

READING THE PSALMS THROUGH A CHRIST-CENTERED LENS

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WorshipGod22: Unchanging

“In the Psalms we looked into the heart of all the saints, and we seem to gaze into fair pleasure gardens – into heaven itself, indeed – where blooms in sweet, refreshing, gladdening flowers of holy and happy thoughts about God and all his benefits.” (Martin Luther)

“What various and resplendent riches are contained in this treasury, it were difficult to find words to describe.... I have been wont to call this book not inappropriately, an anatomy of all parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.” (John Calvin)¹

“Does any literature in the world compare with the book of Psalms? The Greeks have Homer, the Romans Virgil, the Italians Dante, and the British Shakespeare. But nothing sings like the Psalms.”²

Key question: how do the Psalms reveal to us the Lord Jesus Christ?

A DEFINITION

What this session is *not* about:

- Distinguishing messianic psalms from other types of psalms
- Exegeting specific psalms to see how they point us to the work of Christ
- Finding “hidden” references to Christ in the Psalms

What then is our goal? To answer this question: how do the Psalms as a *book* – that is, as a unified collection (*The Psalms*) and therefore in each of its parts (individual psalms) – reveal the Lord Jesus Christ to us?

Our definition: the Psalms as a whole are a microcosm, a history in hymns, a prophecy in poetry of God’s plan of salvation. As such, they sing to us of our coming King and our future destiny in him.

¹ Both of these quotes are taken from Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1988), 13.

² James M. Hamilton, *Psalms Volume I: Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2021), 1.

AN ASSUMPTION

Jesus and the New Testament apostles assume that the Psalms are about Christ.

Jesus' own words:

Luke 24:44-47: Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

Matt. 22:41-45: Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"

The Apostles' Use of the Psalms

58 verses from the Psalms are quoted in the NT (and in some cases, e.g. Psalm 110:1, a single psalm is cited by multiple NT authors).

- Psalm 22 is cited directly in Matthew 27:35, 39-43, 46; John 19:24; Hebrews 2:11-12.
- Psalm 69 is cited directly in John 2:17, Romans 15:3, John 15:25.
- Psalm 110 is cited directly in Matthew 22:41-46, Mark 12:35-37, Luke 20:41-44, and Hebrews 7:15-16.
- Paul cites Psalm 5:9, 10:7, 14:1-3, 36:1, and 140:3 in Romans 3:10-18. What is striking here is that Paul interprets verses that in original context speak of the enemies of God and the Davidic king as proving the universal sinfulness of mankind apart from Christ. In other words, the OT enemies of the Davidic king are, in NT context, all those who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Additional citations and allusions

- Psalm 16 in Acts 2:25-28
- Psalm 2, especially v.7, alluded to often in the Gospels and Revelation, cited directly in Hebrews 1:5.
- The use of Psalms in Hebrews 1:5-10.

Conclusion: Jesus and the NT apostles assume that the Psalms are about Christ.

A CONFIRMATION

Do we find confirmation of this Christ-centered reading in the Psalms themselves?

The Five Books of the Psalms

Psalms are divided into five books. Unlike verse markers in other parts of Scripture, this is not a later addition to the text for ease of citation, but a structural feature of the Psalms themselves.

Table 1. The Five Books of the Psalms

Book One	Book Two	Book Three	Book Four	Book Five
Psa 1-41	Psa 42-72	Psa 73-89	Psa 90-106	Psa 107-150

These divisions are marked off in the original text by the presence of doxologies at the conclusion of each book.

This general structure should be nuanced at the beginning and end of the Psalter. Psalms 1-2 are widely acknowledged to be an introduction to the entire book. Book Five lacks a concluding benediction, but instead the cluster of Psalms 146-150 function as a sustained benediction. Thus we could modify our outline this way:³

Table 2. Modified Structure of the Psalter.

Introduction	Book One	Book Two	Book Three	Book Four	Book Five	Conclusion
Psa 1-2	Psa 3-41	Psa 42-72	Psa 73-89	Psa 90-106	Psa 107-145	Psa 146-150

One final observation about this arrangement of the Psalter: the “Book of Praises” and the presence of laments.

- By one scholar’s estimate, of the 150 psalms, roughly 40% of them are lament psalms of one form or another.⁴
- But how are they distributed across the Psalms? Table 3 shows the distribution of the main psalm types (hymn, lament, thanksgiving) by book.⁵

Table 3. Main Psalm Types by Book.

	Book One	Book Two	Book Three	Book Four	Book Five
Laments	19	19	9	2	11
Hymns	3	3	4	11	20
Thanksgivings	12	4	1	2	8

Conclusion: there is a rough movement in the psalms from laments to praises.

³ This structure is fairly well attested in Psalms studies, though commentators diverge on how this structure is to be interpreted (or whether it has meaning beyond a mere echoing of the Pentateuch). See David Howard’s chapter for a succinct overview of the issues in David M. Howard Jr, “Divine and Human Kingship as Organizing Motifs in the Psalter,” in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 197–207.

