

In nearly 30 years of ministry, it has been my observation that one book of the Bible that seems to be the favorite of many believers is the book of Psalms. It cannot be a mere coincidence that many believers who are actually near going into eternity find this to be their favorite book. H.A. Ironside said, "I suppose there is no portion of Holy Scripture that has meant more to the people of God, particularly to tried and afflicted believers down through both the Jewish and Christian centuries" (*Psalms*, p. 3). As one scholar said, "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the arena of faith the book of Psalms has been a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night for Israel and the church" (C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books*, p. 111).

There is no book of the Bible quite like Psalms. It is simple and yet sublime. It is relevant to modern life. It applies to Israel and the Church. It meets all kinds of needs in all kinds of situations and it touches hearts in ways that honor God. It describes experiences, emotions and life as it really is in the context of helping us elevate our strength, emotions, faith and service for God. It is a book that truly does prompt one to look to God and exalt God. The theology of Psalms is high and holy.

Allen P. Ross, who has written a good commentary on Psalms, says that saints of all ages have loved this book and used it for prayer purposes, praise purposes, worship purpose and for private meditations (*Psalms*, p. 779). When believers have been sick, they have read Psalms. When believers have been near death, they have read Psalms. When believers have been in sin, they have read Psalms. When believers are scared, they have read Psalms. When believers want encouragement and hope, they have read Psalms.

In fact, this was one of the favorite books of the Bible of the great Reformation leader Martin Luther, who of course was known for his love for Romans and Galatians. The first book he ever published with a translation and explanation was a book about seven Psalms. He loved the Psalms and as we journey through it, it will be a book you will love too. We would like to introduce this book by asking ten introductory questions:

**QUESTION #1** – What is the title of the book of Psalms?

The actual Hebrew title of the book of Psalms is "Tehillim" which means "praises." Actually it is "sephir tehillim" that means "**book of praises**." This particular word occurs 28 times in the book of Psalms but only one time is it used to actually classify a specific Psalm—Psalm 145.

**Actually our English word "Psalms" comes to us through the Greek language and the Greek translation of the O.T. Hebrew.** The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the O.T. done in 300 B.C., uses the title Psalmoi (ψαλμοι). The ending of the word "oi" is plural meaning Psalms.

**So our English word "Psalms" is a transliteration of the Greek title used in the Septuagint.**

There is good N.T. support for calling this book Psalms. In fact, when Jesus referred to the Psalms in Luke 20:42, He used this very plural word. The Apostle Paul used this word multiple times to describe this book—I Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16. Paul actually had a handle on the number of Psalms and specifically used this word in Acts 13:33. The Apostle Peter also referred to this as the book of Psalms—Acts 1:20.

The actual meaning of the Greek word “psalms” is a poem or song to be sung with a stringed instrument (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 487). However, over time, the Greek word psalmoi came to mean “songs of praise” apart from any specific reference to stringed accompaniment (Thomas Constable, *Notes on Psalms*, p. 1).

## **QUESTION #2 – What actually are the Psalms?**

The Psalms are a collection of 150 separate poems, songs and prayers written by different people from different time periods which were grouped together by one or more editors to form one book of the Bible that could be used for worship purposes, teaching purposes and singing purposes.

It is not known for sure just how the 150 psalms were collected. Many people wrote poems and songs but only 150 made it into the book of Psalms. Paul Benware is accurate when he said, “we may be sure that the Holy Spirit...using men and natural processes, preserved those that were to be included in the canon of Scripture” (*Survey of the Old Testament*, p. 170). Many believe that the 150 found in our Bible was the work of one final editor, who is typically identified as being Ezra the scribe.

Originally these Psalms were written for and given to Israel. At the time the Psalms were written, Jesus Christ had not yet come into the world in human form. At the time the Psalms were written, the Holy Spirit had not been forever given to every believer. At the time the Psalms were written, we were not in the Pauline dispensation of grace. There are things in the Psalms not suitable for Grace Age believers. For example, no believer needs to ever ask God not to take His Spirit from him, as David prayed (Ps. 51:11). The geography of Israel comes into play in understanding psalms. For example, Psalms of ascent (Ps. 120-134) only make sense with Jerusalem in view. We must always keep these things in mind with “rightly dividing” Psalms.

However, this does not mean we cannot find much that will feed us and uplift us in the Grace Age. In fact, in view of apostolic instruction and use, we know that the book of Psalms is also given by God to minister to the Church in a variety of ways. John Calvin said that there was no book of the Bible that could touch the soul like Psalms.

The Book of Psalms is one of the most quoted O.T. books in the New Testament.

According to the “Index of Allusions and Verbal Parallels” plus the “Index of Quotations” listed in the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament*, Psalms is quoted or alluded to 412 times in the New Testament, only one less than Isaiah (413), which clearly indicates this book of Psalms does contain critical truth for the Church and Grace Age.

**QUESTION #3** – If the Psalms were written to be sung (with instruments), why don’t we, generally speaking, sing more of them?

