



OVERVIEW: THE BOOK OF PSALMS

Answer the questions together as a group to get an overview of the Book of Psalms.

DISCUSSION STARTER

Which word(s) best describes your present estimation of the **Book of Psalms**?

Explain your choice.

- ◆Mysterious ◆Comforting ◆Enigma ◆Relevant ◆Out-dated
- ◆Irrelevant ◆Significant ◆Useful ◆Clueless ◆Poetic

1. The Book of Psalms actually means *Book of Praises* in Hebrew. The songs collected in the Book of Psalms were written by a number of different persons over the span of hundreds of years. As this book came together thousands of years ago, the Psalms were divided into 5 major portions which we call Book One through Book Five. Even though the Psalms were written by many authors over many years, recurrent ideas and themes are often repeated which unify the whole book.

Identify **6 themes** found in the Book of Psalms by looking up the verses listed below.

Psalms 5:1-2; 17:1; 28:1-2; 61:1-2 Theme: _____

Psalms 41:13; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6 Theme: _____

Psalms 1:2; 48:9; 77:12; 119:148 Theme: _____

Psalms 32:1; 41:1; 112:1; 128:1 Theme: _____

Psalms 27:11; 51:6; 119:33; 143:10 Theme: _____

Psalms 9:10; 13:5; 31:14; 62:8 Theme: _____

2. The Psalms can also be categorized by types. There are many different types of Psalms and this year we are going to explore four major types:

Songs of Wisdom that teach and instruct us how to live a life and relate to God;
Songs of Praise and Thanksgiving that honor God for **who he is** and **what he has done**;
Songs of Lament that express distress and sorrow as they appeal to God for deliverance;
Songs of Trust that articulate confidence and dependence on God and his care for us.

Skim the Psalms listed below and indicate their type: **Wisdom; Praise; Lament; Trust**

Psalm 103 _____ Psalm 90 _____

Psalm 42 _____ Psalm 145 _____

Psalm 62 _____ Psalm 37 _____

Psalm 130 _____ Psalm 27 _____

3. The Psalms are poetry, so they need to be read and understood as such. Hebrew poetry, unlike English poetry, does not depend on rhyme or meter, but on *parallelism*, which is a particular arrangement of thoughts. In parallelism, two lines of the poem are meant to be read and understood together, as in parallel lines that are drawn beside one another.

There are three types of *parallelism* that are fun to discover once you understand the concept.

The first type is **SYNONYMOUS PARALLELISM**, in which the second line of the poem repeats the truth of the first line, meaning the thoughts **synonymous**. For example:

Psalm 24:1

The earth is the Lord's and everything in it,
The world, and all who live in it.

The second type of parallelism is **ANTITHETIC PARALLELISM**, in which the second line of the poem contains an opposite thought from the first line, meaning the two lines have **contrasting** ideas.

For example:

Psalm 73:26

My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

The third type of parallelism is **SYNTHETIC PARALLELISM**, in which the second or following lines build on the thought expressed in the first line, expanding or developing the thought by giving more information, like building blocks. For example:

Psalm 19:7

The law of the Lord is perfect,
Reviving the soul.

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
Making wise the simple.

Now it's your turn! Which kind of parallelism are used in the Psalms below:

Psalm 1:1

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
Or stand in the way of sinners
Or sit in the seat of mockers

SYNONYMOUS?

ANTITHETIC?

SYNTHETIC?

Psalm 2:4

The One enthroned in the heaven laughs;
The Lord scoffs at them.

SYNONYMOUS? ANTITHETIC? SYNTHETIC?

Psalm 1:6

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

SYNONYMOUS? ANTITHETIC? SYNTHETIC?

Now, if all this poetry stuff makes your head swim and leaves you cold, don't worry! You don't have to understand the technical stuff in order for the Psalm to speak to your heart. Sometimes, however, the reader wonders why the Psalm keeps "repeating the same thing." Now you know!

4. The Psalms are full of images and word pictures that the Psalmist uses to make connections to our emotions and experiences of life. It is helpful to know how to interpret two kind of images, the **simile** and the **metaphor**, that are used often in the Psalms.

A **simile** is the comparison of two things, linking them with the words *like* or *as*. For example, Psalm 1:3, "He is *like a tree*, planted by streams of water."

A **metaphor** is the comparison of two things **without** the signal word *like* or *as*. For example, Psalm 84:11, "The Lord *is* a sun and shield."

The poet uses these devices because he is trying to describe something that is hard to explain by using a very familiar object. It is the reader's job to unpack the image and carry over the meaning from one object to the other.

For example, how can we possibly describe God? "For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD? Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings? (Psalm 89:6) However, we all know how brilliant and powerful the **sun** is or what the function of a **shield** is. As we meditate on and explore the characteristics of these familiar objects, we apply those characteristics to God and come to a better understanding of who he is and what he does for us.

Look up the following verses to discover some common **metaphors for God**. Quickly mention what each metaphor communicates to us about God.

Psalm 18:1-2 _____ Psalm 23:1 _____

Psalm 23:5 _____ Psalm 93:1 _____

Psalm 91:1 _____ Psalm 91:4 _____

5. As we study the Psalms this year, we will focus on learning all we can about God's character. The Psalmist invites us into an intimate relationship with our God, but we cannot be intimate with someone unless we know them well. Embedded in the imagery of the Psalms, we will find a God who is faithful, loving, merciful, righteous, sovereign and compassionate.

What key aspects of God's perfect character are repeated in the following verses?

Psalm **86:15** **103:8** **111:4** **116:5** **145:8**

Which of these attributes would you say is the most important for us to understand better today, and why?

6. As we study the Psalms this year, remember that the Psalms are to be read with your **heart**, as well as your **head**. Truth about God, ourselves and living life will be found in images, word pictures and emotions. Many of the Psalms meet us where we are, in the nitty-gritty of everyday life, and they point us to our compassionate Creator who is our King, Warrior, Fortress, Shepherd, and Rock. Let the beauty these Songs sink deep into your soul and they will become "*Honey for your Heart.*"

What one question do you have about the Psalms that you hope will get answered this year?

Go back to Question 1 on this Overview. Have your word choices changed at all?