⁴ Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 32.

⁵ I have developed this table from Pemberton’s data in Pemberton, 241–46. Pemberton includes a fourth category, “Other,” that lumps all other types of psalms. I have not included this column in my table.

The Role of David in the Psalms

- The collections of Davidic psalms

David is the author of 73 psalms. In Book One and Book Two, there were 55 (out of 72) psalms attributed to David. In the same collections, 12 psalms contain historical information in the superscript. But after Psalm 72 (more on that next), there are no more historical references except a single notice in Psalm 142. But there are however several collections of Davidic psalms (Psa 86, 101, 103, 108-110, 122, 124, 131, 133, 138-145). So David has many psalms that are included in the latter three books of the Psalms, but the connections to the historical life of David drop from the picture. Why is this?

- The role of Psalm 72

The superscription to Psalm 72, the last psalm in Book Two, is “Of Solomon.” The Psalm has a concluding benediction that ends Book Two in 72:18-19, but then this final notice in v.20:

Psa. 72:20 The prayers of David, the son of Jesse, are ended.

The content of this psalm is a prayer for God’s blessing on the king, who will rule in righteousness (vv.1-4), reign forever (vv.5-7), in all places (vv.8-11), with compassion on the needy (vv.12-14), and with endless blessings (vv.15-17).⁶

Then, from here on in the Psalms, Davidic psalms appear but with no historical links to the life of David. Furthermore, when David is spoken of in a psalm, it is rarely to speak of historical circumstances in his life. Below are all the references to David after Psalm 72.

⁶ My summary of this psalm is taken from Kidner’s section headings in his commentary on the text. See Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1973), 253–57.

Table 4. References to "David" in Books Three-Five.

Book Three	Book Four	Book Five
<p>Psa 78 (a psalm of Asaph)</p> <p>78:70 He chose David his servant and took him from the sheepfolds;</p>		<p>Psa 122 (a psalm of David)</p> <p>122:5 There thrones for judgment were set, the thrones of the house of David.</p>
<p>Psa 89 (a Psalm of Ethan)</p> <p>89:3-4 You have said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: 'I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations.'"</p> <p>89:20-21 I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him, so that my hand shall be established with him; my arm also shall strengthen him.</p> <p>89:35 Once for all I have sworn by my holiness; I will not lie to David. His offspring shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me.</p> <p>89:49 Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?</p>		<p>Psa 132 (no authorship, located between two Davidic Psalms)</p> <p>132:1 Remember, O LORD, in David's favor, all the hardships he endured,</p> <p>132:10 For the sake of your servant David, do not turn away the face of your anointed one.</p> <p>132:11 The LORD swore to David a sure oath from which he will not turn back: "One of the sons of your body I will set on your throne.</p> <p>132:17 There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed.</p>
		<p>Psa 144 (a psalm of David)</p> <p>144:10 who gives victory to kings, who rescues David his servant from the cruel sword.</p>

Conclusion: there is a movement in the Psalms from David as historical figure to David as pattern for the King to come.

The Movement of the Psalms

Key “moments” in the movement of the Psalms:

- Books One and Two: the historical David.
 - Note role of Psalm 51
- Psalm 72: the end of Book Two.
- Psalm 89: the “failure” of the Davidic hope
- Psalm 90: a psalm of Moses
- Psalms 91-99: the Lord reigns!
- Psalm 101-103: David as pattern
- Psalm 108-110: a messianic priest-king (Psa 110) who praises the Lord and conquers his enemies (Psa 108), yet still suffers unjustly (Psa 109).
- Psalm 145: the Davidic king leading the people in praises

Conclusion: the structure of the Psalter itself points us towards a king in the line of David, who will experience life in the pattern of David (suffering leading to victory), who will bring blessing to the people of God and lead them in praise. The shape of the Psalms points us to the Messiah.

Links Between the Introduction and Conclusion of the Psalms

Here we will look closely at the macrostructure of the Psalter, as indicated by the progression between its opening and its closing. Let’s look first at the themes introduced by Psalms 1-2.⁷ Table 5 shows their texts side-by-side, with key parallel features indicated in bold, italics, underlining, highlighting, and all-caps.

Table 5. Psalms 1-2, ESV, with similarities highlighted.

<p>1:1 Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;</p> <p>1:2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he <u>meditates</u> day and night.</p> <p>1:3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.</p> <p>1:4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.</p> <p>1:5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;</p>	<p>2:1 Why do the nations rage and the peoples <u>plot</u> in vain?</p> <p>2:2 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,</p> <p>2:3 “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.”</p> <p>2:4 He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.</p> <p>2:5 Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying,</p> <p>2:6 “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”</p>
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⁷ Many of the textual details we will consider here come from Hamilton’s work and that of Robert Cole. See Hamilton, *Psalms Volume I*, 89–196; Robert L. Cole, “Psalms 1-2: The Psalter’s Introduction,” in *The Psalms: Language for All Seasons of the Soul*, ed. Andrew J. Schmutzer and David M. Howard Jr (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2013), 183–96.

