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TREASURING  
THE  
PSALMS

HOW TO READ THE SONGS THAT  
SHAPE THE SOUL OF THE CHURCH



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We are given comfort by the God who always shepherds his people well (e.g., Ps 23).

We are humbled with reminders of how glorious it is to be forgiven by God (e.g., Ps 32).

We are blessed with words of security as we encounter our God as the best refuge imaginable (e.g., Ps 46).

We are led in self-forgetful praise of God (e.g., Ps 150).

It is for good reason, then, that the book of Psalms is among the most cited Old Testament books in the New Testament. Along with countless believers through the ages, it is also one of my favorite books of the Bible. In the Psalms we find the theology of the Old Testament put into poetry and expressed in worship to YHWH. This book is clearly Godward, practical, and encouraging.

Even better, the book of Psalms is not only a treasure when life is easy, but it is also precious when life is hard. In this book,

We are given words to express our sorrow in faith, for times when life is deeply painful (e.g., Ps 3).

We are given words to express our yearning to gather with God's people when we have been kept from fellowship (e.g., Ps 42).

We are helped with words of confession and repentance for times when we have committed a horrible sin (e.g., Ps 51).

We are blessed with a heavenly perspective for times when following Christ is hard, and when all but the godly seem to be doing well (e.g., Ps 73).

We are given vocabulary to express our longing for God's presence when he feels distant from us (e.g., Ps 84).

We even encounter the very words Jesus used to express his agony as he hung on the cross (e.g., Ps 22).

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translates the Hebrew *mashiah* (מָשִׁיחַ) as *Christos* (χριστός). This explains the origin of the English words "Messiah" and "Christ," as they are used in reference to Jesus.

How awesome is this book that helps us express our own tears and also gives us a peek into the words and emotions of our Savior.

On the other hand, in our initial encounter with the book of Psalms, we not only find surface treasures but also some puzzling, seemingly impractical, and even deeply disturbing content. For example,

What are we to make of God-the-judge laughing at his enemies (e.g., Ps 2:4)?

Is it right to speak boldly and directly to YHWH, asking him why he stands far away and hides himself in times of trouble (e.g., Ps 10:1)?

Did the psalmist exaggerate the depth of his suffering at times, or did his words always express his exact personal experience (e.g., “all my bones are out of joint,” Ps 22:14)?

Is a psalm that celebrates an ancient Israelite king (e.g., Ps 45) or Zion (e.g., Ps 87) even mildly relevant for us today?

Should believers ever complain to God (e.g., Ps 64:1)?

Can it possibly be right to call “blessed” those who smash the heads of children against “the rock” (Ps 137:9)?

An initial reading of the book of Psalms turns up just as much puzzling, seemingly impractical, and disturbing content as it does surface treasure.

As we continue in the book of Psalms, the questions also continue. For example,

What is a *Shiggaion* or a *Maskil*?

What does “according to The *Sheminith*,” or “according to *Muth-labben*” mean?

What about *Selah*?

To be sure, there are many terms in the book of Psalms that seem far removed from our understanding. And then there are the psalm titles in general: “To the choirmaster. Of David” (e.g., Ps 11:0). Does this

accurately reflect the poem's original authorship? If so, why was it written in the third person? Why do our English Bibles set these titles in a different font and place them *prior* to verse 1? What about the so-called historical psalm superscriptions? Did David really write poems for occasions of his own desperation (e.g., Ps 3) or repentance (e.g., Ps 51)?

Further, is the book of Psalms a random assortment of 150 poems arranged in no particular order, or is there anything significant about the book's shape? Is there a message to be found in the flow of the psalms? If so, why is it out of chronological order, with a psalm of Moses (approximately 1400 BC) appearing in the middle (Ps 90), and many psalms of David (approximately 1000 BC) appearing before (e.g., almost all of Ps 3–41) and long after it (e.g., Ps 138–145)? And why is the larger book of Psalms separated into five smaller books, or sections? Was this a part of the original shape of the book, or was it a later addition?

