

How to Read the Psalms



SABBATH—DECEMBER 30

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Nehemiah 12:8; Psalm 25:1–5; Psalm 3; 2 Samuel 23:1, 2; Psalm 16:8.

The poets who wrote the Psalms wrote their prayers and songs to God.

MEMORY VERSE: “Jesus said to them, ‘Remember when I was with you before? I said that everything written about me must happen—everything written in the Law of Moses, the books of [that were written by] the prophets, and the Psalms’ ” (Luke 24:44, ERV).

THE BOOK OF PSALMS is a collection of prayers and songs for Jews and Christians. The poets who wrote the Psalms wrote their prayers and songs to God. The poets wrote in their own words. But God gave the poets their ideas. So, the Book of Psalms comes from God. God talks to His people in its poems, the same as He does in the rest of the Bible (2 Peter 1:21). Jesus and the New Testament writers used quotes from the Psalms in their teachings. They taught that these poems were part of God’s Word, the Bible (Mark 12:10; John 10:34, 35; John 13:18). The Book of Psalms is part of God’s Word as much as any other book of the Bible.

Different poets wrote the Book of Psalms during Old Testament times. The poets wrote their poems in the Hebrew language. The poems tell us about the times when the poets lived. The Book of Psalms is for our time, too. When we accept the Book of Psalms as God’s Word to us, we can understand its messages. We must pay attention to the history and teachings in the Book of Psalms. We must study, too, how the Israelites used the songs for worship. Then we will understand better what God wants to tell us today.

**SONGS FOR WORSHIP IN OLD TESTAMENT TIMES
(Nehemiah 12:8)**

Why was the Book of Psalms written? When did God’s people use the Psalms? Read 1 Chronicles 16:7; Nehemiah 12:8; Psalm 18:1; Psalm 30:1; Psalm 92:1; Psalm 95:2; Psalm 105:2; Colossians 3:16; and James 5:13 for the answers.

The Book of Psalms is a collection of poems. Different poets wrote the Book of Psalms. Their poems are also songs and prayers to God. The poets wrote their poems for both personal and public worship. The Israelites sang the poems as hymns to God in His temple. Many poets included short notes with their poems or songs. The notes told the music leaders (Psalm 8:1) which musical instruments they should play (Psalm 61:1) or the tune they should use when they sang the song (Psalm 9:1).

In the Hebrew language, the title of the Book of Psalms is “**tehelim**.” “**Tehelim**” means “praises.” “**Tehelim**” shows us an important reason the Psalms were written: to praise God. Our word “psalms” comes from the Septuagint. The Septuagint is a copy of the Old Testament written in the Greek language. The Septuagint was made 200 or 300 years before Jesus was born. In the Septuagint, the word for “psalms” is written as “**psalmoi**” in the Greek language.

The Book of Psalms was an important part of Israel’s worship. God’s people used it for temple celebrations, religious feasts, parades, and when the Ark of Promise came to Jerusalem. Psalms 120–134 were songs for going up to the temple. God’s people sang these songs on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate three big religious festivals each year (Exodus 23:14–17). The people sang Psalms 113–118 and Psalm 136 at the three festivals. They sang these songs at the New Moon festivals and when the leaders gave the temple to God. The people sang Psalms 113 and 114 at the start of the Passover meal, and Psalms 115–118 at the end (Matthew 26:30). The Passover was the time when God brought Israel out of Egypt. Psalms 145–150 were part of the morning prayers used for worship in the temple. The Psalms taught God’s people how to worship Him in His temple. Jesus prayed with the words from Psalm 22 (Matthew 27:46). The New Testament churches also taught and sang from the Book of Psalms, too (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19).

How can we use the Book of Psalms in both our private and public worship today?



The poets of the Book of Psalms wrote their poems for both personal and public worship.

