of the present situation – exile, judgement and the absence of a Davidic monarch – with the enduring throne of David (2 Samuel 7)'⁸.
 - **Book four** (Psalms 90-106) begins with a Psalm of Moses, thus pointing back to the wilderness experience of Israel, a time when Israel was suffering the consequences of their unbelief towards God. The significance here in the Psalter, however, is the implicit confidence that, just as the previous 'exile' ended, so would this one (that is, the exile to Babylon, during which much of the Psalter was likely arranged). Although there was no human kingship in Israel at the time of the exile, the cluster of 'kingship' Psalms (e.g., 93, 95-99) affirms that God is still reigning; Psalm 2 remains 'the vision'. Book four closes with Psalm 106, which reviews Israel's history and serves to confess sin and rebellion, and remembers God's covenant mercy in the past; it closes with a plea that God would again save and gather up his people (compare the endings of book three and book four; Psalms 89 and 106).
 - **Book five** begins with an extended Psalm of thanksgiving which both 'answers' the plea of Psalm 106, and introduces the tone of this final book. Psalm 107 celebrates the gathering in of God's people from the four corners of earth, because of his steadfast (covenant) love. A stretch of Psalms then focus on hope in the Davidic king; the tribe of Judah (David's tribe) is hailed as God's sceptre, to rule the nations, in Psalm 108. Psalm 110 alludes both to Psalm 2 and indeed to Genesis 1 with the language of God's Christ ruling and having dominion. Psalms 111-118 continue the theme of God's kingship. Psalm 119 is then an enormous celebration of God's 'torah' (instruction or law), followed by fifteen 'songs of ascents' (Psalms 120-134) which celebrate pilgrimage to Zion. One scholar comments, 'these pilgrimage songs are probably placed here to show that the reason for return from exile is to go up to Mount Zion to hear the Torah in all its wonder and to worship the Lord (cf. Isaiah 2.1-5; Micah 4.15). Israel's ascent can thus

⁸ Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2003), p197.



point the way to the nations (Zechariah 8.23).⁹ Psalms 135-137, which follow the songs of ascent, return to a tone of bitter lament, in particular the lament of the exiles (Psalm 137). The fact that these are followed by another cluster of Davidic Psalms (Psalms 138-144) highlights again the confident and repeated hope; God will reign for the good of his people through his chosen King (cf Ephesians 1.19-23). Psalm 145 is an 'acrostic' Psalm (one in which the lines begin with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet), calling in both structure and content for utmost praise for the name of Yahweh. We might summarise the 'plot line' like this; *the final answer to the problem of the exile of God's people lies in his Davidic king.*

- All four books end with some form of doxology (a declaration of praise and worship); compare the endings of Psalms 41, 72, 89, and 106. Now book five concludes with the maximal blast of praise for the LORD; the final five Psalms (146-150) have the repeated note, 'Hallelujah' (which means, 'praise the Lord!' in Hebrew); each Psalm has the word twice, once at the beginning and once at the end. Psalm 150 ends with the glorious climax, 'let everything that has breath praise the LORD!' Here then is the goal of all of God's creation; for his rule to be established through his chosen king, for the good of his people, and for the praise of his glory from all his creation.

The gospel in the Psalms

- The Psalms become indescribably rich when we understand them in light of the person and work of Jesus. Consider this extended quotation from a Crosslands Training article:

'The psalms speak of Christ in a variety of ways. First, it turns out in the fulness of Scripture that certain parts of the psalms are ultimately words which the Father speaks to his Son, especially in describing for us who the Son is. This is especially evident in the NT, in Hebrews 1:5-13, where the writer quotes from Psalms 2, 45, 102 and 110, and asserts that each of those statements was made by the Father to the Son. They particularly concern the Son's status, role in creation, lordship and universal reign. Peter, in his sermon at Pentecost, also quotes from Psalm 110, and for precisely the same purpose (Acts 2:34-35). Thus, these psalms are interpreted in the NT as songs *of* Christ in the sense that they are songs that are ultimately *about* Christ.

However, the NT treats the psalms as songs of Christ in an additional sense: *not just as songs about him but as songs to be understood as ultimately sung by him.* A little earlier in that same Pentecost sermon, Peter quotes Psalm 16:8-11 (Acts 2:25-28), saying that in these words David speaks "about" Christ in his resurrection: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken" (v.25). Peter then extends the quote from Psalm 16, and as he does so it becomes clear (at

⁹ Dempster, p200.



least to the careful listener) that these can no longer be words which David said about Christ: “you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, / you will not let your holy one see decay” (v.27). Peter immediately reminds his hearers of the obvious fact that David did in fact die (v.29), and yet his words stand as a prophecy of the resurrection. Yet it seems as if part of what he has quoted from Psalm 16 makes sense, not as words spoken by David *about* Christ’s resurrection, but as words spoken *by* Christ about his own resurrection.

What Peter hints at in this sermon is drawn out explicitly in Hebrews 10:5-7. The writer there quotes words from Psalm 40, in which David spoke to God: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, / but a body you prepared for me...”, and introduces the quote by saying explicitly that Christ said them at the point of his incarnation, addressing his Father: “when Christ came into the world, he said... ‘I have come to do your will, my God’” (v.5, 7).