1:6 for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the WAY OF THE WICKED WILL PERISH.	<p>2:7 I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you.</p> <p>2:8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.</p> <p>2:9 You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."</p> <p>2:10 Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth.</p> <p>2:11 Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.</p> <p>2:12 Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you PERISH IN THE WAY, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.</p>
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Implications:

- Psalm 1: two ways to live
- Psalm 2: blessing and the Messiah; the revolt of the kings and peoples.

Psalms 146-150

There are similarities between each of these psalms:

- Each begins and ends with the phrase, "Hallelujah!"
- No superscription. This pattern mirrors the introduction: psalms lacking any superscription (Psa 1-2) followed by a large Davidic collection (Psa 3-41)...large Davidic collection (Psa 138-145), followed by psalms lacking any superscription.

There is also a progression in these psalms. We could summarize their message as follows:

Psa 146	Psa 147	Psa 148	Psa 149	Psa 150
Put no trust in princes, but instead trust Yahweh, who rules forever	Praise Yahweh, who rules over creation and blesses his chosen people	Praise the Lord, all creation and all peoples	Praise the Lord, who executes judgment through his people	Praise the Lord, all creation

Links with Psalms 1-2:

- The last occurrence of "blessed:" 146:5 with 1:1 and 2:12.
- "The way of the wicked" only occurs in Psalm 1:6 and Psalm 146:9.
- The "kings of the earth:" first appear in Psalm 2:2, and are referenced sporadically in the body of the Psalter (76:12, 89:27, 102:15, 138:4). Last appearance: Psalm 148:11, where they are summoned to praise the Lord with all creation. But then one last reference to kings in Psalm 149:8.
 - Psalm 2:1-2 with Psalm 149:8-9: the "binding of kings" and "the judgment written."

Thus the movement of these final psalms points to an ultimate eschatological fulfillment depicted climactically in Psalm 148-149, in which all humans, kings and peoples and nations, are either joined with the praises of creation (Psalm 148) or judged by the people of God who execute Yahweh's judgment (Psa 149).

Question: where then is the Messiah, the Davidic king, in this portrait of the end?

- The last Davidic collection (Psa 138-145), and the climactic praise of Psalm 145 (note: the last acrostic psalm in the Psalter).
- Transition from Psalm 145-146.

Then, and only then, can the people of God sing Psalm 150. As one man put it, "And then there is one more psalm."⁸

*Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens!
Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!
Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!*

Conclusion: the shape of the Psalter is itself messianic and eschatological. It teaches us to look for one greater than David, a suffering and yet victorious king who will bring history to its last day. "And then there is one more psalm."

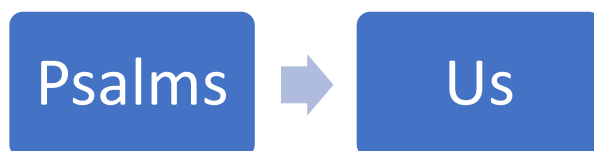
Conclusion: Reading Individual Psalms in a Christ-Centered Way

In light of all this, how do the individual psalms reveal Christ to us? How might we apply all this in our personal use of the Psalms?

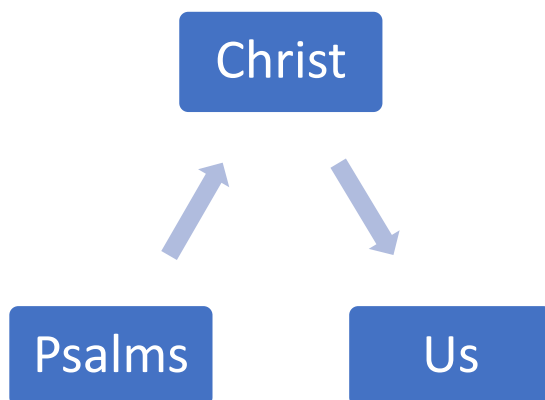
⁸ David Powlison, *Good and Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2016), 243.

A “Me-Centered” Reading of the Psalms vs. a Christ-Centered Reading:

“Me-centered” reading of Psalms:



A Christ-centered reading



“You have noticed that there are ‘we’ Psalms, written in the first person plural: “We are thy people and the sheep of thy pasture” (Ps. 100:3). Jesus sings those Psalms with us. He is the singing Shepherd; we are the lost sheep He has brought home rejoicing. He sings over us (Zeph. 3:17), and with us, and for us. Jesus can sing the ‘we’ Psalms *with* us because he sings the “I” Psalms *for* us as our Savior. “Lo, I am come; in the roll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do thy will, O my God” (Ps. 40:7, 8).”⁹

“What songs of agony Christ sings – the psalms of His suffering that sealed salvation!”¹⁰

Suggestions:

- Reading a lament psalm (e.g., Psa 13 or Psa 44)
- Reading a confession psalm (Psa 51)
- Reading an imprecatory psalm (Psa 137)

⁹ Edmund P. Clowney, “The Singing Savior,” *Moody Monthly*, August 1979, 40.

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, 41.