Tertullian in the second century says that some Christians in his day used to sing some of the Psalms. H.A. Ironside said that he knew of churches that actually thought the inspired Psalms were the only prayers and songs that should ever be sung in the church. Their thinking was the Psalms are inspired by God, but today’s hymns and sacred songs are written by men and are not inspired. However, Dr. Ironside said what many churches didn’t understand was that in this Grace Age, we have a better grasp of truth that was “utterly unknown to those in the days when the Psalms were written” (*Ibid.*, p. 4). **In fact, there is good biblical data to support the idea that by N.T. times, the Psalms were being taught much more than being sung.**

When Jesus was here on earth, He did not use the Psalms for singing purposes but for prophetic teaching purposes (Luke 20:41-44). In fact, the night the Lord instituted the Lord’s Supper, the text says “they sang a hymn” (ὕμνεω), not a psalm (ψαλμος) (Mt. 26:30; Mk. 14:26).

In the Grace Age Scriptures, the Apostle Paul uses the word “psalms” in the context of speaking and teaching and instruction. He did this himself in Acts 13:33. He stressed this point in the context of teaching in I Corinthians 14:26 and of speaking in Ephesians 5:19.

Furthermore, when we track the Psalm quotations in the New Testament, they are often used in teaching and instruction contexts. One good example is Psalm 2:7 which is used in Mt. 3:17; 17:5; Mk. 1:11; 9:7; Lk. 3:22; 9:35; Acts 13:33; Hebrews 1:5; 5:5. This Psalm is critical to the identity of Jesus Christ and frankly, I am not certain one could do justice to this by singing it.

When Paul gave his final charge to Timothy, he charged him to “preach the word,” not “sing the word.” That is not to say we should not sing some of the Psalms, but real growth comes in understanding what a specific Psalm actually means. Many early church fathers such as Origen, Eusebius, Chrysostom, Athanasius, Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome taught and wrote on Psalms.

**QUESTION #4** – Who wrote the Psalms?

**Two thirds of the Psalms, 100 of them, have known stated authors and one third of the Psalms, 50 of them, do not list an author.** There are six stated authors of the Psalms in Hebrew and three more listed as authors in the Greek Septuagint.

**Author #1** - David .

**David is the main author of the Psalms** and the historical books of the Bible clearly agree to the fact that he wrote and organized music for worship in the sanctuary—II Sam. 22:1-51; I Chron. 6:7-36. **David is specifically credited with writing 73 of the Psalms.** It is also speculated that David may have been the one who wrote many of the Psalms that do not have specific authorship. We do know that most of the other writers were closely associated with David. Luke specifically says David wrote Psalm 16 and Psalm 110—Acts 2:25, 34. **The primary author of Psalms is David, but he is not the only author.**

**Author #2** - Asaph .

Asaph was one of the heads of David's choir in Jerusalem (I Chron. 6:39; 15:16-17, 19; 16:5-7). Concerning the authorship of Psalms, **Asaph wrote Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83 for a total of 12.**

**Author #3** - Sons of Korah .

The sons of Korah were Korahite-Levites who were highly honored by King David (I Chron. 9:19). They were also chief temple servants at the time of Hezekiah (II Chron. 20:19; 31:14). These sons of Korah were Levitical singers who wrote prior to any captivity. **They specifically wrote Psalms 42, 44-49, 84, 85, 87, 88 for a total of 11.** In fact Heman, who wrote **Psalm 88**, was a Korahite and a principle singer for David and he also was the son of Joel (I Chron. 6:33, 37).

**Author #4** - Solomon .

It is specifically stated that Solomon, who was the son of David, wrote **Psalm 72 and Psalm 127** for a total of 2.

**Author #5** - Moses .

It is specifically stated that Moses wrote **Psalm 90.**

**Author #6** - Ethan .

It is specifically stated that Ethan, the Ezrahite, wrote **Psalm 89.**

**The Septuagint claims that Jeremiah wrote Psalm 137 and that Haggai and Zechariah collectively wrote Psalms 138, 146, 147, 148.**

Clearly several different authors penned the Psalms. However, if 73 were known to have been written by David and only 31 by others, that accounts for 104, which leaves 46 and if David wrote most of the other Psalms, it is clear he is the central man God used.

**QUESTION #5** – What is the time period covered by the writing of the Psalms?

If Psalm 90 was written by Moses, he lived and wrote somewhere around 1400 B.C. Since many Psalms were written by David and those associated with David, we may assume that **most Psalms were written around 1020-975 B.C.** Ethan, who was connected to Ezra, wrote Psalm 89 and Ezra lived around 500 B.C. So from a technical standpoint the Psalms were written over a time period of about 1000 years 1400-500 B.C. **But from a general perspective the majority of Psalms were written around 1000 B.C.** and the final collection of Psalms was in order by about 500 B.C.

**QUESTION #6** – What manuscripts do we have that contain the Psalms?

We have three wonderfully preserved manuscripts of the Psalms, from which we get our English Bibles:

- 1) We have the Hebrew Masoretic Text—which is a Hebrew vowel pointed text that was copied by Jewish textual scribes starting in A.D. 400.
- 2) We have the Greek Septuagint, in which seventy scribes translated the Hebrew O.T. into Greek in 250-150 B.C.
- 3) We have the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in 1947, but were written 150 years before Jesus Christ was born. Psalms was found in Qumran caves 1, 2, 4 & 11 and it is interesting that scholars said based on the number of fragments found it would appear that Psalms was a favorite book of the scribes and people.

