

Psalms: God's Worship & Prayer Guide

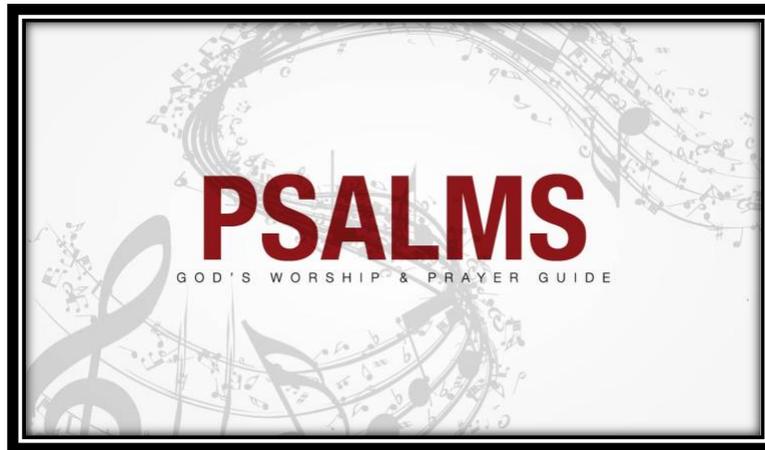
Introduction

Selected Texts

Written By

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COVID-19 has certainly caught us all by surprise. Never in my lifetime did I ever think something like this could occur on a *global* scale. Oh sure, I, like you, am aware of past pestilences like the Spanish Flu of 1918, Smallpox (which killed 70% of Native American according to Healthline.com), Polio . . . which peaked in 1955 or two years before I was born, SARS, Ebola, H5N1 but they were, for the most part, isolated instances. But they were bound to occur.

The Institute of Medicine Forum on Microbial Threats produced a study in 2009 warning of this ongoing occurrence based on a variety of factors. Titled *Microbial Evolution and Co-Adaptation: A Tribute to the Life of Scientific Legacies of Joshua Lederberg*,¹ the periodical demonstrates how viruses infect a host population, and, then, how they disseminate in said population. The second chapter painstakingly identifies 1,4000 human pathogen species. Of these, 500 are capable of human-to-human transmission, and of these fewer than 150 have the potential to cause epidemic or endemic disease. The paper concludes that ongoing ecological change will cause at least three of these types of viruses to be released on the populace of the world PER YEAR. Put your coffee cup down and read that one more time, slowly.

Given what we now know one pandemic virus can do our lives, this statistic is most disconcerting and troubling . . . really unnerving. With one pandemic you lose many of your basic constitutional rights (and wonder if you will ever get them back as fast as you lost them), your

¹ Institute of Medicine (US) Forum on Microbial Threats. *Microbial Evolution and Co-Adaptation: A Tribute to the Life and Scientific Legacies of Joshua Lederberg: Workshop Summary*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US); 2009. 5, Infectious Disease Emergence: Past, Present, and Future. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK45714/>.

ability to go where you want and be with as many people as you want is, well, a distant memory, you start getting tired of having Zoom meetings because you actually want in person meetings (shocking), you find it awkward talking to people while you stand in line because their mouths are hidden behind masks, showing physical affection is out, greeting someone with a firm handshake is a major no-no (I am really having a tough time with this, really), eating out is quickly replaced by eating in, sporting events are unthinkable (but you might have baseball teams sequestered in arid Arizona to play before empty stadiums . . . what's the point?), traveling to any fun destination is not a possibility, boarding a plane is a risky venture, purchasing to most basic life necessities becomes something akin to a treasure hunt (good luck finding what you are looking for), a wide array of people have lost their once stable jobs, and, unfortunately, many people of all ages contract the dreaded disease and have their lives cut short . . . when everything seemed to be going along so well (stocks were rocking and unemployment was at record lows).