A little earlier, in Hebrews 2:12, the writer does something even more remarkable. He introduces a quote from Psalm 22:22 by saying of Christ that “he says” it. Here, not only are words spoken in a psalm by David said to be also words spoken by Christ, they are also said to be words which Christ continues to say in the present: “he says...” The quotation is about Christ calling Christian believers his brothers and sisters, and therefore a remarkable pastoral strategy emerges in Hebrews at this point: when the writer wants to reassure believers that they are truly “of the same family” as Jesus (2:11), he does so by asserting that Jesus is *saying right now* that they are his family and is doing so *by using words from a psalm of David*.¹⁰

- Thus, the most important thing for us to realise is that the Psalms – all of them – are primarily about Jesus, not about us. In fact, we can only relate to the Psalms, and participate in them, through union with Jesus.
- It is only through the gospel of Jesus that we are able to (1) gather together as God’s people, (2) be honest before him, and (3) worship him.
- Jesus is the perfect fulfilment of many of the titles found in the Psalms (e.g. the son, the anointed (Christ), the (Davidic) king, the ‘afflicted’ one, etc).
- Many of the Psalms can be best applied to the Christian when read with Jesus as the one speaking — this is particularly helpful when approaching Psalms which call for judgment on the Psalmist’s enemies. It is Jesus who ‘sings’ the Psalms.
- The Psalms touch upon the full gamut of human emotion and experience. Only in Christ can we rediscover our true human nature, and through the Psalms learn to articulate our thoughts and emotions in a richly God-centred way.

¹⁰ Full article here https://www.crosslands.training/blog/2018/10/31/the-psalms-songs-of-christ?mc_cid=a2ab184c88&mc_eid=4976c6097b, accessed 31/01/2019.



Our series in the book of Psalms

- While each of the five books has a particular emphasis, we can summarise the message of the Psalms as a whole with the tag line, **'Our God Reigns'**.
 - This theme is clearly central in the Psalm 1-2 'gateway' to the whole book, as God is portrayed as 'the one who sits in the heavens', ruling over all the kings and kingdoms of humankind.
 - The subsequent mentions of God's rule are extremely numerous; 'the LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever' (Psalm 29.10)¹¹.
 - What is more, the Psalms insist – from the beginning in Psalm 2 – that our God reigns *through his chosen King*. Psalm 18.50 says, 'Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever.'
 - This emphasis is reflected in the structure of all five books; Psalm 41 closes book 1 with an affirmation that the promises of Psalm 2 are being fulfilled. Psalm 41 opens with the very same word for 'blessed', alluding back to Psalm 1 'and identifying David as the blessed man of that Psalm. Psalm 41.11 confirms God's "delight" in David, which corresponds to David's "delight" in God's instruction in Psalm 1.2'¹².
 - But what about David's death? Is it still the case that 'Our God reigns through his King'? Psalm 72 closes book 2 'with an affirmation that the covenant made with David has indeed been effectively transferred to Solomon [his son]. It is not coincidental that Psalm 72 is "of Solomon", whether this means by Solomon or about Solomon. In any case, now Solomon is caring for the weak (72.4) as the successor of David, who is likewise portrayed as caring for the poor in 41.1 at the close of book 1. And Psalm 72...tells us that Solomon is now the great king who rules over the nations, promised in Psalm 2.'¹³
 - At the close of book 3, the question posed is in terms of God reigning through his Davidic king: 'Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?' (Psalm 89.49). Earlier in the Psalm, it had celebrated God's promises to David.
 - At the heart of book 4 there is a cluster of Psalms celebrating God's kingship (Psalms 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99). In this sense, book 4 answers the pained question of book 3 with the affirmation that our God indeed does reign, even when evidence is to the contrary, and even when (at that time), there was no Davidic king on the throne.

11 Other pertinent cross-references are Psalm 47.8, Psalm 93.1-2.

12 Futato, location 9525.

13 Ibid., location 9536.



'The kingship Psalms in book 4 instil hope that the divine King will come to put all things in right order.'¹⁴

- Book 5 builds on this, insisting on the specific hope that the messianic King – God's chosen one, from David's line - will come. For instance, Psalm 132 'asks God to remember David and all his hardships (132.1) and not to reject his "anointed one" (132.10). This plea is followed by an affirmation of the promise made to David (132.11) and a promise from the Lord himself (132.17-18).'¹⁵ In addition, Psalm 118 contains the famous refrain, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD' (118.26), quoted in John 12.13 as, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!'
- Thus, the theme 'Our God Reigns' ties together all 5 books of the Psalms and is our series tagline. It functions both as the main *content* of the Psalms (God ruling through his Davidic King) but also as the *confidence* and the *praise* of his people.
- We will, over several years, preach through the Psalms – taking them a book at a time. Our sub-heading for book 1 is taken from the start of the book: 'The LORD knows the way of the righteous'.

14 Ibid., location 9571.

15 Futato, location 9571.

