

HOW DO WE READ THE PSALMS?

We all have different experiences with the Psalms; sometimes we read them and think, “huh?” You may love the depth of emotion and vulnerability, or maybe you avoid them altogether. So, what do we do with them? How do we read and understand 150 chapters compiled over 1,000 years?

In this podcast from Church On The Move, Spiritual Formation Pastors, Angela Ekstrum, Casey Shirley, and Blake Zimmerman, explain the structure and history of the Psalms, the practices of lament and gratitude, and teach us how to approach reading scripture meditatively so that we can ultimately understand more about God and ourselves.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2L318cNf2A>

When were the Psalms written?

It's easier to understand something when you understand the general framework. So, let's break it down.

The Psalms were compiled over a period of 1,000 years and were written by various authors, some anonymous, with the most well-known author being David.

At some point (many scholars believe during the Babylonian exile) these poems, songs, and prayers were compiled by a group of scribes and then meticulously arranged into a fivefold structure that together tells one coherent story.

What's the structure of the book?

(Spoiler: the structure is surprisingly important to the overall story in the Psalms.)

Did you know there is a method, a strategy to the order the Psalms are in? They were arranged to tell the whole story of scripture through poems and prayer. In fact, Martin Luther called them the Spirit's summary of the whole Bible, check out the what he said:

“The Psalter should be precious to us if only because it most clearly promises the death and resurrection of Christ, and describes his kingdom, and the nature and standing of all Christian people. It could well be entitled a “Little Bible” since everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully and briefly comprehended, and compacted into...a Manual. It seems to me as if the Holy Ghost had been please to take on himself the trouble of putting together a short Bible...touching the whole of Christianity...in order that they who are unable to read the whole Bible may nevertheless find almost the whole sum comprehended in one little book...the Psalter is the very paragon of books.”

Check out the structure of the book:

- **Book 1: Psalm 1-41**
- Psalm 1 and 2 are the gateway to interpreting the rest of the Psalms. Psalm 1 tells us a human is blessed when they meditate on the scripture. It tells us how we should read them—not like a textbook, but meditatively. Psalm 2 tells us what the story all about: we’re looking forward to the coming of the king.
- **Book 2: Psalm 42-72**
- In Book 2 we are reminded that the Lord goes before us in all things.
- Book 1,2,3 are all filled with a sense of lament.
- **Book 3: Psalm 73-89**
Israel’s exile and the downfall of David’s royal family
- **Book 4: Psalm 90-106**
A prayer of Moses
- **Book 5: 107-150**
a Rekindling of hope for the Messiah and a new temple

When we read these, we’re both looking back and looking forward as we wait for His return. We give thanks that he has come, and we anticipate that He is coming again.

For more on the structure of the Psalms check out this video:

<https://bibleproject.com/bible-studies/church-at-home/week25-psalms/>

Why are the Psalms difficult to understand?

Most people don't read poetry in their spare time. (But if you do, kudos to you).

However, a few hundred years ago, people did. Because poetry is no longer a part of our day-to-day lives, we don't really know how to read it. The form of poetry forces us to slow down, which our culture doesn't do well. Like poetry, the Psalms take time to interpret. They require us to slow down to see the whole story. They take multiple readings and meditation to fully comprehend. Therefore, many people may look at the Psalms and think, *I just don't have time for that.*

The Psalms take us through creation to looking forward to the coming messiah. They take things we have already heard in story form and put them into poetic form for people to sing, to read, and to pray. **They help to take the story we have read and get it into our imagination.**

Practices in the Psalms: Lament, Gratitude, & Meditation

The Practice of Lament

Lament is a topic not talked about enough in the Church. Maybe you've had the thought before, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" or "Where was God in all this?" Lament is concerned with the question of "how am I supposed to pray when I am experiencing a devastating pain and heartbreak?" It happens when what you're currently experiencing doesn't line up with God's promises.