One pandemic has changed everything. It is enough to rock your world to the core and cause you much fear and frustration, and for many this has exactly what has occurred. They are fearful of impending death, of losing loved ones, of losing their retirement monies, of losing all they now hold dear but once took for granted. Why, even surfing off the coast of California proved a criminal offence for one lone surfer trying to get a little rest and relaxation. Some Christians have even been fined for daring to show up in their cars to listen to a worship service broadcast live on an FM channel in the church parking lot. These are, indeed, bizarre times and illogical too. While going to church can cost you \$500 fine, it's quite all right to head to the local liquor store or abortion center. The hypocrisy of the moment merely adds fuel to the fire of fear.

When we encounter deep waters like this, as Christians, how are we to live to God's glory? Is this not the question? No doubt. A follow-up question is in order: How can we gain mental and spiritual strength for these tough, trying, and troublesome times? I believe the answers come from a study of Israel's song book, the Psalms. Within these 150 chapters we learn not only how to worship and live wisely for God at all seasons of our lives, but how to pray and praise Him when the bottom falls out of our once stable lives and world. The saints who wrote this memorable book have stood where we stand, and by learning from their divinely inspired examples we shall be equipped to sail through this pernicious pandemic as victors, not victims.

So I invite you to come with me as we open the pages of one of the most famous, most used, and most profound books of the Old Testament, the Psalms. Charles Spurgeon, the famous English preacher from the 1800s, stated that this book was his favorite of all of Scripture. His massive two volume commentary called *The Treasury of David* attests to his love of this book. Alexander Maclaren, another powerful and godly preacher from the 1800s, once remarked, "If the rest of Scripture may be called the Spirit of God to man, this book (the Psalms) is the answer of the Spirit of God in man."² How true. While God does speak to us in the Psalms about Himself, we learn how to speak to Him in all of the peaks and valleys of our lives as we pour over these pages.

In order to properly set the expositional/exegetical stage for studying this, the longest book of the Bible, I think it most prudent and wise to cover some all-important background information in this opening study. Some of this will be old information to those who have walked with God for years, while for others it will be new concepts. All it will, I hope, stretch and challenge your thinking so you can think deeper thoughts about God and walk even more obediently before Him.

² Donald M. Williams, *The Preachers Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 11.

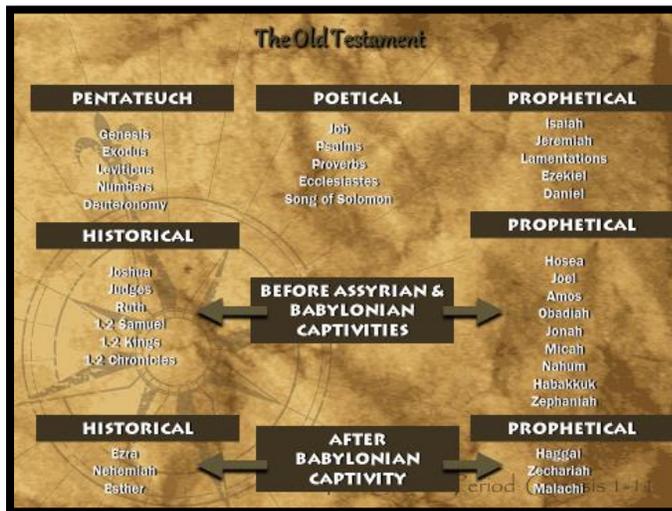
What Are The Introductory Questions We Need Answers To As We Study God’s Worship And Prayer Guide?

The Hebrew name for this great book is Sepher Tehillim, which translates Book of Praises,” and, indeed it is. From Psalm 1 to Psalm 150, the concept of giving praise to God in all seasons of life is paramount. Later, the Greek Septuagint (or the LXX, representing the 70 scholars who assembled it in its final form) called this book Psalmoi, denoting poems sung with musical instrumentation. As you can see, this name is what carried over into our English translations. Either way, Psalms is a book designed to teach you about the need to give your daily praise to the living, loving God.

To commence our study, I invite you to consider seven foundational questions to help you wrap your mind and heart around this new pedagogical venture.

What Is The Structure Of The Old Testament?

In my Tour of the Old Testament I open by showing you how balanced the Old Testament really is.