Finally, we may also have questions about specific content. For example, if Psalm 72:20 marks the end of the prayers of David, son of Jesse, why do other prayers of David appear in Psalms 86 and 142? Or why does the name of YHWH all but disappear in Psalms 42–83? Is there a reason for the temporary switch to *Elohim* (אֱלֹהִים, “God”) in this section, and then the switch back to YHWH in Psalms 84–150? An initial encounter with the book of Psalms certainly turns up questions that need to be answered.

## TWO KEY WORDS

Although the focus of this book will be on reading the Psalms as a purposefully shaped collection of poems (“reading canonically”) that points to Christ (“reading christologically”) and applies directly to the Christian life (“reading personally and corporately”), in the rest of this introduction we will consider two key words and three helpful insights about the book of Psalms. These will equip us to navigate the

particulars through the rest of our study. As we begin to dig a little deeper in search of even more gospel treasure from the book of Psalms, we find that noticing a bit about its use of words will help us to read with understanding. For now we'll look at two brief but important examples: YHWH (יהוה, "Yahweh," or "the LORD") and *hesed* (חֶסֶד, "steadfast love").

**YHWH.** First, the name YHWH (most commonly pronounced "Yahweh") stands out.<sup>3</sup> Isn't it telling that in this intimate book of praise and prayer, the most common way that the poets addressed their God was by his personal, covenant name? This name had been used in praise of God since the earliest days of his people (e.g., Gen 4:26b), by the patriarchs when they spoke to God (e.g., Gen 15:2), and by God when he revealed himself to the patriarchs (e.g., Gen 15:7). However, the full significance of this name was revealed in the exodus from Egypt, when YHWH *redeemed* his people from slavery (e.g., Ex 3:14-16; 6:2-3).<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the name YHWH is wrapped up in the

<sup>3</sup>See this book's preface for an explanation of the name YHWH.

<sup>4</sup>Waltke helpfully explains these texts on a grammatical basis. For Waltke, an analysis of the Hebrew text of Exodus 3:12-13 and Exodus 6:2-3 offers helpful insights into the meaning of these important passages. First, in Exodus 3:13, when Moses asked for God's name, he clearly could have used a Hebrew word with the connotation "What is the name you go by?" but instead he used a Hebrew word to ask, "What is the meaning of your name?" (see Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007], 365). In other words, even though it may not be clear in English, Waltke argues that in the Hebrew it is clear that *Moses was asking for an explanation of what the name YHWH means*. In this place, YHWH's answer was "I am who I am" (*ehye asher ehye* [אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה]), or "I will be who I will be." The same name in Hebrew in the third person "he is," is pronounced "Yahweh." The sense of the name here is that YHWH is always the same: he is unchanging, consistent. And the sense from this explanation by YHWH is something like this: "you can count on me" (see Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 366-67). Then, in Exodus 6 for Waltke, YHWH was getting ready for the plagues on Egypt, and he began in v. 2, "I am YHWH." Then in v. 3, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name, YHWH, I did not make myself known to them." While the Hebrew of Exodus 3:13-14 emphasizes the *meaning* of the name YHWH, Exodus 6:2-3 emphasizes its *significance* (see Waltke and Yu, *An Old Testament Theology*, 367-69). And it all comes down to the verb "to know," or "to make known" in the Hebrew text. So in Exodus 3, the *meaning* of YHWH is being stressed (consistent, never changing, personal covenant God), and in Exodus 6 the *significance* of the name YHWH is being stressed ("this is what YHWH is like"). And in both cases the context is the redemption of YHWH's people from Egypt. In other words, the meaning and the significance of the name YHWH cannot be fully known unless one has personally experienced redemption by him.

covenant commitment God made with his people: *it is the personal name of God that reminds us of his personal commitment to his people's salvation.*

There are 150 individual psalms, and the name YHWH occurs 695 times in the book.<sup>5</sup> That is an average of almost five occurrences per psalm. The first of these is found in the second verse of the book, Psalm 1:2: “Blessed is the [one] / who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, / nor stands in the way of sinners, / nor sits in the seat of scoffers; / but [this person's] delight is in the law of the LORD” (Ps 1:1-2). And the last time the personal name of God occurs is in the very last verse of the book, where we encounter it twice: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! / Praise the LORD!” (Ps 150:6). The psalmists had a boldness to come to their God personally and intimately, and by including the book of Psalms in the Bible, God invites us to enjoy this same kind of intimate, personal access.