Two misconceptions about lament:

1. When I am lamenting, I am complaining

When we complain, we are accusing God of not being good.

But lament is a direct appeal to God *based* on this goodness. We see an example of this in Exodus chapter 2,

The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

2. When I lament, I am doubting.

Some people confuse lamenting with a deep expression of doubt: “God, how can I trust you when you’ve let me down this way?” But lament is actually a form of faith, because we are choosing to trust God with these difficult feelings.

Job and His Friends

In the book of Job, we see a poignant example of lament. Job is stripped of all of his earthly possessions and is left crying out to God in anguish – holding nothing back.

Job’s friends come to him in his time of need, but they reveal where we often go wrong in lament.

They give grand speeches inaccurately portraying God’s character and ultimately placing blame on Job for his suffering.

Job’s friends talked about God, but Job went directly to God.

In his book *Abraham’s Silence*, Richard Middleton explains,

“Lament doesn’t have to be theologically correct speech, but it has to be gut-honest speech. When we have the audacity to lay our pain at God’s feet, to summon the most high into our suffering, something remarkable happens: God comes.”

We know that God will never leave us or forsake us. But sometimes a Psalmist expresses the feeling that He has.

God desires to hear how we *actually* feel.

The Psalms are instructive to the people of God on how to express our feelings. When we take them to God, we are opening the door to resurrection power.

The Psalms give us the opportunity to process our feelings with our friend: God.

When someone comes to us with lament, we should listen and turn them back to God. We have to be gentle with one another’s weaknesses and reassure them that God is also a safe place for them to process. And we must remind each other that on the other side of lament is gratitude.

The Practice of Gratitude

When we practice gratitude we are practicing joy. When we hold joy and hold our pain together, we are becoming fully formed. God is inviting us to hold the intensity of our emotions in tension with one another. And practicing gratitude lays a foundation for when we lament. Psalm 103 gives us a beautiful example of thanksgiving:

*Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name!
Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the pit . . .*

It's not just saying thank you, but going to a place in your mind to a time you especially felt God with you in a moment. What moment like this comes to mind? Spend some time writing about it. There's shaping power in actually articulating gratitude. Journaling your gratitude creates a concrete moment for you to hold onto when you need a reminder of God's faithfulness to you.

Meditating on the Psalms

Lectio divina (Latin for divine word) is a practice that has been around for centuries. It's deeply personal and forces us to slow down. It may sound fancy and intimidating, but we promise it's simple. This is a great place to start when reading Scripture, and it can be broken down into four steps: Read the scripture, meditate on the scripture, pray the scripture, and then rest in God's presence.

Step 1: Choose a passage, get comfortable, and read it slowly.

Step 2: Read it again, but this time read it slower. Look for a word or phrase that stands out to you and focus on that.

Step 3: Read it again, but time as a prayer. Listen to what the Spirit is saying to you. This might look like reading a line of scripture and praying a response. This would be a great time to journal your thoughts and prayers.

Step 4: This can often be the hardest part – read it again and then rest in God’s goodness, in His delight in you, and receive His love.

Pro tip: Read the Psalms outside. There is something powerful to visually seeing God’s creation while reading the beautiful language of the Psalms. We were created as whole, integrated beings with five senses, so engage them!

Don’t make it complicated: just start with 20 minutes. Ultimately, God wants to reveal Himself to you through the story of Scripture. It’s okay to look to resources like commentaries, videos, and podcasts. We have linked some below!

Check out another post about reading the Psalms.

[The Book Of Psalms: An Introduction](#)

Sermon: When Prayer Becomes Real

<https://youtu.be/JUCyp0zSxNI>

Abraham’s Silence by Richard Middleton

<https://www.amazon.com/Abrahams-Silence-Binding-Isaac-Suffering/dp/0801098017>

Richard Middleton Lecture: “The Importance of Lament in the Life of Faith”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjlpR1SXGO4>

Thank you to Church On The Move for additional resources.