

How to Study the Psalms

Introduction

A large and popular portion of God's Word is the Psalms. In them we have—

- Praise to God
- Trust in difficult times
- Encouragement to do what pleases God
- Instruction in daily living

Psalms are probably the most turned to book of the OT, probably because the authors open themselves up to God, expressing emotions such as joy, disappointment, anger, thanksgiving, etc. The Psalms thus help us “relate” to God.

Psalms are poetry, and we are not all “well-versed” in poetry! An important principle is that the *whole* poem/Psalm is designed (built, put together) to convey a theme or topic. This means that you must see how your favorite verses contribute to developing the main theme. For example:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet,
And so are you.

It would be wrong to focus solely on one line/idea in this poem. Why? In expressing the concept of one's affection for a loved one, the poet lists three factual statements and concludes with a similar factual statement—“in like manner you are sweet.” While the main point is *not* to teach about the colors of flowers or the taste of edible crystalline carbohydrates, its main point *is* developed by those facts.

When interpreting the Psalms it is important to remember that they are written from the standpoint of the Mosaic Law. This involves a number of differences from our present standpoint. For example, today there is not *one* nation that God favors above another (51:18); we don't offer animal sacrifices (51:19); and God does not reward obedience with physical blessings (147:14). So use the Psalms *beneficially* but use them *accurately* in light of how God is working in this day and age (2 Tim 2:15). (This has application as well to singing Psalms today—we can't think that Israel, Jerusalem, or Zion is now the church.)

Here are some principles you can use to have a better understanding of a Psalm—

☞ Read each Psalm as a [complete unit](#).

1. What **Type** of Psalm is **This**? Some examples:

- 1) Hymn of Praise, 145:3
- 2) Imprecatory, 137; 35:1–8
 - a. “Cursings”
 - b. Not personal revenge; matter is given to God

- c. Prayer is for God's sake; context is His nature and Kingdom
- d. Author is disturbed about sin and aroused for righteousness

- 3) Royal or Kingship Psalm, 72:15, 17
- 4) Lament (more than a third of the Psalms fit in here), 79:1–2
- 5) Thanksgiving Psalm, 138:4–6

2. What is the **Historical** Setting?

- 1) Check the superscription. Who wrote it? Any other information? Cf. Psalm 51, 52, 54
- 2) Check biblical data from the Psalm itself and from other biblical sources. Cf. Psalm 89 with 2 Samuel 7.
- 3) Usually we must be content with only a general knowledge of the historical setting. Why? The Psalmists wanted these to be used by others; specific information could make public use and application difficult.

3. What is the **Subject** or **Topic**?

- 1) The controlling topic is usually found in the first few verses.
- 2) Remember, the Psalmist is responding to thoughts, emotions, or specific situations, and each Psalm has one main theme that it develops.
- 3) The topic can be stated in different ways.

4. How is the **Topic Developed**?

- 1) Major part of the poem's structure is the development of the topic.
- 2) The subject can be developed in four different ways:
 - a. *Contrast* (Psalm 1—righteous and wicked)
 - b. *Listing* of items associated with the subject (Psalm 23; subject is God's care, like a shepherd, etc)
 - c. *Relationship* (Psalm 19—Creation and God's Word)
 - d. *Repetition* by metaphors and illustrations (Psalm 133—brothers dwelling “*together in unity...is like the precious oil upon the head...it is like the dew of Hermon*”)

5. How is the **Psalm Concluded**?

- 1) Summary statement, 1:6
- 2) Prayer, 19:14
- 3) Exhortation, 32:11

Let's look at Psalm 64 and try to apply what we've just learned

1. What Type of Psalm is This?

Prayer for **protection; lament**

2. What is the Historical Setting?

v. 1 **life is threatened**

v. 2 **intrigue, conspiracy**

vv. 3–4 **verbal attacks**

vv. 5–6 **destructive plans**

- Evidently the Psalmist is experiencing some type of internal (power?) struggle or conspiracy
- Example of such a struggle in David's reign: 2 Samuel 14–15 (Absalom)

3. How is the Topic Developed?

vv. 3–6 Metaphor: **tongue/sword, speech/arrow**

v. 7 Metaphor: **arrow/wounded**

v. 7 Contrast: **“but”**

4. How is the Psalm Concluded?

vv. 9–10 Summary: **Despite the attempts of wicked men to overthrow the godly, they will fail. God will judge the wicked and protect the righteous. As a result of this, all will “fear” God rather than the wicked, and the righteous will continue to trust and praise Him.**