MEET THE POETS OF THE BOOK OF PSALMS (Psalm 25:1–5)



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King David wrote most of the poems in the Book of Psalms. David is named “the sweet [the most pleasant] singer of Israel” (2 Samuel 23:1, ERV). David had an important part in selecting the songs for worship in the temple. New Testament writers also say that David wrote many poems in the Book of Psalms (Matthew 22:43–45; Acts 2:25–29, 34, 35; Acts 4:25; Romans 4:6–8). Temple musicians wrote some of the poems in the Book of Psalms, too. These temple musicians were also Levites: Asaph wrote Psalm 50 and Psalms 73–83. The sons of Korah wrote Psalm 42, Psalms 44–49; Psalm 84; Psalm 85; Psalm 87; and Psalm 88. Heman the Ezrahite also wrote Psalm 88. Ethan the Ezrahite wrote Psalm 89. Then there were the poems that Solomon and Moses wrote: Solomon wrote Psalm 72 and Psalm 127. Moses wrote Psalm 90.

Read Psalm 25:1–5; Psalm 42:1; Psalm 75:1; Psalm 77:1; Psalm 84:1, 2; Psalm 88:1–3; and Psalm 89:1. What do these poems tell us about the poets who wrote them and their experiences?

The Holy Spirit gave these poets their ideas. God used their talents to serve Him and His people. The poets were men with powerful faith and deep love for God. At the same time, the poets often felt the way we do. They felt hopeless. They fought against Satan’s lies and traps. Yes, the poets wrote their songs and poems a long time ago. But they talk about many of our same experiences:

“Please hear my prayer. Pay attention to my cry for help.

I have so many troubles/ I’m about to die” (Psalm 88:2, 3, NlrV).

Who doesn’t feel this way at times? For sure, someone from our time could have written this cry for help.

Some poems in the Book of Psalms are about joy. Other poems are about hard times. The poets are honest about their suffering. They cry to God for help, and He saves them. The poets praise God for His love. They promise to serve God forever. The Book of Psalms is a message about God’s saving love, mercy, and hope. The Book of Psalms is God’s promise to forgive us and give us new life.

The poets who wrote the Book of Psalms suffered many things we suffer. How does this thought give you hope?

A SONG FOR EVERY PART OF OUR LIVES (Psalm 3)

Read Psalm 3; Psalm 33:1–3; and Psalm 109:6–15. What human experiences do these songs talk about?

The Book of Psalms is filled with songs about human experience. We see six types of songs: **1. Praise hymns** give glory to God because He is the King and keeps His promises. **2. Thanksgiving songs** thank God for His many blessings. **3. Laments** are songs about sorrow or sadness. Many laments are cries to God to save His people from trouble. **4. Wisdom songs** are filled with advice about how to live a holy life. **5. Royal songs** talk about God’s Chosen One, who is Israel’s future King and Savior. **6. History songs** talk about Israel’s past. They show us how God kept His promises to His people when they broke their promises to Him. History songs teach the future children of Israel to remember the past and not to make the same mistakes their fathers made.

These poems grab our attention. What writing skills did the poets use to make their poems so powerful?

Word combinations: Poets combined words with the same meaning: “My soul, praise the Lord! Every part of me, praise his holy name!” (Psalm 103:1, ERV). Do you see how the words “My soul” and “every part of me” are alike? The poet combines these same words together in the same verse to help us understand his idea better. Sometimes poets combined different words to do the same thing. “I cry out to you day and night” (Psalm 88:1, ICB). The words “day” and “night” show us the poet cries to God all the time.

Word pictures: Word pictures help us see, touch, smell, hear, or taste life. These pictures help us better understand the poem’s message. In Psalm 17:8, the poet compares God and the protection He gives us to a mother bird who “hides her young under her wings” (ERV).

Double meanings: Sometimes the poets used words that looked almost the same but had different meanings. In Psalm 96:4, 5, the poet uses two Hebrew words that look alike: “’**elohim**,” which means “gods,” and “’**elilim**,” which means “false gods” or “statues.” The poet uses these words to help us understand his message: The gods of the other people groups near Israel may look as if they are “’**elohim**,” or gods. But they are only “’**elilim**,” or statues.

Selah: Poets used the word “**selah**.” This word told the reader to stop and think about the poem’s message. Or “**selah**” alerted the musician to a change in the song.



The Book of Psalms is filled with songs about human experience. (Read Psalm 23.)

PRAYERS FROM GOD (2 Samuel 23:1, 2)

Read 2 Samuel 23:1, 2 and Romans 8:26, 27. What do these verses teach us about prayer?