Before we move on, a little bit of simple translation information will help transform our reading of the book of Psalms (and the entire Old Testament, for that matter). Our English Bibles almost universally translate the name YHWH with the title “the LORD.”<sup>6</sup> While this is common convention, the use of a *title* is far less personal than is warranted by the *name* YHWH in the original Hebrew. If the psalmists lead us to employ the personal, covenant name of God that is especially wrapped up in our redemption, would it not seem logical to use this *name* in favor of an *impersonal title*? A strategy I use in my own reading is simple: when I encounter the title “the LORD”

<sup>5</sup>As a short form for YHWH, the Hebrew YH (יה) occurs an additional 43 times in the book of Psalms. This increases the total occurrences of the personal name of God from 695 to 738 in the book.

<sup>6</sup>Martin Luther was the first to employ the use of capital letters to distinguish Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament. In Luther's case, he employed the German words “HErr” for *adonay* (אֲדֹנָי) and “HERR” for YHWH. See Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, 69 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955), 35:248. Most English translations follow this convention by translating “the Lord” for *adonay* (אֲדֹנָי) and “the LORD” for YHWH.



in my English Bible, I read it as “YHWH.” Over the years, I have found that this transforms my reading of the book of Psalms, and even the entire Old Testament: it constantly reminds me of the personal, intimate way I can and should relate to YHWH. Whether you follow my strategy or not, it is important to at least understand the significance of this Hebrew name, and to know when it is used in our reading of the book of Psalms (or the entire Old Testament).

**Hesed** (חֶסֶד). Our second key word is *hesed* (חֶסֶד). This is a Hebrew word that our English Bibles translate in various ways, including “mercy,” “love,” and “kindness,” while the English Standard Version (ESV) translates it uniformly as “steadfast love.” The word *hesed* occurs 256 times in the Hebrew Old Testament, and 130 of these are found in the book of Psalms. According to Baer and Gordon, this word has a strong relational sense, as well as an emphasis on a prior commitment or bond.<sup>7</sup> In the context of YHWH’s *hesed* toward his people, we can say that it is relational (e.g., “love”), and that it expresses his covenant commitment to his people (e.g., “steadfast”).

In its Old Testament context, this great covenant word reminds us that the God who purchased his people out of slavery is tender toward them, faithful to them, and will never let them go. The ESV has translated this word in a helpful way, because “love” emphasizes God’s tenderness, and “steadfast” emphasizes his covenant faithfulness. A few examples:

Have mercy on me, O God,  
 according to your steadfast love;  
 according to your abundant mercy  
 blot out my transgressions. (Ps 51:1)

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,  
 so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him (Ps 103:11)

So YHWH and *hesed* are two key words that will help us find even more treasure below the surface in the book of Psalms.

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<sup>7</sup>See D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, “חֶסֶד,” NIDOTTE 2:206-13.

### THREE HELPFUL INSIGHTS

As we continue our initial excavation, it would be helpful to ask the question, “What *is* the book of Psalms?” In this section we will learn three helpful insights: one from the Hebrew Old Testament, and two from the early Reformers.

***The book of praises.*** What comes to your mind when you hear reference to “praising God”? Some of us think of organs and hymns like “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.” Some of us think of guitars and songs like “10,000 Reasons.” Some of us think of hand clapping and maybe even dancing. Sadly, some of us think of sharp disagreements we’ve had with other Christians about music styles at church. When we come to the Bible, we find an entire book, 150 chapters, devoted to praising God. The book of Psalms contains 150 songs/prayers of worship to YHWH. As we get looking at this book, we find that it mentions body posture like clapping, dancing, and bowing; it mentions instruments like lyres, harps, and cymbals; but its focus is on God and a believer’s relationship with him. According to the book of Psalms, posture and instruments matter, but most important are the words we sing and the God to whom we sing them.

In the original Hebrew, the title of the book of Psalms is *Tehillim* (תְּהִלִּים), “Praises.” This is related to *hallelujah*, a frequently occurring word in the Psalms that means “praise YHWH.” The Psalms is a book of *Praises*, 150 of them, and for thousands of years it has been the song book and the prayer book of God’s people. This means that if we want to learn to give expression to our praises (in song or prayer), we should come to the book of Psalms for guidance. And in this book we find words to praise God in every season of life, whether we are in the heights of joy or the depths of gloom, whether we feel close to God or far from him, whether we are healthy or sick, whether we are happy or sad or angry or anything in between. The book of Psalms teaches us to praise God in all of life.

**A little Bible.** When I was a new Christian, I heard a professor tell his class that whenever he had focused on the book of Psalms in his personal Bible reading and prayer time, he went through a dry spell in his walk with God. His conclusion (and his recommendation) was that Christians should never sit down to read from the book of Psalms exclusively but should add a psalm to their reading from other parts of the Bible. As a new Christian, this comment seemed out of step with my view of the Bible. After all, the book of Psalms is a part of the Word of God. So I set out to investigate whether this was helpful advice. Having studied the Bible for a few decades, I remain thankful for the impact of this man's teaching in most areas, but I disagree with this particular counsel.

Martin Luther's description of the book of Psalms gave me clarity about my uneasiness with this professor's advice. In his *Preface to the Book of Psalms*, Luther said that it

might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. . . . 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.<sup>8</sup>

After a few decades of studying the Psalms, I can offer my hearty "amen" to the great Reformer's description. The book of Psalms is indeed a little Bible, containing a summary of the Bible's teaching about God, humanity, sin, and salvation. This is awesome when we think about it: a book that began its life as a collection of *responses* of people to God (in song and prayer) was later gathered into a book and recognized as *God's Word* to his people. These songs/prayers are deeply theological, even a little Bible!

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<sup>8</sup>Luther, *Luther's Works*, 35:254.

*An anatomy of all the parts of the soul.* A third insight into the nature of the book of Psalms comes from the great theologian and biblical interpreter John Calvin. In his *Preface to the Book of Psalms*, Calvin noticed the elevated language and the varied nature of its content, and he concluded:

The varied and [resplendent]. . . riches which are contained in this treasury it is no easy matter to express in words . . . I have been accustomed to call this book, I think not inappropriately, “An Anatomy of all the 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. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated. . . . In a word, whatever may serve to encourage us when we are about to pray to God, is taught us in this book.<sup>9</sup>

If the book of Psalms may fairly be called “the book of Praises” and “a little Bible,” it may also be called “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.”

To summarize our findings so far, in the book of Psalms we learn that praises (*Tehillim*) consist in deeply theological (“a little Bible”) and deeply emotive words from every season of life (“an anatomy of all the parts of the soul”), expressed in songs/prayers to YHWH, the great covenant God who has shown his *hesed* (“steadfast love”) to his people. What an incredible book! What a treasure!

## THE PATH AHEAD

This book was written to help equip college or seminary students, pastors, and church study groups to read and study the book of Psalms. In terms of reading level, I have kept the technical discussions

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<sup>9</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1, trans. James Anderson, Calvin’s Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), xxxvi-xxxvii. Original source has “resplendid.”

to the footnotes and appendixes—the latter of which is available as a free PDF download on the IVP website ([www.ivpress.com/treasuring-the-psalms](http://www.ivpress.com/treasuring-the-psalms)). This way, church groups can focus on the heart of the book, while pastors and students can read these other items for a more academic study. In keeping with our treasure-hunting analogy, this book is meant to give Christian readers some tools in their tool-belts for a lifetime of digging deeply in the book of Psalms. This is not a book that *exhausts* everything everyone needs to know about the book of Psalms, but it focuses on some key areas that will equip readers to study deeply on their own.<sup>10</sup>

If this biblical book exhibits surface-level gospel treasure for the taking, it also contains many questions in need of answers before we can gain a deeper benefit from this book of praises, this little Bible, and this anatomy of all the parts of the soul. The Puritans likened the Bible to a bottomless gold mine, and none of us should be content with surface gold (or treasure!) when there is a depth of gospel riches to be mined. So this is a book about how to read the Psalms. Along the way, I will dig up some treasures and display them, and then invite readers to take the tools found in this book and to mine for themselves.