**QUESTION #7** – What are important principles to remember when interpreting a psalm?

- 1) Most psalms, not all, are separate and distinct from the others.
- 2) Most psalms are complete in themselves.
- 3) Most psalms were composed for a specific reason or occasion contained in the psalm.
- 4) Most psalms are not connected or linked to the next psalm.
- 5) Some psalms are specifically and intentionally linked together.

**QUESTION #8** – What are the various kinds of titles given to each psalm?

When you study the Psalms it is clear that there are often introductory superscriptions pertaining to about 100 of the Psalms. We may make five observations:

**(Observation #1)** - Some psalms will specifically list its author—see question 4 above.

**(Observation #2)** - Some psalms will give specific classifications and/or musical instructions.

- 1) Aijeleth Hashshahar is a psalm of the day dawn (Ps. 22).
- 2) Alamoth is a psalm related to maidens, young unmarried women for sopranos.

- 3) Altashheth is a destroy not psalm (Ps. 57, 58, 59, 75).
- 4) Gittith is a psalm of the winepresses for feast of Tabernacles (Ps. 8, 81, 84).
- 5) Higgaion is a psalm of meditation (Ps. 9:16; 19:14; 92:3).
- 6) Jeduthun personal name of one of three chief musicians (Ps. 39, 62, 77).
- 7) Jonath Elem Rehokim a psalm of the dove in a far off tree (Ps. 56).
- 8) Mahalath a psalm of the great dance (Ps. 53).
- 9) Mahalath Leannoth a psalm of great dancing and shouting (Ps. 88).
- 10) Maskil is an instruction—Ps. 74, 78.
- 11) Mikhtam is a poem of gold that is engraved—Ps. 56-60.
- 12) Mizmor is a psalm to be sung with musical instruments (Ps. 6 word psalm is mizmor).
- 13) Muth Labben is a psalm of the death of a champion or son (Ps. 9).
- 14) Selah is in Psalms and it means stop and consider and think (Ps. 3).
- 15) Shiggaion a Psalm of a loud cry an irregular ode (Ps. 7).
- 16) Shir is a song—Ps. 30, 66, 67 the word “song” is shir.
- 17) Shoshannim Eduth Psalm of spring festival of lilies (Ps. 80).
- 18) Tephillah is a prayer—Ps. 17 the word prayer is tephillah.
- 19) Tehillah is a praise—Ps. 145. Only used once but is the Hebrew title of Psalms.

**(Observation #3)** - Some psalms will make a historical statement about the circumstances of the psalm—Psalm 51

**(Observation #4)** - Some psalms will state the character or object of the psalm.

- 1) There is a psalm of teaching. Psalm 60
- 2) There is a psalm of thanksgiving. Psalm 100
- 3) There is a psalm of remembrance. Ps. 28, 70

**(Observation #5)** - Some psalms will state liturgical or worship notices.

- 1) There were psalms for Sabbath day worship—Ps. 92
- 2) There were psalms for going up—Ps. 120-134—psalms as one went up to Jerusalem to worship God at the festivals.

**QUESTION #9** – What is an outline of the book of Psalms?

There is really no way to outline the Psalms, except to say that the Psalms were divided by Jewish scholars into five different books. Hippolytus, one of the early Christian Fathers, said in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. that the Hebrews divided the Psalms into five different books.

This was probably based on the collection process. Our English Bibles follow this division.

**Book #1** - Psalm 1-41—These psalms have been called the book of personal experience. These Psalms use the name “Jehovah” the most (LORD). J-272; E-15

**Book #2** - Psalm 42-72—These psalms have been called the book of Elohim, using God the most.

**Book #3** - Psalm 73-89—These psalms have been called the dark book, using both names for God. Psalms 73-83 use Elohim and Psalms 84-89 use Jehovah.

**Book #4** - Psalm 90-106—These psalms have been called the book of the King and this section only uses the name Jehovah (LORD).

**Book #5** - Psalm 107-150—These psalms have been called the book of praise and the predominant name used for God is Jehovah (LORD)  
(In books 4-5, J-339 times; E-1 time used of true God).

As we prepare to journey through the Psalms the words of Dr. Bullock are appropriate: “Hardly a human situation occurs to which the Psalms do not offer some direct word of comfort or exhortation. The church has drunk from the brook of psalmody through the centuries and has discovered that it originates at the eternal spring of living water” (*Ibid.*, p. 144).

**QUESTION #10** – What is the theme of the Psalms?

This is very difficult to determine, but certainly we are legitimate in saying that the Psalms do teach us that God’s people, who are after righteousness and truth, may turn to God, trust God, worship God and praise God in any circumstance or situation of life, knowing that God is a gracious and merciful God who will help in all of His sovereignty, majesty, glory and power. He will intervene in the lives of individuals and in nations.