

Psalms:
Selection A

Background information on the book of
PSALMS

You are about to dip into the Bible’s emotional treasure-chest!

The book of Psalms is a collection of poetic songs reflecting every imaginable human emotion. Because they deal with every human condition in a *God-centred* way, the Psalms are full of practical theology, comprising a devotional guide to help us relate the ways of God to the varied situations of life.

Some of the psalms contain a *prophetic* element, pointing forward to the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. For that reason they are known as *messianic* psalms.

This Old Testament book is the one most quoted in the New Testament. Of the 283 Old Testament quotations there, 116 come from the Psalms.

The psalms were originally set to the accompaniment of *stringed instruments* and served as the *temple hymn book*. This accounts for the title ‘Psalms’, a word that derives from the Greek *psalmos*, meaning ‘a poem to be sung to a stringed instrument.’

The 150 psalms come from a *variety of authors* and were written over a period approaching 1000 years. The majority, however, seem to have come from a 300-year period commencing with the life of David, to whom most are attributed. According to the superscription preceding some psalms:

- 73 were written by *David*
- 12 by *Asaph*, David’s leading musician
- 10 by the *sons of Korah*
- 2 by *Solomon*
- 1 each by *Ethan, Heman* and *Moses*

That totals 100 psalms. The remaining 50 are thus anonymous. Many believe that *Ezra* wrote some of them, and it is he who most likely compiled the Psalms in the order in which they now appear.

The Psalms are divided into *five books*, each of which ends with a *doxology* (an ascription of praise to God). The last psalm, Psalm 150, forms a fitting doxology to the whole Psalter (book of Psalms), culminating with:

*‘Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.’*

The following chart outlines the five books:

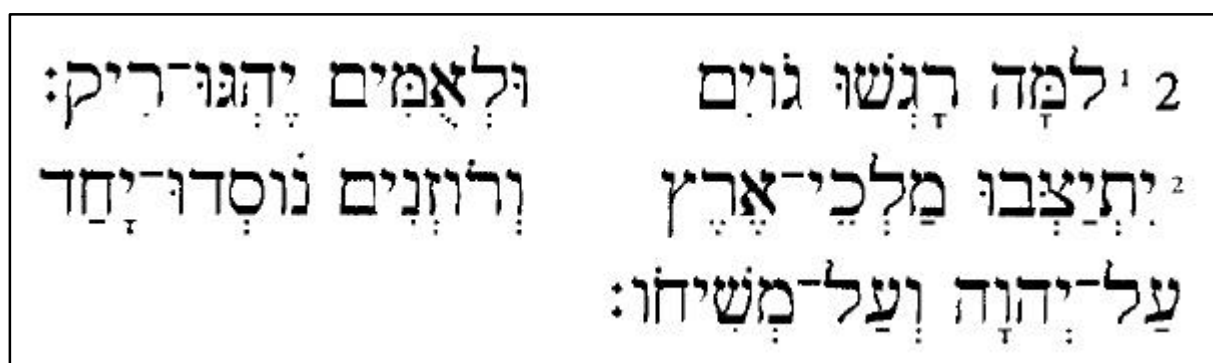
Section	Psalms	Main author	No. of psalms	Closing doxology
Book 1	1-41	David	41	41:13
Book 2	42-72	David/Korah	31	72:18-19
Book 3	73-89	Asaph	17	89:52
Book 4	90-106	Anonymous	17	106:48
Book 5	107-150	David/Anonymous	44	150:1-6

In this series of *Diggers* studies we will be looking at a selection of ten psalms—two from each of the five books. The ten are:

1.	Psalm 2	God, his Anointed One and getting our attitudes right
2.	Psalm 19	God speaks to us—through his creation and through his word
3.	Psalm 44	Trying to understand the mysterious ways of the Lord
4.	Psalm 51	Repentance and confession of sin is the way forward when we fall
5.	Psalm 73	The dangers of envying the prosperity of those who despise God
6.	Psalm 88	Calling to God from the depths of rejection and despair
7.	Psalm 91	Trusting the Lord and his sovereign protection of his people
8.	Psalm 94	God is righteous, faithful and the judge of all the earth
9.	Psalm 107	When we call to the Lord for help, he is always there
10.	Psalm 122	Love for the city of God

How to make the most of this Diggers study

- The Bible version being used as a basis for the series is the *New International Version* (NIV). Try to bring a copy to the sessions as it is much easier if everybody has the same version as a starting point. But by all means use other versions alongside it for reference. You may, for example, have the *Good News Bible* (GNB), the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) or *The Message*.
- Before you come to each session read the psalm to be studied—several times if possible.
- Jot down your thoughts and observations as you go along so that you can come to the group with something to contribute.
- Be a true ‘digger’. When you think you have exhausted the psalm and its meaning, dig deeper because there’s certain to be more!
- Read each psalm with an eye to its *practical applicatiosn* in everyday life.



The first two verses of Psalm 2 in the original Hebrew. Unlike English, Hebrew reads from right to left.

Understanding Hebrew poetry

The layout of the Psalms in versions like the NIV reflects the fact that they are not prose but *poetry*.

Hebrew poetry is totally different from the English variety. We tend to see poetry in terms of rhyme and rhythm, but neither of these elements exists in Hebrew poetry. Instead, it is based on *parallel ideas*, a literary form known as *parallelism*. In simple terms this means that the poet makes a statement, then follows it with another statement. The second one may say the same as the first but using different words, or it may contrast with it, or add a new element to it. For example:

*'Hear this, all you peoples;
listen, all who live in this world,
both low and high,
rich and poor alike.'* (Psalm 49:1-2)

Here are two parallelisms. The second line parallels the first, and the fourth the third, saying the *same thing* in slightly different words. Sometimes, instead, the second part *contrasts with* the first:

*'Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding.'* (Proverbs 3:5)

In another variation, the second part *completes* the first by filling out the detail:

*'You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.'* (Psalm 30:11)

There are other varieties of parallelism, but the above are the main ones.

Another feature of Hebrew poetry is *vivid imagery and figures of speech*. We need to bear this in mind and remember that poetry, by its very nature, should not be interpreted in the literal way that we expect to interpret history or doctrine.

Enjoy exploring these ten selected Psalms. May you find the Lord speaking to you through them!
