



Psalm 119:105

# PSALMS

## Background File

The book of Psalms (also called the Psalter) contains one hundred-fifty prayers, songs, liturgies, and poems that are divided into five smaller books:

Book I (Psalms 1–41)

Book II (Psalms 42–72)

Book III (Psalms 73–89)

Book IV (Psalms 90–106)

Book V (Psalms 107–150)

Within these smaller books, there are other divisions, such as the “Songs of Ascent” (Psalms 120–134).

The psalms were composed by many different authors, who are not identified. Some psalms include a *superscription* (writing or printing that appears above or to the side) such as “of David” or “of Asaph.” These terms do not mean that David or Asaph wrote these psalms, but that the poem or song is associated with them in some manner.

The superscriptions were not originally included in the psalms. They were added at a later date and often include terms with unknown meanings, such as “with stringed instruments” (Ps 4), “for the flutes” (Ps 5), “according to The Sheminith” (Pss 6, 12), “A Shiggaion” (Ps 7), “according to The Gittith” (Ps 8), and “according to Muth-labben” (Ps 9). These may have been musical instructions for the singing of these psalms. The term *selah*, which occurs seventy-one times in the book of Psalms (and three times in Habakkuk 3), is also unknown. Many scholars believe this term was also a musical or liturgical notation.

## What’s the Story?

The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *Tehillim*, which literally means “praises.” The book is a collection of material used by individuals, communities, and kings. This includes a wide variety of psalms:

Prayers for help

Hymns of praise

- Liturgies
- Instructional psalms
- Songs of thanksgiving
- Royal psalms
- Trust psalms
- Acrostic poems
- Festival psalms
- Historical psalms

The chart on the next two pages provides more information on each type of psalm.

## What's the Message?

Martin Luther wrote that the book of Psalms “might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or hand-book. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book” (*LW* 35:254). By this Luther obviously did not mean that the Psalms teach Christian beliefs, since they were all written before the time of Christ. Rather, Luther was referring to the fact that the Psalms explore the highs and lows of the life of faith. They sing with joy and trust from the mountaintop moments and cry out with pain “out of the depths” (*Ps* 130:1). The Psalms weep with those who suffer, laugh with those who celebrate, and teach all of us about the long journey of faith.

# Types of Psalms

## Prayers for help

### Individual

3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9/10, 13, 17, 22, 26, 28, 31, 35, 36, 38, 39, 42/43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 61, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 89, 90, 94, 102, 109, 120, 130, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144

Individual prayers for help, sometimes called laments, were prayed by individuals in crisis. These pleas for help generally include several elements:

- a call to be heard
- complaints about God's absence, the person's suffering, and oppressors
- pleas for help (the most important part of a prayer for help)
- statements of trust in God
- promises to praise God after the crisis is past

The specific crisis in the psalm usually cannot be identified, perhaps so that individuals of every generation could pray these prayers as their own.

Penitential and imprecatory psalms are two sub-categories of individual prayers for help. Penitential psalms (6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143) were identified by the Western church as prayers for individuals who want to ask God for forgiveness. Imprecatory psalms (36, 69, 109, 137, 139) ask God to rescue the person who is praying and also to punish evildoers.

### Communal

44, 60, 67, 74, 79, 80, 82, 83, 85, 108, 123, 126, 137

Communal prayers for help, or communal laments, are the prayers of a community or nation in crisis.

## Hymns of praise

8, 33, 47, 48, 65, 66, 67, 68, 76, 84, 87, 89, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 112, 113, 114, 117, 135, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150

Hymns of praise give witness to God's love and grace through a call to praise ("Praise the Lord") and reasons for praise ("for the Lord ..."). These songs were composed for community worship.

### Creation psalms

8, 19, 104, 139

Creation psalms are hymns that praise God as creator of heaven and earth.

### Enthronement

47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 99

Enthronement hymns specifically praise God as "king." Originally they may have been sung at a festival celebrating the Lord as the universal king.

### Songs of Zion

46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122

Songs of Zion praise God for choosing to "dwell" (or causing God's "name" to dwell) in the Jerusalem temple. They also celebrate God's promise to protect Jerusalem and to remain faithful to David's descendants.

## Liturgies

2, 12, 15, 24, 50, 81, 82, 85, 91, 95, 107, 115, 118, 121, 124, 129, 132, 134, 136

Liturgies were usually composed for more than one person to perform (with various people speaking different parts) and often for some specific purpose (such as to enter the temple, request God's help, or thank God). A priest or another leader of the people probably spoke at least part of many of these psalms.

## Instructional psalms

1, 14, 19, 37, 41, 49, 53, 62, 73, 90, 119, 127, 128, 133

Instructional psalms often include comparisons between the righteous and unrighteous, the wise and the fool, or God's way and the world's way. Also known as Wisdom psalms, they were written to teach the community. Many other psalms include significant teaching (see 25, 91, and 94), and Christians read all the psalms as instruction. The three psalms that focus specifically on God's Law (1, 19, and 119) are also called Torah Psalms.

## Songs of thanksgiving

### Individual

30, 32, 34, 40, 57, 66, 92, 116, 138

Individual songs of thanksgiving praise God for help given to a person during a crisis. Individuals would pray for God's help and promise to praise God afterward (see "Prayers for help—Individual"). They would thank God in the worshiping community, where their praise could build up the faith of others.

### Communal

66, 75, 107

Communal songs of thanksgiving praise God for help given to a community during a crisis. The community sings these songs after passing through a difficult time, such as war, famine, or plague.

## Royal psalms

2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144

Royal psalms were composed for specific events in the king's life, such as his coronation (2) or wedding (45). Other psalms celebrate the king as one of God's servants, or were specifically designed for the king to pray or sing as the leader of the people (18, 20, and 21). Royal psalms were preserved even after kings no longer ruled Israel, because they maintained God's promise that one day the Messiah, the ideal king, would come.

## Trust psalms

11, 16, 23, 27, 46, 52, 63, 121, 125, 129, 131

Trust psalms express faith and confidence in God amid great difficulties, threats, and dangers.

## Acrostic poems

9/10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, 145

Acrostic poems are written so that particular letters follow a pattern, sometimes spelling out words or phrases. The book of Psalms contains eight acrostic poems, in which each line or section begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

## Festival psalms

50, 81, 95

Festival psalms were composed for use at one or more of Israel's three annual festivals.

## Historical psalms

78, 105, 106

Historical psalms tell a portion of Israel's history to give witness to God's faithfulness as shown in history.