Many of the poets write about their own life experiences and the experiences of the Jewish people. (Read Psalm 137.)

The prayers and praises in the Book of Psalms are written to God. At the same time, these prayers and praises come from God. God gave the poets their ideas.

The poets talk to God personally. In their poems, God is “my God and King” (Psalm 5:2, ERV), and “LORD,” (Psalm 84:3, ERV). The poets often ask God to “listen to my words” (Psalm 5:1, ICB), “hear my prayer!” (Psalm 39:12, ERV), “look at my suffering and troubles” (Psalm 25:18, ICB), “answer me” (Psalm 102:2, ERV), and “save me” (Psalm 6:4, ERV). These words show us someone who is praying to God.

The Psalms are powerful and beautiful prayers. They are so powerful and beautiful because they are also God’s Word, the Bible. Paul tells us how prayer works: “Also the Spirit helps us because we are weak. We do not know how we should talk to God. But the Spirit himself talks to God for us, while we cry and cannot say any words. God looks to see what is in people’s hearts. And he knows what the Spirit is going to do. The Spirit talks to God for God’s people. And he asks for them what God wants them to have” (Romans 8:26, 27, WE). The prayers in the Book of Psalms help us to have this same experience with God that Paul talks about.

Jesus used quotes from the Book of Psalms when He taught and preached. In Luke 20:42, 43, Jesus uses this quote from Psalm 110:1: “ ‘David himself says in the Book of Psalms, ‘The LORD said to my lord, ‘Sit at my right hand [next to me] until I put your enemies under your control’ ” ’ ” (NirV).

As we saw yesterday, some poems in the Book of Psalms are about Israel’s history. Many of the poets write about their own life experiences and the experiences of the Jewish people. As you read the Book of Psalms, you will see that the poems talk about hope, praise, fear, anger, and sadness. These things are feelings and experiences that people everywhere, and in every age, know and understand. The poems in the Book of Psalms are for every one of us because they are about our own experiences.

How important is the Book of Psalms to our own faith experience? How does Jesus’ use of the Psalms help us answer that question?

GOD AND HIS HOLY POETS (Psalm 16:8)

How did the poets of the Book of Psalms feel about God? Read Psalm 16:8; Psalm 44:8; Psalm 46:1; Psalm 47:1, 7; Psalm 57:2; Psalm 62:8; Psalm 82:8; and Psalm 121:7 for the answer.

God is the most important part of the poets' lives in the Book of Psalms. The poets lived fully for God. Their poems, praises, and life experiences were about doing what God wanted. God made everything in the skies and on earth. God is the King and Judge of the whole earth, too. God gives His children everything they need. So, we can trust God all the time. When God's people suffer, their enemies "are always saying, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:10, ICB). God's people know the answer. God is always with them. He can't fail His people. So, His people can always trust in Him. The Book of Psalms teaches us that all people will worship God in the future (Psalm 47:1; Psalm 64:9).

The idea that God is the most important part of our lives makes Him the most important part of worship, too. Worship in Old Testament times was different from worship as many people understand it today. Worship in Old Testament times was the most important part of people's lives. So, the poets wrote about everything that happened, both good and bad, in their songs of worship and praise. God hears the poets wherever He may be. He answers them in His perfect time (Psalm 3:4; Psalm 18:6; Psalm 20:6).

The poets who wrote the Book of Psalms understood that God could be or do things that no human can be or do. God can live in heaven, and at the same time, He can live with His people on earth. God can be far away and near at the same time. God can be everywhere and, at the same time, in His temple (Psalm 11:4). God can be hidden (Psalm 10:1) and, at the same time, with us forever (Psalm 41:12). These things are not possible for humans. But these things are possible for God (Psalm 24:7–10). The poets also understood that God was good. God was with the poets in every experience. This knowledge gave them hope while they waited for God to save them.

Can we limit God to only some parts of our lives? How does the Book of Psalms help us answer this question? Are you trying to keep God away from some parts of your life? If yes, what are those parts of your life?



The poets wrote about everything that happened, both good and bad, in their songs of worship and praise. (Read Psalm 38.)