There are five books of Law, Genesis through Deuteronomy; five poetical books, which tell us how we, as individuals are to live before God; and five major prophets who tell us about God’s messianic kingdom plans. God gave us nine historical books before the Babylonian and Assyrian captivities of Israel (586 B.C., 722 B.C.), and each one shows how God faithfully worked to fulfill His messianic/kingdom promise of Genesis 3, verse 15. These historical books are balanced by nine minor prophetic books which give us additional information concerning God’s kingdom

plan, even in the face of opposition and apostasy. Three historical books (viz., Ezra, Nehemiah, Ester) were written after the Babylonian captivity, and they give us insight into God’s kingdom plan after the unthinkable occurred. These books are balanced by three minor prophetic books crafted to show saints how to live in tough times, coupled with spectacular insight in God’s inexorable kingdom program. As you can readily see, the poetical books stand in a pivotal place among the other books, and rightly so for they address how individual believers should worship and walk before the living God.

And to think these thirty-nine books, which were written over 1,200 years by over thirty authors, just happened to thematically dovetail on a wide array of . . . sometimes thorny topics. Further, they just happened to have an intricate structure. Right. No, the loving hand of the most-wise and all-knowing God, the God of all order and structure, assembled these books to communicate His message to man in the most understandable and profound fashion. And He did it all with such variety. After all of that historical narrative of how He moved in man’s history through His chosen people, He paused and gave us a breath of creative air in the poetical books, of which Psalms stands as a logical follow-on to the tumultuous and instructive book of Job. I am

sure many of the Psalms uttered years after Job by saints who struggled with sin would have found the quick approval of Job. Where is God when I suffer? The Psalms give the answer. Does God care that I am in deep trouble? The Psalms give the answer. How do I live a godly life surrounded by godless people? The Psalms give the answer. How do I pray when the pain of my life is so blinding? The Psalms give the answer.

The strategic placement of the Psalms could not, therefore, be more perfect, for we, like the saints of old need for God to speak to us in a new fashion at times, and we, also, need to know how to approach Him when we are at a loss of words, or when our hearts are full and overflowing with His blessing.

Who Wrote This Book?

Various authors wrote the Psalms over a period of some 980 years, counting from Moses in 1410 B.C. to the post-exilic community of Ezra the scribe who probably assemble much of the Psalter 430 B.C. Because of this vast expanse of time, it is no wonder the Psalms, as we shall see, cover all kinds of emotional, psychological, and spiritual ups and downs of the lives of God's people. Ostensibly, this is also why the book is one of the favorites of saints because we can all identify with the emotion, gut-wrenching, tearful, ecstatic, and joyous hand raising nature of these 150 books.

All told, *David*, Israel's most decorated warrior and beloved king, wrote seventy-three of the Psalms (3-9, 11-32; 34-41; 51-65; 68-70; 86; 101; 103; 108-110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138-145). From Acts 4:25 and Hebrews 4:7, we learn that David also wrote Psalms 2 and 95, even though his name does not appear in the introduction to the psalms in question. I find this all most interesting. A man known for bloodshed, hand to hand combat, combat in the open field, a man trained with weapons and tactics was a man with a tender, open heart toward God. We have many David's in our church, men and women trained at West Point, Annapolis, the Air Force Academy, the CIA, the DIA and so forth, people who have seen their share of the so-called action. However, as tough as their lives are, and can be, they can possess a brokenness, a humility before God which is refreshing, as well as highly instructive. If you are David, may God use you and speak to you in a profound fashion, and may your words likewise teach us all how to know and walk wisely with God.

Asaph, a choir director in the temple, is credited with twelve Psalms (50, 73-83). *Korah*, a music leader from the family line which had opposed the leadership of Moses and paid dearly for it when God personally judged them (Num. 16-17), composed ten Psalms (42; 44-49; 84-85; 87). Is not God's grace toward sinners great? Even when a forefather and his followers were judged for insurrection against God-appointed leadership, God still looked upon the family line with mercy, coupled with a desire to use them to His eternal glory. There is hope for both you and I for God has not changed. *King Solomon* crafted two psalms (72, 127), *Moses*, whose name means "to be drawn from water," pours life-giving water into our lives with Psalm 90. *Heman*, an unknown Israelite, also wrote one psalm (Psalm 88), and *Ethan*, another unknown man, also wrote one (Psalm 89). Amazing. God chose one obscure man, Ethan, to write Psalm 89, the great poetical and prophetic account of how God would preserve David's descendent through all kinds of spiritual and geo-political weather to eventually assure the arrival of His Son, and our Messiah, Jesus, who would rule over His holy and perfect empire to beat all empires. Note, the same God who used Ethan desires to use you. God specializes in doing great and memorable things through forgotten, obscure, and seemingly insignificant people. If you are Heman and/or Ethan, have hope God has great plans for you. The rest of the Psalms, all fifty of them, are *anonymous* (1, 3, 20, 33; 43; 66-67; 71; 91-100; 102; 104-107; 111-121; 123; 125-126; 128-130; 132; 134-137; 146-150). One final note:

even when nobody knows what you did to advance God's light and to minister to people, He knows and will reward on the day you stand before Him (Matt. 25). So press on in your high calling of Christ. Great things are up ahead as you submit to His leadership and Lordship.

In addition to the concept of authorship, we must ask:

What Is The Nature Of Hebrew Poetry?

I will admit it. I am not a lover of poetry. Never have been. Probably never will. Some people love to sit around and read poetry, pouring over every line and analyzing the worth of every word. Yes, some people get all excited over something penned by Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, William Wordsworth, Oscar Wilde, or Rudyard Kipling. To place a poem of Frost before them is like dropping a Ruth Chris thick, juicy steak before a hungry man. They cannot wait to sink their teeth into its savory flesh:

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.

Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.

So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.

Nothing gold can stay.

I admit. This is a beautiful piece of literary work, but it is just not my thing. In fact, it is so not my thing that of the several thousand books I own, I can only think of one poetry book I own and I am not quite sure where it is . . . probably somewhere gathering dust, right? I make these observations with utmost respect, for I know there is rich, abiding value in secular poetry, but for me I am more interested in divine poetry as found in the Psalms. I would rather sink my teeth into meat meant to build up my spiritual man and give me wisdom for the sometimes challenging path of life.

Hebrew poetry does it for me. What is Hebrew poetry like? It is full of various forms of parallelism designed to creatively drive home the author's prevailing point. It utilizes repetition to make sure you get God's point, after all, we are typically hard-headed or slow learners. It employs all kinds of figures of speech to arrest your attention and to guide you to grasp the real meaning in what is being stated. How interesting. God could have just told us what He wants us to know straight out, holding back nothing, and stating it in clear, concise words. By using figures in poetry God approaches us in a refreshing, sometimes vivid, always thoughtful format.

In order to get you non-poetry loving people to appreciate how God employs figures in order to teach us so creatively, I think it appropriate to tap into my Southern roots. My father, Al, was from South Carolina, as I have said before, and my dear mother, Sue, is from Arkansas. As a Southerner, my father frequently used the most instructive figurative sayings:

- He's only got one oar in the water. Translated: He is not all quite there, mentally.
- He's grinnin' like a possum eatin' sweet tater. Translated: He's really enjoying whatever it is he is doing.
- His corn bread ain't done in the middle: Translated: There is something missing cognitively with this guy.
- Imma about to jerk a knot in your tail. Translated: Some discipline is coming your way.
- Common sense isn't a flower that grows in everyone's garden: Translated: Son, some people just do not have any common sense.
- Nervous as a cat in a room full of rockin' chairs. No translation needed.

Perhaps the reason why I did so well with German, Greek, and Hebrew because I grew up having to translate all of colorful sayings which typically rolled out of my father's mouth. But I tell you, I shall not ever forget how he communicated because he had a way of making you smile as he laid it on you thick and heavy.

So it is with God. From Genesis through Esther He speaks to us primarily by using a narrative format, with a smattering of figurative language. Then, in the poetical books, like Psalms, He creatively turns to come at us from a different direction altogether. How thoughtful of Him. How interesting. How challenging, too. In what way? Insofar as we typically are not steeped in the art of figurative language. Like my father, we employ it all the time; however, most of the time we do not know why type of figurative language we are using. We just use it. When it comes to understanding and interpreting holy Scripture, however, it is another matter altogether for we should desperately want to know what God is saying to us.

