



PSALMS: THE PRAYER BOOK OF JESUS

Session 3: The Art of the Psalms: Structure and Story

PSALM 2, *Quare fremuerunt gentes?*

Why do the nations so furiously rage together? *

And why do the peoples devise a vain thing?

The kings of the earth stand up, and the rulers
take counsel together, *

against the Lord and against his Anointed:

“Let us break their bonds asunder *

and cast away their cords from us.”

He who dwells in heaven shall laugh them to scorn; *

the Lord shall hold them in derision.

Then shall he speak to them in his wrath *

and terrify them in his great anger:

“I myself have set my King *

upon my holy hill of Zion.”

I will proclaim the decree of the Lord; *

**he said to me, “You are my Son; this day have I
begotten you.**

Ask of me, and I shall give you the nations for your
inheritance *

and the ends of the earth for your possession.

You shall bruise them with a rod of iron *

and break them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

Be wise now, O you kings; *

be warned, you judges of the earth.

Serve the Lord in fear, *

and rejoice with trembling.

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way;
for his wrath is quickly kindled. *

Blessed are all those who put their trust in him.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALTER

- The division of the Psalter into **five books** (Psalms 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150) is ancient, and while we can't say with absolute certainty how it came about.
- By the late Second Temple period (before Christ), the **fivefold Psalter had been established in its current form**.
- Jesus and the apostles would have been familiar with and used the Psalms in this structure.
- Biblical scholarship gives us some solid insights into this structure:

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALTER

1. At the end of each book, there is a **doxology** (a short hymn of praise) marking a natural division:

- Book I (Ps 1–41): “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen.” (41:13)
- Book II (Ps 42–72): “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things...” (72:18–19; also, v. 20 notes the “end of the prayers of David”)
- Book III (Ps 73–89): “Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.” (89:52)
- Book IV (Ps 90–106): “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! And let all the people say, ‘Amen!’” (106:48)
- Book V (Ps 107–150): closes with the great doxology of Psalm 150.

THE STORY OF THE PSALMS

- “The Psalter is not simply a random anthology of ancient Hebrew poems but is purposefully shaped to reflect the unfolding drama of redemption, moving from David’s struggles to the glory of the Lord’s universal reign.” (O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms*)
- The Psalms’ division is not merely formal (i.e., the doxologies), but part of a theological strategy that moves the reader from the reign of David, through exile, and finally to renewed hope.

THE STORY OF THE PSALMS

- **Book I (Pss. 1–41):** Focuses on **David** and his struggles.
 - Introduces the righteous vs. wicked (Psalm 1), the Lord's anointed king (Psalm 2), followed by David's personal laments.
 - Sets the foundation of **God's covenant with David**.
- **Book II (Pss. 42–72):** Broadens the perspective beyond David to the **nation of Israel**.
 - Climaxes with Psalm 72, Solomon's prayer for the king, ending with a vision of the **ideal Davidic reign** (ultimately fulfilled in Christ).
- **Book III (Pss. 73–89):** The **crisis of exile**.
 - Strong emphasis on Asaph and Korah psalms, the temple's destruction, and questions about God's promises. Psalm 89 highlights the apparent failure of the Davidic covenant.
 - This is the **"dark night"** of the Psalter.

THE STORY OF THE PSALMS

- **Book IV (Pss. 90–106):** Turns attention from the failed Davidic kings to **the kingship of YAHWEH himself** ("The LORD reigns!").
 - Moses reappears (Ps. 90), pointing Israel back to God's everlasting rule.
- **Book V (Pss. 107–150):** Climaxes with **renewed hope**.
 - Psalms of return from exile (e.g., Ps. 107),
 - **Songs of Ascents** (120–134),
 - Davidic reappearance (138–145),
 - the final crescendo of **Hallelujah psalms** (146–150). God's kingship and covenant promises converge in praise.

THE STORY OF THE PSALMS

- Reading the Psalms sequentially, not just devotionally in isolation, allows one to experience their **theological “flow.”**
 - Thus, the intentionality of our Daily Office sequential Psalm cycle guides us through the redemption arc depicted in the Psalms.
- The Psalms collectively bear witness to **Christ as the true Davidic King**. Their messianic trajectory culminates in him.
- Our **private devotion** and **corporate worship** are enriched when the Psalms are understood as a “story” of God’s people, not only as individual prayers.

THE STORY OF THE PSALMS

“The Psalms tell the story of Israel in God’s world, the story that reaches its climax in Jesus. To pray them is to rehearse that story, to live it, and to be shaped by it.”

– N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms*

“The Psalms train us in the rhythms of salvation history. They carry us across the landscape of creation and covenant, despair and deliverance, exile and homecoming, until we find ourselves praying in Jesus Christ.”

– Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer*