

## Book of the Bible: Psalms

Based on the *NIV Study Bible, Introductions to the Books of the Bible, Psalms*

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### Theology: Introduction

The Psalter is for the most part a book of prayer and praise. Faith speaks to God in prayer and of God in praise. But there are also psalms that are teaching in form and purpose (teaching the way of godliness). As noted above, the whole collection has been arranged to suggest that one of its main purposes was instruction in the life of faith, a faith formed and nurtured by the Law, the Prophets and the wisdom literature.

Accordingly, the theology of the Psalms is theologically rich. Its is, however, not abstract or systematic but meant to give praise, to confess faith and practical. The Psalter is a large collection of independent pieces of many kinds, serving different purposes and composed over many centuries.

The final editors of the Psalter knew that many voices from many times spoke in the psalms, and they seem to reflect seven major theological themes that, while admittedly a bit artificial, can be helpful to the student of the Psalms.

### Theology: Major Themes

1. At the core of the theology of the Psalter is the conviction **God is the center of life** (of right human understanding, trust, hope, service, morality, adoration), of history and of the whole creation, (Yahweh, “the Lord”; see Deuteronomy 6:4). He is the Great King over all, the One to whom all things are subject. He created all things and preserves them. Because he ordered them, they have a well-defined and “true” identity (no chaos there). Because he maintains them, they are sustained and kept secure from disruption, confusion or annihilation. Because he alone is the sovereign God, they are governed by one hand and held in the service of one divine purpose. Under God creation is an orderly and systematic whole. Nature and history has one Lord, under whose rule all things worked together. Through the creation the Great King’s majestic glory is displayed. He is good (wise, righteous, faithful, amazingly benevolent and merciful—evoking trust), and he is great (his knowledge, thoughts and works are beyond human comprehension—evoking reverent awe). By his good and lordly rule he is shown to be the Holy One.
2. As the **Great King by right of creation and having absolute sovereignty**, he ultimately will not tolerate any power that opposes or denies or ignores him. He will come to rule the nations so that all will be compelled to acknowledge him. This expectation is no doubt the root and scope of the psalmists’ view of the future. Because the Lord is the Great King beyond all challenge, his righteous and peaceable kingdom will come, overwhelming all opposition and purging the creation of all rebellion against his rule—such will be the ultimate outcome of history.
3. As the **Great King on whom all creatures depend**, he opposes the proud who rely on their own resources (and/or the gods they have contrived) to work out their own destiny. These are the ones who ruthlessly wield whatever power they possess to attain worldly wealth, status and security; who are a law to themselves and exploit others as they will. In the Psalter, this kind of pride is the root of all evil. Those who embrace it, though they may seem to prosper, will be brought down to death, their final end. The humble, the poor and needy, those who

acknowledge their dependence on the Lord in all things—these are the ones in whom God delights. Hence the “fear of the Lord”—i.e., humble trust in and obedience to the Lord—is the “beginning” of all wisdom (111:10). Ultimately, those who embrace it will inherit the earth. Not even death can hinder their seeing the face of God.

4. Because God is the **Great King, he is the ultimate Executor of justice** among humans; to avenge oneself is an act of the proud. God is the court of appeal when persons are threatened or wronged—especially when no earthly court has jurisdiction. He is the mighty and faithful Defender of the defenseless and the wronged. He knows every deed and the secrets of every heart. There is no escaping his scrutiny. No false testimony will mislead him in judgment. And he hears the pleas brought to him. As the good and faithful Judge, he delivers those who are oppressed or wrongfully attacked and redresses the wrongs committed against them. This is the unwavering conviction that accounts for the psalmists’ impatient complaints when they boldly, yet as poor and needy, cry to him, “Why, O Lord, (have you not yet delivered me)?” “How long, O Lord (before you act)?”
5. As the **Great King over all the earth, the Lord has chosen Israel to be his servant people**, his inheritance among the nations. He has delivered them by mighty acts out of the hands of the world powers, he has given them a land of their own (territory that he took from other nations to be his own “inheritance” in the earth), and he has united them with himself in covenant as the initial embodiment of his redeemed kingdom. Thus both their destiny and his honor came to be bound up with this relationship. To them he also gave his word of revelation, which testified of him, made specific his promises and proclaimed his will. By God’s covenant, Israel was to live among the nations, loyal only to her heavenly King. She was to trust solely in his protection, hope in his promises, live in accordance with his will and worship him exclusively. She was to sing his praises to the whole world—which in a special sense revealed Israel’s anticipatory role in the evangelization of the nations.
6. As the **Great King, Israel’s covenant Lord, God chose David to be his royal representative** on earth. In this capacity, David was the Lord’s “servant”—i.e., a member of the Great King’s administration. The Lord himself anointed him and adopted him as his royal “son” to rule in his name. Through him God made his people secure in the promised land and subdued all the powers that threatened them. What is more, he covenanted to preserve the Davidic dynasty. Henceforth the kingdom of God on earth, while not dependent on the house of David, was linked to it by God’s decision and commitment. In its continuity and strength lay Israel’s security and hope as she faced a hostile world. And since the Davidic kings were God’s royal representatives in the earth, in concept seated at God’s right hand (110:1), the scope of their rule was potentially worldwide (see Ps 2).
7. As the **Great King, Israel’s covenant Lord, God also chose Jerusalem** (the City of David) as his own royal city, the earthly seat of his throne. Thus Jerusalem (Zion) became the earthly capital (and symbol) of the kingdom of God. There in his palace (the temple) he sat enthroned among his people. There his people could meet with him to bring their prayers and praise, and to see his power and glory. From there he brought salvation, dispensed blessings and judged the nations. And with him as the city’s great Defender, Jerusalem was the secure citadel of the kingdom of God, the hope and joy of God’s people.

### **Theology: Summary, Messianic Import and Conclusion**

Unquestionably the *supreme kingship of Yahweh* is the most basic metaphor and pervasive theological concept in the Psalter—as in the OT generally. It provides the fundamental perspective in which people are to view themselves, the whole creation, events in “nature” and history, and the future. All creation is Yahweh’s kingdom. To be a creature in the world is to be a part of his kingdom and under his rule. To be a human being in the world is to be dependent on and responsible to him. To proudly deny that fact is the root of all wickedness—the wickedness that now pervades the world.

*God’s election of Israel and of David and Zion*, along with the giving of his word, represent the renewed breaking in of God’s righteous kingdom into this world of rebellion and evil. It produces a great divide between the righteous nation and the wicked nations, and on between the righteous and the wicked, a significant distinction that even cuts through Israel. In the end His divine enterprise will triumph. Human pride will be humbled and wrongs will be redressed. The humble will be given the whole earth to possess, and the righteous and peaceable kingdom of God will come to full realization.

Another question is: *Do the Psalms speak of the Christ?* Yes, in a variety of ways—but not in the same way the prophets do. The Psalms were never seen as a prophetic book. Yes, when the Psalms were being given its final form, what the psalms said about the Lord and his ways with his people, about the his ways with the nations and his ways with the righteous and the wicked, what the psalmists said about the Lord’s anointed, his temple and his holy city—all this was understood in light of the writings of the prophets.

When the Psalms speak of the king on David’s throne, they speak of the king who is being crowned (as in Psalm 2; 72; 110) or is reigning (as in Psalm 45). They proclaim him as the Lord’s anointed and declare what the Lord will accomplish through him and his dynasty. And in the exile and the postexilic era, when there was no reigning king, they spoke to Israel about the only great Son of David whom the prophets had announced, as the one in whom God’s covenant with David would yet be fulfilled. The New Testament quotes these psalms as testimonies to Christ. In him they are truly fulfilled.

These cries of God’s oppressed saints became the prayers that were taken up into Israel’s book of prayers. When Christ came in the flesh, he identified himself with God’s humble people in the world. He became for them God’s righteous servant par excellence, and he shared their sufferings at the hands of the wicked. These prayers became his prayers also. The suffering and deliverance of which these prayers speak are fulfilled in him, and they continue to be the prayers also of those who take up their cross and follow him.

Similarly, in speaking of God’s covenant people, of the city of God, and of the temple in which God dwells, the Psalms ultimately speak of Christ’s church. The Psalter is not only the prayer book of the second temple; it is also the prayer book of the people of God. Now, however, it must be used in the light of the new era of redemption that dawned with the first coming of the Messiah and that will be consummated at his second coming.