The chapters in this book are clustered into three sections. After this introduction, which has *generally* oriented us to the book of Psalms, in part one, “The Story: Reading the Psalms Canonically,” we will ask if there are any implications in the fact that the individual psalms have been gathered into a *book*. In part two, “The Savior: Reading the Psalms Christologically,” we will explore how to read the book of Psalms in light of the person and work of Christ, and with a desire for rich gospel application to the Christian life. In part three, “The Soul: Reading the Psalms Personally and

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<sup>10</sup>For an accessible book that complements this one, see Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988).

Corporately,” we will pick up on a key lesson from a previous chapter on the Psalms and the Christian: although the book of Psalms points to the person and work of Christ (i.e., “the gospel”), it also applies immediately and directly to the Christian (what we will refer to as “direct application”).

The last bit of reading will actually come as bonus material available as a free PDF download from the IVP website ([www.ivpress.com/treasuring-the-psalms](http://www.ivpress.com/treasuring-the-psalms)). As I wrote this book with my broad list of readers in mind, I found that there were certain places—six to be exact—where offering a bit of advanced information would be helpful to readers in more academic settings. In these places, I did two things: in the book itself, I provided six “Did You Know?” sections that are marked off in text boxes. Each of these sections introduce and summarize the essence of the teaching in a way that most readers will understand. For each “Did You Know?” section within the book, I then offer a corresponding “Digging Deeper” appendix on the IVP website ([www.ivpress.com/treasuring-the-psalms](http://www.ivpress.com/treasuring-the-psalms)) so that interested readers can turn there to learn more about the subject. Whether you are a pastor or a person in the pew, a student or a layperson who wants to grow in your ability to read God’s Word in a deeper way, you may choose to give these appendixes a try. If you are a pastor or a seminary student, these appendixes are targeted at your reading level, so I especially encourage you to read them.

Before we conclude this initial orientation to the book of Psalms, I return to the question of who should read this book and how they should use it. In my experience, any study of God’s Word is deepened when a person with the gift of teaching leads Christians in group study. As I have written, I have had two such group settings in mind: a college or seminary classroom, and a group Bible study in local churches. For this reason, I have included questions for group discussion at the end of each chapter. If everyone in the class or small

group has read the chapter in question, I suggest that discussion, with the questions as a guide, has the potential to deepen everyone's understanding. Of course, individuals—pastors or students or laypeople—who read this book on their own could very much benefit from these questions too by using them to reflect more on the material. I conclude this introduction, then, with the first set of questions for further reflection.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Early in the chapter, the author shared many examples of “surface treasure” found in the Psalms. Which ones stood out to you as particularly precious?
2. Did any of the author's examples of puzzling, seemingly impractical, and even deeply disturbing content in the Psalms leave you feeling particularly uneasy or confused? Why?
3. In light of your new understanding of the words YHWH and *hesed*, read Psalm 103 (ESV) aloud in your group, replacing the English “the LORD” with YHWH, and the English “steadfast love” with *hesed*.<sup>11</sup> What are your initial impressions about how understanding these two key words, and how being able to identify them in your reading of the Psalms in English, will impact your future study of this biblical book?
4. Of the three insights on the character of the book of Psalms as a whole—a book of praises, a little Bible, and an anatomy of the soul—which one seemed most insightful or helpful? Why?

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<sup>11</sup>I suggest that readers use the English Standard Version (ESV) for this exercise because this translation uniformly translates *hesed* as “steadfast love.” In other words, it is easier to identify in this translation.

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