I say all of this to underscore the importance identifying and cognitively understanding figures of speech like you never have before. The Psalm is awash with them.

- *Anthorpopathia*: Human characteristics/attributes are given to God, who is Spirit. Psalm 32:8, “⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.” God does not have eyes like a man, but He can see. His eyesight is, also, perfect. He can teach us how to walk, and then, like a wise father, keep His eye on us to make sure we are walking as we should.
- *Anabasis*: From the Greek preposition, *ana*, or “up,” and the verb *bainein*, “to go.” Hence to go up or ascend. The purpose of this figure of speech is to build to a pedagogical climax in order to underscore a particular motif. Not to get to ahead of ourselves, we shall see this in Psalm 1: “How blessed is the man who does not **walk** in the counsel of the wicked, Nor **stand** in the path of sinners, Nor **sit** in the seat of scoffers!” The progression here is of a person moving onward and upward (or downward) in the art of sin. At one level they walk, or think about, what the wicked say. At a second level, they move from thinking about sin to standing in it, of checking it out. At the third level, actually personally enjoy it by throwing all caution to the wind. A wise person, as the psalmist denotes, does not live like this. Are you? Anabasis is a powerful way to teach positive and negative truths. As here, we all know how quickly we can get in trouble if we start listening to the wrong people. Next thing you

- now than we are committing the same type of sin they originally tempted us with. More on that when we actually study Psalm 1.
- *Metaphor*: A comparison in which one thing is or represents another, in which the two are basically unlike: This is the declaration that one thing explicitly resembles another thing. Southerners, you will remember do this all the time: “As useful as a trap door in a canoe.” Whereas in simile “All flesh is AS grass” (1 Pet. 1:24), in metaphor, which abounds in the Psalms, “All flesh IS grass.” Illustration: Psalm 23:1, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” stresses the FACT that God is very much our Shepherd of all shepherds. Ostensibly, this means He will be there for us no matter what. Not even the impact of COVID-19 can stop Him from being there to know and meet our needs, be what they may.
 - *Simile*: This is a declaration that one thing explicitly (by means of the presence of like or as) resembles another. Once more, we run into this all throughout the Psalms. Psalm 2:9, “You shall break them with a rod of iron, You shall shatter them like earthenware.” The warning here is that the Messiah, when He rules, will not put up with anyone who opposes His millennial rule. At that point, He will be like an iron rod and they a brittle, defenseless clay pot. Oh, for the day when righteousness will rule and reign over the earth! What a powerful way to connote the Messiah’s geo-political power in the kingdom age.
 - *Chiasmus or Chiasm*: This title comes from the Greek letter *chi* (X), and it denotes a thought movement where thoughts/motifs are developed in a certain ascendant grouping, which terminate in a point entirely different from the previous or following points. Beyond this thematic shift, points mirror the points which appeared before the apex point. Emphasis, of course, is placed on the middle concept. A large chiasm can be found in Psalm 103:
 - A (vv. 1-5) Exhortation to bless
 - B (vv. 6-7) Gracious goodness (Kingdom of grace)
 - C (v. 8) Merciful goodness
 - D (v. 9) Sparing goodness
 - **E (v. 10) Pardoning goodness**
 - **E (v. 11-13) Pardoning goodness**
 - D (vv. 14-16) Sparing goodness
 - C (vv. 17-18) Merciful goodness
 - B (v. 19) Glorious goodness (Kingdom of glory)
 - A (vv. 20-22) Exhortation to bless

As I said, the core teaching God desires to drive home here is creatively tucked away in the structure of the chiasm in verses 10-13:

¹⁰ He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. ¹² As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. ¹³ Just as a father has compassion on *his* children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him.

Wow. Are you not thankful that this is God you know and serve? He purposefully places thematic emphasis in this psalm upon His pardoning, merciful, and loving way toward sinners who humble themselves before Him. And to think, this wonderful, encouraging thought it built, by the Spirit of God, with a figure of speech you might not have ever heard of: chiasm. Now that you know what it is, you will see it all over the place as we search through Israel's prayer and worship guide called Psalms.

And just in case you need a little divine compassion right now, I think you know who you need to run to.