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: Read Ellen G. White, “The Temple and Its Dedication,” pages 35–50, in *Prophets and Kings*; and “The Benefits of Music,” pages 291, 292, in *Messages to Young People*.

The Book of Psalms includes 150 poems. These poems can be grouped into five books: Book 1 (Psalms 1–41), Book 2 (Psalms 42–72), Book 3 (Psalms 73–89), Book 4 (Psalm 90–106), and Book 5 (Psalms 107–150).

The Book of Psalms borrowed poems from other collections of Hebrew poems and songs: from the sons of Korah (Psalms 42–49, Psalm 84, Psalm 85, Psalm 87, Psalm 88), from Asaph (Psalms 73–83), the Songs for Going Up to the Temple (Psalms 120–134), and the Praise Songs (Psalms 111–118; Psalms 146–150). Psalm 72:20 tells us about a small collection of poems that King David wrote.

Most poems in the Book of Psalms were written in the time of King David (1,000 B.C.). The collection of poems and songs continued to grow after King David died. After the new temple was built, many people believe that Ezra ordered the servants of God to put the different collections of Hebrew songs and poems together in one book.

God led these holy men in their work. God showed them which poems to include in the Book of Psalms. We can see both God’s wisdom and man’s skill in the making of the Book of Psalms. This combination of God and man joining together helps us understand better how Jesus, who was God, became one of us. “Bible truth comes from God. Men write God’s ideas in human language. So, the Bible is an example of God and humans joining together. We see this same thing in Jesus. Jesus was the Son of God and the Son of Man. What the Bible says about Jesus we also can say about the Bible. Both the Bible and Jesus ‘became human flesh and lived among us’ [John 1:14, NLV].”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, page 8, adapted.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1 Together, God and humans made the poems in the Book of Psalms. How does this idea help us understand that God wants to be very close to His people?
- 2 In class, talk about how the Book of Psalms helped you during a time of suffering. What hope did the Book of Psalms give you at that time?

FINDING JESUS IN A HOLY BOOK

Paul went from house to house in a big city in Europe. He carried both a Bible and the holy book from another religion. Paul knocked on the door of a house. A man opened the door. His breath smelled of cigarette smoke.

Paul said, "I want to give you a gift today."

The man asked, "What gift?"

Paul answered, "I have this Bible."

The man said, "I don't want a Bible. I belong to a different religion. You are a Christian."

Paul nodded. "I have your religion's holy book, too."

The man was surprised and interested. He said, "OK. Read to me from my holy book. Don't read me anything from the Bible."

Paul opened the man's holy book and read about Jesus. The man grew more surprised. He asked, "Is this the same Jesus who is also in the Bible?"

During the next few weeks, the man studied four lessons about Jesus from his holy book. His religion's holy book didn't talk about Jesus' death on the cross. But his holy book did say that Jesus will come again. The man saw that both people from his religion and Christians waited for Jesus to come back.

When Paul arrived for the fifth lesson, the man wasn't home.

A year passed. Then the man showed up at Paul's church.

The man said, "I want to come to your church. Can I?"

Now Paul was surprised.

The man added, "I want to follow Jesus."

After that day, the man came to church every Sabbath. The man told Paul that his religion's holy book left him feeling empty inside. His holy book did not talk about a Savior for his sins. Now the man wanted to get baptized.

Paul said, "Jesus says that the human body is the same as God's temple. Do you want to be made free from cigarettes? Jesus says, 'So if the Son [Jesus] makes you free, you are really free' [John 8:36, ERV]. You must choose Jesus or cigarettes. You can throw away your cigarettes today if you choose."

The man looked scared. He said, "It's not possible!" But then he reached into his pocket and threw his cigarette pack into the trash. He prayed, "Jesus, I want You to make me free."

Late that night, the man called Paul on the phone. He said, "I feel awful. I can't live without cigarettes. Help me!"

The two men prayed on the phone. God heard their prayer and gave the man His strength to win the fight against cigarettes. The man hasn't smoked since that time, four years ago. Today, the man is a leader in the Adventist Church.

Paul says, "This man loves people. He is waiting for Jesus to come back."

INSIDE
Story

by ANDREW MCCHESENEY



The man prayed, "Jesus,
I want You to make me
free."